

NON-EUROPEAN EUROPEAN UNION MEMBER STATES

An Analysis of the Effect of European Identity Denial by the European Union on Czechia and Hungary

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Abstract This paper explores the European Union (EU's) influence on its member states' national identities through its membership criteria using a case study of the Czech Republic and Hungary. Recognising the EU as the primary authority—or even gatekeeper—of European-ness and the European identity, the paper compares how the EU acts as an identity denier toward Czech and Hungarian national identities and how that subsequently impacts these two nations' self-perception and political behaviour in a European context. Ultimately, it concludes that there are two determinants explaining the difference between the Czechian and Hungarian reactions to this denial: the national identity's receptiveness to the EU's European identity and the strength and aim of the EU's denial.

Keywords: European Identity, Identity Denial, Hungary, Czech Republic, EU Conditionality

I. Introduction

In July 2025, the attorney general of the European Court of Justice accused Hungary of violating EU-values by banning LGBTQ+-related content from schools and television (Ockhuijsen, 2025; Rankin, 2025). Viktor Orbán's government is accused of violating EU law and being uncooperative more often, but the accusation that Hungary violates fundamental EU values is quite interesting. After all, it is a more value-laden and emotive accusation that implies that Orbán's Hungary is in some way not European enough in the eyes of the EU. What it means to belong to Europe though, is arguably an unanswered question and the EU's biggest challenge: although many argue that the EU has outlined its understanding of Europeanness through its liberal democratic membership criteria, it is clear that this version of European identity is not shared by all (McDougall, 2007; Mos, 2020). Hopes of member states' national identities converging and accepting the EU's values have proven illustrious. A list of member and candidate states, among which Hungary, identify as European despite not fitting the EU's understanding of Europeanness.

This paper tries to shed light on some of the consequences of that discrepancy between self-perceived Europeanness and EU-defined European identity. The research question is therefore: "Why did Czechia and Hungary respond differently to the denial of their European self-identity resulting from differences with the European identity embedded in the EU's membership criteria?" The relevance of Hungary is clear, as it has become the leading challenger to the EU's values (Mos, 2020). Czechia is selected as a case study as it provides for a compelling subject for a comparative study between the two states for various reasons. Firstly, Czechia and Hungary were both part of the Habsburg Empire for a very long time which had the twin effect of fundamentally reshaping their cultures, political systems, and the functioning of governance, while simultaneously inspiring a nationalist-like movements for political autonomy and cultural distinctiveness (Cohen, 2007; Vermes, 2014). More importantly, both countries fall within Kundera's (1984) conception of Central Europe, a region that is historically and culturally deeply tied to Western European civilisations but was politically separated from Western Europe in the Cold War era. From a Western perspective, they have ended up on the 'wrong side of history.' Kundera (1984) suggest that this has fostered a feeling of injustice or cultural displacement for Central European societies, leading them to reaffirm their Europeanness by emphasising those cultural and historical ties that previously tied them to the West (Kundera, 1984). Though this paper does not apply Kundera's (1984) framework, his argument highlights a crucial similarity between Czechia and Hungary beyond having a similar historical

trajectory: a deep-rooted sense of historically and culturally belonging to Europe. Simultaneously, Czechia is considered as having Europeanised way better, which makes the two countries compelling subjects for a comparative study about the different successes and limits of the Europeanisation of their identity (Baun et al., 2006; Petrovic & Solingen, 2005).

The paper first outlines a theoretical framework explaining the importance of Europeanness, the EU's role in defining it, how the EU defines it, and how this can lead to identity denial. After analysing the case studies, the paper concludes that there are two determinants explaining the difference between the Czechian and Hungarian reactions to this denial: the national identity's receptiveness to the EU's European identity and the strength and aim of the EU's denial. In doing so, this paper is situated in the overlapping zone between the academic disciplines of political science, international relations, and political sociology. It draws upon the discipline of political science in the sense that the paper requires an understanding of the how the EU operates as a political entity concerning things like integration, membership criteria, and competencies. At the same time, since the paper concerns the interaction between international actors and states, it falls within the discipline of international relations. Finally, the paper draws upon the field of political sociology to understand the political identities and preferences of the Czech and Hungarian societies in a European context. These three disciplines provide the basic understanding required for this paper's analysis on European identity denial on Czechia and Hungary.

2. Theoretical Framework

A shared identity is important because it is a necessity for successful European cooperation. As constructivist scholars emphasise, a common identity is necessary for collective action (Cook-Huffman, 2021). Conceptualising European integration as large-scale collective action including many states and peoples, it becomes evident that this also holds up for the EU; if the EU is to cooperate and fight challenges collectively and effectively, this must be supported by a common identity.

'Europeanness' is not a straightforward geographical description. This identity is linked to perceived wealth, development, and civilisation. States thus often want to be recognised as European. This status partially stems from material factors—like European wealth or development—but largely results from Orientalist beliefs, which portray Europe as the peak of civilisation and development while non-Europeans are seen as barbaric and underdeveloped (Arat-Koç, 2010; Said, 1993). Simultaneously, Europeanness has become strongly associated with EU

membership (Guibernau, 2011; Mayer & Palmowski, 2004). In day-to-day discourse, the terms ‘Europe’ and ‘European Union’ are used interchangeably despite clear geographical differences (Kip et al., 2010). Similarly, former communist-led states portray their accession into the Union as their ‘return to Europe’, indicating that even states often define Europeanness by EU membership (Brodský, 2003; Khorishko & Horlo, 2021). Therefore, the EU has effectively become a gatekeeper of Europeanness; it has a lot of authority in recognising claims to Europeanness by granting membership or candidacy (Guibernau, 2011; Mayer & Palmowski, 2004). Thus, the EU has also acquired an important stake in defining Europeanness. That constitutes this paper’s first core premise: through the importance of EU membership to Europeanness, the EU has become an authority in recognising and defining Europeanness.

Identity construction inevitably involves defining membership criteria (Demmers, 2016). The EU’s membership requirements, the Copenhagen criteria, stipulate that member states should have a functioning democracy, a strong rule of law, and respect for human rights and minorities, (Dudley, 2020; Haar, 2024). By defining these liberal democratic membership criteria, the EU has essentially defined the EU identity as one of liberal democracy. The Copenhagen criteria further require member states to accept the obligations of membership as defined in the Treaties, indirectly meaning that they have to give up certain sovereignties to EU competencies (Haar, 2024). Therefore, scholars argue that some degree of supranational governance is also part of the EU’s identity (Coman & Leconte, 2019; Timmermans, 2016). Shortly, the EU’s identity is characterised by liberal democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and, to a limited extent, supranational governance. This is the second premise. In line with premise one, the EU has thus by extension defined European identity as liberal democratic and supranational through the Copenhagen Criteria. It is noteworthy that the EU has other ways to delineate its version of European identity beyond these criteria, such as academic and educational programmes, cultural heritage policies, and even the depictions on Euro coins and bills (Calligaro, 2013). However, the debate over how the EU *communicates* its understanding of European identity is outside of the scope of this paper.

Defining these criteria also means implicitly defining the out-group as the opposite of these characteristics, a process called Othering (Demmers, 2016; Joffe, 2007). The EU has thus also defined its Other as a lack of commitment to liberal democracy and supranational cooperation (Arat-Koç, 2010; Tzanelli, 2008). Though Othering is not always explicit, the EU sometimes Others explicitly, for example, when it tells a state that it is not abiding by the Copenhagen criteria, essentially saying that the state is an out-group member (Arat-Koç, 2010;

Warkotsch, 2008). Due to its influence in defining Europeanness, the EU is capable of Othering states not just as non-EU, but as non-European (Arat-Koç, 2010). This constitutes the third core premise.

However, the EU's version of Europeanness is contested. Despite agreement that EU membership is crucial to Europeanness, some actors define it not through the EU's political values but through ethnicity, religion, geography, or simply other values (Katzenstein & Checkel, 2009; Paasi, 2001). Thus, the understanding of European identity as defined by the EU, constituted by the Copenhagen criteria, is not widely accepted. This manifests itself in states that self-identify as European and feel they belong in the EU, while not fitting the Copenhagen criteria. Building on premise three, the EU is Othering these states as non-European, effectively amounting to identity denial (Arat-Koç, 2010; Salminen, 2022). Thus, the EU denies the Europeanness of self-identified European states that do not fit the Copenhagen criteria.

Gustafsson (2015) proposes four possible reactions to identity denial on a state level. Firstly, a state can accept the denial and change its self-identity. In reality, this is an unlikely strategy; few politicians will openly contradict national self-identity. Secondly, a state can accept the denial and make an effort to conform to its self-identity. This constitutes a form of normative power: upon being denied European self-identity, a state will reform to better fit the Copenhagen criteria and gain recognition as European (Haukkala, 2008). Thirdly, a state can refute the denial and try to convince the denying party that its self-identity is actually correct. Finally, a state can refute the denial and start othering the denier, denying the denier's self-identity, and convincing third parties that they are correct.

3. Analysis

3.1 Czechia

Czechia is considered to have successfully integrated into the EU and Europeanised its governance (Baun et al., 2006; Petrovic & Solingen, 2005). Czechs saw their accession as their 'return to Europe' and a confirmation of their Europeanness (Brodský, 2003). However, the EU did critique Czechia on its adherence to the Copenhagen criteria, effectively denying Czech Europeanness. How does this denial rhyme with the successful Czech Europeanisation?

Post-communist Czech national identity centred on a sovereign Czechia, belonging to a democratic and civilised Europe (Brodský, 2003; Chlup, 2020). This identity and simultaneous appeal to Europeanness was built on two fundamentals: history and Othering. Historically speaking, Czechs substantiated their Europe-

anness through centuries of cultural, religious, and philosophical exchanges they had with Western Europe (Brodský, 2003; Esparza, 2010). Moreover, Czechs emphasised their brief democratic experience during the First Czech Republic (1918-1938) to highlight their Europeanness (Brodský, 2003; Esparza, 2010). The inclusion of sovereignty in the national identity stemmed from the lack of sovereignty Czechia had during prior centuries, being dominated by Austria-Hungary, Germany, and the Soviet Union (Chlup, 2020; Meredith, 2022). The Othering of the Soviet-communist past further consolidated the national identity. Czechs sought to define themselves as the opposite of this traumatic historical period and, since the EU was essentially the opposite of the Warsaw Pact, democracy and Europeanness were further highlighted (Brodský, 2003; Katzenstein & Checkel, 2009). Since 2000, Czechs have, however, increasingly defined national identity ethnoculturally, emphasising language, background, and cultural practices, instead of through political participation in democracy (Nedomová & Koštelecký, 1997; Vlachová & Řeháková, 2009). Religious identity is consistently excluded from Czech national identity because it is a highly secular country (Buben & Kouba, 2023; Vlachová, 2019). All in all, Czechs felt they fit the mould of Europeanness and EU membership based on these identity elements.

However, the EU challenged Czech Europeanness through the Copenhagen criteria twofold. Firstly, the EU was outspoken about the lack of political rights for Roma minorities (Blitz, 2011; Marden, 2004). Their treatment directly contradicted the emphasis on liberal democracy and human rights in the Copenhagen criteria. As per the theoretical framework, the EU's critique of the adherence to the membership requirements is effectively a denial of Czech Europeanness as constructed by the EU. Secondly, Czechia has consistently been highly Eurosceptical and has obstructed further European integration, for example by not adopting the Euro (Esparza, 2010; Kopecký, 2004). Admittedly, the EU cannot force a member state to participate in further integration beyond past steps of integration. However, as supranational governance became one of the EU's self-identity characteristics, such sovereigntist attitudes have been criticised by Brussels as being anti-European (Coman & Leconte, 2019).

In response, Czechia adhered to a weakened mix of Gustafsson's (2015) second and third strategy. In line with strategy two, Czechia gave into the denial and tried to live up to the EU's version of Europeanness by implementing various policies supporting liberal democracy and human rights (Bönker, 2020; Sirovátka & Bartáková, 2011). However, these reforms have been fairly shallow and declaratory, as societal and institutional discrimination has not changed substantively, implying that the effect of strategy two has been limited to the governmental level (Cashman, 2017; New & Merry, 2010). When it comes to the issue of sov-

ereignty, Czechia has not budged to normative power: the desire for sovereignty is so strong that Czechia has continued to be quite obstructionist to this day (Aydin-Düzgit et al., 2020; Kratochvíl & Sychra, 2019). Since Czechia has upheld its claim to Europeanness, this comes down to strategy three, which means refuting the denial and continuing the claim on the denied identity, though Czechia has not sought to convince the EU that its self-identity is right.

Czechia's combination of these strategies is largely explained by the discrepancies between its national identity and the EU's conception of European identity as well as by the EU's relative acquiescence. The liberal democratic reforms demanded by the EU likely found fertile ground in Czechia because they aligned with Czech democratic self-identification and the Othering of their communist past. The fact that support for European integration is the weakest among communist parties and strongly supported by the anti-communist ones confirms this (Baun et al., 2006). However, the fact that few Czechs had actually experienced liberal democracy at the time that post-Soviet Czechia began its approach to the EU and that they increasingly defined Czech identity through an ethnocultural lens might have undermined true substantive liberal democracy, explaining why strategy two was chosen but failed to deliver fully. The EU's supranational character has, however, found strong opposition in Czechia because it is diametrically opposed to the emphasis on sovereignty (Kratochvíl & Sychra, 2019). The fact that Czechia chose the relatively soft strategy three instead of the antagonistic fourth strategy can be explained by the fact that the EU's denial of Czech Europeanness based on sovereigntist tendencies has been relatively limited, probably because the EU has little legal basis to infringe upon sovereignties outside the Treaties. All in all, Czechs only succumbed to normative power if the EU's demands were in line with the national identity. Moreover, Czechs did not stop considering themselves European despite the discrepancy between EU's conception of European identity and Czech identity.

4.2 Hungary

Despite Hungarian leaders' proclamation of a 'return to Europe', Hungarians were highly sceptical of integration (Khorishko & Horlo, 2021). Today, nationalist Prime Minister Orbán actively obstructs the EU and forwards another conception of Europeanness (Coman & Leconte, 2019). Where do the fault lines between Hungarian nationalism and European integration lie?

Post-1989, the state's identity was defined as a sovereign and civilised nation for ethnic Christian Hungarians (Örkény, 2005). Hungarians saw their civilisation as developed and as old as time, though it had been suppressed by the Ottomans, Habsburgs, and Soviets, which is why they thought highly of sovereignty (Kovács

& Leipnik, 2008; Örkény, 2005). The criteria Hungarians ascribed to Hungarian identity were highly ethnocentric, bordering xenophobia, thus focusing on race, language, and religion, which in the Hungarian case was Catholicism (Bozóki & Ádám, 2016; Örkény, 2005). In line with this ethnocentric view, Hungarians valued liberal democracy and universal human rights lowly (Örkény, 2005). This also explains the resistance against EU membership: the sovereigntist, ethnocentric national identity is difficult to combine with the supranational, liberal democratic nature of the EU (Örkény, 2005).

However, the Hungarian political elite convinced the Hungarians of European integration through three narratives. Firstly, they used the perception of the great, historic Hungarian civilisation along with the entrenching of Orientalist beliefs to assert a claim to Europeanness: Hungary was civilised, just like Europe, while the East was barbaric and uncivilised (Kovács & Leipnik, 2008; Lindquist, 2019). Secondly, they presented accession as consolidating Hungarian sovereignty instead of limiting it, arguing that it protected Hungary from influence by Russia and Turkey, respectively the Soviet and Ottoman successors (Batt, 2001). Thirdly, accession was presented as a solution to the 'Greater Hungary' problem. Many ethnic Hungarians did not live within the Hungarian state but in bordering ones, which nationalist Hungarians saw as a rift in their great nation. EU membership would soften the borders with neighbouring countries and was presented as a way to 'reunify' the Hungarian nation (Batt, 2001; Cram, 2009). Through these narratives, EU accession and the Europeanisation of governance were presented as strengthening the Hungarian nation, despite the differences between national identity and the EU's Europeanness (Cram, 2009).

This creative, but perhaps contradictory narrative unravelled when Orbán came to office and undid many of the Europeanising reforms. Orbán won the elections with an ethnonationalist message, capitalising on discontent with the ruling pro-EU parties (Anghel & Jones, 2024; Fabry, 2019). Subsequently, Orbán upended the rule of law and liberal democracy, mobilising people for illiberal policies by invoking the Christian ethnonational identity and discriminating against those who do not fit this mould (Bánkuti et al., 2012; Scheppele, 2022). To no one's surprise, the EU has been very critical of this violation of the Copenhagen criteria, taking Hungary to the Court of Justice of the European Union, withholding funding, and threatening to take away Hungary's voting rights in the Council (Anders & Priebus, 2021; Camut & Moens, 2023; Zambracki & Glied, 2020). Following the theoretical framework, this amounts to a denial of Hungarian Europeanness as conceptualised through the Copenhagen criteria.

Orbán did not budge to the EU's normative power, rather picking Gustafsson's (2015) fourth strategy. He has forwarded his own version of Europeanness,

arguing that he is fighting for ‘true’ European values (Coman & Leconte, 2019; Lindquist, 2019). According to Orbán, Christian and familial values—quite conservative values opposing the EU’s multiculturalism and liberal democracy—are truly European values (Fekete, 2016; Sadecki, 2022). He also argues that true Europeaness is defined by national pride and sovereignty instead of supranationalism and poses that the Hungarian model of ethnocentric governance is better than liberal democracy because it supposedly ensures true representation of the nation (Coman & Leconte, 2019; Lindquist, 2019). Additionally, they Other and depict the EU as a threat to this ‘true’ Europeaness (Coman & Leconte, 2019; Lindquist, 2019). Hungary has thus not withdrawn its claim to Europeaness, but formulated its own understanding of it, ironically by using the same terminology of democracy and sovereignty (Mos, 2020). Facets of Orbán’s contested version of European identity are echoed and reaffirmed by various other actors, ranging from the PiS Party in Poland to the FPÖ in Austria, and on international conservative political platforms, such as the Conservative Political Action Conference (Coman & Leconte, 2019; Mos & Macedo Piovezan, 2024; Sadecki, 2022). The Hungarian strategy is thus to reassert Hungarian Europeaness by forwarding another definition of it, to Other the EU as not truly European, and to seek third-party support for the Hungarian argument.

The reason Hungary went this route was likely because the other strategies were not feasible due to the discrepancy between the national identity and the EU’s Europeaness. Strategy one, giving up a claim to Europeaness, is not possible because it would undermine the national identity based on the great Hungarian nation belonging to civilised Europe. Strategy two, accepting the EU’s normative power and reforming, is not feasible because of the direct contradictions between the EU’s criteria and Hungarian national identity. The pre-Orbán government managed to strike a bridge between this national identity and the demanded EU reforms, but this ultimately did not undo the underlying contradiction between ethnocentric sovereigntism and liberal democratic supranationalism. Strategy three was not feasible because Hungary was not going to convince the EU that it actually was living up to the EU identity without reforms; the illiberal system led by Orbán is simply too different to the Copenhagen criteria. Moreover, a weakened version of strategy three like the one Czechia took, basically amounting to just staying silent over the denial, is not possible because the EU’s denial has material consequences through the sanctions. That leaves the fourth, aggressive and revisionist option.

5. Discussion: Implications & Conclusion

In reaction to the EU's effective denial of self-identified Europeanness, Czechia chose a strategy of succumbing to normative power (strategy two) and ignoring the denial without changing course (strategy three), while Hungary and its allies actively started forwarding its own definition of Europeanness and denying the EU's Europeanness (strategy four). Two main determinants of strategy choice can be distilled from the analyses above: the national identity's receptiveness to the EU's European identity and the strength and aim of the denial.

The first determinant is the national identity's receptiveness to EU values and reforms, the ability to accept those without changing the national identity. The Czech case highlights this perfectly: the EU found fertile ground for liberal democratic reforms because Czechs self-identified as democratic. However, the EU's criticism of Czech sovereigntism largely fell on deaf ears, as Czechs simply self-identified with sovereignty. Thus, Czechs only adopted the EU's version of Europeanness if it did not contradict their national identity. Additionally, the Czech national identity is not staunchly religious or ethnocentric, making it harder for politicians to mobilise people against liberal democratic values. This also allows us to understand why Hungary's reaction was more revisionist: its national identity was too contradictory to the EU's identity and simultaneously provided a perfect ethnocentric platform to generate hostility against the EU's values.

The second determinant is the strength and aim of the EU's denial. In Czechia, verbal disapproval only became tangible, material denial on the issue of liberal democracy, which was exactly where Czech national identity was receptive to such pressure. On the issue of sovereignty, where Czechia was not receptive, strong denial was not possible: the EU does not have the legal basis to impose further integration. In the Hungarian case, the strength of denial and non-receptiveness of the national identity combined for the worst: the EU sanctioned Hungary exactly on those points at which the national identity was directly opposed to the EU's values. Thus, the strength of the denial, resulting largely from the legal bases on which the EU can operate, combined with the elements on which the denial is taking place are important determinants of the difference between Czech and Hungarian strategies.

These conclusions have a few implications for the interaction between Europeanness and European integration. National identity is seemingly more rigid than presumed and nations will not simply overrule their identity for a European one. National identity is perhaps better seen as a precondition of the adoption of a European identity as conceived by the EU, rather than something susceptible to Europeanisation. This is not to argue, in a discriminatory or deterministic man-

ner, that certain identities do not belong in Europe or the EU because they are diverging from the EU's version of Europeanness. National identities can change over time and nationalist politicians come and go. However, these acknowledgements do not take away the risk, even the likelihood, that a state with a 'divergent' national identity to the EU's Europeanness can undermine the formation of a shared identity among EU member states. After all, it is all too easy for politicians to invoke and uphold this national identity, especially when facing one of today's many crises, which in turn causes friction with the EU's liberal democratic and supranational values. Thus, the EU should deeply understand the national identities of its candidate members and evaluate whether they are fit to join the European Union in the near future, so as to not undermine the Union's common identity construction.

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