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Cooperation and Security: Examining the Political Discourse on Natural Gas Transit in Ukraine and Slovakia

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic appeared in the midst of developing the European Green Deal, the most ambitious project to decarbonise the EU's economy to date. Among other issues, the project highlighted the challenges connected to the long-term role of natural gas as a fossil fuel in the European economy. Moreover, the changes to the gas architecture caused by the development of new import infrastructure (especially Nord Stream and its extension, which is currently under construction) put additional pressure on the transit countries, mainly of which are linked to the Brotherhood pipeline. These have been strong supporters of natural gas utilisation and harsh critics of new pipelines that circumvent their territories, as they consider energy transit to be an important part of their energy sectors. This research examines the political discourse on gas transit in Slovakia and Ukraine in order to identify the main arguments connected to these positions. The paper examines a total of 233 textual units from both countries for the period 2014–2018. It concludes that, while Ukraine sees transit predominantly through the lens of cooperation with the EU and other actors, the Slovak political discourse considers gas transit in terms of energy security and the availability of gas for the national economy.

Keywords: European Union; decarbonisation; discourse; natural gas; Slovakia; transit; Ukraine

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted not only global health, but also all aspects of society and economy, including the energy sector [1,2]. While, in many areas, of this sector the pandemic has highlighted existing dilemmas (for instance, energy poverty [3]), it has also created new challenges, one of the main ones being the nature of the post-pandemic recovery [4]. While some actors argue that economic recovery needs to be prioritised over decarbonisation, thus supporting the business-as-usual model [5], others claim that the recovery presents a unique opportunity for the "greening" of economies [6]. Within the European Union (EU), the pandemic appeared in the midst of developing the European Green Deal, the most ambitious project to decarbonise the EU's economy to date [7]. It fostered a discussion about the utilisation of those energy sources that aspire to decrease the EU's carbon footprint; however, there is no unified position on their current or future use among the EU member states. In addition to nuclear energy, the traditional challenger of European energy policy unity [8], the long-term differences in (among others) the share of renewables [9] and the long-term role of natural gas in the European economy are also being questioned with renewed intensity.

Natural gas has been highlighted as a bridging fuel [10,11] by its proponents, but its critics claim that it is still a fossil fuel with a very limited place within the carbon-neutral economy the EU strives for. This destabilises the position of natural gas in the EU energy mix from a long-term perspective.

However, even from a short-term perspective, there has been significant development within the European gas market, dependant on imports from third countries [12]. Most significantly, the import architecture of gas from the Russian Federation—the EU's main supplier—has been modified [13]. The expansion of the Nord Stream pipeline (Nord Stream 2) has had an especially important impact on the relations between EU member countries and the Russian Federation [14]; namely, once finalised, it will further alter the direction of the gas flow within the EU, bringing new transit capacity to some member countries (for example, Germany and the Czech Republic) while lowering the capacity of others. While the transit volumes through the traditional infrastructure—especially the Brotherhood pipeline—have significantly decreased already after the first two lines of Nord Stream went online in 2011, the commencement of Nord Stream 2 (and Turk Stream 2) would make the Brotherhood pipeline non-essential for Russian export to the EU [15].

As a result, Nord Stream 2 is criticised by the countries that would be impacted by such changes in the transmission architecture [16]. Among them, Ukraine and Slovakia stand out as the countries that would be the most affected since the Brotherhood pipeline directly traverses their territories, on which it has the largest capacity (the pipeline divides into two branches in Slovakia). These countries are therefore likely to lose the largest volume of gas once transit via this pipeline has been terminated. Indeed, existing analyses argue that the two will be highly negatively impacted by the commencement of Nord Stream 2, while transit via Poland, the most vocal critic of the project among the EU member states (it also contested the exemptions granted to Nord Stream at the Court of Justice of the EU [17]), will improve "its position as an important transit country" [18]. Although a contract was signed between Russian (Gazprom) and Ukrainian (Naftogaz) gas companies at the end of 2019 to continue transit via the Brotherhood pipeline to Europe, this was achieved only after long and tedious negotiations [19]. Moreover, it is most unclear what will happen when the deal expires at the end of 2024.

The transit of natural gas is an important dimension of the energy policies of Slovakia and Ukraine [20,21], and both countries have done a lot since the 2009 gas crisis to support it: they have improved their interconnectivity to create new transit opportunities and suggested innovative solutions to improve the utilisation rates of their gas transmission infrastructure (Ukraine started storing gas for European companies, while Slovakia proposed the Eastring pipeline). There is an underlying assumption that the reason behind this strong support of transit is the belief that it improves energy security [22,23] (this differs from the concept of transit security, see [24]). However, a more thorough exploration can help us better understand the positions of those countries that highlight the importance of natural gas transit via their territory and are critical of changes to the existing natural gas infrastructure architecture. Therefore, this paper looks at Slovakia and Ukraine, countries significantly impacted by ongoing changes in the European natural gas import infrastructure. The paper examines the official political discourses connected to the transit of natural gas and identifies the main patterns behind its strong support. The main research question of the paper thus asks how natural gas transit is portrayed in the political discourses of these two countries.

The paper thus aims to contribute to the growing literature examining energy policy discourse within the EU context that has studied, for example, the low-carbon energy futures of Germany [25], climate policy [26], the development of EU energy diplomacy [27], shale gas policy [28], or the role of renewables in the energy mix [29]. Analysis of discourse can help us to understand how actors frame their claims and what kinds of arguments they use when trying to win public support for their energy policy-related ideas. Discourse analysis has also been used not only to examine issues connected to natural gas [30], its potential place in decarbonised energy systems [31] and the discussions within EU member states on natural gas imports from Russia [32], but also Russian discourse on the export to EU member countries [13]. While gas transit is a partial focus of these analyses, to the best of our knowledge, the discourse on natural gas transit within European settings has not been analysed in detail previously. There are a few papers that have examined discourses connected to selected transit issues [33,34]; however, these are now dated. By examining discourse from the 2014 to 2019 period, we hope to contribute to the discussion on the latest developments and provide detailed insight into

the positions of two counties that have a special place in the transportation of natural gas from the Russian Federation to the EU.

The following section discusses the current position of Russian gas in the EU, while the third looks at the Slovakian and Ukrainian gas transmission infrastructure. The fourth section presents the research design of the paper, and the fifth presents the results of our investigation. The conclusion summarises our main findings and proposes possible avenues for future research.

2. Natural Gas and Its Import to Europe from Russia

Although renewable energy sources are at the forefront when it comes to energy transition and decreasing the carbon footprint, natural gas still plays a very important role in energy mixes. Its proponents claim that, from a short- and medium-term perspective, natural gas actually assumes a crucial position in this process as it produces much less CO_2 than other fossil fuels. As such, it can serve as a bridge between the current energy system, focused on fossil fuels (especially coal), which produce large quantities of greenhouse gasses (GHG), and a new system that will be fully based on renewables and produce limited to no GHG [35]. Although there is a lively discussion on whether it really does present this type of bridge (many factors come into play, such as leakages during extraction, carbon tax, the possibility of infrastructural lock-in, etc. [36]), natural gas currently plays an important role in the energy mixes of many countries. The discussion is further complicated by including nuclear energy [37]; however, this remains outside the scope of this paper.

In 2019, global natural gas production hit a new record of 4088 billion cubic meters (bcm), thus recording a 3.3% growth compared to 2018 and sustaining a trend of continuous annual expansion since the 2008/2009 economic crisis of 2.7%. Similarly, global natural gas consumption grew by more than 1.5% in 2019, compared to the previous year [38]. The Russian Federation is the second largest natural gas producer in the world after the United States and continues to be the largest gas supplier to the EU, providing 176 bcm [39] or 40.1% of gas supplies to its member states in 2018 [40]. There are three main supply pipelines of Russian gas to the EU (Brotherhood, Yamal, and Nord Stream) and several smaller ones (supplying Finland, Estonia, and Lithuania). This export architecture has undergone changes in the last period, shifting the volumes of transmitted gas between these pipelines based on non-technical and non-economic reasons. Russia utilised its energy supplies for its geopolitical goals regarding Ukraine [41,42], with the Kremlin strengthening this approach after the 2014 military intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea by proposing and developing new gas pipelines (Turkish Stream, Nord Stream 2) in order to decrease the relevance of Ukraine as a transit country [43].

Due to the development of alternative export routes (especially Nord Stream) [13], transit via Ukraine (via the Brotherhood pipeline) has significantly decreased from 128.5 bcm in 2006 to 86.6 bcm in 2018, although the lowest level so far was 67.1 bcm in 2015 [44]. However, the pipeline still transports significant volumes of Russian gas to the EU and, for the time being (the finalisation of Nord Stream 2 being slowed down by US sanctions [16]), transit via Ukraine is still crucial for Gazprom to fulfil its obligations towards its European customers, especially during the periods of Nord Stream 1 maintenance [45]. Liquefied natural gas is not a viable option in the short term for Gazprom as a replacement for the rest of the Brotherhood capacity, since it comes with severe political and technical restraints [46].

Russia is trying to remain a relevant fossil fuel supplier to Europe, although challenges of a different kind have recently emerged. With a renewables-based energy transition on the way, Russia is trying to secure its place on the European energy market and remain relevant despite rising climate change awareness within the EU [47]. However, this market has also undergone a profound legal and structural reorganisation, with Europe looking for new ways to manage relations with its energy suppliers, including the Russian Federation [48]. This newly created, liberalised model based on the principles of a free market economy—openness, competition, and privatisation—does not work frictionlessly with Russia, and has derailed its energy relations with the European states throughout the past decade [13].

Ukraine's geographic location between the Russian Federation and the EU on the one hand, and its previous disputes and current military conflict with Russia on the other, place the issue of gas transit at the centre of its national public debate. At the same time, the issue of stable and secure gas supplies is the focus of the EU's energy debate as the Union seeks to ensure strategic energy partnerships with production and transit countries [49]. Transit is thus important not only for Ukraine, but also the EU countries, especially those that transport gas deeper into the EU (Slovakia being a prime example [22]). The next section provides basic information on the transmission systems of Ukraine and Slovakia, thus creating a background for the analysis of the two countries' official discourses on gas transit.

3. Ukrainian and Slovak Gas Transmission Systems

Despite the diversification of energy supply routes from Russia, Ukraine is still one of the main transit countries of Russian gas to Europe, while Slovakia has (from the perspective of available capacity) the largest entry point of Russian gas to the EU. Arriving from Ukraine, the Brotherhood pipeline enters the EU at Slovakia's Veľké Kapušany compressor station [50] and divides on its territory into two branches, which go to the Czech Republic (and further on to Germany) and Austria (and further on to Italy and France).

The Ukrainian gas transmission system (see Table 1) is 38,550 kilometres long with a total capacity of 5443 MW, making it one of the longest and most powerful transmission systems in the world [51]. The system spreads over the entire territory of Ukraine and is connected to the transmission systems of Belarus, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, the Russian Federation, and Slovakia. The Ukrainian pipeline in Dashava (Lviv region) became the Soviet Union's first cross-border pipeline, connecting Ukraine with the Polish entry point of Tarnow. Extensive construction began in the 1940s and by the 1980s Ukraine became a transit corridor of gas to Europe, with its main Urengoy–Pomary–Uzhhorod Pipeline, widely known as the Brotherhood pipeline. For a long time, the Ukrainian system was one-directional, receiving gas from the east (the Russian Federation and Belarus) and transporting it to the west/south (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Moldova, and Romania). A small part of the imported gas volume was purchased and withdrawn for domestic use.

Table 1. Characteristics of Slovak and Ukrainian gas transmission system and their gas consumption (2019). Source: [50,51], Naftogaz.com.

	Length of the System (km)	Capacity (mcm [1]/day)	Compressor Stations Outputs	Total Consumption (bcm)	Dependency on Gas Imports (%)	Share of Gas in Energy Mix (%)
Slovakia	2270	195	600 MW	5.0	98	24 [2]
Ukraine	38,550	309	5443 MW	29.8	31	27

[1] Million cubic meters; [2] Data for 2017.

Although disputes over the pricing of gas and transit fees have been a feature of the energy relations between Ukraine and Russia since the dissolution of the USSR, transit functioned without evident disruptions thanks to the various deals made between Kiev and Moscow during the 1990s [52]. However, the two main gas crises in 2006 and 2009 significantly marked not only the relations between these two countries, but also—given their impact on EU member states—their relations with the EU [8]. Despite its harsh impact on several EU member states, the 2009 crisis was eventually resolved; however, the Ukrainian Naftogaz later initiated a case at the Stockholm Court of Arbitration, asking for a review of the conditions and obligations of the contracts it had signed with the Russian gas supplier Gazprom. After a further worsening of mutual relations in April 2014, caused by the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine stopped importing gas from the Russian Federation and developed reverse flows with Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, which enabled it to buy natural gas on European markets [44].

However, because "energy relations between Ukraine and Russia were highly politicized and not effectively institutionalized" [53], Moscow was constantly threatening to block the reverse flow and completely stop gas transit through Ukraine. This further worsened the relations between the EU and the Russian Federation [54], although the EU was also critical of Ukraine for not implementing

the necessary energy reforms fully and in a timely manner [44]. Gas transit is considered to be an important part of Ukrainian energy policy and the loss of its transition status would present a major challenge for the country's energy security [55]. Therefore, Ukraine is interested in maintaining this status in the long term and transporting as much natural gas from the Russian Federation to Europe as possible [56].

The Slovak–Russian gas relations date back to 1967, when Slovakia (then part of Czechoslovakia) started to import gas under the Yamburg and Orenburg agreements [57]. Slovakia was chosen for the development of the transit system to western Europe because Austria had well-developed gas infrastructure close to the Slovak border, which was easily connected to (what is now) the Brotherhood pipeline. As the demand for Russian gas increased during the 1970s and 1980s, both the Ukrainian and Slovak sections of the Brotherhood pipeline were scaled up to allow for the transit of increased volumes of natural gas to customers in western Europe [22]. The Veľké Kapušany entry point at the Ukraine–Slovak border thus became the biggest entry point of Russian gas into the EU. After the 2009 gas crisis, Slovakia launched a programme of diversifying its gas supply routes and sources, as the absence of alternatives to the then one-directional Brotherhood pipeline was considered to be one of the main reasons for the harsh impact of the crisis. A reverse flow with Austria and the Czech Republic was developed and a new pipeline connecting Slovakia to Hungary was built [58]. A planned interconnector with Poland is currently still under construction. Moreover, in September 2014, a reverse flow between Slovakia and Ukraine was established on a pipeline connecting the two countries that runs parallel to the Brotherhood pipeline [59].

After Nord Stream 1 was commenced in 2011, the volume of gas transported via the Brotherhood pipeline from Ukraine decreased; however, a significant volume still flows via the Slovak system, also thanks to the gas imported from western Europe to Ukraine (see Table 2). While 74 bcm of gas was transmitted through Slovakia in 2011, the volume decreased to 46.5 bcm in 2014 and rose to 66.5 bcm between August 2018 and July 2019 [50]. From 1 January 2020, the newly created Operator of the Gas Transmission System of Ukraine and the Slovak transmission system operator Eustream signed a new cooperation agreement to continue gas transit [19], which enabled the transit of Russian gas to Europe, as well as the transit of gas from Europe to Ukraine via the reverse flow with Slovakia.

Table 2. Transit of natural gas via Slovak and Ukrainian transmission system (in bcm). Source: [50], Naftogaz.com.

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Slovakia	66.4	71.4	74.0	56.5	58.5	46.5	55.8	60.6	64.2	34.2 [1]	66.5 [2]
Ukraine	95.8	98.6	104,2	84.3	86.1	62.2	67	82	94	87	90

[1] 1 January 2018 to 31 July 2018; [2] 1 We have done layout for your paper, so please do not change the format of references. August 2018 to 31 July 2018.

The transit of natural gas is considered to be a crucial dimension of Slovak energy security as it creates a double connection to the Russian Federation, the country's main gas provider. Thanks to transit, Slovakia is not only the buyer of a small volume of gas, which does not necessarily prevent Gazprom from breaching its contractual obligations, but also the country helping to fulfil the far greater supply agreements in western Europe, which Gazprom is sure to honour [60]. Maximising the utilisation of the Slovak transmission network is therefore one of the main goals of Slovak energy policy [61].

4. Methods and Data

This paper utilised discourse analysis to examine the official discourse on natural gas transit in Slovakia and Ukraine. Based on Foucault's ideas about looking beyond the purely linguistic approaches to discourse and including a broader context and institutional practices in the analysis, this method aims to uncover the motives behind actors' behaviour and show how they interpret reality under different circumstances [28,62,63]. Discourse can be defined as a "specific ensemble of ideas, concepts,

and categorisations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities" [64]. The individual producing the discourse units is important as not all individuals have the same position within the discourse formation. When discourse-producing actors are political representatives, especially those in dominant positions, discourse analysis can shed light on the crucial milestones of national policy formation.

Political discourse can therefore shape the national interests of a particular entity in both the domestic and international arenas. Van Dijk even claims that political practices are "virtually exclusively discursive" and that political ideologies are largely reproduced by discourse [65]. Discourse analysis identifies the conditions of socially accepted and shared views on problems, as well as the foundations, potentials, and limits of social actions and changes. This allows discourse analysis to go 'beyond the text' and examine it within a particular broader context. Consequently, analysing political discourse at the level of the highest state representatives allows one to draw general and explanatory conclusions on how policies are formed.

In order to analyse the policy discourse connected to gas transit via Slovakia and Ukraine, we borrowed the conceptualisation of four structural dimensions, or "analytical categories describing the policy environments faced by the actors", developed by Aalto et al. [66]. These categories help map the empirical environment assessed by the actors and thus establish "a platform to study energy policy processes in their relevant settings in a comprehensive and systematic manner" (Ibid.). In other words, the four dimensions—resource economic, financial, institutional, and ecological—enable us to shed light on what influences energy policy formation (in our case, support for gas transit). We examined our data (see below) through the prisms of the four dimensions to find out which of them is crucial for shaping the gas transit policies of the examined countries. However, it should be noted that these are ideal types and we used them as starting points for organising our data in a coherent way.

The resource economic dimension represents the material facilities connected to energy extraction, development, and transport, as well as the physical geography which shapes transportation and distribution [66]. The financial dimension embraces all the economic variables relating to a particular policy environment. These include investments, financial barriers, expenses, losses, financial gains, price variations, etc., both for private entities and the state, as well as national and international markets. The third dimension is represented by the institutions linked to "the regulation of production, distribution, and consumption of energy resources" [66]. Both formal and informal institutions participate in creating this particular structural dimension, which also embraces regional, state, and international arenas. The fourth, the ecological dimension, encompasses environmental issues related to the production and consumption of energy. The environmental externalities of energy production and consumption, as well as the emergence and development of green technologies to minimise the ecological footprint of the energy sector, are issues covered by this dimension.

To examine the political discourse connected to gas transit in Slovakia and Ukraine, the research presented in this paper used a unique set of data stemming from official documents and speeches produced by the top executive bodies of both countries. Due to the differences in their political regimes, in the Slovak case, this was the government of the Slovak Republic, while the Ukrainian case included both the government of Ukraine and the presidential office of Ukraine. The primary data were collected from the official websites of these actors for the period from 1 January 2014 to 31 December 2018. The data consisted of different types of texts, including speeches, reports, press releases, statements, interviews, summaries, etc. The start date was chosen because the beginning of 2014 was marked by increased tension between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, leading to the annexation of Crimea, and the development of a reverse flow with Slovakia, which impacted the transit policies of both Ukraine and Slovakia. Several keywords and their combinations were used (gas, gas transit, transit of gas, transit) to choose the appropriate data. Slovak, Ukrainian, and English languages were used since additional texts on the Ukrainian case were available in English. The data consist of 173 textual units from Ukraine in English and Ukrainian (27 units were collected from the presidential and 146 from the government website), and 60 textual units in Slovak collected from the government website.

In the next step, we identified all the claims within these textual units connected to gas transit. We identified a total of 1258 claims in the Ukrainian case and 241 claims in the Slovak case. These were first coded with the help of the previously described conceptualisation; then, a finer inductive coding system was used to organise them into more detailed categories within the four dimensions. In the following section, we present the results of our analysis, which unveil the main features of the political discourse on natural gas transit in Slovakia and Ukraine.

5. Results

Figure 1 presents the number of textual units and individually coded claims in both Slovakia and Ukraine for the analysed period. The paper examines a total of 233 textual units that deal with natural gas transit, within which we identified 1499 claims. In this section of the paper, we examine the data from the two countries separately, as we are interested in national positions towards gas transit. At the same time, a comparative perspective would allow us to see the common traits and differences between the two countries connected by gas pipelines (not only Brotherhood, but also the smaller bi-directional pipeline used for reverse flow to Ukraine from Slovakia), which create the background for cooperation in the gas transit sector. The paper examines this comparative perspective in the concluding section.

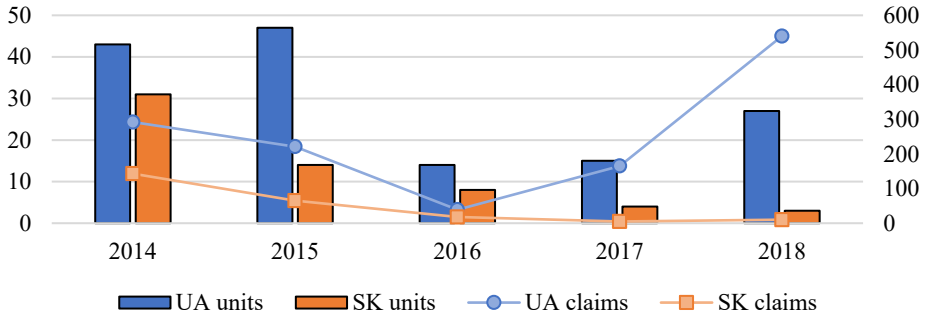

Figure 1. Number of textual units (**left**) and claims (**right**) analysed for both examined countries. Source: Authors' calculations. Note: Ukraine (UA); Slovakia (SK).

The Ukrainian official discourse is marked by an uneven distribution of textual units and claims during the analysed period (Figure 1). This most likely mirrors not only the escalation of the conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation within the energy sector, but also the situation more generally. On top of the annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in eastern Ukraine, in April 2014, Gazprom cancelled Ukraine's gas discount, granted on 17 December 2013, increasing the price for domestic use in Ukraine. The multiple disputes between the two countries were patched up by the European Union acting as an intermediary between Ukraine and Russia; however, the future of gas supplies to Europe via Ukraine was still unclear at that time [67]. These security concerns were generated thorough discourse on energy policy—including energy transit—in Ukraine. By 2016, the situation was stabilised to a degree, with Ukraine ceasing to purchase natural gas from Russia [44]. However, the verdict of the Stockholm Arbitration Court from 2017 (in June 2014, Gazprom and Naftogaz filed multi-billion-dollar claims against each other with the Stockholm Arbitration Court), which satisfied Naftogaz's claim for USD 4.63 billion compensation, did not sit well with the Russian Federation. Since Gazprom did not comply with the court's decision, Ukraine began freezing the company's assets, which led to new threats from Russia to halt gas supplies to Ukraine; this, in turn, brought about a new round of gas conflict between Kiev and Moscow.

Consequently, gas transit issues once again became more prominent in 2018, as evident not only in the increase in the number of textual units mentioning natural gas transit, but also in the frequency with which transit is mentioned in those texts. There was a sharp rise in the absolute number of claims in 2018 compared to the previous year, as well as in the average number of claims about gas transit in individual textual units compared to the rest of the examined period. Naftogaz and Gazprom reached

an agreement in December 2019 (this served as the foundation for a new deal on transit concluded later that month), with the latter paying USD 2.9 billion and the former dropping another lawsuit against Gazprom, filed in Stockholm in 2019 [68].

We see a somewhat different pattern in the case of Slovakia, characterised by a linear decrease in the number of textual units mentioning gas transit since 2014. Transit was high on the political agenda in 2014 due to concerns about possible transit disruption, caused by increased tension between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Moreover, the reverse flow from Slovakia to Ukraine via the so-called 'small reverse' was established in September 2014 (entry/exit point Budince), which further increased the interest in transit issues. Veľké Kapušany is considered to be the 'big' entry point to Slovakia from Ukraine; however, due to legal disputes with Gazprom, it was not possible to create a reverse flow to Ukraine, which would turn it into an entry/exit point. To strengthen the transit capacity in the future and prepare for a possible termination of transit via the Brotherhood pipeline, the Slovak Government supported the Slovak transmission system operator's (eustream) idea to develop a new transit pipeline, Eastring [59].

Figures 2 and 3 present the results of our analysis for both countries and show the dominant themes in their political discourses during the examined period. The conceptualisation proposed by Aalto et al. [66] served as the main framework (internal rings), which was supplemented with a set of more detailed codes we developed within the four dimensions, based on an inductive approach (external rings). This allowed us to keep the structure of our argumentation and, at the same time, look deeper into the individual issues. As a result, we were able to differentiate between the various aspects of some broader issues. For example, Nord Stream 2 was widely discussed from several perspectives: we identified the financial and institutional dimensions within the Ukrainian political discourse (with 2.4% and 8.2% of total claims, respectively). The same dimensions were also identified in the case of the Stockholm arbitration, which was under way during the examined period. We did not find any subcategories within the environmental dimensions as these were only marginally represented in the examined discourses.

In the Ukrainian case, the institutional dimension clearly dominates the discourse with almost 61% of claims (Figure 2). The rest of the claims are divided among the resource geographic and financial dimensions, with the ecological dimension mentioned in only 10 claims (out of 1257—0.8%; green section). The majority of claims (24%) belong to the international cooperation subgroup (as part of the institutional dimension), connected to Ukrainian efforts to cooperate with the EU on gas transit matters, follow the EU's advice when it comes to gas market regulation (i.e., implement EU rules in this area), engage in trilateral negotiations (including those with Russia and the EU as mediator), and gradually integrate Ukraine's gas transmission system into the European system.

The institutional dimension also includes the second and third most frequently identified claims: national and Ukraine–Russia affairs (mentioned only slightly more frequently than Nord Stream 2 within the institutional dimension). The two were mentioned in 13.5% and 8.4% of claims, respectively. National affairs include claims related to domestic energy market reforms, the Naftogaz unbundling, fighting corruption, and gas consumption reduction, all of which are connected to the domestic institutional impact on the transit of gas. Ukraine–Russia affairs include claims about the pressure from the Kremlin, accusations against Gazprom, the justification of Naftogaz's actions, Gazprom's interruption of the gas supply, and non-reliance on Russia as a fair partner. Cooperation on transit issues between the two states is inevitable, even though transit faces constraints on both sides.

Of special interest are also the claims connected to Nord Stream 2 (almost 10.6% of claims) and the Stockholm arbitration (a total of 10.6% of claims—in absolute numbers, only one claim more than in the previous subgroup), as they are divided into two dimensions: the institutional and the financial. Indeed, these two topics are connected to the relationship with other actors via various institutions, as well as to financial issues (loss of transit fees due to new lines of Nord Stream and compensation claims at court). However, transit fees, as such, were mentioned only to a very limited degree within the Ukrainian discourse.

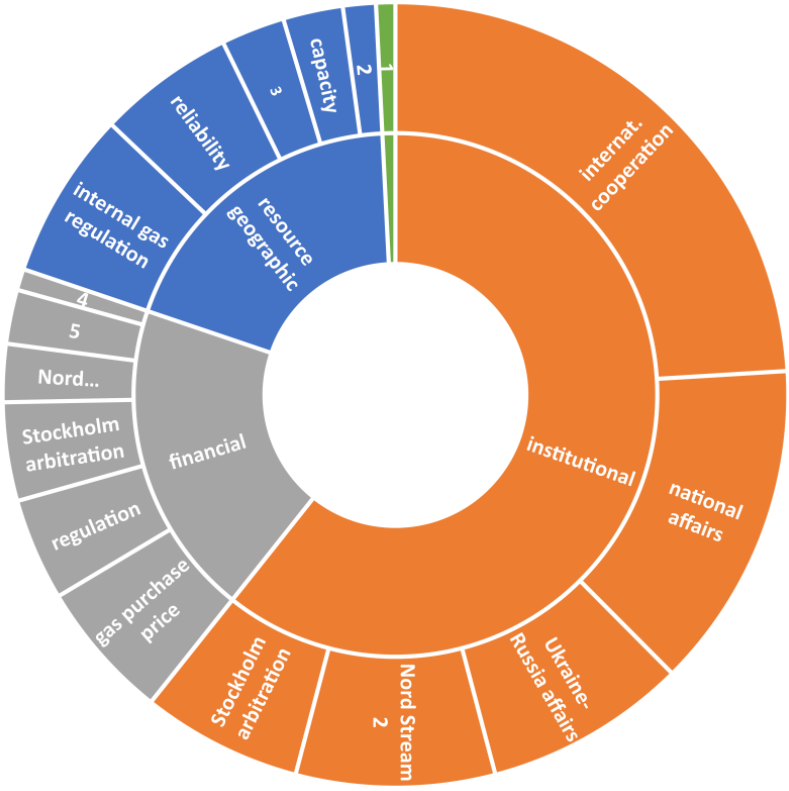

Figure 2. Political discourse on gas transit in Ukraine, 2014–2018. Source: Authors' calculations. Notes: ecological (1); safety (2); supply diversification (3); transit fees (4); foreign investments (5).

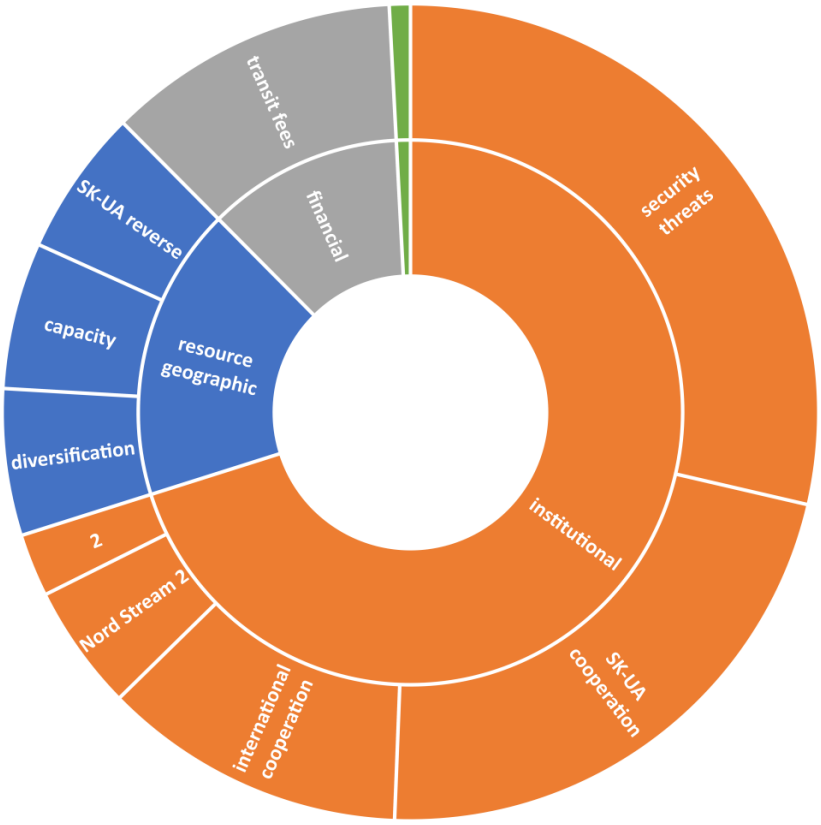

Figure 3. Political discourse on gas transit in Slovakia, 2014–2018. Source: Authors' calculations. Notes: ecological (green colour) (1); internal affairs (institutional) (2).

In general, the Ukrainian discourse on natural gas transit in the period from 2014 to 2018 focused mostly on the institutional relations between various actors. While the majority of the discourse revolved around cooperation with international actors (predominantly the EU), an important role was also played by domestic institutions and the wide range of relations with the Russian Federation. The latter also entered the Ukrainian discourse via the financial prism as the discourse on Nord Stream 2 and the Stockholm arbitration had an important institutional, as well as financial dimension. The rest of the financial, but also other issues, constitute only a minor part of the discourse (32.8% of identified claims).

The Slovak political discourse on gas transit was also dominated by the institutional dimension (Figure 3). However, its main focus was on energy security and the different threats connected to gas transit, especially its interruption, leading to a cut-off of supplies due to a conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. We identified a total of 28.6% of claims in this subcategory. However, the cooperation with Ukraine was the second largest subgroup with 22% of claims, which can be linked to another group of claims from the resource geographic dimension on reverse gas flow between Slovakia and Ukraine. Reverse flow was a significant issue for the relations between Slovakia and Ukraine during the first half of 2014, prior to its establishment in September of that year. Together with three other subgroups within the same dimension, the institutional dimension was responsible for 70.1% of all identified claims.

Institutional relations with international actors thus constituted the majority of the discourse on gas transit in Slovakia. Although the main subgroup within this dimension covered problematic relations (threat of gas supply interruptions), several other parts focused on institutional cooperation as a solution to energy transit issues (cooperation with Ukraine and other international actors or domestic institutional changes). Only the claims related to Nord Stream 2 (5% of claims) referred to the negative consequences of the project's commencement.

Embodying the physical aspects of transit infrastructure, the resource geographic dimension was evenly distributed between three subgroups: the previously mentioned reverse flow between Ukraine and Slovakia, which can be linked to institutional cooperation between the countries; the discourse on diversification; and the discussion on the physical capacity of transit. While the first subgroup focused on the technical aspects of the reverse flow (then under construction), the other two focused on the technical aspects of transit infrastructure (mostly pipelines, but also storage facilities) and the technical capacities (and their availability) for alternative gas supplies. Rather surprisingly, financial aspects were not a significant part of the Slovak discourse on transit in the studied period, although this issue seemed to be an important part of the development of the reverse flow with Ukraine. We identified only 11.6% of claims that belong to the financial category, covering issues such as transit fees, costs, gains, and losses. The ecological dimension was identified in only two claims (0.8% of claims), which makes it—as in the case of Ukraine—only a marginal topic within the Slovak discourse on gas transit.

The data indicate that the political discourse on gas transit in Slovakia is predominantly focused on relations to other actors involved in the process. However, negative expectations prevailed as the main part of the discourse was linked to security issues—i.e., the threat of gas supply interruptions caused by the conflict between the Russian Federation (being the supplier) and Ukraine (being the transit country). At the same time, the cooperation with Ukraine on the development of the reverse flow that would allow Ukraine to become independent from Russian gas supplies was also an important part of the Slovak discourse. Financial issues were not at the epicentre of the discourse, while ecological issues were a footnote at best.

6. Conclusions

This research examined the political discourse on natural gas transit in Ukraine and Slovakia, two countries that are important for the transit of gas from the Russian Federation, the EU's main gas supplier, to the EU member states. The main finding of the paper is that the dominant feature of Ukrainian discourse is cooperation with various international actors (predominantly the EU), while the

Slovak discourse on gas transit evolved around issues connected to the energy security and stability of gas supplies to the country. Other issues, including financial and technical ones (capacity, transit fees, etc.) are secondary in both cases; environmental topics were basically missing from the transit discourse (only 0.8% of all claims were connected to these topics). This is an important contribution to the current research that analyses the discourse on the position of natural gas within the EU [31], relations between the Russian Federation and the EU [30,63] as well as individual member states [32], but so far has paid only very limited attention to the discourse on transit. This research contributed to our knowledge of the discourse connected to natural gas by shifting its focus to transit, that is, due to the developments around the Nord Stream 2 pipeline [14,15], which is, again, at the centre of energy policy.

Therefore, we believe that this research has very important policy implications as it shows that Slovak discourse on gas transit focuses on energy security even after a decade of the diversification programme (still ongoing) that has provided the country with alternative supply routes and sources of natural gas [20]. Contrary to this, Ukrainian discourse focuses on more complex issues of international cooperation and goes beyond a one-dimensional understanding of transit as a guarantor of energy security. Therefore, we can expect different behaviours from the representatives of these two countries at the international level when negotiating on the transit issue.

While this paper identified the main traits of the discourse on gas transit in Slovakia and Ukraine, it has certain limits that shall be addressed by future research. First, the present research is exploratory and thus does not examine the sources of the identified discourses. Future research should thus concentrate on explaining the differences between Slovak and Ukrainian transit discourses by looking into their sources. Second, discourse is a complex issue that goes beyond the official documents on which the present research is based. While media discourse on energy policy in the case of Slovakia has been examined [8], a comprehensive analysis of media discourse on gas transit can provide further insight into the issue. Third, the Brotherhood pipeline is only one of several pipelines that supplies gas to the EU. To gain a broader picture that would lead to more general conclusions and would have wider policy implications, future research should concentrate on discourses related to other gas pipelines (for example, Yamal or Nord Stream). Such a comparative approach would also be able to shed light on the differences in the way in which gas transit is approached by different countries and in different settings.

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