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To cite this article: Monika Brusenbauch Meislová & Balázs Szent-Iványi (2023) Exploitation Opportunities for Distant Crises: Political Framings of Brexit in the Czech Republic and Hungary, *Problems of Post-Communism*, 70:1, 55-65, DOI: [10.1080/10758216.2021.1915162](https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2021.1915162)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2021.1915162>



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# Exploitation Opportunities for Distant Crises: Political Framings of Brexit in the Czech Republic and Hungary

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## ABSTRACT

Brexit has been a major crisis facing the European integration process. The paper examines how Brexit was framed and exploited by two EU member state governments, Czechia and Hungary. We conceptualize Brexit as a “distant crisis” for these two countries: although it is likely to have significant impacts, these are uncertain and not immediate. Building on the crisis-framing literature, we apply frame analysis to examine governmental rhetoric and find that both governments have instrumentalized Brexit for internal purposes by pragmatically adapting their discursive positions on it to fit their political calculus on both domestic and European issues.

## Introduction

There has been a profound sense of crisis in the European Union (EU) for more than a decade (Dinan, Nugent, and Paterson 2017). The global economic crisis, the Eurozone crises, the rise of populism and illiberalism, the refugee crisis, and most recently, Brexit, have all contributed to perceptions that the integration process is under significant stress (Lefkofridi and Schmitter 2015; Rosamond 2016). However, crisis events create not only threats for policy actors, but also opportunities. According to Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell (2008, 285), a crisis “opens up semantic and political space for actors to redefine issues, propose new policies, foster public reflection, or simply to gain popularity and strike at opponents.” Government actors will use a number of rhetorical devices to frame a crisis in ways that deflect potential blame from themselves or build public support for specific policies, with the ultimate goal of improving their chances of reelection. Crises allow governments to push certain agendas, under the pretext that “business as usual” can no longer be sustained (Boin et al. 2009). Exploiting the crisis for their own ends is thus a key concern for governments.

Most of the literature on crisis framing focuses on crises that have immediate and tangible impacts requiring urgent action, such as the 2008 global financial crisis (Masters and 't Hart 2012; McCann 2013), natural disasters (De Vries 2004), or man-made catastrophes (Wagner-Pacifi 1994). There have also been a number of contributions focusing on long-term “simmering” crises, most notably the difficulties of funding welfare states, or climate change (Rosenthal, Boin, and Comfort 2001; Vasilescu 2007). The literature, however, seems to have neglected a third type of crisis, which we term “distant crisis.” Distant crises originate from outside of the country, and while their effects are potentially large, these are

generally not immediately apparent. As opposed to simmering crises, which may only impact future generations, a distant crisis has relatively more immediate effects, thus carrying a greater sense of urgency. For example, Western European states may perceive the Russian annexation of Crimea and the resulting conflict as a distant crisis, at least when it comes to how it impacts their internal affairs. A distant crisis provides governments with different framing and crisis-exploitation possibilities than the more “immediate” crises do, and these differences are not well understood in the literature.

In order to examine how EU actors frame and exploit distant crises, the paper compares how Brexit has entered the rhetoric of political actors in the Czech Republic and Hungary. Brexit has been widely perceived as one of the most important crises facing the European integration process (Caporaso 2018; Menon and Salter 2016; Rosamond 2016), and one of the key topics on the EU's agenda since the United Kingdom's (UK) electorate voted to leave the bloc on June 23, 2016. Brexit is a major crisis for the EU not only because the UK is the first member state seeking to leave the Union, but also because it “is a large and powerful Member State whose withdrawal will have damaging political and economic implications” (Nugent 2018, 54). Despite this, the crisis is distant for many smaller member states, especially ones in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE); due to the uncertainties of the Brexit process and the difficulties in forming a political consensus in the UK on the exact form of Brexit, its economic, political, and security-related impacts have been unclear, and in many cases indirect. Furthermore, these impacts are not immediate, as a lengthy negotiation process followed the referendum, and the UK failed to leave the EU on the original Brexit date of March 29, 2019.

The paper develops a framework to understand how political actors may frame a distant crisis like Brexit, using insights from the crisis-framing and -exploitation literatures (e.g. Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2008; Boin et al. 2009; de Vries 2004; Masters and 't Hart 2012). The actual frames used by Czech and Hungarian politicians are identified using a qualitative dataset composed of policymaking documents and speeches/statements/interviews between the Brexit referendum in June 2016 and the finalization of the withdrawal agreement in November 2018. The primary focus is on framings of government actors, but opposition framings are also included as contrast to these. The main results indicate that both governments mainly used Brexit to portray themselves as well-prepared, determined defenders of the national interest. They also framed Brexit to apportion blame on the EU, and Hungary even used it instrumentally to attack the EU on its perceived failings in other areas, such as its management of the refugee crisis. Despite the criticism and vague calls for EU reform, neither country seized the opportunity to put forward constructive proposals, and indeed both seemed intent on guarding the status quo.

These results contribute to the literature on EU member states' policymaking with respect to Brexit (and the EU more generally). With Brexit constituting "a two-way process involving 27 other member states" (Oliver 2016), it is essential to know how the UK's partners have been approaching it. While this area has been a compelling focus for scholarly attention (Brusenbauch Meislová 2020; Szent-Iványi 2018; Turner et al. 2018; Usherwood and Kassim 2018), there has been comparatively little detailed academic analysis on the Brexit policies of CEE states. Thus, by examining the Czech and Hungarian framing of Brexit, this article aims to provide a detailed analysis of the topic. Furthermore, the research also matters in wider theoretical and empirical terms. Brexit carries implications for the EU27 and for the future of the EU itself, and thus shapes the EU policies of member states. Understanding the member-state-level discourses that come out of, and are related to, Brexit and how it (co-)forms wider narratives on the EU is therefore of special importance. More broadly, with member states' stances on Brexit closely related to national policy preferences toward the EU, the research sheds further light on the nature of these preferences and their formation in a CEE context (Copsey and Haughton 2009; Haughton and Malova 2007), as well as the behavior of these countries within the multi-level governance system of the EU polity, which has long been ambiguous (Nič 2016). By shaping public opinion on Brexit as an EU crisis, national political actors also signal their positions on the EU to their supporters, who then "use these signals as information shortcuts" for how they perceive, locate, and identify with the EU (Schlippach and Treib 2017, 3).

The paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the paper's theoretical framework, focusing on crisis framing in the case of distant crises. This is followed by a discussion of the political contexts in the Czech Republic and Hungary, and the rationale for selecting these two countries for comparison. The subsequent section presents the data and methods used in the paper, followed by the empirical findings. The final section provides concluding remarks.

## Crisis Framing and Distant Crises

According to Robert M. Entman (1993), framing is defined as selecting "some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described." The key idea is that the reaction to an event is determined not by the event itself, but by the way in which such events are interpreted and given meaning (De Vries 2004, 596–97). Frames help in defining problems, identifying causes, passing judgment, apportioning blame, and suggesting remedies (Kuypers 2009, 182). Framing as an act of political communication and rhetoric is therefore possibly the most cost-effective tool political actors have to influence public-policy processes (Jacoby 2000). Rational government actors will use frames with the view of advancing their own goals, which ultimately relate to ensuring reelection. Politicians generally spend "considerable time determining the frames most advantageous to them" (Klar, Robinson, and Druckam 2012, 5) and ensuring that their favored interpretations of complex social phenomena prevail (Kinder and Sanders 1990, 74).

A significant literature has emerged on how governments frame major political events, with a specific focus on crises, defined as events that have strong and tangible impacts on society and require immediate action (see Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2008; Boin et al. 2009; de Vries 2004; Masters and 't Hart 2012; or McCann 2013). Crises provide windows of opportunity for governments to push a specific agenda or policy reform. The paper adapts Arjen Boin et al.'s (2009) framework for interpreting how political actors make use of these windows of opportunity. Boin et al. (2009, 83) term these actions "crisis exploitation," referring to the ways crisis rhetoric is used to alter support for public office holders or for specific policies. Political actors can frame a crisis event with a view to apportioning blame (deflecting it from themselves or placing it on opponents), and use the sense of urgency caused by the crisis to advocate for a change in the status quo. Boin et al. (2009) identify three broad possible framing strategies for political actors. First, they can deny the crisis, playing down the relevance of the events and arguing that no one is to blame. Second, the crisis may be framed as a threat: the government will aim to deflect blame, but will otherwise argue for maintaining business as usual. Finally, the crisis can also be presented as an opportunity, allowing governments to argue for change, and focus blame on dysfunctional policies or political opponents.

The crisis-exploitation framework was developed based on government framings of urgent events with high impacts. We extend this framework to cover events that we term "distant crises." A distant crisis has two key features that differentiate it from the kinds of crises covered by Boin et al. (2009): first, its origins are external to the country, and second, while it clearly has domestic impacts, these are uncertain, indirect, and not immediate. Brexit constitutes such a distant crisis for the CEE countries. It originates externally from their geographic region, and while it does threaten material wellbeing within the region through its impacts on trade, investment, and the flow of people, the magnitude of these is uncertain.

The populations of the CEE countries are unlikely to have strong understandings of how Brexit will impact their daily lives. The fact that the UK was still an EU member more than three years after the 2016 referendum also mitigated any sense of urgency.

We argue that a distant crisis leads to different framing opportunities for political actors as opposed to the ones generally featured in the literature. We identify three ways in which the distant nature of a crisis may have an impact on the possibilities political elites have to frame it for domestic audiences. We discuss these below, formulating specific expectations on how these may play out in the way Brexit is framed by the Czech and Hungarian governments.

First, since Brexit originates from outside of their polities and its actual threat level is unclear, it is unlikely that either government would need to use frames that deflect blame from themselves. Government policies did not cause the crisis; the only potential criticism toward governments would relate to whether they were well prepared for the crisis, and how they are reacting to it. Governments will therefore aim to portray themselves as having clear ideas on how to manage any domestic fallout, and taking the appropriate actions. We expect both the Czech and Hungarian governments to use framings of Brexit that show them as prepared, knowledgeable, and ready to engage. They will portray themselves as ready to defend the national interest and as capable negotiators who will do what they can to ensure that the final outcome of the Brexit negotiations fits with these interests. These framings of Brexit may be especially important for domestic purposes. While opposition politicians cannot blame the government for Brexit, they can attack it for not responding appropriately. This may further induce the government to frame Brexit in ways that highlight its competence in managing the impacts. Brexit can be an opportunity for the government to communicate its prowess to domestic audiences with relatively little risk, given how the outcome does not really depend on government actions.

Second, governments may use a distant crisis to apportion blame on adversaries. In the case of Brexit, apportioning blame on the domestic opposition is nonsensical for CEE governments, but there may be external adversaries. Hungary's government has had an especially contentious relationship with the European Commission (EC) and other EU institutions since 2010, and has repeatedly portrayed the country as being "under attack from Brussels" (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018). Thus, it is reasonable to expect blame apportioning toward the EU. While successive Czech governments have also shown degrees of Euroskepticism, their relations with the EU have generally been much smoother than Hungary's, making blame apportioning toward the EU less likely. We therefore expect the Hungarian government especially to use Brexit instrumentally and to frame it as an argument in its broader criticism of the EU.

Third, given that the roots of a distant crisis are independent from domestic policies, and perceived levels of threat are lower, governments have less scope to argue for changing the domestic status quo. The Czech Republic and Hungary could frame Brexit to argue for maintaining "business as usual" on the EU level as well. In the past, both countries have resisted EU reforms that would have decreased the relative influence of member states vis-à-vis supranational bodies (Dostál and

Végh 2017). They may see their position on these matters weakened with the departure of the UK, which they perceived as an ally (Szent-Iványi 2018). Furthermore, both countries are beneficiaries of EU funding. Therefore, we expect both governments to frame Brexit as a threat to their beneficial situation within the EU, as opposed to an opportunity for EU reform. The Hungarian government may be more likely to use such framings due to its greater dependence on EU funding (Keszthelyi 2017).

These three expectations illustrate that the ways in which governments may exploit a distant crisis like Brexit are heavily shaped by their preferences with respect to the EU, and these discursive exercises can be seen as parts of the national EU preference-formation process. In other words, framing, as an act of including and emphasizing on the one hand, and excluding on the other, is a way to strategically communicate these preferences. Existing scholarship has shown that preference formation is a complex process, and no single factor can explain CEE preferences vis-à-vis EU politics (Copsey and Haughton 2009; Haughton and Malova 2007). Distant crises such as Brexit can impact the process of preference formation by shifting national (material) interests, but the way governments frame Brexit can also be indicative of their existing preferences.

### **Brexit and Political Contexts in the Czech Republic and Hungary**

Following the referendum in June 2016, the UK's withdrawal from the EU began on March 29, 2017, when Prime Minister (PM) Theresa May invoked Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). The European Council adopted a joint negotiating position in April 2017, and the negotiations were led by the EC, represented by Michel Barnier. In December 2017, a Joint Report was published setting out the areas of agreement between the two sides, focusing on protecting the rights of EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens in the EU, the Northern Irish border, and the financial settlement. The negotiations continued throughout 2018. The Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration on the future UK-EU relationship were endorsed at a meeting of the European Council in November 2018. The negotiations have been dubbed as "the world's most complex divorce" (Barker 2016; for more details, see Bulmer and Quaglia 2018 or Turner et al. 2018).

Examining how EU member states framed Brexit during this process can support a deeper understanding of how the negotiations evolved. Selecting the Czech Republic and Hungary as case studies for this has been driven by a most-similar-cases design. Both are CEE, former communist, mid-sized EU member states with similar population levels. Both joined the EU in 2004, but have not joined the Eurozone. Both have an ambiguous relationship with the EU: while they are dependent on the Union, their governments criticize it extensively, albeit to varying degrees. Furthermore, neither country's relationship with the UK stands out in any way: they both have extensive trade and investment relationships with the UK (see Table 1), but Britain is not a key economic partner for either country. Even though the UK was the fourth largest export market for the Czech Republic in 2016, the value of exports to

**Table 1.** Trade, Investment, and Migration between the UK and the Czech Republic/Hungary, 2016 (in Million USD, UK's Position Among Top Export/Import/Investment Partners in Parentheses)

	Czech Republic	Hungary
Goods exports to the UK	8,416 (4th)	4,026 (9th)
Goods imports from the UK	3,751 (8th)	1,769 (14th)
Stock of UK FDI	5,604 (8th)	3,046 (6th)
Expatriate population in the UK	40,000–100,000	100,000–250,000

Sources: World Bank WITS; OECD.stat, MZV (2018a) and Beke (2017).

Germany was five times greater than those to the UK (and seven times higher for Hungary). Therefore, while both countries have interests in maintaining frictionless trade with Britain, their ties with Germany are generally more important. Finally, both countries have significant expatriate populations living in the UK, although these numbers are higher for Hungary.

The Czech Republic and Hungary are perhaps the “most similar” countries from the region in terms of their potential positions toward Brexit. Poland and Romania have significantly larger expatriate populations in the UK, and Poland, together with the Baltic countries, is also more preoccupied with security concerns and ensuring the UK's continued commitment to NATO. Slovakia, due to its membership in the Eurozone and lack of any strong or visible confrontation with the EU, also represents a very different set of circumstances (Szent-Iványi 2018).

The key source of variation between Hungary and the Czech Republic in terms of framing Brexit is linked to the differences in their domestic politics, especially how they instrumentalize the EU for domestic purposes.

In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party came to power after a landslide victory in the 2010 general elections, and achieved similar successes in 2014 and 2018 as well. Constitutional majorities in the parliament, as well as a fragmented opposition, have allowed Fidesz to gradually dismantle democratic institutions (Kornai 2015), turning Hungary into the EU's first “illiberal” democracy (Ágh 2016; Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018). Fidesz's ideology has been characterized as a mix between paternalist populism and illiberal elitism (Enyedi 2016), and its rhetoric as aggressive conservative nationalism. Protecting the nation against malicious forces has been a key part of the party's rhetoric. Fidesz has successfully externalized this “them vs. us” rhetoric, shifting the focus to external sources of threat (Hegedűs 2019), and has portrayed itself as the only actor capable of protecting the nation. “Brussels” has frequently been framed as one of these threats. EU institutions have been highly critical of the Hungarian government's de-democratization measures, leading to frequent political clashes. These culminated in 2018 with the EU launching TEU Article 7 proceedings against Hungary (Politico 2018). The anti-EU rhetoric is in sharp contrast to the fact that Hungary is heavily dependent on the EU: funding from the EU was the main source of growth between 2007 and 2013 (KPMG 2017).

After the European refugee crisis in 2015, the government's focus shifted toward “illegal migrants” as a new source of external threat (Tétényi, Barczikay, and Szent-Iványi 2019). Hungary refused to accept refugees under the EU's reallocation

scheme, and the government organized a referendum against it in 2016. The government used the refugee crisis to paint itself as a protector not only of Hungary, but of the entire “European Christian civilization” (Thorleifsson 2017).

This narrative of exceptionalism has been reinforced by Orbán's rhetoric, as he portrays himself as a leader of a Europe-wide nationalist-populist revolt against the EU. The government has shifted the domestic debates on Europe, focusing on a need for “strong” member states. Most discussions on Hungary's position in the EU have revolved around how Hungary can implement its interests. The EU is therefore chiefly seen as an arena for bargaining, which creates winners and losers, and less a forum for cooperation (Ágh 2016). Fidesz has successfully promoted the understanding of EU membership as a loss of national sovereignty, using this to discredit the more internationalist attitudes of its domestic political rivals (Matthes 2016). However, while Orbán frequently muses about “life outside of the EU” (Magyar Nemzet 2016), Fidesz has not entertained these notions seriously.

At the time of the British referendum, the Czech government consisted of the center-left Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), the centrist-populist ANO party, and the Christian Democrats, and was led by PM Bohuslav Sobotka (ČSSD). In June 2018, a new, minority coalition government, headed by Andrej Babiš, was sworn in. Babiš's ANO party won the general election in October 2017 and entered into a coalition agreement with the ČSSD, also relying on the support of KSČM.

The Czech political context differs from the Hungarian one. ANO has a much less dominant position than Fidesz, and the level of democratic backsliding is much lower, not least because the country lacks a powerful narrative of Czech nationalism (Hanley and Vachudova 2018, 278) or the language of cultural or political exceptionalism (Brusis 2016; Havlík and Hloušek 2021; Havlík and Voda 2018). ANO portrays itself a non-ideological citizens' movement of practical “doers” (Hanley and Vachudova 2018, 281), with Babiš vowing to run the country like a successful firm (Dostál and Nič 2018, 2). Furthermore, Czech EU politics is “reactive, pragmatic, non-ideological, and very transactional” (Dostál and Nič 2018, 4). While more recent Czech EU discourses have been characterized by a predominantly critical tone, EU policy has been highly ambivalent, with the government accentuating the importance of the EU to the Czech Republic and considering EU membership a key pillar of its foreign (though not domestic) policy (Hloušek and Kaniok 2021). Babiš calls himself a pro-European politician and argues that membership in the EU “has no alternative” (Babiš 2018). In this context, he only “promotes views which he expects will earn him popularity with voters” (Borčány and Janebová 2019, 11), as typified, for instance, by his views on the EU migration crisis or climate change. Compounding this is ANO's lack of a clearly defined EU policy, with the party suffering from a shortage of senior figures experienced in EU affairs (Dostál and Nič 2018, 4). This non-ideological, pragmatic approach to the EU explains why ANO is less inclined than Fidesz to embrace the notion of Brexit as a part of a Europe-wide nationalist-populist revolt. Despite the change in the Czech government in 2018, there are reasons to expect consistency in the country's framing of

Brexit, as the general content of Czech foreign and EU policy has been marked by substantial continuity, even stagnation (Borčány and Janebová 2019, 9).

Further indicative of the country's pragmatic approach to the EU is the fact that no parliamentary political party promotes Czech withdrawal from the EU ("Czexit"), with the exception of the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD). This said, in the immediate wake of the British referendum, calls for a referendum on the country's EU membership were also voiced by the euroskeptic president, Miloš Zeman. Zeman, who has no authority to call a referendum, declared that he would "do everything for [Czechs] to have a referendum and be able to express themselves" (John 2016). These suggestions were, however, rebuffed by the government.

These differences in domestic politics are likely to lead to different framings of Brexit in the two countries. Hungary takes an ideological position toward the EU and the country's position within it, and has consistently framed it as a threat to national sovereignty. Hungary has also had a highly confrontational relationship with the EU, and it is therefore reasonable to expect that the government will channel Brexit into its existing approach toward integration. Politicians in the Czech Republic, however, are less ideological, and no party dominates the country's politics to the degree that Fidesz does in Hungary. Czech framings of Brexit therefore may be much more pragmatic.

## Methods for Frame Analysis

In order to examine how the three framing expectations play out in practice, we constructed a qualitative dataset of political speeches, interviews, and other statements from the Czech Republic and Hungary regarding Brexit, between the date of the Brexit referendum (June 23, 2016) and the date of the European Council's endorsement of the withdrawal agreement (November 25, 2018). We aimed to systematically capture all the important government texts in order to ensure comparability between the two countries. Data collection focused on the official government websites of the two countries (vlada.cz and kormany.hu), using the keywords Brexit, United Kingdom, and Great Britain. In the case of Hungary, kormany.hu includes the official websites of all line ministries. In the Czech Republic, the search on vlada.cz was further complemented by searches on individual ministry websites. We only included texts that met three criteria: the text needed to feature a national-level government politician mentioning Brexit; Brexit had to be featured relatively significantly in the text; and only texts in Czech and Hungarian were included, given the focus on domestic framings.

In addition to government documents, a number of texts from opposition politicians were also collected from both countries. The purpose of this was not to give a comprehensive account of the views of the opposition, but rather to juxtapose these with government framings. The collection of these statements used the same criteria as in the case of government texts, and focused on the websites of the main opposition parties: the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), Jobbik, and Politics Can Be Different (LMP) in Hungary; the

Civic Democratic Party (ODS), the Communist Party (KSČM), Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), and TOP09 in the Czech Republic.

We included in the analysis all the government and opposition texts that met our search criteria; their total numbers are shown in Table 2.

Our approach to analyzing the texts relies on frame analysis, "a particular causal-oriented and focused version of discourse analysis" (Lindekilde 2014, 222). Each text was coded with the goal of identifying the specific way in which Brexit was discussed. We opted for a data-driven process of coding, within which the frames emerge as the research progresses. Following the standard procedures for this outlined by Baldwin Van Gorp (2010, 94–97), the coding followed three (iterative) procedures. The first step involved open coding: each text was examined without a predefined coding instrument, with attention to the elements by which frames manifest themselves, namely problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation (Entman 1993, 52). The second step involved a higher level of abstraction and arranging the codes around "axes" of meaning and linking them to overarching frames. The third step included linking these frames to the three expectations outlined in the previous section (self-portrayal, apportioning blame, and opposition to EU reform), in a way to ensure that they are "mutually exclusive and each link is meaningful" (Van Gorp 2010, 96–97).

## Framing Brexit

### Self-Portrayal of Governments

The first expectation centers around frames of Brexit that portray governments as prepared defenders of the national interest. The analysis suggests that there is strong evidence of both governments framing Brexit in ways that portray themselves as capable actors. Defending the national interest is possibly the most important specific frame. The framings used by the opposition are consistent with our expectations only in the case of Hungary, where the opposition, while generally not engaging with Brexit, has used it on occasion to attack the government for its lack of actions.

### Czech Republic

The Czech government clearly portrayed itself as the capable defender of the national interest.<sup>1</sup> Framing of Brexit along the lines of Czech national interests dominated the Czech governmental discourse on Brexit, with rhetoric focusing on the country's preferences in the withdrawal process. This frame has been a constant and stable feature of Czech government discourse on Brexit, but gained strength particularly in the run-up to the October 2017 parliamentary elections. The promotion of Czech interests has provided a robust contextualization

Table 2. Number of Texts Used in the Analysis

		2016	2017	2018	Total
Czech Republic	Government	35	31	46	112
	Opposition	29	29	6	64
Hungary	Government	35	51	45	131
	Opposition	10	5	3	18

factor for the government's thinking on Brexit; government figures usually made sure to include an explicit reference to Czech priorities and interests (as in MZV 2017b).<sup>2</sup>

Czech interests in connection with Brexit have mainly revolved around the rights of Czech citizens in the UK and economic prosperity. Czech government figures have been very vocal in making it clear that Czech expatriates must retain their rights as regards health and benefits (Vláda 2016d). With up to 100,000 Czech nationals resident in the UK (MZV 2018a), this line of reasoning resonated with domestic voters, and was politically useful as parliamentary elections approached (Brusenbauch Meislová 2018). Unlike officials in Hungary, Czech government figures invariably referred to Czech nationals in the UK as “Czech citizens.”

The government rhetoric on Czech economic interests included three key themes: ensuring that Czech access to the UK market and British investments in the Czech Republic are not undermined (MPO 2017; Vláda 2017d); that the UK settles all its financial commitments to the EU (MZV 2017c; Vláda 2017d); and, given that the country is a net beneficiary of EU funding, concerns about the financial gap that the UK's withdrawal will leave in the EU budget (MF 2018; MZV 2018b). Additionally, less salient elements of framings around national interest referred to ensuring that the UK remains a close partner in security and defense areas (MO 2016; Vláda 2017c); safeguarding an “orderly” Brexit (Vláda 2018a); and avoiding a no-deal scenario (Vláda 2018c). By contrast, the avoidance of a hard border in Ireland carried only little salience with the Czech governing elite. Finally, the national interest frame also positioned the EU's unified front on Brexit as clearly in the country's interest, evidenced through the repeated employment of phrases such as “in the case of Brexit, the EU is strong and united” (Vláda 2018a) and “we are united and Michel Barnier enjoys our full confidence” (Vláda 2018b). This relatively extensive focus on unity is in line with the country's broader official approach toward the EU's future, which emphasizes keeping the EU united.

National interests, and calling on the government to protect these, were important elements in the opposition's framings of Brexit as well, especially in the discourse of ODS (2017b, 2017d). Yet, unlike in Hungary, the Czech opposition did not explicitly accuse the government of failing to do so. The only exception seems to be ODS, which frequently disapproved of the lack of the Czech unity regarding the withdrawal negotiations (ODS 2016c, 2017e). The SPD is an outlier among the Czech opposition parliamentary parties, inasmuch as it believes that Czech national interests vis-à-vis Brexit (or any other issue, for that matter) cannot be protected within the EU and has argued that the country should replicate the UK's actions (SPD 2016e).

### Hungary

The Hungarian government has also made significant framing efforts to show itself as prepared and determined regarding the Brexit process, as well as “strong” enough to implement the national interests. This frame emerged immediately after the referendum, and the early focus was on protecting the rights of Hungarian workers in the UK (Kormany.hu 2016c). The number of Hungarians resident

in the UK is much larger than the Czech expatriate population, and clearly represents a large constituency (Beke 2017). Various government figures have emphasized that Hungary will be “tough and determined” in the negotiations to ensure that the rights of Hungarians are not harmed (Kormany.hu 2016d). This “tough” stance aligns very closely with the Hungarian government's broader rhetoric in foreign policy and vows to protect the country's interests, ensuring that foreign powers do not harm Hungary. Some government figures even stated that Hungary's entire approach to Brexit would be determined by how the issue of Hungarian workers was dealt with (Kormany.hu 2017a). Interestingly, the government almost always referred to Hungarians in the UK as “workers” and, especially in the rhetoric of Orbán, as “families” (Kormany.hu 2016e). The term “citizens” was rarely used, and “migrants,” or any other term that could be associated with migration, practically never: the government was keen to disassociate Hungarians working in other European countries from Asian or African arrivals to the continent. Protecting the rights of Hungarians remained a constant element in the government's framing of Brexit throughout, even after the Joint Report in December 2017 (Kormany.hu 2018b). After the finalization of the withdrawal agreement in November 2018, Orbán triumphantly reported that *he* had achieved the Hungarian government's “main goal” of protecting the rights of Hungarians in the UK (Kormany.hu 2018c).

While this framing aligned with the government's general rhetoric regarding the EU, it was also made necessary by the opposition's heavily instrumental usage of Brexit. While Hungarian opposition parties seem to have engaged much less with Brexit than their Czech counterparts, potentially underlining the distant nature of the crisis, they did on occasion use it to attack the government for its lack of action. MSZP claimed that the Orbán government had abandoned expatriate Hungarians and was only protecting their interests with “weak slogans” (MSZP 2017), while LMP argued that Fidesz does not care about Hungarians living in the UK (LMP 2018a). LMP even introduced a motion in parliament requiring the government to publish a clear strategy on Brexit and on supporting Hungarians in the UK (LMP 2018b). While this was voted down by the government majority, the criticisms from the opposition may have compelled the government to emphasize its own determination even more strongly.<sup>3</sup>

As in the Czech Republic, the Hungarian government also portrayed itself as committed to protecting national economic interests. The Hungarian government's rhetoric on economic relations after Brexit aimed to show that it had a clear idea of its preferences, and was willing to stand up for these. These preferences included ensuring free trade and investment between Hungary and the UK (Kormany.hu 2016d). Phrases like “frictionless trade” (Kormany.hu 2016f), or “maintaining close economic ties” (Kormany.hu 2016g), were common, and from early 2017 a “broad and comprehensive trade deal” became the main catchphrase (Kormany.hu 2017b). The government also began calling for a “fair” Brexit from early 2017 (Kormany.hu 2017d). This framing has a number of connotations not present in the Czech case. It not only

shows the Hungarian government as determined to protect national interests, but also portrays Hungary as being sympathetic toward the UK's interests, as opposed to the EU, which wanted to punish it for leaving, and thus moves into framings about apportioning blame, which are discussed in the next section. The more sporadic, national interest-related elements present in the Czech Republic are also evident in the self-portrayals of the Hungarian government: defense and security (Kormany.hu 2017h); avoiding a no-deal Brexit (Kormany.hu 2018e); and ensuring the unity of the EU (Kormany.hu 2018f).

### **Apportioning Blame on the EU**

Both governments are expected to frame Brexit in ways that apportion blame on the EU. Due to its preexisting conflicts with the EU, we expect such framing to be stronger in Hungary. In line with these expectations, we find considerable evidence that the Czech government was rather restrained in using Brexit to apportion blame on the EU, unlike some opposition actors. The Hungarian government, however, used these framings extensively, drawing parallels between how Hungary and the UK are treated by the EU.

### **Czech Republic**

The Czech government has criticized the EU (and EC president Jean-Claude Juncker in particular) for significantly contributing to the referendum result. This framing is apparent in the rhetoric of individual ministers (especially foreign affairs minister Lubomir Zaorálek, Andrej Babiš when he was finance minister, and defense minister Martin Stropnický), but never in the case of prime ministers, who have generally opted for a more conciliatory tone. To provide a few examples, Zaorálek proclaimed that the EU “did very little to persuade the British to remain” (MZV 2016c), and that Brexit was “a very bad school report for the Union” (MZV 2016b). In the same spirit, a narrative invoked by Babiš was that the victory of the Leave vote was “solely a result of the failure of EU leaders who ‘pushed Britain into a corner’” (MF 2016). Likewise, Stropnický averred that he did not “recall President Juncker backing PM Cameron in any way in his efforts to persuade British voters to remain” (MO 2016a), and that he was “at least partly responsible for the negative referendum result” (MO 2016b). Out of all the frames embedded in the Czech government's discourse on Brexit, blaming the EU invites the most moral judgments with the use of emotionally charged language (“pushed into a corner,” “offended,” “failure”). This rhetoric was clearly discernible in the government's discourse in the immediate wake of the referendum and was prominent until the end of summer 2016. It was later subdued, however, and the government never criticized the EU's approach toward the negotiations as such.

Adding to the strength of this frame has been a certain degree of sympathy with the UK and its interests, typified by PM Babiš's statement in September 2018 that he felt “sorry” for the UK, or Zaorálek's remark that “the British discontent with the EU can be understood” (MZV 2016b). From the Czech point of view (and especially immediately after the referendum), it was the UK, rather than the EU, that was facing “great

worries” (Vláda ČR 2016a). However, such statements never became dominant.

Czech opposition actors have perhaps framed Brexit as a fault of the EU even more strongly than the government. The opposition employed blame appropriation to create a stronger image of Brexit as a preventable crisis and used it to attack EU leaders *ad hominem* (especially Juncker). The SPD and KSČM (and to a lesser extent, ODS) have especially laid blame on the EU for Brexit and the state of Article 50 negotiations, with their discourse conveying an image of the EU as an inefficient, detached, elitist actor that knowingly contributed to creating Brexit. According to the KSČM, the EU is characterized by “senseless quotas, vulgar diktat, absurd orders, ill-considered prohibitions and regulations” (KSČM 2016c); is “barbarously anti-democratic” (KSČM 2016b); and “makes a mess of everything it touches” (KSČM 2016a). The SPD argued that Brexit is the victory of “common sense” (SPD 2016a), “freedom and direct democracy” (SPD 2016b) over the oppressive, unresponsive, and bureaucratic EU. ODS portrayed the EU's mismanagement of the migration crisis as the major cause of Brexit (ODS 2016b).

### **Hungary**

As expected, the Hungarian government framed Brexit with the goal of apportioning blame on the EU much more strongly than the Czech government did. The framing around the need for Brexit to be “fair” is an example of this. While this term is fuzzy, some elements are clear: Brexit should be beneficial for both the UK and the EU, balancing rights and obligations for both parties, and focusing on identifying possibilities for mutual economic wins (Kormany.hu 2017f, 2017g). The EU should not act as the offended party (Kormany.hu 2017b), and according to Orbán it should “stand on the ground of common sense” (Kormany.hu 2017e). This insinuates that the EU is behaving less maturely than expected. “Fair Brexit” serves a purpose for domestic audiences, and fits into the government's wider discourse on Hungary's relationship with the EU. It shows sympathy toward a state that stood up against the EU and is now suffering the consequences. This strengthens government rhetoric about how the Brussels elite aims to punish member states that go against it; the parallels with how the government portrays the EU's approach toward Hungary are unmissable, and sometimes even mentioned explicitly (Kormany.hu 2017b). The EU is seen as a vengeful negotiator pursuing unfair solutions, implying that standing up against this irrational bully is the “right” way to act.

Brexit has also been framed to argue how dysfunctional the EU is, and was routinely used as a tool to attack it. Most importantly, Brexit was employed to criticize the EU's approach to migration. As stated by foreign affairs minister Péter Szijjártó, “a key lesson from Brexit is that we need to end Brussels's pro-migration policies, which jeopardize the unity of the EU” (Kormany.hu 2016c). Claims were made by Hungarian politicians that Brussels's management of “illegal migration” was a key factor affecting the Brexit vote (Kormany.hu 2016h). Brexit was also a failure of the EU for not listening to “the people” (Kormany.hu 2016i), and a consequence of the EU's being unable to solve its own problems, including

migration, economic decline, terrorism, and declining competitiveness (Kormany.hu 2016j).

Blame apportionment seems to have been used for domestic purposes, justifying how the government was right in its approach to confronting the EU. As stated by Orbán: “the British have said that things are not going well in the EU, and they will leave. We also have to think about what is not going well in the EU” (Kormany.hu 2016k). The rhetoric of blaming Brexit on the EU was especially dominant in the run-up to the government’s referendum on the EU’s refugee reallocation scheme in October 2016, but made periodic appearances later on as well. For example, in mid-2018, Brexit was used to attack specific EU politicians, especially in the wake of the Sargentini report. This report, adopted by the European Parliament in September 2018, heavily condemned the undemocratic practices of the Hungarian government. In response, Hungarian government rhetoric attacked the credibility of EU leaders, who should have resigned after the Brexit vote (Kormany.hu 2018g). Orbán specifically stated in November 2018 that electing Juncker as EC president, a candidate opposed by both Hungary and the UK, was a mistake that contributed to Brexit (Kormany.hu 2018h).

Using Brexit to juxtapose “the people” and the unelected Brussels elite, a common argument made by populist politicians, fits with the Hungarian government’s view of integration. In this sense, Brexit is portrayed as a failure of the elite-led federalist EU project and an indication of the need to reform the EU in a direction that gives nations greater power.<sup>4</sup>

Given such strong blame apportionment from the government, it is unsurprising that the Hungarian opposition made little use of these framings. Even the extreme right Jobbik party was relatively restrained, and while some blame was placed on the EU for having become a “centralized dictatorship” (Jobbik 2016a), these voices were relatively rare.

### **Opposing EU Reform?**

Despite apportioning blame on the EU, the expectation is that the Czech Republic and Hungary will actually favor maintaining the status quo, given their beneficial status. Contrary to this expectation, however, the data reveal seemingly strong calls for EU reform in both countries.

#### **Czech Republic**

The Czech government’s discourse on Brexit interprets the UK’s decision to leave the bloc as a signal of the “need” for EU reform (MF 2016; Vláda 2017b). This frame was most commonly used throughout 2016 and early 2017, but became less prevalent later on. The links between Brexit and EU reform in the government’s thinking are shown by the fact that the official name of the Government Office’s Brexit working group was Working Group for Brexit and EU Reform. Yet, even though Czech politicians expressed various ideas about how the EU might be changed, in the context of Brexit their rhetoric on EU reform was very broad-based, superficial, and vague. Czech government figures have emphasized that, because of Brexit, the EU must be reformed in order to “increase citizens’ confidence in European cooperation” (Vláda 2016b), to “increase the EU’s capacity for action and its ability to solve

specific problems of our people” (Vláda 2017b), and to make decisions “more effectively and more quickly” (MZV 2017a). At the same time, however, they firmly opposed ceding further powers to the EU and treaty changes. Furthermore, true to its long-term transactional view of the EU, epitomized recently by its membership of the Friends of Cohesion club, the Czech Republic has been keen to emphasize the Brexit budget hole of “roughly 11 billion euro by 2021” (Vláda 2018d), sharply objecting to any Brexit-induced decrease of the EU cohesion allocation.

The frame of post-Brexit EU reform is foregrounded also by the opposition, which argued that Brexit had triggered discussion on EU reform, possibly in the direction of a “multi-speed Europe” with a differentiated approach to integration (apparent especially in the discourses of TOP09 [2017b] and ODS [2016a, 2017a]). The exact details of how the EU should be reformed in the wake of Brexit, however, are even vaguer than in case of the government, with the opposition proposing “more space for individual national parliaments and their interests” (KSČM 2018; ODS 2017c), and claiming “what is needed is not just different forms of cooperation, but a different type of civilization” (KSČM 2018). Pro-EU TOP09 is the only Czech political party that calls for the country to belong to the EU core and to initiate debate on joining the single currency (TOP09 2017a). However, the SPD, and to a lesser extent the KSČM, foreground EU unreformability, emphasizing a lack of courage and political will on the part of, particularly, the EC, which is described as incapable of any reforms, let alone self-reforms (SPD 2016d).

These framings of Brexit around EU reform correspond with the wider trends of the Czech discussion on the future of the EU, which has been mostly couched in broad, vague terms and characterized by reactivity and defensiveness. Indeed, deeper, constructive proposals for EU reform have been largely neglected by Czech leaders (Borčány and Dostál 2018, 23), with the country tending to respond only to suggestions formulated elsewhere. As such, it has “not been able to present a consistent and realistic vision for the Czech Republic’s place in the EU” (Borčány and Janebová 2019, 19). The elite Brexit-related attitudes to EU reform are thus well in line with the country’s general preference for pragmatic, ad hoc solutions when it comes to its engagement in EU policymaking.

#### **Hungary**

Calls for EU reform in Hungary have also been present, and similarly vague. As stated by Orbán in September 2016, “Brexit is an excellent opportunity for us [the leaders of the EU] to face our mistakes and weaknesses, and provides a sense of urgent need for correcting these mistakes” (Kormany.hu 2016l). According to Orbán, Brexit shows that further integration between nation states is no longer possible (Kormany.hu 2016b). This global shift toward greater nationalism and illiberal politics has been a crucial element of Orbán’s world view, and Brexit fits into it well. However, most of the government framing on the EU’s failings focuses on attacking the EU with little constructive substance. Any calls for reforms in these frames were general and vague. For example, Hungarian officials argued that Brexit “poses an enormous challenge” for the

future of the EU (Kormany.hu 2018i), as it has shown that strengthening the EU (i.e., the EC) at the expense of member states is a dead end (Kormany.hu 2016m). The EU should now focus more on the “security of European people” (Kormany.hu 2016n). What exactly this would mean in practice, however, was never elaborated, and the government did not put any detailed proposals forward. Most of Orbán’s speeches regarding the EU’s future simply repeated the mantras related to migration and sovereignty, and lacked details (Kormany.hu 2017g). Such a lack of detailed proposals questions just how serious the government was about reforming the EU.

In fact, there have been a number of calls for maintaining the status quo in some policy areas: the Hungarian government was clearly against any reforms that would hurt its access to EU structural and cohesion funding. According to Szijjártó: “it is not our fault that the British decided to leave, so the EU cannot punish Hungary by decreasing cohesion and structural funding” (Kormany.hu 2017i). The EU is thus blamed not only for Brexit, but also for decreasing funding possibilities.

Other than Jobbik’s calls for greater sovereignty for nation states (Jobbik 2016a), or even welcoming the “historic opportunity” to end the federalist EU project and create a “Europe of nations” (Jobbik 2016b), which resonate well with those of the government, Hungarian opposition parties were silent on the kind of Europe they would like to see after Brexit. MSZP politicians have talked about the need for “an EU that works better” due to stronger solidarity and deeper integration (MSZP 2016); however, they have failed to put forward a positive image of the EU’s future, and especially Hungary’s role in it. While the EU has often been portrayed in the discourses of the left as “indispensable” for Hungary’s future prosperity, the opposition did not seize the opportunity provided by Brexit to show why this is the case. While funding from the EU has been seen by all as an important benefit for Hungary, the opposition increasingly framed this negatively as a fuel for government corruption (see e.g. MSZP 2018). There has been little discussion on how “deeper integration” could benefit Hungary. While there have been references in the past to solving the collective challenges facing the EU (MSZP 2013), it is often unclear what these are, or indeed why they matter for a small country like Hungary. This passivity from the opposition means that the government has dominated the national preference-formation process about the EU with its negative framings of Brexit and the EU more broadly, and its message that only “strong and sovereign” member states can solve challenges. The dominance of these messages will have long-term consequences for the Hungarian public’s attitude toward integration.

## Conclusions

The paper analyzed the crisis-exploitation framings of two EU member state governments, the Czech Republic and Hungary, focusing on Brexit as a distant crisis and examining three expectations. The first expectation, focusing on how the Czech and Hungarian governments exploit Brexit to portray themselves as prepared and knowledgeable actors, was confirmed, with both governments using the crisis to convey the message that they are determined defenders of national

interests. Second, we expected blame apportioning toward the EU to be present in Hungary but less so in the Czech Republic, which has a less conflictual relationship with the EU. These framings were present in both countries, but Hungarian government actors engaged more heavily in such rhetoric, using Brexit instrumentally for domestic political purposes by criticizing the EU for its failures in managing the refugee crisis. The Hungarian government’s framing of Brexit also included a higher degree of moral judgment and was more ideologically charged, as epitomized by the “fair Brexit” frame. Third, our initial expectation on the governments’ framing of Brexit to argue for maintaining EU business as usual was only partially confirmed. While there were vague calls for EU reform in both countries, neither of them used the opportunity to constructively argue for it.

These results point to the instrumentalization of Brexit as a distant crisis for internal political purposes, with the Czech and Hungarian governments exploiting it to justify their approaches to both domestic and EU politics. In this sense, Brexit, recontextualized within EU27 domestic politics, carries a specific political function, and its framing is neither arbitrary nor capricious, but deliberate and intentional. Indeed, both governments pragmatically adapted their discursive positions on Brexit on the grounds of their political calculus on both domestic and European questions. As evidenced in the paper, a distant crisis can be exploited with the goal of legitimizing the government’s actions, and in this case, anti-EU, pro-sovereignty rhetoric. Indeed, even though both governments officially endorsed and complied with the EU’s official Brexit position, they did not refrain from apportioning Brexit-related blame on the EU (if to varying degrees), or even questioning some of its decisions. Also, as the two cases have demonstrated, formal calls for EU reform, prompted by a distant crisis, do not necessarily mean that the governments really would like to challenge the status quo.

These conclusions also provide lessons for “distant crisis” as an analytical concept. The theoretical contribution of the paper is the extension of the crisis-exploitation framework to cover such distant crisis events. We argue that a distant crisis has two key features that differentiate it from the kinds of crises covered by Boin et al. (2009): its external origins and uncertain, indirect, and not immediate domestic impacts. Our paper showed that a distant crisis leads to different framing opportunities for political actors as opposed to the ones generally featured in the crisis-framing literature (De Vries 2014; Masters and ‘t Hart 2012; McCann 2013), especially in terms of the incentives to apportion blame on external versus domestic adversaries, and the utilization of crisis to call for change. Although further research will be required to substantiate this with evidence from other cases, the exploitation of Brexit in the Czech Republic and Hungary shows that political actors instrumentalize distant crises for domestic political purposes, intentionally selecting and highlighting some features of reality while omitting and obscuring others (cf. Dean 2009, 41). While the contours of this framing manipulation crucially depend on the domestic context, public framings are not really about the crisis itself (and/or a diagnosis of its causes and effects), but about using the crisis as an example, or an excuse, to promote other political

goals. A distant crisis thus creates a political opportunity and is exploited, but not necessarily to justify or call for action related to the crisis. Especially in the case of Hungary, Brexit was molded and framed to fit into the government's existing world view. The way a distant crisis is framed and discursively (re)presented may therefore reveal existing political preferences of the government and opposition.

## Notes

1. This rhetoric was not in line with the actual state of the Czech administration's preparations for Brexit, which were slow and unsystematic, with the government repeatedly emphasizing that it is the responsibility of companies and individuals to prepare.
2. References to Czech and Hungarian government and opposition sources are listed in an online appendix available at <https://doi:10.1080/10758216.2021.1915162>.
3. As in the Czech case, actual official preparations for Brexit were sporadic at best in Hungary, and did not go beyond providing advice to citizens and companies.
4. This rhetoric of blaming the EU is similar to what the Hungarian government did during and after the 2015 migration crisis. Although the government's framing of migration was very different than that of Brexit, portraying it as an immediate national security threat (Bocskor 2018; Cantat and Rajaram 2019), it was instrumentalized in very similar ways to attack the EU for its perceived failings and the unfair way in which it treats certain member states.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the editors of the *Problems of Post-Communism* and the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments on earlier versions of the manuscript. All errors of course remain ours.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

Monika Brusenbauch Meislová's contribution to the paper was supported by the Czech Science Agency [project 19-10214S].

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