

CENTRAL EUROPEAN LEADERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE MIGRATION AND THE MIGRATION CRISIS

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With the number of migrants and refugees knocking on Europe's doors relatively stable, there is now a sense of relief at the EU political level. The EU leaders confirmed a shift in their focus from internal and structural to external and security dimensions of the migration challenge. However, the policy shift in the EU's strategy on migration has not been fully accepted by the Visegrad Group countries (V4). This article examines the national policy discourse and government policies on migration in these four respective countries, focused primarily on the period from mid-2015 to the end of 2018. The authors argue that the problem here lies in the different approaches towards migration held by EU member states. Different migratory traditions are one of the key issues related to the misunderstanding among the states. Their approaches are determined by their geographical locations and migration histories. The main aim of this article is to analyze, compare, and to give some clarity to the positions held by the V4 countries and their political leaders. Even though apparently, they hold opposite positions towards migration, the article finds that they share some common features such as a denial of being an asylum country and the absence of a related public policy.

Key words: migration; political leaders; Visegrad Group, European Union; refugees.

1 INTRODUCTION

The increased inflow of asylum seekers over the last years instigated fierce debates among European policy makers about the appropriate way to handle this new "crisis" (Hercowitz-Amir et al. 2017). As member states failed to agree on which rules to implement, a joint European reaction remained absent, and the

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limits of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) became apparent (Niemann and Zaun 2018). Some countries, such as Germany, advocated for relocation schemes and a pragmatic response. Yet others, including the Visegrad Group countries, opposed the introduction of quota and the idea of burden-sharing (Castells 2018). This lack of effective cooperation and the inability to develop harmonized asylum policies have intensified cleavages between states that pursue more restrictive policies, and nations that are more open and welcoming toward newcomers (Bakker et al. 2016).

These opposing political reactions coincide with two broader conflicting perspectives on the desired design of asylum policies and the approach in handling the renewed inflow of asylum seekers (Triandafyllidou 2018). On the one hand, the humanitarian perspective emphasizes the importance of open policies, a welcoming and solidary culture, and compassion with refugees and asylum seekers. On the other hand, the exclusionary perspective advocates for the restricted admission of asylum seekers and understands the inflow of asylum seekers as European crisis that is above all damaging to the well-being of the native population (De Cleen et al. 2017). This perspective has mainly been advocated by populist radical right-wing parties across Europe.

While there is growing scholarly attention for these deepening political cleavages and their implications for the European integration project (Zaun 2018), there is far less insight into whether this context has also instigated polarization between European populations in terms of attitudes toward humanitarian vs. exclusionary asylum policies. In the light of the current political divides, the question remains how arguments used on either side of the humanitarian-exclusionary spectrum are echoed in public opinion. Understanding popular attitudes toward asylum policy is crucial to grasp the dynamics of policy-making as well as the intergroup climates wherein asylum seekers must be embedded. To remedy this knowledge gap, this study uncovers the preferences of European citizens for asylum policies that are aimed at either curbing the inflow or giving access to larger numbers of asylum seekers.

Most of the public does not oppose allowing refugees to stay in a given country (especially in Western European countries), but the current political context warrants deeper understanding of European citizens' attitudes toward asylum policies. The current situation differs profoundly in terms of the inflow rate of asylum seekers as well as in the cultural background of most applicants (arguments of Central and Eastern European countries).

The aim of this article is to try to uncover how Central European political parties' and political leaders' attitudes toward asylum policy and migration take shape within the current social-economic context and how they are dependent of the various national contexts across Europe (Bachman 2016). To achieve the given aim, we decided to use as our primary sources of analysis data from The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and GLOBSEC.

As Europe struggles to receive and integrate the massive influx of asylum seekers and migrants that began in mid-2015, the continent seems to once again be divided between West and East. The countries of Central Europe argued vehemently against plans to relocate asylum seekers across the European Union (EU) (a proposal that was backed by Germany and other Western European countries). In September 2015, the Visegrad Group (composed of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) released a joint statement saying any EU proposal leading to the introduction of mandatory and permanent quota for

solidarity measures would be unacceptable for them (Van Hootegeem et al. 2020). The four Visegrad Group countries have taken a strong stand against mandatory EU quotas for refugees. This reflects both concerns about the cultural integration of migrants and a sense that the European Commission's proposals are too great an infringement of national sovereignty. Hungary has experienced the largest influx of refugees and has responded in a particularly confrontational tone. However, anti-migrant rhetoric has also been used by prominent figures in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, and public opinion is very negative across the region. All four countries are now under significant pressure from the EU and Western Europe to revise their opposition to the quotas, but domestic political considerations mean that a meaningful compromise on the issue is unlikely. Even nowadays the tensions between the Visegrad Group countries and the EU continue.

2 “MIGRATION CRISIS” IN VISEGRAD GROUP COUNTRIES AND MIGRATION ATTITUDES OF NATIONAL PARLIAMENTARY ELITES

Central European countries not only are geographically close, but also share similar history, culture and economy. All of them experienced communism and since their collapse have been developing democratic institutions based on the rule of law. All of them now, and Hungary and Poland in particular, are experiencing populist ideology, the questioning of human rights frameworks and an anti-EU discourse - all of which are formally supported or even promoted by their respective governments. Another element they have in common is the quite homogeneous composition of each society and a rather low level of immigration - the highest in the Czech Republic but still not exceeding 5% of the general population. Although only Hungary was directly affected by the so-called migration crisis in 2015, the EU-wide debate on asylum seekers and refugees and the policy towards them strongly influenced all the societies' perceptions and resulted in anti-immigrant attitudes towards refugees (presented as 'bogus refugees' or 'purely economic migrants').

The opinion poll conducted in October 2015 in all Visegrad Group countries demonstrated very negative attitudes of respondents towards immigrants. More than three fourths of all respondents in each country (except Poland) claimed that immigrants' presence will lead to a deterioration of the way of life and that immigrants are responsible for spreading atypical diseases. For more than two thirds of respondents (again except for Poland), immigration to their countries was perceived as out of control and immigrants were seen as individuals contributing to the increase of criminality (CBOS 2015). In this poll, the Polish society was the most welcoming compared to other V4 societies, but negative attitudes towards immigrants in Poland developed in the next few months, so we can say that the situation in all countries is quite similar. In research conducted in January– February 2017 among young people (15–24 years old) in Central European countries (covering V4), immigration and so-called Islamic terrorism were considered, respectively, as the most and second-most important issue that the EU is dealing with at the moment – 75–83% respondents from V4 ranked it that way. Between 60 and 70% of respondents agreed with the statement that immigrants are a threat to the public safety, and more than 70% were against accepting refugees fleeing from their country of origin. (Kucharczyk and Łada 2017).

The refugee crisis in Europe has fuelled nationalist and xenophobic attitudes among citizens of the European Union. The politics of phobias unwrapped the dynamics of ethnocentric and discriminatory campaigns against immigrants. It emboldened right-wing populist parties to unleash a new wave of xenophobic mobilization against “the enemy from abroad” (Pelinka 2013) by creating fear of the consequences of immigration (Wodak 2015). Public opinion translated into voting behaviour and political decisions became a source of strength for nationalist anti-immigrant movements and parties across Europe. Central Europe is no exception, although the region has not experienced a long-term, massive inflow of these refugees thus far. However, the issue of immigrants coming to Europe from the Middle East and Africa has left a deep mark on political discourse and for now has brought about specific political consequences. A new political narrative has exploited deeply rooted resentments, complexes, and fears, which has led to the politicization and securitization of the migration and refugee issues. Central Europe is one of the arenas of the public discourse on immigration and the international protection of refugees. The political arena has been stigmatized by ethno-nationalist narratives, projected onto societies by governments and some nationalist and populist political parties.

Why was the radical policy response to the Europe-wide refugee crisis started in Central Europe in the mid-2010s? The growing resentment against immigrants accompanied the exceptional inflow of “strangers” from Asian and African countries. Regardless of the unprecedented scale of the migration crisis, popular preferences for fending off foreigners and preserving national integrity were nothing unusual; they had occurred on various occasions in Europe prior to the developments of the mid-2010s. Ethnocentric, xenophobic and racist attitudes have been intensified in times of emergency caused by internal cleavages, integration challenges, and external pressures (Levy 2010).

There are three reasons in the case of Visegrad Group. Firstly, the governments of the Visegrad Group countries adopted an uncompromising stance against refugees and coordinated their policies on the regional level. Secondly, they deliberately disavowed the rights of refugees by considering them a sub-category of voluntary migrants. Accordingly, they expunged the term “refugee” from the official discourse of migration. Thirdly, the semantic eradication of refugees was a deliberate ploy for deflecting criticism of intolerance towards exiles and the delegitimization of asylum seekers (Gruszczak 2021).

Since the end of the World War II migration to Europe unfolded in several waves. A wider geopolitical event such as 2003 Iraq conflict or Arab Spring in 2011 triggered waves distinct in immigrant populations. The most recent arrivals after Syrian crisis in 2015 and 2020 were the most diversified in terms of country of origin, migration motives and structure of migrant populations (Van Mol and de Valk 2016). Historical migratory waves document that immigration is not an unusual or insurmountable challenge for host societies. However, large numbers of Muslim immigrants along the European Union (EU’s) border in summer 2015 and in spring 2020 clearly show that immigration may become a potent socioeconomic and political challenge for host countries where prompt and adequate government reactions are called for. In summer 2015, Germany welcomed over a million of Middle Eastern immigrants, while Hungary built a fence on its borders with Serbia and Croatia to contain illegal immigration (Simonovits 2020).

Absent harmonized EU immigration policy these contrasting approaches to immigration by EU members call for greater attention to immigration attitudes of national elites. Immigration attitudes are commonly studied at citizen level while elite attitudes across Europe are widely neglected (Davidov et al., 2020). To fill this gap, let us look at the immigration attitudes among national parliamentary elite (MPs) across Western, but especially in Central EU member states (Visegrad Group). MPs should be top-ranking politicians with legislative expertise, the ability to influence policy-making and wide powers to control the government (Yamamoto 2007). As experts, they may influence positions of their parties on immigration and participate in various EU immigration focus groups (Oliveira et al. 2014). The study of immigration attitudes is an important complement to better-established manifesto-based research because analysing individual MPs can account for heterogeneity of immigration preferences within a single party. It also has important implications for political representation, policy-making and political polarization. Different considerations MPs take in the account when thinking about immigration might affect the agenda of political competition or intensify polarization where it was previously low or moderate. Also, the way MPs see immigration may influence citizens' opinion, thus forming and/or strengthening political representation (Magnani 2012).

Comparing the two regions (Western Europe and Central Europe) is warranted, because countries within these regions share similar socioeconomic characteristics, but are still profoundly different from one another. While Western EU countries are established democracies with robust economies and high levels of immigration, Central EU countries share a communist past, weaker degree of economic development and low levels of immigration.

It looks like that social identity (religiosity) and political ideology (positions on general left–right scale) rather than economic prospects influence immigration attitudes of national MPs. Central European MPs positioned further to the right of the ideological scale are not more anti-immigrant than Western European MPs. On the other hand, economic left in Central Europe tends to be more anti-immigrant than economic left in Western Europe (Kocijan and Kukec 2022).

In Western Europe, and, to a weaker extent, in the arrival countries of Southern Europe, the attitudes towards immigrants of left-wing and right-wing citizens became more polarized during the refugee crisis, especially if a country experienced many asylum applications. In Central Europe, no significant differences exist between the attitudes towards immigration of left-wing and right-wing citizens to start with. In these countries the refugee crisis (as reflected in the number of applications across Europe as a whole) was accompanied by a slight, but not significant, increase in anti-immigration attitudes among citizens at both sides of the ideological spectrum. In all parts of Europe, attachment to the national identity seemed to have been hardly affected, apart from the countries affected the most by large numbers of refugees arriving (Greece, Italy, and Spain).

How do we explain the differences between the various regions of Europe as well as the differences between the two dependent variables? In general, we find it plausible that the distinct patterns are the result of how the political debate on the refugee crisis developed in these countries. We believe that left-leaning actors in Western and Southern Europe were more likely to speak out favourably about refugees than in Central Europe. This is to be expected, because expert survey data show that many Central-Eastern Europe left-wing parties tend to take substantially more critical stands on immigration than left-wing parties in Western Europe (Marks et al. 2006). So, if left-wing actors in Western and

Southern Europe responded differently to the refugee crisis than left-wing actors in Central-Eastern Europe, diverging patterns would be expected (Van der Brug and Harteveld 2021).

The reactions of the Central European political leaders were mostly unanimous regarding the migration crisis and the EU's plan to solve the crisis (regulations, quotas, etc.). The greatest burden of receiving Syria's refugees fell on Syria's neighbours: Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. In 2015 the number of refugees raised up and their destination changed to Europe. The refugees decided to emigrate to countries such as Germany, Austria or Norway looking for a better life. It was not until refugees appeared in the streets of Europe that European leaders realized that they could no longer ignore the problem. Besides, flows of migrants and asylum seekers were used by terrorist organizations such as ISIS to infiltrate terrorists to European countries. Facing this humanitarian crisis, European Union ministers approved a plan in September 2015 to share the burden of relocating up to 120,000 people from the so called "Frontline States" of Greece, Italy and Hungary to elsewhere within the EU. The plan assigned each member state quotas: several people to receive based on its economic strength, population and unemployment. Nevertheless, the quotas were rejected by a group of Central European countries also known as the Visegrad Group that share many interests and try to reach common agreements.

The tensions between the Visegrad Group and the EU started in 2015, immediately when the EU approved the quotas of relocation of the refugees only after the dissenting votes of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia were overruled. In asking the court to annul the deal, Hungary and Slovakia argued at the Court of Justice that there were procedural mistakes, and that quotas were not a suitable response to the crisis. Besides, the political leaders said the problem was not their making, and the policy exposed them to a risk of Islamist terrorism that represented a threat to their homogenous societies. Their case was supported by Polish right-wing government of the party Law and Justice, which came to power in 2015 and claimed that the quotes were not comprehensive.

Regarding Poland's rejection to the quotas, it should be considered that is a country of 38 million people and already home to an exponential number of Ukrainian immigrants. Most of them decided to emigrate after military conflict erupted in eastern Ukraine in 2014. This could be a reason why after having received all these immigration from Ukraine, the Polish government believed that they were not ready to take any more refugees, and in that case from a different culture. They also claimed that the relocation methods would only attract more waves of immigration to Europe (López-Dóriga 2018).

More than one million migrants and refugees crossed Central Europe in 2015. The mismanagement of this influx of people caused emotions to run high. While some countries in the region opened their borders, others walled themselves in. EU mandatory quotas were discussed, determined and dismissed. The Dublin and Schengen agreements, as well as European solidarity, were under heavy pressure. With cross-border accusations among Central European capitals the political rhetoric of some leaders hardened and even slid towards xenophobia (Góbl et al. 2016).

The attitude of Central European leaders did not change even during the upcoming years (although we must mention that there were some slight changes thanks to various elections in these countries). We can give a few examples. The prime ministers of four Visegrad Group countries reiterated their opposition to migration in January 2018, with Hungary's leader saying Europe needs a "new blueprint" to be successful. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán argued that the countries of Central Europe were making increasingly strong contributions to the EU economy, which needs to be more competitive. This idea was supported by then-prime ministers of V4 - Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, acting Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico.

The country leaders claimed that these countries were a self-conscious community, which gives to the European Union at least as much as the EU gives them and the blueprint would return Europe to the technological forefront, include a joint defence force and the goal of a "work-based society — meaning a clause relating to total employment," There was an agreement among the Visegrad Group that it was in their interests for Europe to be strong while preserving the independence of individual countries instead of creating a "United States of Europe." Besides, the Visegrad Group leaders are pro-European politicians with a goal to make Europe stronger (Gorondi 2018).

The same rhetoric was followed by Visegrad Group leaders also after a new package of proposals was introduced by the European Commission in September 2020. Under this plan the EU would introduce a "solidarity and responsibility" mechanism allowing member countries that do not want to accept asylum applicants to instead take over responsibility for the return of people who are denied asylum in other EU states. The new package also included proposals to foster faster procedures at the bloc's external borders and aimed to overcome long-standing policy differences across the continent. However, it did not bring a breakthrough either, because the Central European leaders were not convinced by the European Commission's new migration plan. The V4 political leaders indicated they were not convinced that the idea of mandatory schemes to redistribute asylum seekers across the bloc was off the table. According to them relocation and quota, is still relocation and quota, so to change the name is not enough. They argued that the basic approach was still unchanged because the EU would like to manage the migration and not to stop the migrants.

The proposal of Visegrad Group leaders was to create "hotspots" outside the EU to handle asylum seekers. They would guarantee that nobody could step on the ground of the European Union without having a permission to do so, because their request for asylum is accepted. Besides, the EU should negotiate with North African countries and prepare a long-term strategy on Syria and on Libya. The Visegrad Group countries have a much-unified position on migration, calling for a rigorous and effective policy of border controls and help in areas where potential migrants could migrate to Europe (Bayer 2020).

3 VISEGRAD GROUP'S MIGRATION DISCOURSE AND POLICY

3.1 The Czech Republic

During the humanitarian crisis of 2015, the country's position in the quota debate was slightly different from the other V4 members, such as Hungary and Poland, which refused the European Commission proposal of voluntary quotas straight away. The main complaint made by the Czech authorities was related to the

procedure of voting at the June EU Council meeting. The decision on voluntary or compulsory quotas was not made by consensus, but by a qualified majority, and the result was perceived by the Czech authorities as mandatory and was read as an attack on the Czech Republic's sovereignty. Since then, not many differences can be seen between the Czech position and those of the other Visegrad Group countries. They all defended a position in which the numbers of accepted refugees depend only on the will of each individual state and argued that the EU cannot make them accept any quota in a clear denunciation of the legality of the decision taking in the EU Council. Under the EU relocation quotas, the Czech Republic had to take in 4,300 people, around 410 refugees per one million people in the country. The Czech authorities have accepted only 12 refugees so far. The former Czech Prime Minister, Bohuslav Sobotka, showed then that the political line of the Czech government would be a security-based one. This narrative was followed and reinforced by the subsequent Andrej Babiš government.

When looking at Czech politics in relation to the refugee crisis both the role of political parties and of the president should be discussed. Each of them plays an important role in shaping the debate about refugees since, given the presence of the mentioned 12 refugees in the country, there is very little interpersonal contact between Czech citizens and refugees, possibly one of the most important ways to increase intercultural understanding (Dražanová 2018). Because these interpersonal contacts do not exist in the Czech Republic citizens are dependent on the political debate and the media to form their opinion.

Political parties in the Czech Republic were and still are united in their refusal of refugees and immigration. Of the top six parties elected in the national parliament in 2017 only one, the Czech Pirate Party, officially declared a pro migrant position (Hinshaw and Heijmans 2017). The other five parties range from utterly against any form of migration, the position of the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party, to against the forced refugee relocation scheme as in the case of the Czech Social Democratic Party. Since almost every major party in the Czech Republic is opposed to refugees it should not come as a surprise that the cues taken from the political debate depict the refugee crisis in a genuine negative way.

One notable characteristic of the Czech political landscape is the significant fragmentation of extremist forces. While the Muslim population and Islam as such have been politically expedient as key mobilizing topics for large parts of the society in the past years, attempts for the transformation of the non-formal platform "We don't want Islam in the Czech Republic" into a relevant political force became futile. To a large extent, that is but a result of internal power squabbles among the hard-line Islamophobic leaders, undermining the credibility of what may have become a movement of sorts.

As it appears, the half-Japanese Czech populist politician Tomio Okamura who is one of the country's leading Islamophobes, was struggling to repeat his party's (initially called Dawn-Úsvit before fragmenting while the Okamura wing established an offshoot named SPD) election result from 2013 (6.9 %) and thus secure at least some seats in the 2017 parliament. No other openly anti-migrant, xenophobic party appears very likely to follow suit (though Petr Robejšek's ambitions, contacts and capabilities should not be underrated). The other part of the story, however, is that much of the xenophobic parlance as much as policy proposals themselves was readily incorporated by mainstream political parties. Even if they do not fare particularly well in the election, the so-called "phobes" have already managed to radicalize the public and poison the discourse for years to come (Frelak 2017).

Although the president has only a ceremonial role, the office traditionally has a strong role in influencing the public debate. The incumbent president, Miloš Zeman, is obviously against refugees and his actions are contributing to “an increasingly xenophobic public discourse” in the Czech Republic (Nielsen 2015). As elsewhere in Europe, where anti-immigration movements have gained a new toehold, the Czech Republic in recent years has witnessed rising polarization of politics and society around migration issues. In the face of the prevailing public ambivalence, politicians who support more open migration policies have been reluctant to advance their views and less numerous than the opposing side. As a result, recently proposed and adopted policies are based on a security paradigm that is focused on migration control and greater selectivity of immigrants. With Czech Republic there are just four more countries, which voted against the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration in December 2018 (Drbohlav and Janurová 2019). Once again, the Czech Republic is aligned with Hungary, Poland and Slovakia in an anti-migration crusade, thus feeding populist and xenophobic discourses around Europe.

3.2 Slovakia

Like its Visegrad Group counterparts, Slovakia has pursued extremely restrictive immigration policies and employed anti-migrant rhetoric since the onset of the “refugee crisis” in 2015. Even though Muslims make up only 0.1 percent of the population, Slovakia has witnessed a surge in Islamophobic discourse and hate crimes.

We can say that the socio-political factors are the most important factors influencing the current situation concerning attitudes towards immigrants in Slovakia. Before the outbreak of the current migration and refugee crisis, it was only a marginal topic for Slovak politicians and public, but with the crisis the situation has changed significantly, especially because the migration policy became a part of electoral programs of the main Slovak political parties before the parliamentary elections in 2016. With a few exceptions, the most of the political party leaders used the migration actively (and negatively) in the campaign, including the former Prime Minister and leader of Smer-SD, Robert Fico, the leader of opposition liberal party SaS, Richard Sulík, the leader of the nationalist party SNS, Andrej Danko or the extremist ĽSNS leader, Marian Kotleba.

The rather acrimonious debates about migration in the run-up to the Parliamentary elections in Slovakia in March 2016 left Slovak society divided. Three nationalist and populist conservative parties with an anti-migration agenda won seats, including the far-right People’s Party – Our Slovakia (Kotleba - Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko, ĽSNS), and one of them – the Slovak National Party (SNS) – was part of the governing coalition. Even with the cooling effect of the EU Presidency, the divisions that were fostered during the purposefully spiteful election campaigns and the open anti-migration position of some of the parties in the Parliament made it close to impossible for the country to return to business as usual after the elections. The rising extremist, nationalist, populist and anti-EU rhetoric was sweeping the region. Slovakia itself did not manage to survive entirely unscathed from these ongoing debates. Still an outsider of the European mainstream, Slovakia, however, has quietly distanced itself from its more outspoken members – Hungary and Poland (Frelak 2017). With the emerging of refugee crisis in 2015, another threat hit the Slovak society. The pro-Kremlin propaganda has created a new set of anti-European arguments. Migration became a serious issue dividing not only politicians, but public, too. It

resulted in the fact that 54% of Slovaks perceived migration as a problem, what was highly above the European average (Ižak 2019).

In the view of the Slovak government, due to different historical and societal circumstances, Slovakia was not positioned to permanently host large numbers of refugees, particularly those who come from different societies and cultures (Muslims and people from Africa). Consequently, the government, supported by public opinion, was not willing to take political risks and experiment with bringing in foreigners. As a result, most of the effort was oriented towards contributing to external solutions or aiding not involving the acceptance a fixed number of people.

Although Slovakia offered spots for relocation, only 16 of these spots have been filled so far. Slovak uneasiness with relocations is not only conditioned by the simple reluctance of the government to take political risks. Slovakia is not an attractive destination country for asylum seekers. It does not have developed expat networks that can function to smoothen the cultural integration of newcomers and provide additional employment options. Sufficient state support to refugees is also lacking in Slovakia. The country's complicated, often incoherent legal system makes it even harder for asylum seekers to receive legal status, appeal decisions, or understand their education, labour, health care and other rights and obligations.

Furthermore, asylum seekers lack information about Slovakia and the European asylum system in general while residing in Greece or Italy. This leads to their unwillingness to seek asylum in a country, where they see no future or to a traumatic mismatch of their expectations and reality on the ground. The lack of interest and knowledge of Slovakia among asylum seekers is a rather convenient situation: it helps reduce the responsibility for introducing domestic changes that would involve political risks and long-term commitment (Frelak 2017).

What's more, the predominantly Christian country of Slovakia passed a law in November 2016 that effectively bans Islam as an officially recognized religion, which also blocks Islam from receiving any state subsidies for its schools. According to the new law, a religion must have at least 50,000 members to qualify for state recognition; the previous threshold was 20,000 members. According to Slovakia's latest census, there are 2,000 Muslims and there are no recognized mosques. The former Prime Minister, Robert Fico, led the campaign for the 2016 March election under the slogan "We protect Slovakia", calling migrants "a danger". However, an unintended result of Fico's harsh and undemocratic rhetoric towards the migrants was that the far-right People's Party - Our Slovakia entered parliament with over 8% of the vote. Surprisingly, also many young people in Slovakia have been against the idea of accepting the migrants to Slovak society (Galanova 2016). The protests come as a surprise since the country has accepted only a few of the migrants fleeing to European continent. Since its independence, only about 60,000 people have sought asylum in Slovakia and a little over 800 have been successful. Less than 700 others have received subsidiary protection, which means a status for people who do not qualify as refugees. "Still, many Slovaks argue that refugees and migrants are one of the most serious challenges for this Central European country. For many Slovaks the refugees are one the biggest problem facing the country. They have been worried about migration while most think refugees and migrants would increase crime and the risk of terrorist attacks. It is obvious that most of Slovaks, who oppose settlement of migrants in their country, have such a stance due to security and economic concerns. However, their fears due to cultural and ideological concerns should not be neglected as well (Brljavac 2017).

3.3 Poland

The migration crisis rumbled on for the last few years since it had developed as a major issue in Polish politics dividing the main parties in the run up to October 2015 parliamentary election. Along with the three other Visegrad Group countries, the previous government, led by the centrist Civic Platform (PO) grouping, initially opposed the European Commission's proposal for mandatory re-distribution quotas for Middle Eastern and North African migrants located in Greece and Italy.

However, concerned that the country was coming across as one of the least sympathetic to the migrants' plight, the Polish government changed its approach following the summer 2015 migration wave. Civic Platform's EU strategy was based on trying to locate Poland within the so-called 'European mainstream' by presenting itself as a reliable and stable member state adopting a positive and constructive approach towards the main EU powers, so it was anxious to appear to be playing a positive role in helping alleviate the crisis. In the event, at the September 2015 EU summit Poland broke with its Central European allies and signed up to a burden-sharing plan which involved the country admitting 6,200 migrants as part of an EU-wide scheme to relocate 160,000 people in total by September 2017.

On the other hand, the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party, at the time the main opposition grouping, bitterly opposed the EU plan arguing that Poland should resist pressure to take in migrants. The party warned that there was a danger of making the same mistakes as many Western European states with large Muslim communities, which could lead to admitting migrants who did not respect Polish laws and customs and tried to impose their way of life on the country. While it always supported Polish EU membership in principle, Law and Justice was a broadly anti-federalist (verging on Eurosceptic) party committed to defending Polish sovereignty, especially in the moral-cultural sphere where it rejected what it saw as a hegemonic EU liberal-left consensus that undermined Poland's traditional values and national identity. It viewed the migrant relocation scheme as part of this wider clash of cultures, which also threatened the country's national security. Not surprisingly, therefore, Law and Justice accused the outgoing Civic Platform government of betraying its Central European allies by taking decisions under EU pressure that undermined Polish culture and security. It argued that the figure of a few thousand migrants was unrealistic, because family members would be able to join initial arrivals and that the quota would be used as a precedent to force Poland to take in additional migrants in the future.

The 2015 elections empowered the extreme fringe groups on the right. This was seen through the several anti-refugee and anti-Muslim demonstrations held across Poland, attracting large crowds of Poles whose attitudes have grown increasingly hostile to refugees in general and Muslims in particular. As the government and the Church have facilitated spaces for the strengthening and legitimization of the far-right movement, this provoked a strong response from other elements within civil society to resist this shift resulting in increased levels of solidarity politics across difference. The more the Polish borders shrank to ensure no "Others" slip through, the more civil society activism mushroomed across Poland unveiling divisions within and between key public institutions that ran deeper than disagreement over whether to welcome refugees.

Following its October 2015 election victory, the new Law and Justice government agreed initially to implement the scheme approved by its predecessor and, as a start, accept 100 migrants. However, in April 2016 it suspended the process arguing that the verification procedures for the vetting of migrants were insufficient to guarantee Polish national security. Since then, Poland (along with Hungary) has not accepted any migrants under the EU scheme (Szczerbiak 2017).

The political change resulting from the elections in 2015 has put the discussions on the Polish integration policy on hold. It should also be underlined that the low priority given to the issue of integration is manifested not only by the suspension of work on integration policy but also the reduction of funding for the NGO sector in these areas.

The Law and Justice government expressed the following priorities in the field of migration policy: internal security (including border protection), facilitation of channels for economic migration, and further easing of the inflow of people of Polish origin. It is therefore safe to assume that integration policy was not treated as an important element of this new strategy. The securitization of migration and the perception of migrants as potential threats could be seen not only in the political discourse, but also in the actions that have already been taken. In June 2016, the government adopted a so-called antiterrorist law, in accordance with which every foreigner in Poland can be put under surveillance without a court order, for essentially an indefinite period. It also grants the Internal Security Agency, the police and the Border Guard the right to take fingerprints, facial images and even biological material (DNA) from foreigners in the case that there are doubts concerning their identity. The NGO sector has criticized the new regulations for potentially leading to discrimination and stigmatization (Frelak 2017).

The Law and Justice government's opposition to the relocation of Syrians to Poland has harmed the country. It has been criticized many times by EU countries and institutions, including the European Parliament. Poland has lost the reputation of a country that can take responsibility for the community and solve European problems. By refusing to show solidarity with the migration crisis, the country has lost the right to demand solidarity from others (Csanyi 2020).

3.4 Hungary

The government's attitude towards the migration crisis was obvious. At the beginning of 2015, the Fidesz - Hungarian Civic Alliance government ran an anti-immigrant campaign, a 'National Consultation on Immigration'. Later in July 2015, the Hungarian parliament passed amendments to the Asylum Act. The UNHCR raised concerns about the amendment, which might lead to denying assistance to asylum-seekers, their deportation and prolonged detention.

The Hungarian government stood in opposition to the quota system voting against it along with other three Member States. While Fidesz ran an anti-immigrant campaign, many Hungarians protested it and the governmental campaign was criticized by advocacy organizations and researchers. The public's response was different from the government's expectations and anti-immigrant protests took place in the country as well as demonstrations against border fence raising.

However, the inflammatory way that officials and the national media in Hungary have described the influx of refugees created confusion, hostility, and fear among

the citizens. This discourse has only exacerbated the xenophobia deeply entrenched in a part of the Hungarian population and made the efforts of ordinary citizens and organizations working with asylum seekers and migrants more difficult (Pardavi and Gyulai 2015). Due to the government's anti-migration campaign and 'zero refugee' strategy, the public opinion has changed a lot in Hungary.

Hungary was the second European Union country in 2015, behind Greece, to apprehend irregular migrants at its external borders. However, the construction of the fences at the two Southern borders with Serbia and Croatia put Hungary outside the Western Balkan migratory route. A series of amendments to asylum legislation caused many changes in the arrival procedures and overall treatment of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection in Hungary. In August and September 2015, together with the completion of the fence, Hungary designated Serbia as a safe third country, allowed for expedited asylum determination, and limited procedural safeguards. Additionally, climbing through the border fence or damaging it became a criminal offence punishable with imprisonment.

In 2016, a new amendment to asylum law prescribed police to push migrants who had "illegally" entered the territory and were apprehended within 8 km from the border, back to the other side of the border fence. More amendments have been subsequently adopted to decrease or suppress the different support mechanisms to asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection. In March 2017, new revisions to asylum law were enacted that decreed all irregular migrants be pushed back to the Southern border. The above asylum policies have been highly criticized based on international and EU law as many international actors have argued that effective access to protection and the principle of non-refoulement are not upheld. Due to reception conditions in Hungary, several EU member states have chosen to stop transfers to Hungary under the Dublin III mechanism (IOM 2018).

The Viktor Orbán-led governing party's political strategy was to polarize society along political fault lines. The main principle of this strategy is that the governing Fidesz party divides the political field into "national" and "anti-national" camps and contextualizes every political topic according to this division. If someone contests Fidesz's viewpoint, they are almost automatically put into the "anti-national" group regardless of their arguments, because in the view of Fidesz, the Orbán-government is the only voice of Hungarian national interest. The conflict between the protection of minorities and minority opinion, the unconditional acknowledgement of human rights and the politically constructed will of the majority – on a national, ethnical or cultural basis - has systemic importance. In the name of the government's capability to act it can refer to the democratic will of the public and some sort of "special state" to relegate human rights and procedural norms considered to be the foundations of liberal democracies to secondary roles. Therefore, the Hungarian government uses the migration issue consciously to transform the political system.

The politics of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán are built on the logic of perpetuating conflicts rather than creating some kind of constructive national consensus. This strategy is applied to both the domestic and EU levels to set the political agenda and consolidate domestic political support (Frelak 2017).

It is obvious that in Viktor Orbán's Hungary, refugees are unwelcome. Orbán won a third successive term in office in 2018 (and a fourth successive term in office in 2022), campaigning on a strong anti-immigrant platform. He refused to take part

in the European Union's resettlement program for refugees in 2015. Later, Hungary approved a package of legislation called the "Stop Soros" law, which criminalized providing aid to undocumented immigrants and asylum-seekers. It declares that any group or individual helping undocumented immigrants claim asylum could be liable for a jail term. The move has unsettled NGOs and made Hungarians nervous about volunteering to help (Barry 2019). Another channel through which the anti-Fidesz enemies propagating illegal immigration operated in Hungary, at least according to the state propaganda, were the media. Viktor Orbán's government forced hundreds of private media owners to donate their outlets under the control of a single, state-friendly entity led by a former lawmaker from Fidesz (Szabó 2020).

In 2015 the European Commission initiated an infringement procedure against Hungary concerning its asylum legislation. After several steps taken by the Commission in January 2018 the European Court of Justice revealed that it would hear the case against Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland regarding the infringement procedure for their refusal to abide by the decision on EU refugee quotas (Csanyi 2020).

4 CONCLUSIONS

Considering the current context, characterized by increased inflows of asylum seekers as well as deepening European cleavages in perspectives on appropriate political responses, this article set out to gain deeper insight into political elites' attitudes toward open vs. restrictive asylum policies within and between European societies (especially between Central European societies). Although the current situation differs profoundly from the context at the beginning of the century in terms of diversity and pace of the inflow of asylum seekers (OECD 2015). Nevertheless, we did find strong regional variations in attitudes toward asylum policy as well as growing polarizations within European countries. In line with the growing divergence in terms of political responses to the crisis as well as in discourses being adopted (Castells 2018), public opinions on the European continent tend to become more divided. While in the Western European countries the public and political leaders seem to favour open policies that admit larger quantities of asylum seekers, attitudes in Central European countries are far more restrictive.

On the individual level, discourses appeared to be relevant, as we found a strong impact of several individual factors that are closely related to dominant discourses on asylum. In accordance with frames or discourses that portray refugees as economically burdensome and as culturally deviant (Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017), economic and cultural threat perceptions fostered restrictive attitudes. Socio-tropic concerns about the impact of the inflow of immigrants on the economy and cultural life appeared to be of great importance in shaping attitudes. Apart from threat perceptions, the two human values universalism and conformity-tradition had a considerable impact. Universalism, which coincides with a humanitarian frame, led to weaker concerns about the impact of migration and to more support for open policies. Equivalent to concerns for the preservation of the Western liberal core values in political debates (Lucassen 2018), conformity-tradition fuelled economic and cultural fears, and opposition to open migration policies.

The absence of effects of the migratory and economic context suggests that other factors might be more relevant to understand diverging attitudes toward asylum

policy across European countries. The public opinion mirrors dividing lines in dominant political perspectives and discourses. The rather restrictive opinion climate of the Central European countries, for instance, resembles the strong resistance of policy makers in these countries (including the Visegrad Group) against open policies and the adoption of quota.

The seemingly higher relevance of political mobilizations and media discourses in understanding attitudes compared to the actual cross-national circumstances also has other implications. The diverging national contexts across EU member states do not seem to negate the development of a common public response to the challenges that the increased inflow of asylum seekers introduces. Contrarily to what is often believed and argued, the differential national contexts as such do not seem to make wide public support for a strong common European asylum system impossible. Instead, populist governmental mobilizations and vast differences in adopted discourses might complicate wide public support for shared and open solutions across Europe (Zaun 2018). As the cases of Hungary and Poland clearly indicate, aggressive mobilizations and strong anti-immigrant rhetoric might instigate drastic increases in anti-migrant sentiments and, as a result, erode the social basis for open and common migration policies (Van Hootegeem et al. 2020).

The exclusionary, deterrent approach to immigrants and refugees arriving in Europe from the beginning of 2015 was one of the most remarkable features of European politics at that time. The anti-immigrant narrative became a permanent part of everyday communication and public discourse. Though not particularly unique when compared to earlier immigration waves in Europe or to some EU member states, the Visegrad Group deserve a critical assessment regarding the outburst of aversion and hostility towards migrants coinciding with the denial of refugees as migrants deserving protection based on international humanitarian law. This may be partly explained by ideological factors. The liberal model was challenged by, and (in the case of Hungary and Poland) substituted with a specific illiberal project entailing the restoration of traditionalist patterns of parochial communities mobilized by the top-down, persuasive transmission of a strange blend of nationalist, xenophobic, anti-cosmopolitan, anti-elitist, and conspiratorial views. That project also underlaid the ideological construction of immigration policy and influenced attitudes towards migrants and refugees.

Concurrently, it must be pointed out that the values and norms of European Union politics, especially those concerning the freedom of movement of persons, were used selectively to justify and legitimize the Visegrad Group's ethnocentric postures via integrationist policies and mechanisms which accentuated protective measures and security imperatives (Gruszczak 2021). The parochial realms cultivated in the Visegrad Group were intimately tied to their territories, enhancing therefore the deterrent and repulsive functions of border, immigration, and asylum policies.

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ODNOS SREDNJEVROPSKIH VODITELJEV DO MIGRACIJ IN MIGRACIJSKE KRIZE

Ker je število migrantov in beguncev, ki trkajo na vrata Evrope, relativno stabilno, je zdaj na politični ravni EU čutiti olajšanje. Voditelji Evropske unije so potrdili premik fokusa z notranjih in strukturnih na zunanje in varnostne razsežnosti migracijskega izziva. Vendar države višegrajske skupine (V4) niso v celoti sprejele političnega premika v migracijski strategiji EU. Članek preučuje nacionalni politični diskurz in vladne politike o migracijah v omenjenih štirih državah, ki se osredotočajo predvsem na obdobje od sredine leta 2015 do konca leta 2018. Avtorji trdijo, da je problem v različnih pristopih držav članic EU do migracij. Različne migracijske tradicije so eno ključnih vprašanj povezanih z nerazumevanji med državami. Njihove pristope določajo njihove geografske lege in migracijske zgodovine. Glavni cilj tega članka je analizirati, primerjati in razjasniti stališča držav V4 in njihovih političnih voditeljev. Čeprav imajo očitno nasprotna stališča do migracij, članek ugotavlja, da imajo nekaj skupnih značilnosti, kot sta zanikanje statusa azilne države in odsotnost s tem povezane javne politike.

Ključne besede: migracije; politični voditelji; Višegrajska skupina; Evropska unija; begunci.