

# Second-Rate Coverage of Second-Order Elections: Czech and Slovak Elections to the EP in the Media

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*Abstract: Elections to the European Parliament (EP) are considered second-order national elections (SOE). The SOE model suggests that there is a qualitative difference between different types of elections depending on the perception of what is at stake. Compared to first order elections, in second order elections there is less at stake because they do not determine the composition of government. Given that voters behave differently in second-order elections, the question arises: do the media also consider second-order elections less interesting and therefore devote to them less coverage? The media play a crucial role in informing citizens about such events as elections; they function as intermediaries between the electorate and the political arena. However, little is known about how EU issues are covered in the media, particularly in the new EU member states. Conducting a content analysis and applying the second-order election model, this paper analyses TV news coverage of the 2004 and 2009 European elections in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in a comparative fashion. The findings are discussed in the light of existing research literature on the EU's legitimacy as well as its alleged democratic and communication deficit, not least because the EU relies on the media in strengthening (albeit indirectly) its legitimacy by increasing citizen awareness of its activities.*

*Key words: Domestication (Europeanization), Electoral campaign, European elections, Input legitimacy, Media, Second-order elections.*

## 1. Introduction

Elections to the European Parliament (EP) are often referred to as second-order national elections (Reif, Schmitt 1980; for overview see Marsh, Mikhaylov 2010). Refining the definition in a later work, Reif suggested: “All elections (except the one that fills the most important political office of the entire system and therefore is the first order election) are ‘national second order elections’, irrespective of whether they take place in the entire, or only in a part of, the country.”

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(Reif 1997: 117) The second-order election (SOE) model is one of the most widely tested and supported theories of voting behaviour in elections to the EP (e.g. Hix, Marsh 2007; Koepke, Ringe 2006; Marsh 1998; Schmitt 2005). It suggests that there is a qualitative difference between different types of elections depending on the perception of what is at stake. Compared to first-order elections, in second order elections there is less at stake due to the fact that they do not determine the composition of government.

Knowing that voters and political parties behave differently in second-order elections,<sup>2</sup> the question arises: do the media also consider second-order elections less interesting and therefore devote less coverage to them within their main news. With a few exceptions (de Vreese et al. 2006; de Vreese, Lauf, Peter 2007), however, the SOE model has not been used much in the analysis of the media. This is surprising given that the media constitute the most important source of political information and channel of communication between the governors and the governed (de Vreese, Boomgaarden 2006a; Meyer 1999; Strömbäck, Shehata 2010; see also *Eurobarometer* 1999–2007: 60-61). Put differently, politics has become increasingly mediated as well as mediatised (Bennett, Entman 2001; Strömbäck 2008). This may be especially the case in relation to an issue as remote and abstract as European Union (EU) politics, even more so than for national politics (Blumler 1983; Koopmans 2007), and particularly in the case of low-salience, second-order elections (see *Flash Eurobarometer* 2004: 162).

Moreover, it is common wisdom in political communication literature that the media are important for democratic processes, public debate and the formation of citizens' political attitudes. Exposure to political news also increases political knowledge, which, in turn, increases turnout (de Vreese, Boomgaarden 2006a; Prior 2005; Verba et al. 1997), both because political knowledge and turnout are closely related and because exposure to political information mobilizes and motivates people to vote. Within communication research, links have been identified between media coverage of the EU and public perceptions of EU legitimacy and citizen engagement in elections (de Vreese et al. 2006; Peter 2007); and support for European integration, EU enlargement or specific policies (de Vreese, Boomgaarden 2006a; 2006b;

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<sup>2</sup> The objection here could be that from the SOE model we only know that voters behave differently in European elections – given the aggregate nature of the model's predictions – and not the parties and the media. On the other hand, there is little doubt that the media find European elections less interesting than national general elections (de Vreese et al. 2006; de Vreese 2003) and also little doubt that most of the parties expend considerably fewer resources on European elections than they do on general elections (e.g. van der Eijk, Franklin 1996; Auers 2005) and mount much weaker campaigns in second order elections (e.g. Weber 2007).

Hewstone 1986; Maier, Rittberger 2008; Semetko, van der Brug, Valkenburg 2003). Prominent and visible coverage of EU issues likewise increases citizens' knowledge about the EU and consequentially contributes to their likelihood of participating in European referenda or elections (e.g. Banducci, Semetko 2003; de Vreese, Boomgaarden 2006).

In addition, both the alleged democratic and communication deficits of the EU (Anderson, McLeod 2004; Coultrap 1999; Follesdal, Hix 2006; Mair, Thomassen 2010; Meyer 1999) call for a more informed and engaged citizenry (e.g. Benz, Stutzer 2004; Bijsmans, Altides 2007; Karp, Banducci, Bowler 2003). According to some (de Vreese 2007: 281), closing the communication gap between EU institutions and its citizens is a starting point for addressing the legitimacy deficit – which is inevitably interconnected with the EU's democratic deficit (e.g. Jensen 2009). All in all, as pointed out by de Vreese and his colleagues (2006: 478), “[e]mpirical knowledge about the media's coverage of EP elections is a prerequisite for assessing the well-being of democratic processes in Europe and for informing the ongoing discussion about the EU's democratic and communication deficits”, as more news is certainly conducive to increased public awareness of, and debate about European politics (Boomgaarden et al. 2010).

Taken together, a discussion of European themes among a set of EU actors in the media is important to the development of a European public sphere that will sustain the EU's democracy and develop it further (de Vreese et al. 2006: 479). Both theoretical and empirical accounts “argue for the necessity of visible EU affairs in the news in order to advance a viable public debate about European integration. Visibility of key democratic moments, such as elections, in the news is a pre-requisite for an enhancement of public awareness and possible engagement in EU politics.” (de Vreese et al. 2005: 182) It has been argued elsewhere that the need for visibility<sup>3</sup> in *national* news media is particularly important given the absence of a pan-European media system (de Vreese 2002; van Noije 2010). The structure of the paper is as follows. First, the SOE model and media reporting about the EU are presented as a theoretical background and the research questions are formulated. Second, the methodological issues and expectations are clarified. Third, the results are presented and discussed in the light of existing literature on the EU's legitimacy.

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<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this study, the term *visibility* is operationalized in Section 3. It means, in general, the quantity of coverage or, in other words, the amount of attention devoted to a particular issue in relation to the whole.

## 2. Second-order model and the EU in the media

In the aftermath of the first direct elections to the EP, Reif and Schmitt (1980) asserted that European elections are not in essence about “EU-politics” but more about domestic (national) politics. Therefore, results of second-order elections are not only influenced by factors related to the second-order arena, but also (and often primarily) by factors relevant to the first-order arena at the time of the second-order election (Reif 1985: 8-9). In other words, voters rely predominantly on their relationship to the national (first-order) political arena when deciding whether or how to vote. The SOE model, as suggested by Reif and Schmitt (1980), has three main premises that characterize differences between the aggregate results of European elections and previous (and subsequent) national (first-order) elections: 1) *lower participation of voters*; 2) *brighter prospects for small parties*; and 3) *government parties lose*. Moreover, because “[t]he strategy and tactics of political parties in second-order election campaigns are often influenced by political calculations concerning main arena” (Reif, Schmitt 1980: 9), the last implication is: 4) *domestication of electoral campaigns*. This last proposition is usually reflected in electoral campaign as well as in the media (de Vreese et al. 2006).

During the last decade an increasing amount of scholarly work has been aimed at analysing whether, how and when news media cover issues of European integration, the European Union and elections to the EP, in particular (e.g. Boomgaarden et al. 2010; de Vreese 2003; de Vreese et al. 2006; Jankowski et al. 2005; Peter, Lauf, Semetko 1999). Focusing on television, newspapers and the Web across a range of EU member states, these studies show that the EU is only marginally covered in the news and that the coverage is predominantly centred on important EU events, such as EU summits, national referenda on issues of European integration and elections to the EP (de Vreese 2001; Peter, de Vreese 2004; Semetko, Valkenburg 2000). The latest research literature asserts that the European elections together with installations of the new European Commission are the single most important factors affecting EU visibility in the media (Boomgaarden et al. 2010).

A variety of studies have focused on media coverage during European elections campaigns (Blumler 1983; de Vreese et al. 2005; Leroy & Siune 1994). It was shown that during the campaign preceding the first direct elections to the EP of 1979, “Europe” played no role in the news until the actual start of the election campaign (e.g. Blumler 1983; Siune 1983). Siaroff (2001) suggested that, to the extent that the media take an interest in European elections, they tend to focus on the national campaign. Moreover, analysing television coverage of the 1999 European elections, Peter and his colleagues pointed out: “the invisibility of the campaign in the

main evening news of several countries is striking” (Peter, Lauf, Semetko 2004: 427). To summarise, elections to the EP have consistently been found not to be very visible in national television news. On the other hand, others suggest that the visibility of EU news during the campaign period increased overall from 1999 to 2004 (de Vreese et al. 2006). When looking at the presence of different actors in the news about the elections, de Vreese with colleagues (2005; 2006) found that most of the actors in the news were domestic political actors.

Another strand of research focuses on Euroscepticism and concludes that news media coverage of EU events can cause a change in the level of cynicism about European integration (de Vreese 2007), and that Euro-sceptic parties do provide a substantial share of actors in EU news about European elections (Boomgaarden, de Vreese 2008). There is also evolving research reflecting the Czech media landscape and its portrayal of the European integration process. Rakušanová (2007), for example, found that coverage of the constitutional debate in the Czech media reflected certain key European events relevant to the constitutional debate (e.g. French and Dutch referenda); it involved a relatively low number of non-political actors with President Vaclav Klaus being the dominant actor; and negative evaluations were by far the more dominant argumentative strategy. Moreover, analysing the constitutional debate in the Czech Republic, Nečas (2007) pointed out that the debate on the Constitution was largely national with an overwhelming dominance of Czech (domestic) actors and with strong politicization and personalization. The constitutional debate also demonstrated the characteristics of the horizontal Europeanization of the national public sphere (Neas 2007: 32).<sup>4</sup> To sum up, previous research suggests that the EU in general and European elections in particular are not visibly and prominently covered; domestic actors often dominate relevant coverage; visibility increases when key events take place; and the overall visibility increases over time (Boomgaarden et al. 2010). Much less is, however, known about how EU issues are covered in the media in the new member states (de Vreese et al. 2006).

This study aspires to make a contribution to this area of research literature by asking the following questions: How visible was the 2004 and 2009 European election campaign coverage in the two weeks leading up to Election Day in the Czech Republic and Slovakia? Was it visible to the same extent in both countries and over the five year period? Are the elections to the EP less visible as compared to national – first-order – elections? Are the European election campaign

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<sup>4</sup> Horizontal Europeanization is defined as national media covering issues in other EU member states and national actors addressing issues or actors in another EU member state (Koopmans, Erbe 2004).

stories dominated by national or European political actors? Does the visibility differ across the different types of television outlets? Although the results and the analysis are largely descriptive, other researchers can incorporate these findings into their own research on the European Union in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, because the study reports characteristics of coverage across these countries in 1999 and 2004 using standardized measures. Along the primary focus of the paper, namely the analysis of second-rate character of European elections in the media, it is a secondary focus of this study.

### **3. Content analysis of news media coverage of European elections: research design, data and methods**

A media content analysis was carried out in order to study TV news coverage of the 2004 and 2009 European elections in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Carrying out a content analysis of the media coverage of European elections can help us understand how important the media perceive European elections to be; i.e. elections which are generally regarded as “second-order” (Reif, Schmitt 1980), because content analysis (through the content-analyzed materials) helps us learn more about the meaning the media assign to elections without their (media outlets) cooperation (Hermann 2009). For the purposes of this paper, I focus on the main television news programmes of both public service and private television broadcasters, because the majority of citizens in Europe mention television as their main source of political information in general and information about European affairs in particular (*Eurobarometer* 1999–2007: 51-67; Chaffee, Kanihan 1997) and because television together with newspapers were the two most often cited sources of information for the 2004 European elections (*Flash Eurobarometer* 2004: 162).

Both analysed countries underwent remarkable changes to their broadcasting systems throughout the 1990s. In the same vein as in the rest of the countries in the region, private television was introduced in the Czech Republic (1993) and in Slovakia (1995) (Culík 2004) and the state-owned media monopoly thus came to an end.<sup>5</sup> The present broadcasting system in both countries is therefore characterized by a number of competing channels that offer a full range of programmes, thus making them dual broadcasting systems with similar audience reach for both public service and private channels (Banducci, Semetko 2003). For the purpose of this study

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the development of the broadcasting systems of other Central and Eastern European countries see, for example, Kelly, Mazzoleni, McQuail 2004.

I examine the main evening news broadcast of all main public service and private television stations.<sup>6</sup> Together, this makes three television stations for the Czech Republic and four for Slovakia, which are summarized in Table no. 1.

**Table no. 1.** Summary of main television stations in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

	<b>Czech Republic</b>	<b>Slovakia</b>
<b>Public Service</b>	Česká televize (ČT 1)	Slovenská televízia (STV 1)
<b>Private</b>	TV Nova, Prima TV	Joj TV, TV Markíza, TA3

The two weeks prior to Election Day became the subject of the analysis because prior research has demonstrated that election coverage tends to cluster around the period shortly before Election Day (Leroy, Siune 1994; Siune, 1983) and thus it makes this study comparable to other research conducted in the field (Peter, Lauf, Semetko 2004).<sup>7</sup> The period covered is therefore 27 May – 9 June 2004 for the 2004 European elections and 21 May – 3 June 2009 for the latest 2009 European elections.

The previous above-mentioned research of EU media coverage stresses the importance of three main aspects that tend to influence public perceptions and involvement. These three aspects of media coverage are the visibility of EU news; the degree of domestication (Europeanization) of the news (in particular the visibility of EU topics and EU actors), and the tone of the news about European integration (de Vreese et al. 2006; Peter, Semetko, de Vreese 2003). Greater visibility of EU issues during a campaign is connected with higher turnout in European elections (Banducci & Semetko 2004) as well as with the reasons why voters choose not to turn-out (Hobolt, Spoon, Tilley 2008). The tone of coverage is also an important (de-)mobilizing force (Banducci, Semetko 2004; Goldstein, Freedman 2002). A negative tone in news about European integration has been shown to influence public evaluations of the EU (Norris 2000). It has also been suggested that greater visibility of EU actors increases turnout in European elections (Banducci, Semetko 2003) and that the sheer visibility of transnational actors

<sup>6</sup> Only national television stations are included, as opposed to stations with regional or sub-national coverage.

<sup>7</sup> It would have been interesting to focus on the whole campaigns from the moments they were officially announced by political parties. However, this contribution is interested in the media portrayal of campaigns, not so much in the electoral campaigns themselves. Moreover, the author's tentative analysis has shown that the election coverage usually emerges around 16 days before EP elections. For the sake of sustaining the possibility of comparison with similar studies conducted previously this contribution retains the 14-day period as the subject of analysis.

is a necessary but insufficient condition for the existence of a European public sphere (Adam 2007).

Two of these aspects of research on EU media coverage, namely the *visibility* and the *degree of domestication* (Europeanization) of election news, are also closely connected to the second-order election model. One of the defining features of second-order elections is that there is little media coverage relevant to the outcome (Cutler 2008). It has also been suggested that during European election campaigns there is third-rate coverage of EU actors (Anderson, McLeod 2004; Peter, Lauf, Semetko 2004), signalling domestication of electoral campaigns, another proposition of the SOE model. Here, I focus on the *visibility* of EU issues during the campaign and *domestication* (Europeanization) of European elections campaigns in the main evening TV news broadcasts, thereby linking this study to previous research on EU media coverage as well as to previous research on second-order election explanations of European elections.

### 3.1. Expectations

The nature of the second-order election model together with the findings of previous research on EU media coverage bring about clear expectations as regards the two aspects of EU media coverage I analyze here. The first expectation is for the media coverage to be greater in elections that are more salient and in contests that are more competitive or intense (Banducci, Semetko 2003). In other words, more important elections will receive greater media coverage. Because in second-order elections there is less at stake (Reif, Schmitt 1980), the media coverage is supposed to be lower as compared to first-order elections. Therefore, as far as the visibility of European elections is concerned, I expect it to be low and especially lower in the case of European elections in comparison to the visibility of first-order elections (de Vreese, Lauf, Peter 2007).<sup>8</sup> With respect to the domestication (Europeanization) of European electoral campaigns in the media, the characterization of European elections as second-order elections suggests that a domestic frame will be strongly dominant (de Vreese, Lauf, Peter 2007), signalling domestication rather than the Europeanization of campaigns. Therefore, I expect the EP election campaigns in the media to be predominantly domestic (national) in nature with little reference to the European dimension.

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<sup>8</sup> Both countries under analysis are parliamentary democracies and therefore national parliamentary elections are first-order national elections.



According to previous research of media coverage of European elections, the first elections received some amount of (duty) media coverage because of the novelty of the event and with subsequent elections they disappeared from media coverage (Siune, McQuail, Blumler 1984; de Vreese, Lauf, Peter 2007). Moreover, the research also indicates that predominantly domestic appeals played a greater role in the campaigns in subsequent European elections as compared to the first elections that took place in the respective country (Leroy, Siune 1994). Both countries under analysis joined the EU in May 2004 and the first European elections took place soon after during June 2004, thus being something completely novel for the citizens, parties as well as the media of both countries. As a result of aforementioned findings of prior research, I expect the media coverage of the 2004 European elections to be higher than that of the subsequent European elections of 2009.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the domestication of media coverage of campaigns is expected to be lower for the 2004 European elections, given their novelty, and more pronounced for the 2009 EP elections.

Given that both countries operate under dual broadcasting systems with similar audience reaching for public service and private channels, the analysis focuses on both types of channels. Public service broadcasting has, by definition, an obligation to provide a sufficient amount of news and public affairs coverage, which is pluralist in terms of both issue content and coverage of political actors (Act No. 231/2001; Act No. 308/2000; Popescu, Tóka 2009). In addition, it has been shown that public service broadcasters tend to have more political and economic news than do their private counterparts (Pfetsch 1996; Semetko, Valkenburg 2000). Private television channels, on the other hand, are usually assumed mainly to focus on soft news and infotainment instead of conveying everyday politics to the viewers (Blumler 1997; Pfetsch 1996). With respect to media coverage of European affairs, public service broadcasters tend to have more news about European integration (de Vreese et al. 2006; Peter, de Vreese 2004) and more often include EU-level actors in the news than do private news outlets (de Vreese, Boomgaarden 2006a). Moreover, the campaigns preceding European elections were more visible overall and EU-actors were more present on public service news programmes (Banducci, Semetko 2003).<sup>10</sup> Taken

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<sup>9</sup> This declining media coverage may, on the other hand, be alleviated by the fact that overall media coverage of the European Union (EU) has increased during the last two decades (Boomgaarden et al. 2010) and also by the growing importance of the European Parliament (EP) after the successful ratification of the Lisbon Treaty that may make European elections less second-order by making the stakes higher.

<sup>10</sup> The division between public and private television stations is also important in relation to research on effects of type of outlet on viewers' political knowledge and interest. The research in this field is ambiguous. While some

together, this gives rise to two expectations related to the analysis. First, I expect public service broadcasting television news programmes to report more on European election campaigns than private outlets. The second expectation is that public service broadcasters will include more relevant EU-actors in their main news programmes as compared to private broadcasters.

### 3.2. Data and operationalization

For the purposes of this study I focus exclusively on main television news programmes. Television is consistently cited as the most important source of information among European citizens when they are looking for information about the EU (*Eurobarometer* 51-67).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, television is generally seen as the most influential mass medium (Chaffee, Kanihan 1997). More specifically, I focus on main evening television news programmes for each outlet, because out of all the news programmes these have the largest audiences. Moreover, as pointed out by Peter and his colleagues “these ‘flagship’ news programs provide an indicator of the importance that broadcasters attach to the EU and European parliamentary elections” (Peter, Lauf, Semetko 2004: 416). For each country, the main evening news programmes of all main public service and private television stations – as summarized in Table no. 1 – were included. Table no. 2 summarizes the main evening news programmes included in the analysis. As mentioned previously, the collection of data covered the two weeks preceding Election Day for the 2004 and 2009 EP elections.<sup>12</sup>

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research finds that exposure to public and private television news both tend to increase political knowledge (e.g. Popescu, Tóka 2009), another strand of research suggests that “watching public television news regularly has a positive influence on a number of political involvement measures including knowledge, internal efficacy, and turning out to vote, whereas regularly watching private television news has a negative impact on these aspects of political involvement” (Aarts, Semetko 2003: 776).

<sup>11</sup> One could object here, following media studies theory, agenda-setting research and political communication theories, that the most important source of information is interpersonal communication. Nonetheless, when concerned with information about European integration, interpersonal communication has consistently ranked the fourth most important source of information. Moreover, a post-2004 European elections survey has shown that – for campaign relevant information – interpersonal communication was only the fifth most important source of information (*Flash Eurobarometer* 2004: 162).

<sup>12</sup> The period covered is therefore 27 May – 9 June 2004 for the 2004 European elections and 21 May – 3 June 2009 for the latest 2009 European elections.

**Table no. 2.** Summary of main evening television news programmes in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

	<b>Channels analysed</b>
<b>Czech Republic</b>	ČT1/ČT 24: <i>Události</i> ; TV Nova: <i>Televizní noviny</i> ; Prima TV: <i>Zpravodajský deník/Zprávy TV Prima</i> <sup>13</sup>
<b>Slovakia</b>	STV1: <i>Hlavné správy/Správy STV</i> <sup>14</sup> ; TA3: <i>Hlavné správy</i> ; Joj TV: <i>Noviny</i> ; TV Markíza: <i>Televízne noviny</i>

In line with previous research studies, I base all analyses on the length of the individual news story in relation to the total length of each news programme (e.g. de Vreese et al. 2006).<sup>15</sup> Length is a more appropriate measure of the visibility of topics than the number of stories because the length of the news programmes (from 15 to 35 minutes) and of the news stories varies as well as the number of stories per news programme. For the measure of visibility, the unit of analysis and coding is the individual news story, generally defined as a semantic entity with at least one topic delimited from another story by a change of topic (Peter, de Vreese 2004; Peter, Lauf, Semetko 2004). In total, 3 504 television news stories were analysed. To identify the domestic versus European nature of the story, I rely on the coding of actors in the news. Individual actor thus became a unit of analysis. An actor is defined as a person (e.g. an MEP candidate), a group of persons (e.g. a political party), an institution (e.g. a national parliament) or other organization featured in the news story (de Vreese et al. 2006). Up to 10 actors per news story were coded. In total, 509 actors in relevant television news stories were coded.

The first key measure used in this study is the *visibility* of the (campaigns preceding) elections to the EP. *European election campaign* coverage is operationalized as stories in which the European election campaign (e.g. candidates, parties, polls, policy areas) was mentioned in at least two complete, independent sentences (Peter, de Vreese 2004). All stories in the news programmes were analysed to identify stories about European election campaign. European election campaign coverage should be distinguished from EU-related coverage. EU-related coverage comprises of both coverage of EU topics other than the European election and coverage with some reference to the EU without direct reference to European elections. This

<sup>13</sup> During the analysed period, Prima TV has changed the name of its main evening news programme.

<sup>14</sup> During the analysed period, STV1 has changed the name of its main evening news programme.

<sup>15</sup> The analysis was conducted as follows: Initially all television newscasts were videotaped and analysed according to the methods indicated. Length was operationalized in terms of time. However, due to missing data for some TV outlets and election years, I turned to Newton Media and analysed their transcripts of the news. Here, length was operationalized in terms of word count. Because both analyses were yielding very similar (almost the same) results, I eventually decided to use Newton Media transcripts not only because of missing video data but also because of the increased ease of carrying out the analysis using transcripts.

study focuses on European election campaign coverage only, thus excluding other EU-related coverage.

To test the proposition derived from the SOE model that European elections receive lower coverage in main television news programmes in comparison to coverage of first-order (national) elections (de Vreese, Lauf, Peter 2007), another content analysis was conducted, this time covering the two week period preceding the Election Day of national parliamentary elections. In both countries, these first-order national elections took place in 2006 and 2010 respectively, always within two weeks of each other.<sup>16</sup> Here, again, the key measure was the *visibility* of the (campaign preceding) national parliamentary elections. *National election campaign* coverage was operationalized as stories in which a national election campaign (e.g. candidates, parties, polls, policy areas) was mentioned in at least two complete, independent sentences. Again, all stories in television news programmes were analysed to identify stories about the campaigns. Within this second content analysis, a total of 3 440 television news stories were analysed.<sup>17</sup>

The second key measure used in this study is the *domestication (Europeanization)* of EP election campaigns in the news measured as the visibility of different actors. As was mentioned above, up to 10 actors were coded for each story. Each actor was coded only once per story. *EU-actors* were operationalized as EP election candidates, members and representatives of EU institutions as well as the EU President and EU Commission members, persons appointed by the EU, spokespersons and other actors clearly connected with the EU (the head of state or government of the country holding the rotating presidency was coded as an EU-actor). *Domestic political actors* are members of the government, spokespersons for government agencies, or members of opposition parties. This includes all members of both chambers of national parliaments. The category of *other actors* includes journalists, celebrities, ordinary citizens and other actors that do not fall into the EU or domestic political actor categories.

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<sup>16</sup> In 2006, national parliamentary elections took place on June 2–3 in the Czech Republic and on June 17 in Slovakia. The latest parliamentary elections of 2010 took place on May 28–29 in the Czech Republic and on June 12 in Slovakia.

<sup>17</sup> It has been shown that European/EU issues are hardly present during the campaigns leading up to national parliamentary elections (Hlousek, Kaniok 2010).

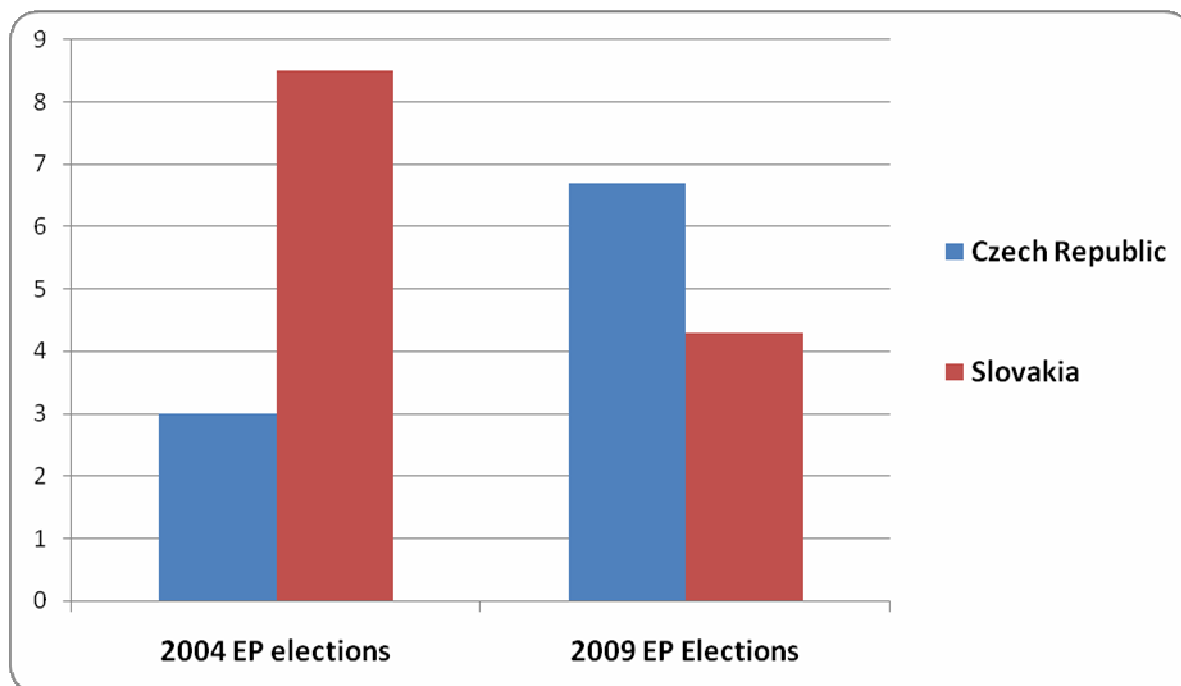
#### 4. Results

The 2004 European Parliamentary elections in the television news in both countries were of marginal visibility.<sup>18</sup> In the Czech Republic, the news related to European election campaigns took up 3 % of the news, while in Slovakia the elections were considerably more visible, taking up around 8.5 % of the news. The situation for the 2009 European Parliamentary elections was quite different. In both countries the visibility of elections changed dramatically. Nonetheless, the news related to European election campaigns remained marginally visible. In the Czech Republic, 2009 EP election stories took up 6.7 % of the newscasts, representing more than double the amount of coverage devoted to the EP elections in 2004. On the other hand, in Slovakia, 2009 European election stories took up only 4.3 % of the news, their visibility decreasing by almost a half as compared to the visibility of the 2004 European elections. These findings are in line with previous research suggesting that European elections are only marginally covered in the television news (e.g. de Vreese et al. 2005). Figure no. 1 summarizes the visibility of European elections in 2004 and 2009 in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

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<sup>18</sup> A tentative analysis (not reported here) has shown that news related to, for example, culture/entertainment takes up around 15–20 % of newscasts. The term marginal here refers to the fact that European elections have never taken up more than 10 % of the news. The score sheets are provided in the Appendix.

**Figure no. 1.** Visibility of the 2004 and 2009 European elections in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.<sup>19</sup>

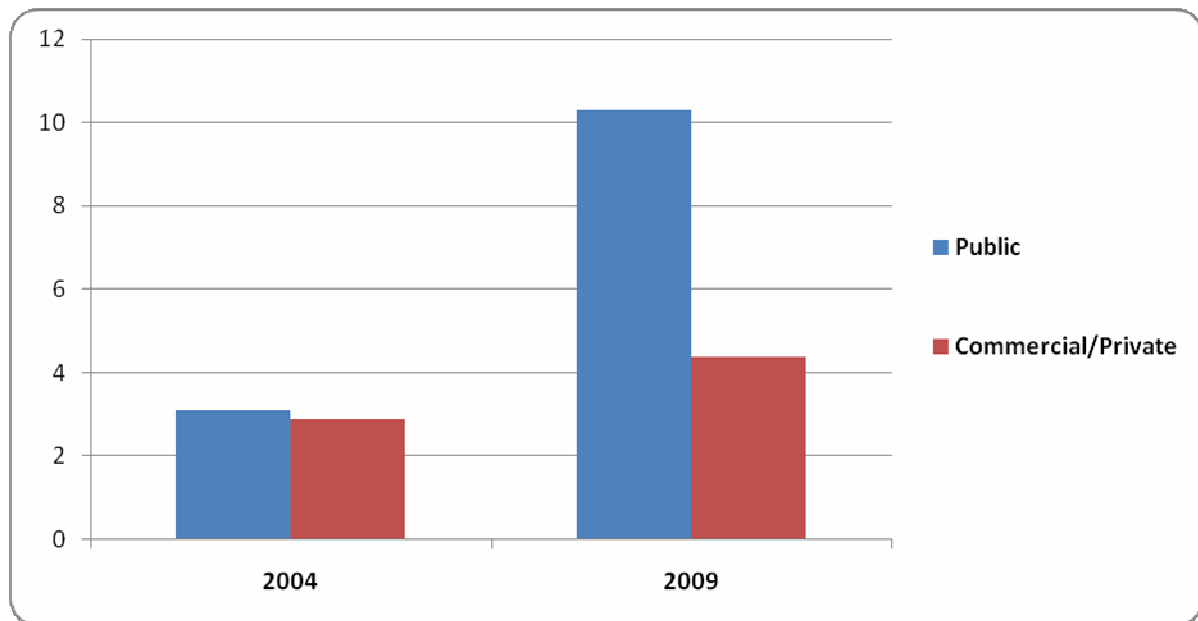


As far as the expectation that the first European elections in a given country receive some amount of (duty) media coverage because of the novelty of the event and that with subsequent elections they disappear, this was the case only in Slovakia where visibility across the two European elections decreased by almost a half. In the Czech Republic, on the other hand, the visibility of European elections doubled from 2004 to 2009. Comparing the visibility of European elections on the news programmes of public service and private broadcasters, I find support for the expectation that public service broadcasters devote more time to the elections than their private counterparts. This pattern was valid for the 2004 as well as for the 2009 European election in both countries. The results for Slovakia were, however, more pronounced. (In 2004, public service broadcasters devoted 9.7 % of news coverage to the EP elections, while private broadcasters devoted only 4.9 %; in 2009, public service broadcasters devoted 7.1 % of news coverage to the EP elections, while private broadcasters devoted only 3.4 %). In the Czech Republic in 2004, the margin between public service vs. private was quite narrow (3.1 % and 2.9 % respectively). However, the expectation was fulfilled in 2009, with public broadcasters

<sup>19</sup> Values are length-based percentages within a country and during election periods. All stories in main evening television newscasts were included. Values display the proportion of news stories about the European election campaign. 2004:  $n = 1\,493$ ; 2009:  $n = 2\,011$ .

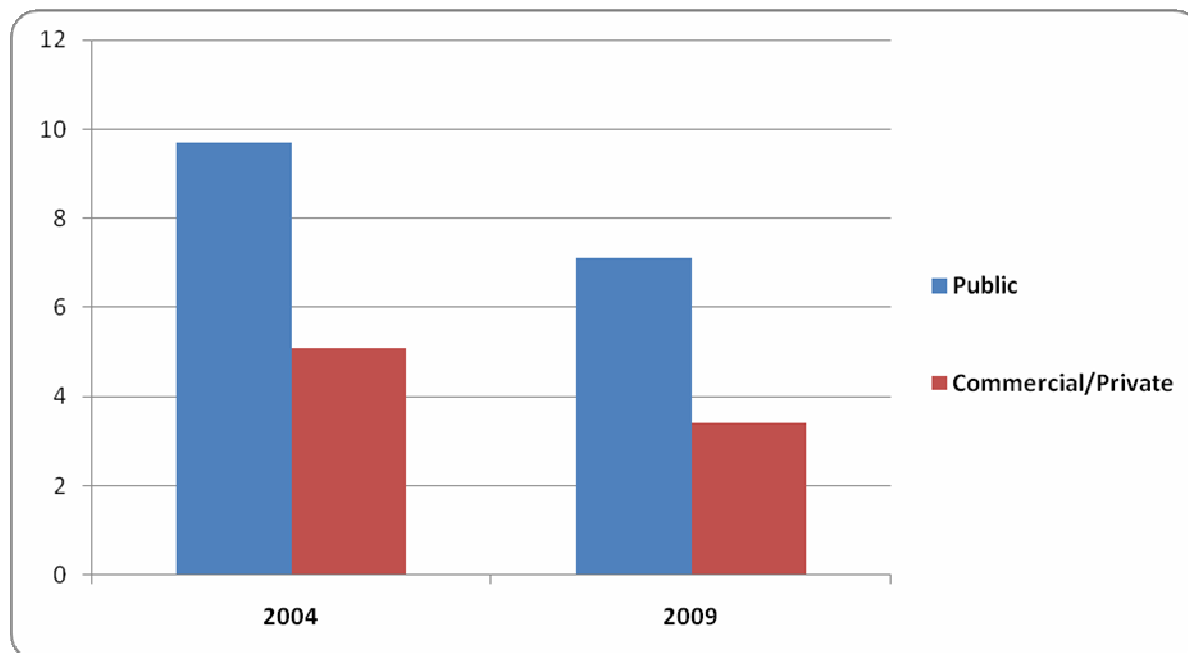
devoting 10.2 % of news coverage to the elections while private broadcasters devoted only 4.4 %. Figures no. 2 and no. 3 clearly show that European elections were consistently more visible in public service broadcasting newscasts than on private television news.

**Figure no. 2.** Visibility of European elections in public service and private television newscasts in the Czech Republic, 2004 and 2009.<sup>20</sup>



<sup>20</sup> Values are length-based percentages within the categories and election periods. All stories in television newscasts were included. Values display the proportion of news stories about the European election campaign. 2004:  $n = 651$ ; 2009:  $n = 859$ .

**Figure no. 3.** Visibility of European elections in public service and private television newscasts in Slovakia, 2004 and 2009.<sup>21</sup>

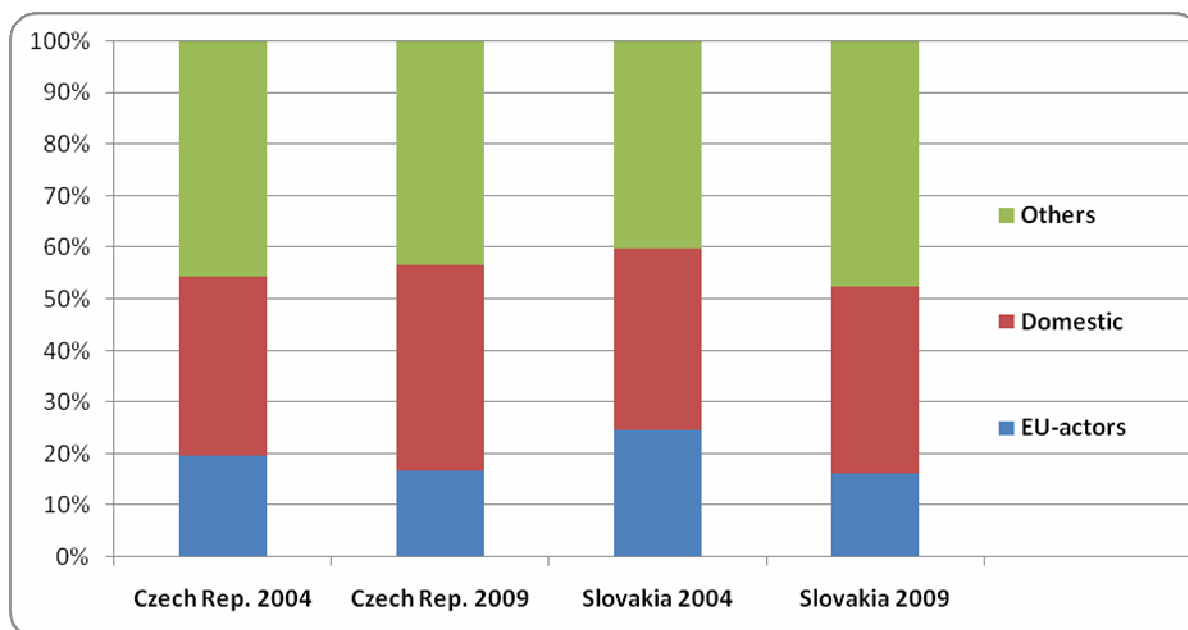


The expectation – derived from the SOE model – that EP election stories are dominated by national actors is addressed by looking at actors featured in news stories about European election campaigns. Figure no. 4 summarizes the proportions of actors who appeared in European election campaign stories. The appearance of actors is also compared across the two analysed European elections. Among the groups of political actors, domestic political actors clearly dominated the coverage of European elections in both countries in both election years. This may be taken as an indication that the nature of European elections as second order national elections was reflected in television news coverage. With respect to the expectation that the first European elections in a given country are less dominated by domestic appeals and actors than subsequent European elections (Leroy, Siune 1994; Siune 1983), it proved to be valid for both countries. In the Czech Republic the proportion of EU-actors decreased from 19.6 % in 2004 to 16.6 % in 2009. The proportional decline was larger in Slovakia, falling from 25 % in 2004 to 16 % in 2009. The results therefore support the findings of a variety of previous research studies.

<sup>21</sup> Values are length-based percentages within the categories and election periods. All stories in television newscasts were included. Values display the proportion of news stories about the European election campaign. 2004:  $n = 842$ ; 2009:  $n = 1\,152$ .



**Figure no. 4.** Visibility of actors in European election stories in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, 2004 and 2009.<sup>22</sup>



Given that public service broadcasters have an educational mission and also an obligation to provide a sufficient amount of news and public affairs coverage, which is pluralist in terms of both issue content and coverage of political actors (Popescu, Tóka 2009), I expected that public service broadcasting newscasts would include EU-level actors more often than do private news outlets (Banducci, Semetko 2003; de Vreese, Boomgaarden 2006a). The differences were, however, quite small between public service and private broadcasters, with a margin of only a few percent.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the results are in line with another recent study finding only small differences between public service and private broadcasters (de Vreese et al. 2006).

The second expectation derived from the SOE model, namely, that the visibility of European elections is considerably lower than the visibility of first-order (national) elections (de Vreese, Lauf, Peter 2007), was addressed by conducting another content analysis, this time covering the two week period preceding the Election Day of national (first-order) elections in 2006 and 2010. The period covered was therefore 19 May – 1 June 2006 for the 2006 national parliamentary elections and 14–27 May 2010 for the latest 2010 national parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic. For Slovakia, the period covered was 3–16 June 2006 for the 2006 national

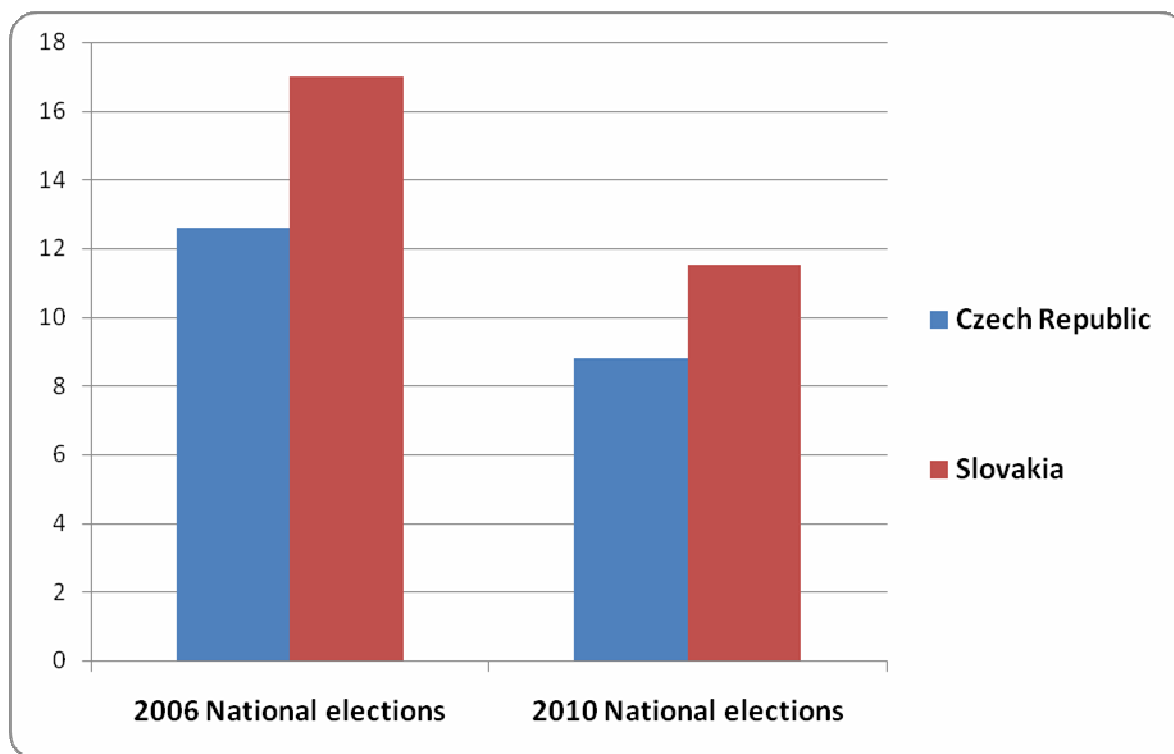
<sup>22</sup> The figure compares all actors in the news in 2004 with all actors in the news in 2009.

<sup>23</sup> The data are not reported here in numerical form or in a figure. Nonetheless, the data are available upon request.

parliamentary elections and 29 May – 11 June 2010 for the latest 2010 national parliamentary elections.

Figure no. 5 shows the visibility of national parliamentary elections in 2006 and 2010 in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In both election years, Slovakian television broadcasters devoted more time to national election campaigns than their counterparts in the Czech Republic. What also clearly stands out is the decrease in the number of national election stories from 2006 to 2010 in both countries. This study is, nonetheless, mainly interested in the comparison of the visibility of second-order vs. first-order elections.

**Figure no. 5.** Visibility of national elections in television newscasts in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, 2006 and 2010.<sup>24</sup>

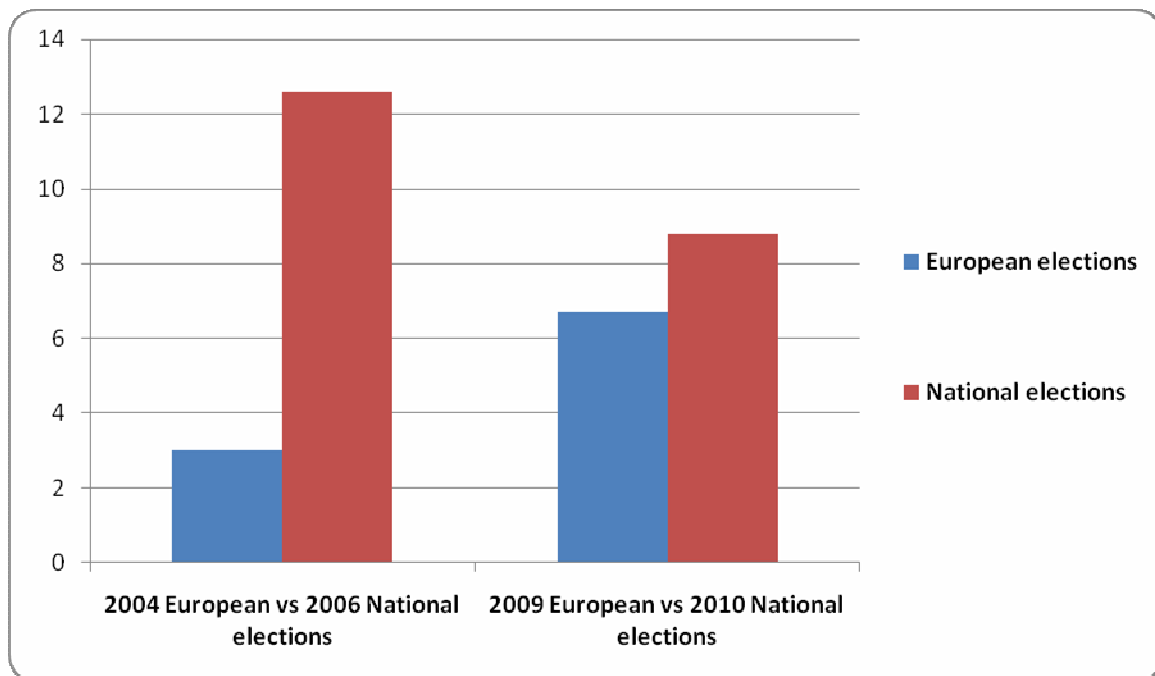


Figures no. 6 and no. 7 show that the visibility of European elections was consistently lower than the visibility of national – first-order – elections. The differences in Slovakia were more striking: within both election pairs the visibility of national elections was at least twice as high compared

<sup>24</sup> Values are length-based percentages within a country and election periods. All stories in main evening television newscasts were included. Values display the proportion of news stories about the national parliamentary election campaign. 2006:  $n = 1\,508$ ; 2009:  $n = 1\,934$ .

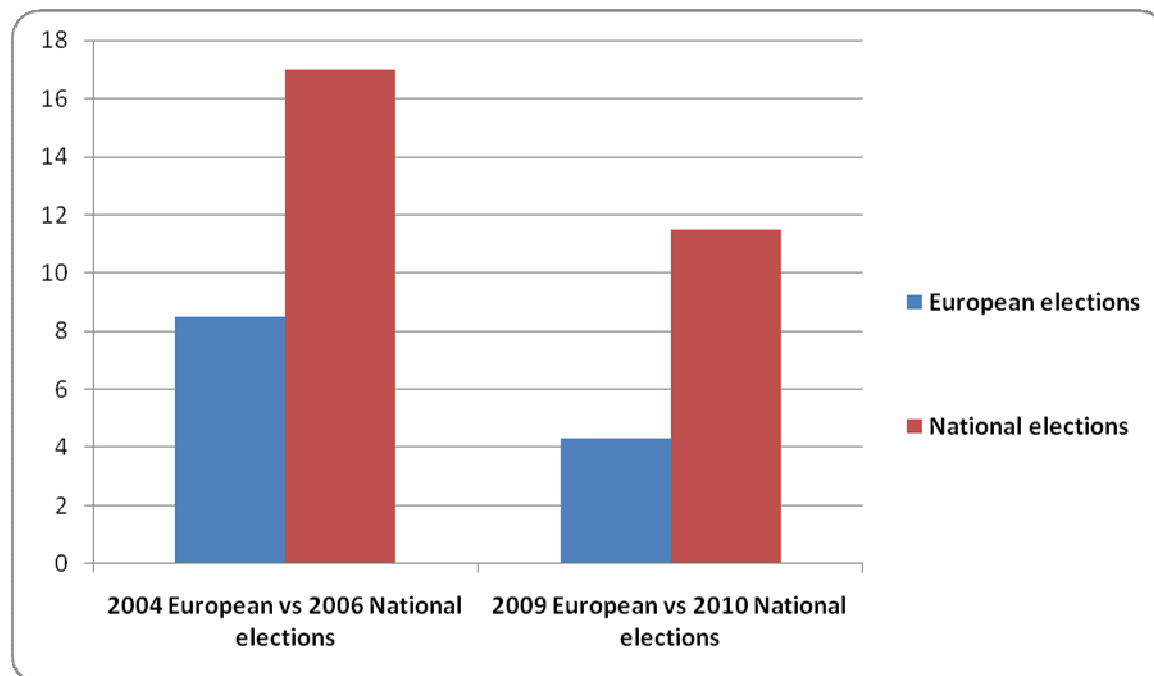
to the visibility of European elections. In the Czech Republic, for the first election pair the visibility of national elections was four times higher than the visibility of European elections, while for the second election pair national elections were only 1.3 times more visible than European elections. In no case, however, were European elections more visible than national ones, underlying the second-order nature of European elections, at least as reflected in the TV news coverage.

**Figure no. 6.** Visibility of European elections compared to visibility of the subsequent national parliamentary elections in television newscasts in the Czech Republic.<sup>25</sup>



<sup>25</sup> Values are length-based percentages within a country, election period and type of election.

**Figure no. 7.** Visibility of European elections compared to visibility of the subsequent national parliamentary elections in television newscasts in Slovakia.<sup>26</sup>



To sum up, the results lend support to most of the initially held expectations. The coverage of European elections in television news was indeed low, in no case exceeding 10 % of news programmes. Moreover, European election campaign stories were dominated by domestic rather than EU actors, indicating the domestication rather than Europeanization of campaigns. The first European elections in a given country featured more EU-actors than subsequent elections to the EP. Public service broadcasters, in general, devoted more time to European elections than their private counterparts. Lastly, the visibility of national (first-order) elections was, in all cases, higher than the visibility of preceding European elections. In addition, two expectations proved to be only partly valid, or not valid at all. First, I expected that the visibility of European election campaign stories would be higher in the first European elections in a given country than in subsequent ones. It proved valid in one country only, namely Slovakia, and the effect was reversed in the Czech Republic. Second, it was expected that public service broadcasters – performing an educational mission – would involve more EU-actors within their main newscasts than their private counterparts. However, the differences were very small and not always in favour of public service broadcasters.

<sup>26</sup> Values are length-based percentages within a country, election period and type of election.

## 5. Discussion

At the beginning of the paper, I argued that the news and information environment during an election is of crucial importance and that the media provide information and communication as the key ingredients in the democratic process of political debate and opinion formation (Meyer 1999). Moreover, it was argued that the media constitute the most important sources of political information and channels of communication between the governors and the governed (Strömbäck, Shehata 2010; *Eurobarometer* 1999–2007: 60-62). Television plays the key role in informing European citizens about European integration in general and European elections in particular (*Flash Eurobarometer* 2004: 162). It was also argued that the media are important for the existence and running of democratic processes, as well as for the formation of citizens' political knowledge and attitudes, and determining their level of interest and participation. Furthermore, previous research on campaign effects suggests that news can either mobilize or demobilize voters, while both processes may depend on whether one relies on the news programmes of public service broadcasters or competing private channels (Aarts, Semetko 2003; Popescu, Tóka 2009). Such effects are not only contingent upon the individual characteristics of voters, such as political interest or political awareness (Kahn, Kenney 1999) – and we know that there is a causal and reciprocal relationship between political interest and awareness and attention to political news (Strömbäck, Shehata 2010) – but also depend on the diet of information provided by the media (the actual content) (Schoenbach, Lauf 2002). In addition, it has been particularly demonstrated that television is capable of contributing to turnout in European elections (Schoenbach, Lauf 2002; Banducci, Semetko 2003; 2004).

It has also been pointed out by others that “[f]rom a standpoint of democratic citizenship, a campaign has the potential to inform and mobilize voters to take part in the process of electing representatives” (de Vreese et al.: 185). The media play a crucial role in this process, because one of the crucial functions the media fulfil in the European policy process is that, in the absence of direct communicative links, EU-actors, issues and policies have to be made visible by the media, and it is in this public forum that they must gain public legitimacy (Koopmans 2007). The EU, therefore, also relies on the media indirectly to strengthen its legitimacy by increasing citizens' awareness of its activities and policies (de Vreese et al. 2006). As part of input legitimation, political communication contributes to the legitimacy of governance if it helps to increase citizens' influence on decision-making and to hold political actors accountable for their actions in between electoral procedures (Meyer 1999). In other words, greater public debate and

communication could play an important role in legitimizing the EU (Karp, Banducci, Bowler 2003). Put simply, proper communication is required in order for the EU to gain support and legitimacy, especially in the case of EU institutions (Dolghi 2009).

The necessity for the EU to be the subject of proper communication through the media is especially important in the light of the evaporating ‘permissive consensus’ (Hooghe, Marks 2006), whereby public opinion becomes of paramount importance for the future of European integration. Acknowledging it, the Commission in its White Paper on European Governance noted that the Union “will no longer be judged solely by its ability to remove barriers to trade or to complete an internal market; its legitimacy today depends on involvement and participation” (European Commission 2001: 11). Given the media effects on involvement and participation and indirectly on the EU’s legitimacy, the White Paper on a European Communication Policy stresses the need for widely available information about the EU in, for instance, the mass media to increase citizen involvement (European Commission 2006). The results, however, show that news about European elections was covered only marginally and was thus only available to a very limited extent in television newscasts.

Drawing on the SOE model, I put forward a hypothesis about news coverage of the European Parliamentary elections. First, the coverage of European election campaigns would, in general, be low in visibility and, in particular, lower than the coverage of national (first-order) elections. Second, I hypothesized that the coverage of European election campaigns would be predominantly domestic as opposed to European in nature. Both these main expectations were borne out by the results. Television newscasts devoted little attention to the European election campaign and, in terms of actors featured, the coverage was overwhelmingly domesticized. Again, given the media effects on citizens involvement and thus indirectly on the EU’s legitimacy and the campaign’s potential to inform and mobilize citizens to vote, this is rather bad news for the EU and its citizens. The low visibility of European elections and the domestic nature of coverage hardly contribute to public knowledge about the issues and procedures of the EU or help European voters to make an informed choice.

European Parliamentary elections in 2004 and 2009 in the Czech Republic remained second-order elections, at least as far as the coverage in television news programmes was concerned. Compared to national parliamentary elections, television coverage of European elections was second-rate; the level of information provided was low. This is a pity especially because latest research suggests that receiving additional information about the European

dimension results in a conditioning effect on the second-order nature of voting behaviour in European elections (Hobolt, Wittrock 2009).

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**Appendix A.** Score sheet of the 2009 European elections in TV newscasts in the Czech Republic.

	Total no. of news	Total no. of European elections campaign news	Proportion (%)	Total length of news	Total length of European elections campaign news	Proportion (%)	Domestic political actors	EU political actors	Other actors
Česká televize (CT1/CT24)	351	32	9,117	83 065	8 528	10,267	20	14	30
Prima TV	231	9	3,896	68 482	3 364	4,9122	18	5	7
TV Nova	277	6	2,166	61 129	2 351	3,846	11	1	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>859</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>5,471</b>	<b>212 676</b>	<b>14 243</b>	<b>6,697</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>52</b>

**Appendix B.** Score sheet of the 2004 European elections in TV newscast in the Czech Republic.

	Total no. of news	Total no. of European elections campaign news	Proportion (%)	Total length of news	Total length of European elections campaign news	Proportion (%)	Domestic political actors	EU political actors	Other actors
Česká televize (CT1/CT24)	232	9	3,879	46 704	1 375	2,944	11	2	7
Prima TV	210	12	5,714	28 500	1 372	4,814	6	11	14
TV Nova	209	3	1,435	51 776	977	1,887	6	0	19
<b>Total</b>	<b>651</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>3,687</b>	<b>126 980</b>	<b>3 724</b>	<b>2,933</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>30</b>

**Appendix C.** Score sheet of the 2009 European elections in TV newscast in Slovakia.

	Total no. of news	Total no. of European elections campaign news	Proportion (%)	Total length of news	Total length of European elections campaign news	Proportion (%)	Domestic political actors	EU political actors	Other actors
STV	246	20	8,130	54 100	3 869	7,152	9	11	17
TV Markíza	391	11	2,813	94 415	2 727	2,888	7	4	9
TV Joj	274	6	2,190	62 243	1 740	2,795	13	0	7
TA3	241	10	4,149	46 848	2 638	5,631	7	1	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>1152</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>4,080</b>	<b>257 606</b>	<b>10 974</b>	<b>4,260</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>46</b>

**Appendix D.** Score sheet of the 2004 European elections in TV newscast in Slovakia.

	Total no. of news	Total no. of European elections campaign news	Proportion (%)	Total length of news	Total length of European elections campaign news	Proportion (%)	Domestic political actors	EU political actors	Other actors
<b>STV</b>	212	16	7,547	38 545	3 664	9,5058	21	15	25
<b>TV Markíza</b>	225	11	4,889	43 027	3 170	7,367	17	16	19
<b>TV Joj</b>	216	4	1,852	35 344	969	2,7416	10	2	8
<b>TA3</b>	189	7	3,704	39 116	1 671	4,272	6	5	10
<b>Total</b>	842	38	4,513	156 032	9 474	6,072	54	38	62

**Appendix E.** Score sheet of the 2010 national parliamentary elections in TV newscasts in the Czech Republic.

	Total no. of news	Total no. of national elections campaign news	Proportion (%)	Total length of news	Total length of national elections campaign news	Proportion (%)
<b>Česká televize (CT1/CT24)</b>	296	34	11,486	70 077	7 216	10,297
<b>Prima TV</b>	197	23	11,675	55 332	6 433	11,626
<b>TV Nova</b>	217	6	2,765	56 401	2 286	4,053
<b>Total</b>	710	63	8,873	181 810	15 935	8,765

**Appendix F.** Score sheet of the 2006 national parliamentary elections in TV newscasts in the Czech Republic.

	Total no. of news	Total no. of national elections campaign news	Proportion (%)	Total length of news	Total length of national elections campaign news	Proportion (%)
<b>Česká televize (CT1/CT24)</b>	193	33	17,098	49 561	7 658	15,452
<b>Prima TV</b>	183	15	8,197	28 090	3 776	13,443
<b>TV Nova</b>	209	18	8,612	52 980	4 988	9,415
<b>Total</b>	585	66	11,282	130 631	16 422	12,571

**Appendix G.** Score sheet of the 2010 national parliamentary elections in TV newscasts in Slovakia.

	<b>Total no. of news</b>	<b>Total no. of national elections campaign news</b>	<b>Proportion (%)</b>	<b>Total length of news</b>	<b>Total length of national elections campaign news</b>	<b>Proportion (%)</b>
<b>STV</b>	244	19	7,787	54 413	6 286	11,552
<b>TV Markíza</b>	438	41	9,361	99 543	13 128	13,188
<b>TV Joj</b>	291	9	3,093	53 131	1 833	3,450
<b>TA3</b>	251	30	11,952	48 345	8 061	16,674
<b>Total</b>	1214	99	8,088	255 432	29 308	11,474

**Appendix H.** Score sheet of the 2006 national parliamentary elections in TV newscasts in Slovakia.

	<b>Total no. of news</b>	<b>Total no. of national elections campaign news</b>	<b>Proportion (%)</b>	<b>Total length of news</b>	<b>Total length of national elections campaign news</b>	<b>Proportion (%)</b>
<b>STV</b>	247	47	19,028	48 059	8 546	17,782
<b>TV Markíza</b>	215	30	13,953	45 953	7 672	16,695
<b>TV Joj</b>	263	29	11,027	49 698	7 265	14,618
<b>TA3</b>	196	36	18,367	42 160	8 016	19,013
<b>Total</b>	921	142	15,418	185 870	31 499	16,947