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Rethinking Small State Paradigm: Nuclear Pragmatism in Slovakia under the European Green Deal*

Araştırma Makalesi /Research Article

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ABSTRACT: *This article argues that the binary of compliance versus resistance does not explain Slovakia's behaviour, but domestic economic structures, technological capabilities, and geopolitical vulnerabilities characterise its adaptation to European Union (EU) climate commitments. It synthesises small state and securitisation theories, and the empirical findings drawn upon semi-structured elite interviews with representatives from Slovak government institutions, European organisations, industry associations, trade unions, think tanks, and academia show that the 2022 Russian attack on Ukraine has heightened a securitised understanding of climate governance in Slovakia. In this context, the concepts of resilience, energy security, competitiveness, and decarbonisation come to the forefront. The results also indicate that nuclear energy is not only seen as a low-carbon technology and an energy-security instrument but also as a strategic asset, which supports cooperation in the context of EU climate governance, diversification of suppliers, technological continuity, and industrial competitiveness. Thus, nuclear pragmatism emerges as a preference of Slovakia. The article also adds to the debates about the European integration process, EU climate governance, energy security, and the potential for small states.*

Keywords: *EU climate governance, Energy security, Industrial competitiveness, Securitisation, Slovakia*

Küçük Devlet Paradigmasını Yeniden Düşünmek: Avrupa Yeşil Mutabakatı Kapsamında Slovakya'da Nükleer Pragmatizm

ÖZ: *Bu makale, uyum ve direnç ikiliğinin Slovakya'nın davranışını açıklamadığını, bunun yerine iç ekonomik yapıların, teknolojik yeteneklerin ve jeopolitik kırılganlıkların Avrupa Birliği (AB) iklim taahhütlerine uyumunu karakterize ettiğini savunmaktadır. Küçük devlet ve güvenlikleştirme teorileri sentezlenmekte ve Slovak devlet kurumları, Avrupa örgütleri, sanayi birlikleri, sendikalar, düşünce kuruluşları ve akademiden temsilcilerle yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış elit görüşmelerden elde edilen ampirik bulgular ise, 2022 Rusya'nın Ukrayna'ya saldırısının Slovakya'da iklim yönetimine ilişkin güvenlikleştirilmiş bir anlayışı artırdığını göstermektedir. Bu bağlamda dayanıklılık, enerji güvenliği, rekabet gücü ve karbonsuzlaştırma kavramları ön plana çıkmaktadır. Sonuçlar ayrıca, nükleer enerjinin sadece düşük karbonlu bir teknoloji ve enerji güvenliği aracı olarak değil, aynı zamanda AB iklim*

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yönetimi bağlamında iş birliğini, tedarikçi çeşitlendirmesini, teknolojik sürekliliği ve endüstriyel rekabet gücünü destekleyen stratejik bir varlık olarak da görüldüğüne işaret etmektedir. Bu nedenle, nükleer pragmatizm Slovakya'nın bir tercihi olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Makale ayrıca Avrupa entegrasyon süreci, AB iklim yönetimi, enerji güvenliği ve küçük devletlerin potansiyelleri hakkındaki tartışmalara katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *AB iklim yönetimi, Enerji güvenliği, Endüstriyel rekabet gücü, Güvenlikleştirme, Slovakya*

1. Introduction

The European Green Deal (EGD) has transformed the nature of the climate governance programme into a project of industrial restructuring and transition of the European economy. The EGD is also putting decarbonisation at the core of industrial competitiveness, energy markets, strategic technologies, and the future role of European Union (EU) economies in a new geopolitical landscape. This policy landscape was drastically changed by the 2022 Russian attack on Ukraine. New conditions did not affect the European decarbonisation targets but gave a new rationale. As crucial dimensions of climate policy, the objective of reducing reliance on external energy sources, strategic autonomy, and resilience to geopolitical tensions became prominent. Hence, energy security turned into an organising principle of European climate governance. Whereas the EGD resulted in strong demands for adaptation, the smaller, open, and industrially exposed member states found themselves to balance EU-level climate agreements with their economic needs and the shifting geopolitical landscape.

Here, Slovakia is particularly instructive because it is one of the most industrialised European countries relative to its size, embedded in European manufacturing value chains, and to some extent historically reliant on Russian energy supplies. It also has one of the lowest carbon intensities of electricity supply in the EU, as it has the highest proportion of nuclear electricity generation. These features put the Slovak Republic at the competing directions of decarbonisation, energy security, industrial competitiveness, and technological transformation. To date, smaller member countries of the EU have been seen as policy followers, whose behaviours are predominantly determined by structural asymmetries and institutional dependencies. Such a perspective does not enable understanding of three research questions explored in this article. The first question is: how does Slovakia adapt to the EGD under conditions of economic and geopolitical uncertainty? Second, how has Russia's operation in Ukraine reshaped Slovakia's interpretation of climate governance and the relationship between decarbonisation and energy security? Third, how does a structurally constrained small state exercise purposeful engagement within EU climate governance despite limited agenda-setting capacity?

This article contends that Slovakia's engagement with EU climate implementations cannot be understood through the distinction between compliance and resistance. Slovak actors interpret the fulfilment of EU climate commitments by prioritising

their industrial competitiveness, technological potential, and geopolitical risks. Therefore, the adaptation was taken up in terms of energy security, resilience, affordability, and strategic autonomy, particularly since the 2022 Russian attack on Ukraine. In this context, the policy preference of Slovakia over nuclear energy is conceptualised under the term nuclear pragmatism, which sets the strategic role of nuclear energy as a multifunctional resource to serve climate objectives and, more generally, economic and geopolitical interests.

The article brings together the small state theory and securitisation theory in a single theoretical frame. The small state theory provides a lens for understanding how structurally constrained member states adapt to EU climate governance while balancing domestic economic and political priorities. Securitisation theory, in turn, explains how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine reinforced the connection between climate governance and energy security by elevating resilience, affordability, and strategic autonomy alongside environmental sustainability. Together with these perspectives, the article examines how Slovak policy actors interpret and justify adaptation to the EGD in connection with its economic implications and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with particular attention to the relationship between decarbonisation, energy security, industrial competitiveness, and the strategic role attributed to nuclear energy.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design centred on semi-structured elite interviews with representatives of Slovak ministries, European institutions, industry organisations, think tanks, trade unions, and academia. The interviews are analysed through discourse- and frame-oriented interpretive policy analysis, enabling the study to reconstruct how key actors understand the relationship between climate governance, energy security, industrial competitiveness, and technological choice. Rather than treating interview evidence as objective descriptions of policy reality, the analysis examines how political and institutional actors construct strategic narratives through which policy priorities, constraints, and adaptation strategies are legitimised.

It is important to note that the main goals of the article are not to provide a comprehensive overview of Slovakia's climate performance or to present an in-depth analysis of the feasibility of alternative decarbonisation pathways. Likewise, it does not offer a full policy evaluation of the EGD, REPowerEU, Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), or Slovakia's national energy and climate plans. Furthermore, this is a single-country case study and therefore does not seek generalisation across the EU. The analysis is interpretive and centres on how political, bureaucratic, industrial, and expert actors understand and justify policy choices rather than evaluating the effectiveness of particular climate or energy policies.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature and presents the contributions of the article. Then, it develops an integrated theoretical framework, combining small state theory and securitisation.

The subsequent section outlines the research strategy and methodological approach. The empirical analysis then examines how Slovak political, bureaucratic, industrial, and expert actors interpret the EGD. The final section concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for research on EU climate governance, small state adaptation, and the relationship between decarbonisation and energy security.

2. Existing approaches and remaining gaps in Slovakia's adaptation to the EGD

The article gathers the research areas of EU climate governance, small state adaptation, energy security, and the political economy of decarbonisation. This review is held in three analytical strands: (1) studies from the angles of discourse and governance, (2) scholarship on energy security and nuclear energy, and (3) research on nuclear governance in Slovakia.

The first branch investigates the effects of domestic political discourse and governance concerning European climate policy. In the period of COVID-19 and the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, Figulová and Vicenová (2025) analyse the shift in political discourse, showing how nationalist narratives emerged and how climate policy became excluded from domestic political discourse. The challenges of governance for the energy transition are commented on by Figulová and Gondášová (2023), and the progress of Slovakia in the process of achieving objectives of the circular economy is analysed by Levický et al. (2021). Leal-Arcas and Burstein (2023) discuss energy decentralisation and smart grids as they relate to other issues of technological modernisation and energy security. The studies recognise climate governance as a topic of political debate yet seldom offer a limited explanation of national adaptation strategies.

Another literature expands on energy security and nuclear energy. Mez (2012) looks at nuclear energy in a wider sustainability transitions perspective. Aszódi et al. (2023) find a decrease in emissions and a higher level of security of the power supply if the European countries' electricity generation scenarios include nuclear power. Similarly, Prăvălie and Bandoc (2018) highlight several environmental and energy security benefits of nuclear energy, and Liu et al. (2023) demonstrate how nuclear electricity has helped in carbon emissions reduction in the long run. Also, at the European level, nuclear electricity, as presented by Petruška et al. (2022), has a statistically significant negative correlation with carbon emissions per capita. In Central and Eastern Europe, perceptions regarding nuclear energy are changing towards a security rather than an environmental policy perspective. Despite the fact that Visegrad countries currently rely on and, even in the near future, will be attached to imported nuclear fuel and reactor technologies, they believe that nuclear energy is a strategic solution helping them to reduce import dependency on fossil fuels, as mentioned by Hebda and Mišík (2024). Since Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, the importance of nuclear energy has been further underlined. According to Pan (2023), the war heightened the sheer reliance of Eastern and Central European countries on Russian technology and fuel in the nuclear sector.

The question of what place nuclear energy can play in a country's energy mix becomes how to slowly phase out the Russian-fuelled element. Likewise, Kratochvíl and Mišík (2020) highlight the public perception of the connection between the energy shortage and the image of vulnerability in the sense of strategic autonomy and resilience. The relevance of nuclear power is evident in these studies, which is not limited to climate change but also includes the reliability of the energy system, the security of supply, and energy system resilience. They are mostly focused on changing energy-security preferences and not on understanding the implications of these developments for wider trends of adaptation to EU climate governance.

The third approach is dedicated to the Slovak nuclear energy policy. These studies rely on Slovakia's historical, technological, and infrastructural underpinning of its continued dependence on nuclear power. The authors Mišík and Oravcová (2022) claim that nuclear energy has a special status in Slovakia's energy policies due to its share in electricity production, security of supply, and decarbonisation. The dependence on Russian energy remains a structural constraint in Slovakia, as elucidated by Zucconi (2024), and these remaining problems due to the Soviet legacy of infrastructure create vulnerabilities, as pointed out by Takáč (2018). While this scholarship convincingly explains why nuclear energy remains central to Slovak energy policy, it pays less attention to how nuclear energy becomes embedded within broader strategies of adaptation to EU climate governance as a response to its implications for industrial competitiveness and the geopolitical changes triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

This article addresses these gaps in three respects. First, it reconceptualises Slovakia not simply as a policy implementer but as an adaptive small state operating within the EU multilevel governance. Second, it combines insights from small state theory and securitisation to explain how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine reshaped the interpretation of EU climate governance by reinforcing the link between decarbonisation, energy security, and industrial competitiveness. Third, drawing on elite interviews with bureaucratic, industrial, and expert actors, it shows how nuclear energy has come to occupy a central place in Slovakia's adaptation to the EGD and its response to the limitations of European climate governance on competitive power.

3. An integrated framework of securitised climate governance

This article develops an integrated framework to explain how a structurally constrained EU member state adjusts to supranational climate commitments under conditions of weakening industrial competitiveness and geopolitical disruption. The framework therefore does not treat small state theory, securitisation, and nuclear pragmatism as competing explanations. Small state theory specifies the constraints and opportunities within which adaptation occurs. Securitisation explains why energy security, affordability, and supply resilience become increasingly prominent through which adaptation is pursued. Within this sequence,

nuclear pragmatism is conceptualised as the particular role attributed to nuclear energy within Slovakia's adaptive response in search of reconciling decarbonisation, energy security, and industrial competitiveness.

The notion of a small state finds its place in the domain of International Relations and European integration studies. The classical definitions of small state are based on material factors like population, geographical size, economic performance, military strength, and international influence (Baehr, 1975; Crowards, 2002; Katzenstein, 2003; Maass, 2009). These viewpoints link smallness to the conditions of possessing less bargaining power, being dependent on international institutions, and experiencing the lack of ability to exert unilateral influence. Within the EU, however, material size alone does not determine political relevance. Administrative expertise, institutional access, coalition opportunities, issue salience, and network embeddedness may partially compensate for limited structural power (Thorhallsson and Wivel, 2006; Panke, 2010; Bailes and Thorhallsson, 2012). More recent scholarship treats smallness as relational and issue-specific rather than as a fixed material condition (Thorhallsson, 2006; Nasra, 2011; Grøn and Wivel, 2011; Baldacchino and Wivel, 2020). A member state may possess limited influence across the EU agenda as a whole but retain greater room for manoeuvre in policy areas where it has concentrated interests, technical knowledge, or access to supportive coalitions. Small state behaviour should therefore not be reduced either to passivity or to successful policy influence. The more analytically relevant question is how structurally constrained states adjust their behaviour when they cannot independently determine the rules governing them.

This perspective is particularly appropriate for Slovakia. Its economic integration into European production networks and dependence on EU regulatory and financial structures limit the plausibility of outright rejection of EU climate governance. Slovakia has an industrial profile and energy infrastructure relying on Russian supplies. By extension, it poses a constraint in designing a uniform approach at home and increases the political and economic costs of implementation. This situation paves the way for a dual condition due to Slovakia being a small country. On the one hand, Slovakia has a lot of interest in keeping the level of alignment with the EU climate commitments. On the other hand, there is a need to adapt itself to the specific economic, technical, and security requirements in accordance with national conditions.

The following indicators may be used to observe the concept empirically. First, individual instruments and plans can be employed to comply with the EU climate targets. Second, a selective differentiation of policy components, in which some of the components are accepted and other components of the policy are challenged, postponed, or redefined, may be revealed. Third, the reconfiguration of implementation trajectories to local industrial, technological, infrastructural, or social areas can be uncovered. Fourth, the justification of affordability,

competitiveness, technological neutrality, resilience, and security of supply can take place.

Small states will not be able to engage in comprehensive agenda-setting actions. They may manifest themselves in the form of selective engagement in very salient areas, efforts to gain flexibility, and the reframing of national preferences in a way that is compatible with the general EU goals. Coalition-building, technical argumentation, and issue specialisation may facilitate such adaptation. Still, it should be noted that these modes of action are treated here as possible strategies rather than as separate concepts requiring independent explanation. The article therefore does not assume that participation in a coalition necessarily demonstrates influence. Instead, coalition activity is relevant insofar as it reveals an effort to protect or legitimise a preferred adaptive pathway.

The article contends that the policy issue to which the state is adapting can be framed through security concerns. Securitisation theory is therefore used to explain how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has altered the hierarchy of considerations shaping Slovak engagement with EU climate governance. According to the Copenhagen School, securitisation occurs when political actors construct an issue as a threat to a valued referent object and seek audience acceptance for policy responses that would otherwise be more difficult to legitimise (Heinrich and Szulecki, 2017). The article is based on a broader understanding of securitisation, which looks beyond emergency measures.

In the field of energy governance, the energy supply can be threatened by physical scarcity, reliance on politically unreliable suppliers, fluctuating energy prices, inadequate infrastructure, technological vulnerability, and geopolitical coercion (Wilson, 2019). Consequently, energy security covers the availability, reliability, affordability, and sustainability (Pascual and Elkind, 2010). In this sense, the Russian invasion of Ukraine did not replace decarbonisation with the concept of energy security. Instead, it paved the way for the reinterpretation of political rationale of decarbonisation. Reducing fossil-fuel dependence could now be presented as the answer to an environmental objectives, geopolitical vulnerability, and economic resilience.

Therefore, the military invasion securitised the context of adaptation. In this connection, actors started to frame dependence on external suppliers as a political or strategic vulnerability. They have also combined energy policies with national resilience, economic security, or exposure to coercion. Here, diversification, infrastructure investment, or technological continuity are justified as security responses. Moreover, climate policy priorities are reordered by placing reliability and affordability alongside emissions reduction. The framework does not assume that all post-2022 energy policy automatically constitutes securitisation. References to high prices or supply shortages alone are insufficient. Securitisation is presented when these conditions are interpreted as threats to broader economic, societal, or

political stability and are used to justify a significant reorientation of policy priorities.

In this securitised context, nuclear power plays a unique role, as it is positioned as being able to achieve more than one objective. The article incorporates the conceptualisation of this orientation termed nuclear pragmatism. Rather than using the term in connection with the nexus of a modest proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Global South and incentives for nuclear disarmament (Adem, 2024), its explanatory power concerning the ecological transition is underlined (Sconfienza and Durand, 2024). For this article, nuclear pragmatism is a policy stance that has maintained a strong reliance on nuclear energy because of its ability to balance energy-system continuity and security, decarbonisation, competitiveness, and minimising geopolitical dependence. It is pragmatic because, in the end, nuclear energy is not being promoted as an ideological commitment or a superior technology. On the contrary, its legitimacy is based on the fact that it is seen as being compatible with various policy goals that are considered to be binding for Slovak actors.

The securitisation of energy resources can be temporary or reversible. Processes of desecuritisation can shift political interaction from conflict towards cooperation (Dağ and Fırat, 2020), while changing strategic conditions may create incentives to reconsider previously securitised energy relations (Fırat and Dağ, 2023). This possibility constitutes an important link to nuclear pragmatism. The context of nuclear pragmatism is heightened by securitisation, but it is not conditioned by a constant threat of a securitised energy environment. In this respect, nuclear power can appear less important as geopolitical relations become settled and energy relations desecuritised. Yet its security rationale is closely connected to its strategic value. The multifunctionality of nuclear energy, covering low-carbon electricity generation, supply reliability, price stability, industrial competitiveness, technological expertise, and compatibility with EU decarbonisation objectives, could sustain its instrumentality for adaptation.

To set apart nuclear pragmatism from the concept of simple support for nuclear energy, the article determines three necessary analytical conditions. First of all, nuclear energy needs to be directly connected to the climate and non-climate goals. A tendency that only relies on emissions reduction, electricity generation, or historical preference would not be considered nuclear pragmatism. Second, nuclear continuity needs to be introduced in compliance with adaptation to the new geopolitical context, such as reducing external dependency, fuel diversification, price stability, or relations with suppliers. Third, nuclear energy should be presented as a means to accommodate nationally specific technological infrastructure and industrial conditions in line with the decarbonisation goals of the EU. The description of nuclear power as a low-carbon, reliable, and economically relevant energy source leads to the operationalisation of nuclear pragmatism.

These indicators distinguish nuclear pragmatism from path dependence. The availability of nuclear power might be due to its historical use but would not necessarily explain the political justification of that reliance. Nuclear pragmatism means that the use of the inherited infrastructure is reinterpreted as a strategic resource under changing climate, economic, and geopolitical conditions. Nuclear pragmatism is, therefore, an interpretive and policy concept concerned with the strategic role assigned to nuclear energy within national adaptation.

The explanatory sequence can therefore be summarised as follows. Slovakia's small-state position and economic embeddedness create strong incentives to remain aligned with EU climate governance but limit its capacity to determine the broader agenda. These conditions encourage the acceptance of common objectives combined with selective recalibration of implementation pathways while promoting its own economic development as a response to the impacts of the EGD on industrial competitiveness. Russia's invasion of Ukraine subsequently securitised the environment within which this adaptation occurred by elevating resilience, affordability, and supplier diversification. Within this reordered policy context, nuclear pragmatism emerged as a nationally specific expression of adaptation through which Slovak actors sought to reconcile climate commitments with industrial and energy-security priorities.

4. Research design and analytical strategy

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design. Looking for the selective recalibration of implementation pathways, the empirical task is not limited to identifying formal policy positions. It also requires examining how actors interpret EU climate commitments, connect them to domestic industrial and energy conditions, and justify particular technological and policy preferences.

Slovakia is selected as a theoretically informative case of small-state adaptation within EU climate governance. It is an EU country characterised by its dependence on the EU manufacturing value chains, energy-intensive production, and the automotive sector. In Slovakia, there is a high level of reliance on nuclear electricity and a considerable dominance of Russian fossil fuels and nuclear technologies, and it is highly vulnerable to the energy-security implications of the geopolitical developments after 2022. Slovakia is an interesting case in regard to its domestic industrial exposures, legacy infrastructure, geopolitical sensitivities, and supranational climate commitments.

Following the selection of the case, potential participants for the interview phase were identified purposively on the basis of their institutional position, professional responsibilities, or expertise relevant to Slovak climate, energy, industrial, and EU policy rather than a statistically representative sampling procedure. Outreach began in November 2025 and continued until June 2026. Elite interviews were conducted between December 2025 and June 2026. A total of nine respondents were interviewed, either in person or online, and two respondents answered the interview

questions in written format. The sample included representatives of two ministries of the Slovak government, one representative of a Slovak governmental agency, one member of the European Parliament, five policy experts, and two representatives of an economic interest organisation. Table 1 summarises the institutional affiliation and profile of each respondent, together with the date and format of data collection.

Table 1: Composition and profile of the elite interview sample

Interview code	Institution type	Interviewee profile / policy domain	Date	Format
EXP-1	Slovak policy/foreign-policy institute	Policy expert; European Affairs / energy policy and climate change	10 December 2025	In person
EXP-2	Slovak policy/foreign-policy institute	Policy expert; European Affairs / energy policy and climate change	14 January 2026	In person
GOV-1	Slovak government ministry	Government official; economic and fiscal policy	21 January 2026	Online
IND-1	Labour/economic interest organisation	Labour representative; employment, industry, and energy policy	12 February 2026	In person
EXP-3	Economic/trade policy organisation	Economic policy expert; exports, competitiveness, and energy	10 March 2026	Online
IND-2	Industrial/economic interest organisation	Industry representative; automotive sector and industrial competitiveness	27 March 2026	Written response/email
EU-1	European Parliament	Political representative; EU climate, energy, and environmental policy	7 May 2026	Online
GOV-2	Slovak government ministry	Government official; environmental and climate policy	12 May 2026	In person
EXP-4	Research/policy organisation	Policy expert; energy and industrial policy	19 May 2026	In person
GOV-3	Slovak governmental agency	Public-sector expert; environmental and sustainability policy	28 May 2026	Written response/email
EXP-5	Academic institution	Academic expert; climate, energy, and European policy	3 June 2026	In person

In addition to the organisations represented in the final sample, outreach covered a broader pool, including Slovak government ministries and public agencies, EU-level institutions and political representatives, business and employer organisations, trade and investment bodies, think tanks, and energy- and innovation-related organisations. Some did not respond, some declined to participate, some initially

indicated an intention to take part but did not confirm the interview, some did not have an appropriate expert available, and others encouraged to contact alternative entities. This resulting sample should not be seen as being representative of all actors that are part of the Slovak climate-energy governance. The final sample was therefore shaped by both purposive selection and respondent availability during the fieldwork phase.

The interviews were composed of open-ended, semi-structured, and theoretically oriented questions. The respondents were asked how to characterise Slovakia's general approach to the EGD; which was the perceived attitude towards the EGD (acceptance, caution, contestation, or adaptation); how the EGD was reflected in the Slovak political and economic discourse; the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on energy security; how nuclear energy was positioned in the context of decarbonisation in Slovakia; and the impact of energy cost and regulatory changes on the perception of industrial competitiveness.

The article employed a process of categorisation, comparison, and interpretive synthesis that was driven by its theoretical framework. There were four phases of the analysis. First, the oral interview transcripts, interview notes, and the written responses were used to identify the central claims. Second, relevant passages were grouped manually according to the three analytical expectations that were developed in the theoretical framework. Third, the answers were compared across institutional categories. The analysis focused on the areas of convergence and divergence between representatives. Fourth, after grouping material, they were interpreted under the concepts of continued support for overarching EU climate objectives in combination with efforts to recalibrate instruments, timelines, technological pathways, energy security, affordability, resilience, supplier dependence in the post-2022, the presentation of nuclear energy in connection with decarbonisation, security of supply, industrial competitiveness, and geopolitical diversification.

The research is grounded in interpretive policy analysis. Accordingly, language is recognised as a medium through which political priorities, institutional constraints, threat perceptions, and policy hierarchies are constructed and contested (Dryzek, 2013; Hajer, 1995; Wagenaar, 2015). To analyse how climate governance is foregrounded and backgrounded some aspects of climate governance, frame analysis is used. Frames are interpretive structures, and actors employ frames to lay out a problem, explain its causes, make assessments, and propose policy recommendations (Entman, 1993; Schön and Rein, 1994; Benford and Snow, 2000; Dewulf et al., 2019). In addition, the discourse analysis is extended to the vocabularies which makes up the meaning of these frames. Based on the conceptual frameworks of Dryzek (2013), Hajer (1995), and Van Hulst et al. (2025), discourse is defined as a collection of ideas, categories, and assumptions which shape interpretations of actors to political and social phenomena. The discourse analysis goes on to explore the respondents' perceptions of Slovakia's climate and energy

choices through the terms security, affordability, resilience, competitiveness, technological neutrality, fairness, and strategic autonomy.

The frame analysis provides more precise definitions of the problem and the proposed solutions, whereas the discourse analysis places these problem definitions and proposed solutions in broader systems of meaning concerning European integration, national vulnerability, industrial development, and energy security. Interview statements are thus not viewed as describing a policy reality that is independent of the interviewee. They are examined as situated statements, in which the respondents describe policy problems, attribute causes, articulate preferences, and legitimise particular courses of action (Crotty, 1998; Roulston, 2010).

5. Slovakia's response to the EGD

Determining the attitude of Slovakia towards the EGD is challenging. It does not fit within a dichotomy between compliance and resistance. Having recognised the overall legitimacy and inevitability of European decarbonisation, most of the respondents had some reservations regarding the implementation. GOV-1 (personal communication, January 21, 2026) describes that Slovak institutions observe initiatives of Brussels, assess their domestic implications, and seek to "mitigat[e] those potentially overly ambitious targets." This statement reveals that EU obligations are not deemed illegitimate, but the state tries to control the impacts of EU measures at home by asking for flexibility when proposed measures are assessed not to overlap with the country's economic conditions.

GOV-2 (personal communication, May 12, 2026), in turn, interprets the EGD as a broad political agreement that has had a pivotal influence on the legislative packages for which it had its own distributive consequences for specific sectors. The respondent shared the observation that the EGD had its first acceptance under better economic conditions, when economic growth was stronger, the availability of funds was not an issue, and distributional conflicts were not noticeable. The "real game changer" came when the commitments were translated into binding obligations, affecting industrial production, mobility, energy costs, and investment decisions. Subsequently, the interviews suggest that the more the EGD is focused on the domestic sectors, the more it is being used for opposition or cautious positions.

EXP-1 (personal communication, December 10, 2025) indicates Slovakia's limited capacity in setting the agenda and its profile as a policy follower. The same respondent argued that Slovak engagement intensifies when a policy instrument directly affects a highly salient national sector. The case of the future of internal combustion engine cars is a good example at this point. Given the importance of the automotive industry, Slovakia participated with the other member countries which wanted changes to the implementation of the proposed phase-out. The available evidence has proven that Slovakia was involved in a coalition and focused its scarce political energies on an issue that was of immediate domestic concern.

Here, Slovakia does not challenge the EGD but becomes more active in certain areas with higher levels of adaptation costs and a possible cooperative environment with more influential states.

This situation was also expressed by IND-2 (personal communication, March 27, 2026). The interviewee says that the sector "does not fundamentally question the need for the transition to a low-carbon economy" but challenges the way and timing of its implementation. The respondent mentioned the absence of economic, technological, and market realities in determining the framework of the regulations. EXP-4 (personal communication, May 19, 2026) had similar sentiments, supporting the underlying objectives of the EGD while criticising aspects of its implementation and their implications for European competitiveness. It is not a contrast between support and opposition but between the acceptance of the objectives and the criticism of the instruments. EXP-5 (personal communication, June 3, 2026) similarly argued that environmental transformation should be understood in connection with energy security and wider socioeconomic change rather than as a self-contained project in the field of the environment. Overall, the respondents recognise the decarbonisation of Europe as a legitimate attempt. Still, they consider a level of differentiation between its constituent parts and agree that there exist pathways in line with the necessities and capabilities of Slovakia.

GOV-1 (personal communication, January 21, 2026) pointed out that positive communication had been available at the initial stage but left its place to the perception of a greater concern. GOV-2 (personal communication, May 12, 2026) similarly contrasted the modernisation frame advanced by civil society and some economic actors with governmental interpretations that increasingly emphasised implementation costs and economic constraints. EXP-1 (personal communication, December 10, 2025) described a widespread domestic framing of the EGD as a "necessary regulation" that "is harming us, but […] ha[s] to [be done] because it is a European policy adopted by the whole EU." This formulation captures that the EGD is weakening European competitiveness while emissions continue to increase elsewhere. IND-2 (personal communication, March 27, 2026) accepted the necessity of transformation provided that it was accompanied by realistic implementation and adequate support. EU-1 (personal communication, May 7, 2026) offered the strongest version of this interpretation by describing the EGD as a very strong modernisation project encompassing environmental, technological, economic, and geopolitical dimensions. These efforts would strengthen Europe's geopolitical autonomy by decreasing vulnerability to external suppliers. These responses reveal that EU membership generates strong incentives for continued alignment. Yet it creates tensions once European climate policy weakens domestic competitive power.

The interviews repeatedly indicate that the post-2022 period changed the language through which climate and energy policy were evaluated. EU-1 (personal communication, May 7, 2026) argued that Russia's invasion clarified the

geopolitical consequences of fossil-fuel dependence, noting that "every single euro" paid to Russia for fossil fuels could contribute to financing aggression. REPowerEU was therefore interpreted not only as a climate or market intervention but also as a response to geopolitical vulnerability. The respondent further distinguished the temporary substitution of Russian fossil fuels with alternative suppliers from the longer-term reduction of fossil-fuel dependence itself. EXP-5 (personal communication, June 3, 2026) described the perceived shift more explicitly by saying that "we changed our understanding from green to securitisation." This statement is important not because it proves the securitisation but because it shows a change in the hierarchy of considerations. The discussion about climate change policy is now beyond the scope of reducing emissions and achieving modernisation.

The answer of GOV-2 (personal communication, May 12, 2026) was that the importance of diversification, resilience, and regional cooperation was recaptured as a result of the war in Ukraine. Also, the respondent revealed that Slovakia's dependence on Russia in terms of energy supply cannot be solved rapidly. Furthermore, the interviewees mentioned problems, such as inherited infrastructure, supplier concentration, and the economic costs of diversification. A longer-range scenario has been drawn from the gas disruption in 2009 by EXP-2 (personal communication, January 14, 2026). The respondent stated that the previous crisis woke them up and resulted in the building of compressor stations, investment in storage capacity, the introduction of emergency law, and increased interconnections with neighbouring states. Subsequently, these measures have helped Slovakia better respond to the crisis in 2022-2023. Slovakia benefited from its access to Norwegian gas, liquefied natural gas, stored supplies, and purchases on European markets. This description of past events makes it difficult to pinpoint the year 2022 as the start of securitisation. It appears that a greater emphasis on the role of supplier diversification for European decarbonisation, strategic autonomy, and industrial strength received attention in earlier years. The evidence, therefore, reinforces and rearticulates the securitised adaptation, rather than simply offering a new securitisation.

The interviews also indicate that the idea of energy security does not just involve physical availability. Affordability, predictability, employment, and industrial viability were repeatedly marked as part of the referent object. IND-1 (personal communication, February 12, 2026) accepted that businesses had to face a considerable rise in energy costs, and the price increase in energy has affected the negotiations on wages, employment, and the stability of industrial production. The respondent also attributes a role for enlarging the electricity generation capacity at home to meet the demand for electricity. Here, a pro-nuclear stance was expressed due to the motivation of protecting the interest of the workforce in the nuclear industry. From this perspective, the social aspect is introduced to the security framing. This part of the interview suggests that domestic acceptance of

decarbonisation to some degree is related to being able to connect this process to the stability of the labour market and acceptable production costs.

GOV-3 (personal communication, May 28, 2026) pointed out that there are additional burdens caused by EU environmental regulations that impair energy-intensive firms in competing against companies in other countries. These firms are expected to achieve greater environmental standards without decreasing productivity or placing an extra burden on compliance expenses. The European energy price is a "major competitive disadvantage" for the EU compared to Asia and the U.S., IND-2 (personal communication, March 27, 2026) said. EXP-3 (personal communication, March 10, 2026) went on to divide this concern into the two components composed of price stability and low prices. The energy expenses should be counted in long-term contracts and pricing strategy. The unpredictability of energy prices is thus a competitive risk for exporting companies. It is an observation which can be included with the analysis of affordability. For industrial actors, energy security does not just mean getting access to electricity but also their ability to foresee the costs in the long term. The accounts give insight into the filtering processes of adaptation which take place in Slovakia due to its economic structure. The prominent place of the automotive sector and energy-intensive production techniques in Slovakia make climate policy inseparable from industrial competitiveness. The highlight of the case is the combination of a high level of industrial exposure and a power grid with a high share of nuclear and hydropower generation.

EXP-4 (personal communication, May 19, 2026) explained that Slovakia has a comparatively low carbon footprint of electricity generation. However, it is at the mercy of high costs of electricity generation in the broader European market. The situation undermines the competitiveness of the European industry compared to countries that have other types of arrangements of electricity pricing. From this perspective, uniform transition instruments may create unequal effects across member states with different starting points. The respondent maintained that further solar expansion in Slovakia would yield limited reductions in emissions once it is compared with investment in a coal-dependent system. Further renewable investments would potentially create additional system costs associated with intermittency and storage in Slovakia. This argument was echoed by GOV-2 (personal communication, May 12, 2026) by acknowledging the necessity to follow differentiated pathways on the basis of geographical, historical, infrastructural, and societal variation among member states and framed this position through the principle of technological neutrality. EXP-2 (personal communication, January 14, 2026) similarly linked Slovakia's comparatively favourable electricity profile to its nuclear base and the termination of coal-fired electricity production.

Nuclear energy provides the clearest evidence for the article's concept of nuclear pragmatism. It allows a nationally preferred technological pathway to be articulated in EU-compatible language. Thereby, common decarbonisation objectives should

be pursued without prescribing an identical technological model for every member state. Across bureaucratic, expert, industrial, and labour organisation interviews, nuclear power was connected to low-carbon generation, supply reliability, projected electricity demand, price stability, industrial competitiveness, and management of geopolitical dependence. EXP-2 (personal communication, January 14, 2026) introduced an ideational distinction between Slovak and some Western European approaches to nuclear power. The respondent argued that anti-nuclear norms are more deeply embedded in parts of Western European environmental politics, particularly in Germany, whereas Slovak attitudes are more strongly structured around reliability, security, and economic necessity. This study makes no systematic comparisons between the Slovak Republic and the other countries of the European Union. The level of acceptance of nuclear power, however, is in line with the literature, which shows a higher level in Slovakia and other Central European countries. The Slovak case, however, is a very particular one in which the respondents consider nuclear infrastructure not to be in conflict with environmental transition but as a component of this purpose.

Nuclear energy is thought to be the backbone of Slovakia's future energy policy by GOV-1 (personal communication, 21 January 2026), especially in the context of a growing demand for electricity associated with the electrification and decarbonisation process. This account overlaps with the conceptualisation of nuclear pragmatism, in which there would be simultaneous linkage between emissions reduction and non-climate goals such as supply adequacy and industrial transformation. In addition, the evidence suggests that nuclear power does not automatically mean the continuation of existing geopolitical relationships. Traditionally, Slovakian reactors have been designed by the Soviet Union and maintained with Russian nuclear fuel, while Slovenské Elektrárne has been seeking other sources from the West, such as Westinghouse, and, of course, with diversification, others from France (EXP-2, personal communication, January 14, 2026).

The combination of technological continuity and supplier diversification uncovers the intention to continue to have nuclear energy while reducing vulnerabilities in the supply lines they have with Russia. This tendency is rather a reflection of nuclear pragmatism than of support for nuclear power. On the one hand, there are the perceived benefits in terms of climate, economy, and reliability. On the other hand, this technology is kept to respond to security concerns due to altered geopolitical conditions. This pattern also provides more concrete evidence of post-2022 adaptive change than general statements about the growing importance of energy security. Supplier diversification constitutes an observable policy reorientation connected to the identification of Russian dependence as a strategic vulnerability. It therefore illustrates how securitisation may operate through long-term changes in procurement and technology governance rather than through the abandonment of ordinary policymaking.

The interviews also indicate that nuclear policy provides Slovakia with a focal issue around which it can coordinate with other member states. EXP-1 (personal communication, December 10, 2025) identified nuclear energy as the central organising principle of Slovak energy policy and referred to Slovakia's participation in efforts to secure recognition of nuclear power within the EU sustainable finance taxonomy. Cooperation with Czechia and particularly France was described as important in this process. Slovakia associated itself with larger and similarly oriented member states in order to defend an energy pathway of high domestic salience. The case is situated within the context of small state scholarship in terms of the claim concerning coalition-based positioning and using technical expertise strategically. EXP-5 (personal communication, June 3, 2026) shares the opinion that Slovakia should look for partners with comparable experience and technological possibilities because of the low weight of its economic power. To the degree that Slovakia is structurally constrained, coalition-building comes out of it. This purposive positioning reveals itself on the basis of selecting issues of high domestic importance, framing preferences in EU-compatible terms, and cooperating with states possessing greater political weight.

The empirical materials support the main argument of the article. First, the combination of alignment and selective adjustment defines how Slovakia engages in the EGD. The path towards decarbonisation seems acceptable, though there is some concern voiced by the representatives of governmental entities, industry, labour, and experts regarding timing, distributional effects, or technological assumptions of particular measures. This pattern corresponds to a nation-specific adaptation pathway. Second, respondents perceive that the post-2022 environment heightened the issues of dependence on suppliers, resilience, affordability, and geopolitical vulnerability. The interviews indicate that the securitisation process was exacerbated by the full-fledged invasion of Russia and broadened this logic. In this regard, energy diversification started to be more directly linked to decarbonisation, strategic autonomy, and industrial resilience. Third, the respondents recognised the multifunctional purposes of nuclear energy. It is not solely seen as a low-carbon electricity source but one that will help meet future demand, continuity of industry, reliability of supply, and the need to cut back on the consumption of fossil fuels. Efforts for ensuring the diversification of suppliers of nuclear fuel further demonstrate that technological continuity reflects on the reconfiguration of geopolitical dependencies. Nuclear pragmatism appears as a nation-specific form of adaptation and thus finds strongest empirical support.

There exists evidence with regard to purposeful engagement at the EU level. Slovakia has engaged in coalitions and has focused its attentions on areas in which it is most interested and most experienced, including the automotive industry and nuclear energy. These practices illustrate how selective positioning and those attempts aimed at influencing the results of EU policies are being undertaken but are not creating a change in EU policy outcomes as an independent actor. In the Slovak case, preserving alignment with EU objectives, advocating differentiated

implementation, framing national preferences through common European principles, and assigning strategic importance to a technology perceived as serving several objectives simultaneously are all evidence of how a small member state with a high industrial base is trying to manage the structural constraints. Adaptation is not a temporary compromise that is set between the national interest and the requirements of Europe. This process should be interpreted and adjusted to reflect on the national infrastructural capabilities, vulnerabilities, and economy of each country in light of the common objective of climate change. In Slovakia, nuclear pragmatism constitutes a particularly prominent expression of that adaptive logic.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this article is to focus on the adaptation of Slovakia, a small and highly industrialised member country of the EU, in the framework of the EGD under the conditions of geopolitical changes, energy insecurity, and growing pressure for protecting competitiveness. The article did not portray Slovakia as a passive rule-taker or challenger in the context of EU climate governance. It is treated as a player which was caught up in the overall direction of EU decarbonisation with the need to recalibrate particular instruments, timelines, and technological pathways in accordance with domestic economic structures, infrastructural legacies, and security vulnerabilities.

The empirical findings provide that Slovak actors do not reject the objectives of the EGD. Rather, they make a distinction between a desire to support decarbonisation as an overarching goal and their concern about the economic, technological, and distributional implications of specific implementation measures. These concerns are interpreted through affordability, industrial competitiveness, and implementation capacity. Second, the interviews revealed the security-oriented interpretation of Slovak climate and energy policy intensified by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Although the discussions on energy vulnerability, supply disruptions, diversification, and infrastructural preparedness can be traced back to the 2009 gas crisis, the respondents emphasised the impact of the political and military outcomes of 2022 in connection with supplier dependence, resilience, price stability, industrial viability, and geopolitical exposure. The war integrated energy security more closely into the rationale for decarbonisation.

Third, the findings show how a structurally constrained member state seeks to create room for manoeuvre through selective engagement. Slovakia concentrates its attention on policy areas of high domestic salience, frames its preferences through EU-compatible principles such as technological neutrality and security of supply, and cooperates with more influential or similarly positioned member states. The evidence supports a claim of coalition-based positioning and attempted influence, particularly in relation to nuclear energy. It does not, however, establish that Slovakia independently determined EU-level outcomes. Small state engagement is therefore most clearly visible in purposive adaptation and issue-specific mobilisation.

At the theoretical level, the article refines existing understandings of small state behaviour in EU governance by showing that structural constraint does not produce either uniform compliance or systematic resistance. In the case of Slovakia, the shared goals are kept, but the interpretation of how to implement them is done in the context of the specific vulnerabilities and capacities of the country. Also, the Slovak case is in line with the scholarly literature on securitisation which argues that securitisation does not necessarily lead to a formal emergency regime. Instead, it can manifest itself in modifications in the ways of infrastructure, supplier diversification, investment decisions, and the rationale of technological decisions.

One of the most distinctive aspects of the interviews is the conceptualisation of nuclear pragmatism. Energy insecurity and the low-carbon electricity option are not the only reasons given for nuclear energy. In response to changing climatic, economic, and geopolitical conditions, different actors have associated the practices of nuclear pragmatism with decarbonisation, reliable energy production, expected energy consumption in the future, sustainability of industry, energy price stability, and managing energy dependency. It also has strategic significance once it is accompanied by efforts to diversify away from Russian fuel and supply.

For future research, comparative studies can focus on other countries with a noticeable share of nuclear energy to operationalise the concept of nuclear pragmatism. Another line of further research can investigate specific EU negotiations, including the sustainable finance taxonomy, electricity market reform, automotive transition, or the design of climate-related industrial support. The account of interviews would be supplemented and elevated by such work.

Research and Publication Ethics Statements

1. Author Contribution Statement

The author made a substantial, direct, and original contribution to the design of the study, data collection, analysis and interpretation, and the preparation of the manuscript. Author contribution: G.K.: study design, conceptualization, methodology development, data curation and analysis, funding acquisition, writing of the manuscript, and review and editing. The author has read and approved the final version of the manuscript and accepts full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and content of the study.

2. Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there are no financial, academic, or personal relationships or interests that could give rise to a conflict of interest in relation to the preparation or conduct of the study, the analysis of the data, the interpretation of the findings, or the publication of the manuscript.

3. Ethics Statement and Data Availability

This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of research and publication ethics and was approved by the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences Comenius University Bratislava Ethics Committee on 04 November 2025 under the decision numbered 161-24/2025. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the principles of voluntary participation, privacy, personal data protection, and confidentiality were observed throughout the research process. The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to applicable ethical and legal restrictions.

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