Between NATO and a hard place: defence spending debate in Germany and Czechia

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ABSTRACT
Defence spending has become a primary issue in the context of NATO. The question of fair burden-sharing and development of new capabilities in reaction to the changing security environment led NATO members to aim to spend 2% of GDP on defence by 2024. While some allies have managed to reach the level quickly, others seem not to be able or willing to do so. We know little, however, how the international commitment is reflected and referred to in individual member states. This article shows how size played a role when the 2% pledge was discussed in domestic politics, even if the resulting policy may be very similar. Based on expert and political debates in Germany and Czechia, it demonstrates that external expectations and the question of status play a crucial part in the small state’s reasoning whereas it is mainly internal drivers that shape the big state’s decisions.

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Introduction
After more than two decades of benefiting from the peace dividend, the defence budgets are rising again in most European countries. This is good news for the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO), which has long encouraged its member states to invest more into defence capabilities, as well as for the United States whose representatives have long claimed that the US is bearing a disproportional burden in transatlantic security. However, spending more on defence is often unpopular among European publics – partly because it means less money for other causes, partly because Europeans have felt as secure as never before in the post-Cold War world (European Council 2003). The international pressure and domestic opposition cause a headache to the government representatives who struggle to sustain domestic legitimacy and to fulfil their international commitments.

Scholarly literature has addressed defence spending in Europe extensively, but the accounts have been restricted mainly to the analysis of the relationship between defence spending and economic indicators (Paul 1996, Kollias 2008), the development of capabilities (Sperling 2004, James 2006, Bove and Cavatorta 2012), and its link to the development of the EU’s common security and defence policy (CSDP) (Mawdsley 2004, cf. Posen 2006). Besides, there is an abundance of think tank outputs that focus on the policy side of the defence spending conundrum (Schmitt 2003, Liberti 2011, Ortega
2017, Brustlein 2018). Less attention has been paid to the link between the institutional architecture of European security policy and domestic politics, except the national preference between NATO and the EU and their impact on institution building, particularly within the EU’s CSDP (Hofmann 2011, Menon 2011, Pannier and Schmitt 2014, Heisbourg 2016).

This article aims to show that small and big European states differ in their approach to the mismatch between international expectations and domestic preference. In the cases of Germany and Czechia and their debate on defence spending, particularly the NATO members’ commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence, it shows that the difference in size does not necessarily produce a variation in the policy. What it does bring about, however, is a difference in how the mismatch is perceived and constructed in the domestic debate, including which arguments are used to support individual policy options. The article builds on and contributes to the literature that focuses on the behaviour of small states in international relations and international organisations, in particular. It supports the accounts highlighting the role of status in the small state’s decisions as well as the importance of self-identification when it comes to the definition of smallness.

The text is divided into five parts. Firstly, the scholarly debate on small states’ security policy in international organisations is briefly overviewed. Secondly, the NATO 2% commitment is described, both as a concept and as a political phenomenon. Thirdly, the two cases and the sources of data are introduced. Fourthly, the German and Czech debates on the 2% commitment are analysed in detail. The last part concludes.

Small states’ security policy in international organisations

International cooperation and integration have been identified as one of several factors that limit nation states’ freedom of action and tie national governments’ hands (cf. Cooper 2004). Particularly in the European Union, the impact of international organisations on state behaviour and options has been studied extensively (Cowles et al. 2001, Olsen 2002, Graziano and Vink 2007, Bulmer and Lequesne 2013). While much of the scholarship focused on policy areas where the supranational institutions had coercive power over the member states, there is a general agreement that national foreign and security policies have been subject to adaptation and limitation too (Torreblanca 2001, Irondelle 2003, Smith 2004b, Larsen 2005, Wong 2006, Miskimmon 2007, Gross 2011, Moumoutzis 2011, Palosaari 2011, Raimundo 2013), even if there is no common understanding of the mechanism of this influence (for a review see Tonra 2013). Foreign policy documents, declarations, and strategies adopted at the international level, such as the EU Global Strategy (EEAS 2016) and Council conclusions, define a common understanding of the world as well as default reactions that steer the member states’ national debate and strategic documents. Similarly, NATO strategic concepts (NATO 1991, 1999, 2010) and summit declarations provide the same function for the allies. Both the EU’s and NATO’s influence over the member states’ policies is further boosted by the massive institutional underpinning that develops the organisations’ policy between major strategic debates, be it the European External Action Service and the Commission in case of the EU or the International Staff and the International Military Staff in case of NATO.

States have different room for manoeuvre within international organisations. Despite being nominally equal, the literature has long recognised that larger states command
more influence over events than smaller countries. In anarchic international relations, small states were considered “marginal at best and counterproductive at worst” (Smed and Wivel 2017, p. 81). They cannot expect to have much influence on the shape of things, and they need to adopt specific strategies to ensure their survival (Walt 1987, Snyder 1997, cf. Kassab 2018). In a more orderly environment provided by a hegemon or institutional order, such as the one in Europe, however, small states can thrive (Wivel et al. 2014). They can focus on more than mere survival and, indeed, help shape international politics (Bunse 2009, Panke 2012, Vandecasteele et al. 2013, Bossuyt 2017, Haugevik 2017, Smed and Wivel 2017, Weiss 2017, Corbett et al. 2018).

At the same time, however, small states remain “structurally disadvantaged” (Panke 2010). The bigger and richer countries have more power to persuade their partners with threats, side-offers, or issue-linkages (Pedersen 1998, cf. Hayes-Renshaw and Wallace 2006, p. 252, Hix and Høyland 2011, Thomson 2011, p. 212ff). Bigger countries are generally believed to have more viable alternatives to a negotiated solution, the so-called “outside option” (cf. Moravcsik 1993, p. 500, Voeten 2001), which makes them less willing to make concessions and more likely to have greater influence over the result. Counterintuitively, this is also true for intergovernmental negotiations, in which all states are theoretically equal. In the European Union, for example, where policymaking in some areas (particularly foreign and security policy) is still subject to unanimous decisions and thus lends every single state, disregarding the size, the power of veto, scholars have long argued that the practice does not necessarily follow the theory (Smith 2004a, Stetter 2004, cf. Sjursen 2011). Unlike bigger countries, smaller member states need to use their veto parsimoniously and link it directly with the key national interest in the debate in order not to lose too much political capital in the recurring negotiations (Tallberg 2008, p. 691). International institutions benefit small states, but do not “overcome or work outside of international political realities” (Hey 2003, p. 188).

Small states can become surprisingly successful in international negotiations by using other ways to promote their interests to make up for the deficit in size (Golub 2012). They can enter the discussion with a superior argument (Risse 2000) or nominate experienced negotiators (Meerts 1997). An essential aspect of their effort is the perception of others. Due to the lack of power, status and valuation by partners become a crucial asset (de Carvalho and Neumann 2014, Wohlforth et al. 2018). Being seen as a constructive partner and a good ally is important, even though it may occasionally conflict with domestic norms and policy preferences (cf. Vigeland Rottem 2007). As a result, small states’ debate about alliances and commitments, as well as, ultimately, their national policies differ from the debate in larger countries. This article shows what form such a difference may take in practice.

The 2% guideline and its adoption in NATO

The debate over burden sharing is as old as NATO itself (James 2006). The US has always complained that it invests disproportionately more into European security than Europeans do. While there is no agreement in the literature regarding whether Europeans were free-riding during the Cold War and post-Cold War period (cf. Gadea et al. 2004, George and Sandler 2018, Jakobsen 2018), it is clear that this has been the perception in the US for a long time. It is true that the decrease of defence budgets after 1990 occurred on both
sides of the Atlantic. If there were any criticism involved, it targeted the inefficiency of the military reform that did not allow the budget to sink faster (Aufrant 1999). But after 2001, when the American budget started rising due to the ongoing war on terror, while the European budgets remained stagnant or even further declined, the gap became obvious and the topic of a heated political debate (Sandler and Shimizu 2014).

The 2% guideline first appeared in 2002 when NATO requested that candidate countries committed “sufficient resources” while bidding for membership. Given the state of defence spending in the candidate countries at the time, the number seemed realistic and motivational (Lunn and Williams 2017, p. 6, von Krause 2019). After all, all allies had been spending 2% of their GDP on defence without major troubles in 1990. The 2% commitment did not bind the member states, even though the US had argued that the allies should stick to it for the sake of credibility towards the candidates. As a result, many European allies’ defence budgets kept falling (as a percentage of the GDP), as did those of most new members immediately after accession (NATO 2011).

The trouble with the European defence budgets is not just their size. The problem is the apparent inability of the European militaries to fulfil the tasks that the politicians and public expect from them (Sperling 2004, cf. Coonen 2006, Hallams and Schreer 2012). The transformation to an expeditionary all-volunteer force that many European militaries underwent during the first two decades after the end of the Cold War was very costly (cf. Bove and Cavatorta 2012) and took its toll on European capabilities. Over the years, American representatives intensified their push for a fairer burden sharing, meaning primarily more European spending (Gates 2011). The result was the Wales pledge in 2014.

The Wales summit took place in a specific strategic situation. After decades of out-of-area operations, NATO decided to re-emphasise territorial defence following the Russian annexation of Crimea. This involved designing the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force and, later, the establishment of the enhanced forward presence in the Baltic countries and Poland (Ringsmose and Rynning 2017, Zapfe 2017). Addressing the dismal state of European defence spending, the allies pledged to halt any further decrease, to aim to increase it in real terms and to aim to move towards the 2% and the 20% investment share respectively within a decade, i.e. by 2024 (NATO 2014). While it needs to be emphasised that the member states only committed to aiming to reach the guideline, it was still the first time that the number appeared in the summit declaration, endorsed by the heads of states and governments. As it is usually the case with such international declarations once agreed, the subsequent summits have repeated and confirmed it (NATO 2016, 2018a).

The importance of the defence spending issue has grown with Donald Trump’s presidency. The candidate Donald Trump turned the burden-sharing in NATO into a major campaign issue (Besch 2016) and followed on as a president. He has been the first US president to question the US commitment to European security, connecting the US guarantees to the level of individual countries’ defence budget. Even though no change occurred in the official texts issued by NATO (NATO 2018a), Trump’s rhetoric managed to narrow down the issue of transatlantic security cooperation to a single issue – defence spending (cf. Birnbaum 2018). In a characteristically chaotic manner, the US president first criticised allies for freeriding, warned that the 2% level of spending needed to be achieved as soon as possible, increased the requested level of spending to 4%, and later signed the summit declaration, which maintained the 2% guideline unchanged, boasting of his ability to change the allies’ positions.
The 2% pledge has played a useful role in simplifying the issue of burden sharing and the need for the Europeans to play a more significant role in ensuring their security. As an indicator, however, it is fundamentally flawed. Most scholars agree that Europeans need to spend more on defence,¹ but they criticise the focus on input that the current pledge embodies. Instead of measuring security by how much money is spent, they argue that it needs to be evaluated by how much it responds to current and future threats and creates necessary military capabilities (Mölling 2014, Biscop 2017, von Krause 2019). In particular, by linking the defence spending to the GDP, it connects two factors that are not mutually dependent. A growing economy does not result in increased threats and vice versa. Paradoxically, a country may meet the criteria and become less capable when the GDP falls quicker than defence spending, due to long-term contractual obligations of the state budget (Major 2015).

**Germany and Czechia as suitable cases**

This article shows how the NATO’s decision on defence spending was reflected in the domestic debates and policies in Germany and Czechia, two countries that share many characteristics but differ in one specific aspect – their size.² Both countries belong to laggards among NATO countries which in 2014 were spending only 1.18% and 0.95% of GDP respectively on defence, out of which they spent respectively 12.94% and 6.53% on equipment (NATO 2018b). The public opinion in both countries never considered defence expenditure an important topic. In Czechia, more than 50% of respondents viewed defence spending as a vain strain on the state budget steadily between 2001 and 2013 (CVVM 2018). Similarly, the GMF Transatlantic Trends showed the German population’s preference for maintaining or even decreasing the current levels of spending in 2011–2013 (GMF 2011, 2012, 2013). The debate on defence spending occurs in an environment influenced by vested interest in both countries because they have a defence industry that depends on the state as a customer and, particularly, historical legacies and idiosyncrasies (cf. Hyde-Price 2000, Sarvaš 2000, Weiss 2013).³

Germany and Czechia do not share just a location in Central Europe, shielded from potential enemies by neighbouring allies and partners. They have taken a somewhat similar path over the past 30 years in defence policy. They passed two major internal reforms. First, the Bundeswehr had to ingest the former GDR-forces after the German unification and the Czech Army had to establish itself after the split of Czechoslovakia. A decade later, both militaries transformed from an army based on conscription into a professional all-volunteer force. In the meantime, they had completely revisited their tasks and doctrines and became expeditionary forces deployable in overseas theatres under NATO and EU flags. Over this time, the armed forces of both countries shrunk significantly and lost sizable parts of their budgets. Even when Europeans started investing more into defence in the mid-2010s, Germany and Czechia remained the only countries in their region whose investment share kept sinking (Béraud-Sudreau and Giegerich 2018).

The internal debate in both Germany and Czechia is understood as containing three parts here. Firstly, there is the expert debate on defence policy that cultivates the concepts and relations for policymakers and the public to make their decision. Secondly, political parties translate their understanding of security threats and responses into election manifestos, governments’ policy statements and coalition agreements. Lastly, the budget
discussions in the parliament represent the views of the audience that needs to be persuaded to invest more in defence. The analysis is based on a qualitative interpretative approach, tracing how individuals refer to the 2% guideline and the issue of the transatlantic burden sharing in the debate as well as what other arguments they use to support or oppose the budget increase. The parliaments’ budgetary deliberations seem to be an appropriate place to read what forms the internal debate on defence spending in the respective countries takes, even if the parliamentarians are mere representatives and their views undoubtedly differ from the population as a whole.

Both Germany and Czechia held general elections in autumn 2013 and 2017. The two campaigns offer the opportunity to compare how the thinking of political parties shifted over time, and how the Wales pledge and Donald Trump’s ascent influence the parties’ programmes. Similarly, the governments’ policy statements and coalition agreements reflect how the party promises are translated into a concrete political programme. Further, the first two budgetary debates of all governments are studied (2014 and 2015, and 2018 and 2019) to trace the arguments used about defence spending and how the parliamentarians refer to the NATO commitment.

German and Czech debate on defence spending

This part presents the three types of debates that have occurred in Germany and Czechia on the topic of defence spending and NATO commitments. First, the expert debate is reviewed to show the knowledge base upon which the political debates take place. Second, the two sets of election manifestos are reviewed to find out whether any conceptual shift occurred between 2013 and 2017. Lastly, the budgetary debates are summed up to show how the issue of defence spending translated into specific decisions at the national level.

Expert debate

There is one parliament in Germany and one in Czechia. There is always one national budget in each of the countries. The difference in size matters, however, when we look at the expert debate because there are many more institutes and researchers dealing with security in Germany than there are in Czechia. The debate is, therefore, deeper and more inclusive, touching upon all issues in Germany. In Czechia, by contrast, the pool is somewhat limited, and some issues do not find their researcher to make an informed point about them (cf. Weiss 2018, pp. 170–171).

German experts have published extensively on the issue of defence spending. The sore state of the Bundeswehr after years of austerity has attracted much coverage, particularly from the perspective of future objectives and developments (Dickow and Linnenkamp 2016, Schütz 2016) and when new solutions were proposed (Major and Mölling 2014, Allers 2016). Because the Bundeswehr is a “parliamentary army”, unlike in other countries, the shortcomings of both the military and the structures surrounding it have been addressed transparently every year in the reports of the parliamentary commissioner (for one of the recent reports see Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces 2018). The 2% guideline of NATO quickly became a topic for policy papers and analyses. While acknowledging that Germany needs to invest more on defence and take on more
responsibility within the Alliance and in security policy more generally, most German experts denounced the 2% guideline for being arbitrary and illogical. Several arguments appear in the German expert debate. Firstly, the false connection between defence spending and GDP is targeted with the notion that threats and shortcomings should drive defence budgets, not the state of the economy. Secondly, the input-oriented design of the indicator rates poorly in the reviews because the mere fact of spending more money does not mean spending efficiently (a long-term weakness of the federal defence ministry) nor acquiring capabilities needed for effective deployment and international cooperation. Lastly, German experts criticise the total amounts that Germany should be spending according to the NATO guideline. They question the ability of the Bundeswehr and the federal ministry to manage projects that would require so much spending, as well as the political desirability of Germany becoming the largest defence spender in Europe by far. Instead of the 2%, they claim, Germany should focus on making the procurement system more efficient and sustaining the ongoing projects of internationalisation and cooperation that, in the longer term, make Europeans more capable and interoperable.

In comparison to the German expert debate, the Czech discussions are much more limited and shallower. Existing contributions focus on the military finances, their sustainability and reasons for the existing structural debt (Pernica 2011, Kufčák 2015). The ministry of defence has also conducted a similar analysis, acknowledging that the costs of transformation in combination with falling budgets have produced an unsustainable situation (Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic 2011). Most of the expert outputs in the Czech debate, however, focus on explaining the internal workings of the two security organisations of which Czechia is a member and new initiatives launched at the international level, such as the EU battle groups and PESCO (Krásný and Socha 2007, Kolín 2018). When the Wales 2% pledge appears in the expert debate, it remains mostly undisputed. Even where the authors argue that the measure is “fetishised” at the level of NATO, they do not conclude an alternative Czech policy is needed and even argue that there still is a need to commit resources (Kufčák 2016).

**Election manifestos and governmental statements**

General elections in 2013 and 2017 in Germany led to the same result: a victory of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and a “grand coalition” between the CDU/CSU and social democrats (SPD). The two parties entered both campaigns as the main contestants, however, which made them seek differences from each other. In 2017 it was particularly difficult because the campaign took place after four years of joint government by the two (technically three) parties.

In 2013, most of the political parties proposed cutting the defence budget as well as the military more generally. In an extreme version, Die Linke campaigned for a withdrawal from all overseas missions and operations (including CSDP police missions), the reduction and disarmament of the Bundeswehr, and re-investing the money saved into a civilian peace corps (Die Linke 2013, pp. 52–53). The Greens did not go as far as that but still suggested cutting the defence budget that they considered to be guided by the defence industry demands too much (B90/Die Grünen 2013, p. 309). They suggested a reduction of military forces that would be possible thanks to more integration at the
European level, which was a point strongly advocated by the social democrats as well (SPD 2013, pp. 111–112). The further to the right of the political spectrum, the more parties avoided mentioning budget cuts. The manifesto of the free democrats argued for ensuring the deployability of the Bundeswehr through “appropriate funding” (FDP 2013, p. 91), even if they did not specify what exactly they deemed appropriate. Similarly, the CDU/CSU mentioned the need for “sustainability of financing” and wanted to ensure “planning security and reliability” (CDU/CSU 2013, p. 76) but they failed to note what exactly that would mean. At the same time, the manifesto prioritised financial stability in Germany and Europe as an overarching topic. The coalition agreement between the CDU, the CSU, and the SPD did not address the question of the defence budget at all (CDU, CSU, and SPD 2013).

Four years later, the picture could not look more different. The 2% pledge was referred to in all parties’ manifests, even if only implicitly sometimes. It became an important topic of division between the left and the right. The CDU/CSU, which had run the defence ministry since 2005, praised itself for a turnaround in defence financing and the first growth in the defence budget after 25 years. The party clearly stated that it aimed at increasing the defence budget gradually to 2% of GDP “as agreed at the NATO summit in 2014 in Wales”. As if expecting opposition, the manifesto emphasised that the money was aimed at defence against external threats and that the guideline had been adopted “unanimously by the Alliance and with the then US president Obama”. It also listed the support of the whole coalition of the time, which included the SPD, and framed the pledge as “an issue of reliability too” (CDU/CSU 2017, p. 65). To prevent accusations of excessive militarisation, the CDU/CSU connected the rise in defence spending with a rise in official development assistance (ODA) of the same amount up to the level of 0.7% of GDP. The social democrats, by contrast, acknowledged the need to build capable forces, well paid and well equipped, which requires a “necessary increase in the defence budget” (SPD 2017, p. 105). They strongly opposed, however, a “fully unnecessary and unrealistic increase rate of the German defence budget” (SPD 2017, p. 106), quoting specifically the 2% indicator. The manifesto argued that such a raise would mean doubling the current amount, which was not realistic, and criticised the indicator more generally because security and stability could not be measured by defence spending. The coalition agreement did not mention any spending levels but claimed that means must be “significantly boosted to manage the immense international challenges”. This should be done both in the defence and development areas where the budget should be increased by a 1:1 ratio (CDU, CSU, and SPD 2018, pp. 144–145).

The smaller parties differed widely in their approach. The extreme right AfD was, maybe paradoxically when compared to other right-wing parties in Europe, the most open to the 2% objective, arguing for a more just burden sharing. The increased defence spending should achieve more German and European influence in NATO, help turn NATO into a “pure defence alliance” again, and make German forces deployable (AfD 2017, pp. 18–19). The extreme left, on the other hand, called for a “significant decrease” of the defence budget (Die Linke 2017, p. 12), disarmament of the Bundeswehr, its transformation from a deployment force, and a German exit from the NATO military structures (Die Linke 2017, pp. 100–101). The two centrist parties took a middle ground, while still very critical of the government’s approach. The Free Democrats (FDP) agreed with a budget increase in order to make the Bundeswehr capable of both territorial defence
and overseas deployment but lambasted inefficient procurement processes. The manifesto did not openly declare the party’s position to the NATO’s 2% indicator but argued for joint spending for defence and development at the level of 3% of GDP (FDP 2017, pp. 100–101). The Greens shared the criticism of the defence procurement system but argued that Bundeswehr needed clearer political priorities and European cooperation instead of more money. They rejected the 2% objective and advocated more money in development assistance (B90/Die Grünen 2017, p. 87).

In Czechia, there are generally more parties in the parliament than in Germany, which means more election manifestos, but not necessarily more arguments on defence spending. In 2013, some parties did not address defence at all (extreme right-wing party Úsvit) or did not address the defence budget (communist KSČM). Most major parties both on the right and left emphasised the need for Czechia to be an “active and responsible member of [...] the North Atlantic Alliance” (ČSSD 2013, p. 32, compare ODS 2013, p. 26, ANO 2011 2013), but did not make a direct connection between responsibility and investment. Unlike in Germany, several parties argued for a “stabilisation” (TOP 09 2013, p. 24) or even an increase in defence spending (ODS 2013, p. 26) in 2013. The Christian democratic KDU-ČSL advocated an increase to the level of 1.5% of GDP while mentioning that a NATO commitment was 2% in the same sentence and conditioning the increase by the growth of GDP (sic!) (KDU-ČSL 2013, p. 12). The government’s policy statement did not address the level of defence spending at all. It only stated that “defence capabilities need[ed] to be developed” and the government should “seek adjustments in the financing of the Ministry so as to ensure the necessary development of the armed forces” (Government of the Czech Republic 2014, sec. 3.15).

In 2017, the debate shifted, and the size of the defence budget became a critical issue. While most manifests did not elaborate on detailed arguments, many argued for an increase on the basis of “responsibility” (KDU-ČSL 2017, p. 12), “living up to promises” (TOP 09 2017, p. 14), “commitments” (ODS 2017, p. 11, STAN 2017, p. 50), and being a “reliable partner” (ANO 2011 2017, p. 21). Most parties acknowledged the commitment to reach 2% of GDP level by 2024 or earlier, except the social democrats aiming at 1.4% (ČSSD 2017, p. 29) and the extreme right SPD’s 1.6% (SPD 2016, p. 21). None of the latter numbers deserved any reasoning in the respective manifestos. Generally, there were very few conceptual ideas on defence spending in the parties’ proclamations. Only the Pirates and conservative TOP09 briefly mentioned an establishment of a multi-year fund to finance strategic procurement projects to replace the yearly budgetary planning of the defence ministry (Piráti 2017, p. 10, TOP 09 2017, p. 20). The policy statement of the minority ANO and ČSSD government pledged to “gradually increase the defence budget” to 1.4% of GDP by 2021. It did not mention any connection of the defence spending to the NATO debate but claimed to aim for “an active role in the UN, the EU, NATO and other organisations” (Government of the Czech Republic 2018, p. 19).

Parliamentary debates

There are significant procedural differences between the processes of the parliamentary budget approval in Germany and Czechia. Firstly, the German parliament reserves much more time for a detailed discussion of individual chapters of the budget. Secondly, the budget for the year following the general elections is drafted by the new government
in Germany, which means that its adoption only occurs during the year for which the budget is proposed. In Czechia, by contrast, the incoming governments accepted the draft budgets prepared by their predecessors and rushed it through the parliament within a couple of weeks in December. The latter difference does not, however, necessarily limit the possibility of the Czech parliamentarians to put forward arguments and proposals for budget alteration.

The German parliamentary debates over the 2014 budget took place after the Russian annexation of Crimea but before the Wales NATO summit. The overall topic of the debate was budget consolidation, meaning mainly budget cuts. There was no expectation of more money for defence, “at least not in the upcoming years” (SPD, 9 April 2014). The 2% level was mentioned in the debate but brushed aside by the defence minister as a wrong issue for the debate, even though she recognised the need to react to allies’ requests based on the Crimean crisis (25 June 2014). Her party representatives argued that 2% spending would be welcome, but a sustainable budget consolidation was needed (CDU/CSU, 25 June 2014).

The mood changed only slightly after Wales when the Bundestag debated the 2015 budget. The CDU/CSU recognised the 2% as a long-term objective “without question” (CDU/CSU, 9 September 2014) and even the SPD admitted that it should be reached within the next ten years (SPD, 26 November 2014). There was no doubt, however, that it did not have much relevance for the current budget. Even the defence minister did not advocate an increase, but just refused further cuts (10 September 2014). In the shorter term, she pledged for increasing the spending efficiency, the lack of which was broadly criticised by many Bundestag members (SPD, Greens, 10 September 2014; Linke, 26 November 2014). The SPD believed the 2% NATO spending commitment was “not doable” for Germany because the ministry was unable to spend so much money and politically, it would be problematic in relations with the UK and France (SPD, 10 September 2014).

The debates in 2018 (budgets for 2018 and 2019) touched upon the 2% pledge most of the time. Generally, most parties agreed that an increase was necessary, except Die Linke that criticised the government for a “hasty” acceptance of Donald Trump’s demands (Linke, 12 September 2018) and the Greens who wanted to improve spending rather than to increase it (Greens, 8 November 2018). They differed, however, in their target level of spending and the role of the NATO pledge in setting the right level. For the AfD, there was a commitment, which should be met (AfD, 16 May 2018). For the CDU/CSU, it was a target and Germany had to take its responsibility seriously (CDU/CSU, 21 November 2018) as it “owed it to its allies and soldiers” (CDU/CSU, 12 September 2018), but was happy with modest increases towards 1.5% by 2024, which their minister labelled “an ambitious objective” (21 November 2018). Other parties rejected the 2% as a false measure (SPD, 16 May 2018) that blurred the important debate on military reform (FDP, 21 November 2018), and the budget increase was necessary with respect to concrete procurement projects, not to “some NATO quota” (SPD, 21 November 2018).

Czech parliamentary debates were on the one hand much shorter than the German ones. On the other hand, NATO commitments were present in the discussion irrespective of the year, even if not in the form of the 2% pledge. The 2014 budget discussed in December 2013, before both Crimea and Wales, was not particularly controversial in respect to defence. It was one of the last austerity budgets with cuts across all areas. The minister
of defence pleaded to the parliament to reject further budget cuts introduced by the budget committee that would “disrupt [Czech] credibility in relations to the Alliance and allies” (16 December 2013) but did not succeed. The following year, the 2% pledge was explicitly mentioned. An opposition representative reminded the parliament that Czechia “had promised 2% of GDP to the allies before entering NATO” and argued that this ratio was, among others, a measure of the country’s “willingness to invest into defence and to be a fully-fledged ally” (ODS, 3 December 2014). She also expressed her regret that an agreement among political leaders to increase the defence budget to 2% of GDP by 2025 had failed in 2014 and the government only declared its commitment to reach 1.4% during that period (Smlouva koaličních stran o zajištění obrany České republiky 2014).

The size of the defence budget was slightly more prominent in the 2018 and 2019 budget debates. While the government’s representatives did not deem necessary to explain the exact size of the (slowly rising) defence budget, opposition once again criticised the slow increase and tabled a proposal to reallocate additional funds. The 2% indicator was mentioned both as NATO’s “recommendation” and as a “commitment” (ODS, 15 December 2017). The existence of a structural debt in military equipment and the deteriorating security environment were both mentioned as the reason why Czechia should “send a clear signal that [it is] an ally to be taken into account”. Similar proposals were tabled by opposition parliamentarians one year later to increase the defence budget, which was “roughly half of what NATO demands” (TOP09, 5 December 2018). The parliament rejected all those proposals. Others were more sceptical, however. The Pirates argued for a more limited increase of the defence budget fearing the inability of the ministry to spend the money efficiently (Piráti, 5 December 2018). From the left, the rise of the defence budget was criticised by some because, while not disputing Czech obligations and needs, “even richer countries do not meet the 2 per cent for military” (ČSSD, 19 December 2018).

Interestingly enough, both in Germany and in Czechia, the opposition tried to incorporate their view of the 2% pledge into law. In Germany, Die Linke tabled a proposal to reject the 2% pledge and bind the government to withdraw the German agreement officially in NATO. While many parliamentarians expressed their reservations to the target and its significance (19 January 2018), the proposal was rejected by the Bundestag with backing restricted to Die Linke and the Greens only. In Czechia, by contrast, the conservative opposition tabled a proposal that would, if adopted, oblige the government to draft budgets committing 2% of the previous year’s GDP on defence (Cěnochová 2017). The authors argued that the law would merely codify an existing Czech commitment, it would help improve the Czech image in NATO, and help stabilise long-term financial planning in the defence sector. The proposal was rejected by the parliament at the first reading.

**Conclusions**

Defence spending has become an important issue in international and domestic debates on European security. In Wales in 2014, NATO member states officially pledged to spend 2% of their GDP on defence by 2024. The internal debate often differs, however, from what is discussed and concluded internationally. This article has analysed the defence spending debate in two European countries, Germany and Czechia, that share many features and differ significantly in their size. The objective has been to show that size influences the
way in which international commitment is debated domestically with the focus on three types of debate – expert, election/governmental, and parliamentary.

The impact of the size difference can be seen on the richness and depth of the domestic debate on defence spending. In Germany, the broad expert background provides a plethora of arguments about defence budgets and the feasibility of NATO’s 2% measure. These arguments spill over to the political debate and are used by parties and politicians in both the election manifestos (in a more compact version) and parliamentary debates. In Czechia, the argumentation is missing altogether, or it is limited to short statements that lack the in-depth understanding of the practical dynamics behind the defence budgets’ construction.

The NATO pledge managed to bring the issue of defence spending to the foreground of the political debate in both countries, which was then driven by a different type of argumentation. Without any doubt, both debates include the issue of reliability and commitment. But in the Czech case, the external expectations are the primary driver of increased investment. Very little attention has been paid to the changing security environment, new threats, and the need to boost the EU’s and NATO’s presence abroad. Similarly, the sustainability of Czech military capabilities has been mentioned in the debate, but never featured as the key argument for more investment. In Germany, by contrast, the change in approach to defence investment has been mainly internally driven. The external expectations are present too, but they are not accepted at face value. Instead, they are translated into the need to become a leader in European security as appropriate for a country of Germany’s size. The main argument revolves around the rising instability around Europe and the necessity to improve the sore state of the Bundeswehr. Notably, the historical legacies do not feature very high in the German debate, although they might remain unspoken in the background and contribute to the general scepticism towards the 2% objective.

Interestingly enough, the resulting policy has been very similar in both countries. Czechia has been raising its defence budget slowly but is most probably going to miss the 2% mark by far in 2024. Germany has increased the defence budget over the past couple of years too but will not reach the 2% level either. Still, the message is different from the two countries. While Czechia nominally remains committed to the pledge, Germany has openly declared that it will miss the goal and not even reach 1.5% of GDP by 2023 as previously planned, which caused a brief but significant uproar in the media (Chazan and Buck 2019).

To come back to the central perspective of this article, several points can be made that the present research feeds into the general debate on small states. Firstly, there is a clear difference in the two internal debates on the NATO spending pledge that can be attributed to the difference in size. The preoccupation with external expectations in Czechia contrasts with the open, though qualified, disregard for the peer pressure in Germany. This is in line with the general expectation of the literature, which posits that small states need international organisations to work and see them as a valuable member of the club. Secondly, however, the findings qualify the importance of the outside option, which is crucial for many accounts distinguishing the small and big state behaviour. In the case of NATO, Germany would appear to have as limited an outside option as Czechia, not least due to the low levels of investment and its reliance on the Alliance and the US for defence. Despite that, German behaviour and the way in which the 2% commitment is referred to in the domestic debates reveals that the absence of the outside option does not play a role at all. Instead, the German debate reflects the confidence of a big country that
does not need to uphold its position in NATO by a demonstration of loyalty, boosting its status and valuation by partners. Following directly, thirdly, the research supports the notion that smallness is a state of mind (Crandall and Varov 2016, Haugevik and Rieker 2017). Czechia does not debate the current security environment and how to face the new threats, but its position in NATO and how it would be seen by allies. Germany, by contrast, does not pay much attention to image in the internal debates, but discusses the security environment and the German contribution to common defence. Fourthly, the research supports the claim that small states compete with their peers over status (Wohlforth et al. 2018). Czech failure to live up to the allies’ expectations has been relativised in the internal debate by the fact that others do not meet the 2% either. The relative loss of status can thus be expected to be limited or none at all.

Practically, the paper reveals how limited the impact of NATO’s and the United States’ push for more European defence investment has been. Even though there has been an increase in defence spending in Germany and Czechia, it has fallen short of external expectations. Both big and a small country’s governments prefer to accommodate their domestic constituency when faced a mismatch of international commitments and domestic perceptions. The difference has just resided in the relative transparency of this behaviour in the case of the big country and obfuscation on the part of the small state.

Notes

1. Very few argue that the current level of funding should remain unchanged (Biscop 2017) or even is too high (Robinson 2017).
2. The concept of size remains contested despite being widely used in the academic debate (Archer and Nugent 2002, Rickli 2008). Some base the definition on objective criteria, particularly geographic or demographic size of the country or the gross domestic product (Vital 1967). Others prefer the position of states in the system and focus on their influence (Maass 2016). And others focus on a state’s position relative to others (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006) or self-perception (Crandall and Varov 2016). By all accounts, Germany remains a big state whereas Czechia is a small one in the context of European security. Clearly visible is the difference on the fact that Germany, along with the UK and France, belongs to the only EU countries with the full spectrum of military capability (with the exception of nuclear weapons).
3. It should be noted that Germany invests a lot of resources in other forms of external engagement, such as development assistance and post-conflict reconstruction. Czechia falls short of its commitments in this area too.
4. Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) did stand in the 2013 general elections but removed its manifesto from the website. It is not available on other websites either and could not be included in the analysis.
5. The minutes of the respective lower chambers’ plenaries have been used as a source, accessible on the websites of the institutions. The arguments in the debate are cited by the date and party affiliation of the speaker. Although a more detailed discussion usually takes place in the respective committees, their minutes are not published and could not be subject to analysis.

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