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THE MIGRATION STRATEGIES AND POSITIONS ON THE EU MIGRATION AND ASYLUM AGENDA: EVIDENCE FROM THE VISEGRAD GROUP COUNTRIES

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Abstract: *At the time of the outbreak of the migration crisis in Europe, the Visegrad Group gained the status of the EU troublemaker due to its opposition to the solidarity and cohesion mechanisms adopted on the European level. The migration strategies (not only) of the individual states of the grouping proved insufficient and unfeasible in times of crisis. However, in the case of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and the Slovak Republic, the absence of national mechanisms and solutions was partially replaced after 2015 by joint declarations and statements rejecting active cooperation in resolving migration and asylum pressures within the EU Single Market. Despite failing to manage migratory pressures since 2015, four Central European countries have not learned their lessons and will face unprecedented crises in 2022 again. This time, however, Visegrad countries became the first-line countries affected by the refugee crisis. The migration and asylum agenda is thus becoming an extremely complex problem within the Visegrad Group region due to the initially intense politicization of the topic by the government elites in individual states. The paper analyses the migration strategies of individual states and the migration and asylum management-related positions after the migration crisis in 2015 and the sequence of events associated with the outbreak of armed conflict in Ukraine in early 2022.*

Keywords: *Visegrad Group; European Union; Migration; Asylum; Migration and Asylum Policy*

INTRODUCTION

The increased influx of migrants and asylum seekers from third countries into the EU since 2014 has resulted in the outbreak of the so-called migration crisis, which has become an integral part of the EU's political crisis. However, perceptions of the protection of common values, particularly solidarity, still differ from one Member State to another. Significant differences of opinions on the issue of addressing migratory pressures after 2015 can generally be observed mainly on the west-east EU axis. Since 2015, the Visegrad Group (V4), consisting of four EU Member States - the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and the Slovak Republic, became an infamous group of Member States. Since 2015, the image of the so-called troublemakers has begun to link the EU's migration and asylum agenda to this mini-lateral grouping. The group's image has stabilized after EU Council votes on further proposals to address Migration and Asylum policy. In connection with the outbreak of the armed conflict in Ukraine at the end of

February 2022, the V4 again became a geopolitical area, once again inflected with migration and asylum issues. However, the position of states within this declination has reversed. From the original opponents of solidarity and cooperation in Europe since 2015, the V4 has now become the first-line countries and the main transit route for Ukrainians to the western Member States. A well-known proverb states that the more prudent will learn from history. However, this does not seem to be the case within the V4. The presented article analyses the changes in the positions and migration strategies of the individual states of the grouping adopted as a result of the outbreak of the migration crisis in the middle of the second decade of the XXI century and analyses the V4´s position on several European initiatives in the field of EU Migration and Asylum policy reform in recent years.

Several researchers and scholars began to address the topic of EU Migration and Asylum policy, the position of the V4 states on its reform, and the rejection of the proposed mechanisms of cohesion and solidarity after 2015. The first significant contributions analyzing the position of the V4 on the management of the migration crisis undoubtedly include Bauerová (2018), Stepper (2016), Ivanova (2016) and Pachocka (2016). Their studies not only analyze parallels and differences in national approaches to crisis solutions but also offer cross-sectional explanations of the refusal to accept migrants according to the solidarity mechanisms adopted at the European level. Later studies by Csányi (2020) and Frelak (2017) offer a comparative analysis of the positions of individual V4 states on the EU migration and asylum agenda. The topic of migration and asylum in the EU has also become an integral part of the contributions dealing with selected aspects of the functionality of the V4 as a mini-lateral grouping in the European Union (Strnad 2022). Probably the most extensive category of scientific literature dealing with the V4 in the context of EU migration and asylum agenda after 2015 is publications analyzing social, historical, political and other developments that influenced national positions on proposed European solutions to solidarity and cooperation and the long-intended reform of EU Migration and Asylum policy.

BRIEFLY ABOUT THE OUTBREAK OF THE MIGRATION CRISIS AND THE POSITION OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP

The first significant sign of agreement within the V4 on the issue of addressing migratory pressures in Europe can be considered the joint position of the Prime Ministers of the V4 countries of September 2015. The common position rejects the introduction of redistribution of asylum seekers based on the introduced principle of mandatory quotas (Visegrad Group 2015). From the point of view of individual Member States, the rhetoric differed slightly at the beginning of the crisis. While the Czech Republic, Hungary and the Slovak Republic rejected mandatory quotas in the first vote, Poland initially took a more reserved position (Jurečková 2016). The change in Polish rhetoric and the unequivocal rejection of the relocation mechanism did not occur until the parliamentary elections at the end of 2015, in which the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) succeeded. In the following period, the joint promotion of national interests in the V4 migration agenda became much more frequent. In general, several trends can be observed in the V4 joint declarations on the migration agenda:

- The primary tool for defending V4's opposition to allocation mechanisms and restrictive measures, such as the closure of some parts of the Hungarian border, has become a protection of the integrity of the EU's external borders. Compliance with the obligations arising from specific sources of European law, particularly the Schengen Agreement and the Dublin Regulation, is integral to maintaining this integrity. The V4 states have spoken out against the closure of all internal borders within the EU Single Market and against the idea of creating a so-called Mini-Schengen, brought by the Dutch Presidency of the EU Council in 2016. The common position of the V4 in the post-crisis period unanimously supported the reform of the Dublin system (especially the Dublin III Regulation). However, unless new regulations are reached by consensus, which would adequately address the situation in the event of a repeated mass influx of migrants and asylum seekers, according to V4 leaders, the applicable legislation must be followed. According to the common position, any proposal to allocate refugees involving a sanction mechanism for possibly refusing to comply with the relocation mechanism is unacceptable.
- The V4 common positions supported the improvement of migration pressures by addressing the causes of migration in third countries outside the EU Single Market. In addition to addressing the root causes of migration by assisting in various forms (political, military or humanitarian) to Syria, Iraq and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, the V4 also supports increased financial and technical support for countries of origin and transit. The common V4 vision to address the pressures also includes strengthening the European Border and Coast Guard (Frontex) mandate, the European Asylum Fingerprinting System (Eurodac), and building a strategic network of hotspots both in the EU and in third countries.
- The migration policies of the individual V4 states are incompatible with the open-door policy (for example, in Germany). The most crucial point of conflict has become any proposals for the redistribution of refugees on the principle of mandatory quotas. The V4 countries agreed on the need to create a single European solution adopted by the consensus of all EU Member States. Consensus is essential for the implementation of the EU agreement with Turkey, the adequate protection of the EU's external borders, the establishment of fully operational hotspots, the implementation of an effective return policy and better targeting of policies addressing the causes of migration (Szalai 2017).

Following the adoption of the EU Council Regulation on the introduction of temporary measures in the field of international protection (second relocation mechanism) in September 2015, the V4 was partially divided in terms of the intensity of individual states' opposition to the approved mechanism. The Slovak Republic and Hungary have brought actions against the temporary mechanism based on several procedural defects in adopting this legislation. The Czech Republic, despite the original vote against the adoption of the legislation, took a neutral position and distanced itself from the lawsuits mentioned above. The Polish government refused to intervene in the procedure before the Court. Poland intervened in support of Slovakia and Hungary, while seven Member States[1] supporting the new relocation mechanism entered the

[1]Belgium, Germany, Greece, France, Italy, Luxembourg, and Sweden.

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procedure in support of the EU Council. Almost two years after the adoption of controversial legislation, the Court of Justice of the EU rejected the lawsuits of Slovakia and Hungary in September 2017, making the redistribution of 160,000 first-line refugees (from Greece and Italy) legally binding (Court of Justice 2017).

According to the key approved in September 2015 for calculating quotas for individual EU member states, the V4 states were to receive approximately 12,000 refugees from Greece and Italy: Czech Republic - 2691, Hungary - 1294, Poland 7082 and the Slovak Republic 902. Hungarian and Polish governments unequivocally rejected the redistribution of refugees; the Czech Republic received 12 and the Slovak Republic 16 refugees. In 2017, the EC filed a lawsuit against three V4 states (except the Slovak Republic)[2] for non-compliance with an obligation arising from the Union law. The EU Court of Justice complied with the EC almost three years later in a judgment of 2 April 2020, ruling out national positions justifying the non-acceptance of the required number of refugees. The Czech Republic's opposing position was based on doubts about the functioning of the relocation mechanism based on a unilateral assessment of the state concerned. In Hungary and Poland's case, refugees' temporary relocation was refused based on Article 72 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU) due to concerns about public order and national security threats. The judgment of the Court of Justice of the EU thus rejected all these defenses, thus at the same time ruling definitively on the violation of European law (Court of Justice of the EU 2020).

The outbreak of the migration crisis in Europe highlighted the lack of long-term experience of the V4 (with the partial exception of Poland) with a large influx of migrants. Theoretical concepts of migration and integration policies have thus proved insufficient for the situation since 2015. The common denominator of the opposition to the reception of migrants and the granting of asylum in the V4 region has become partly populist speeches by government elites, often linking migrants to terrorism and concerns about Islam in a region with a solid Christian history. Moreover, Hungarian Prime Minister V. Orbán has become an unwritten V4 leader with sharp rhetoric against the EU Migration and Asylum policy.

Table 1: Development of the Number of Asylum Applications in the V4 Countries Since 2012 (Source: Author's own work 2022)

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Czech Republic	740	695	1145	1515	1475	1445	1690	1915	1160
Hungary	2155	1889	4277	17713	29430	3390	670	500	115
Poland	1075	1524	8020	12190	12305	5045	4110	4070	2785
Slovak Republic	730	440	330	330	145	1475	175	230	280
V4 *sum*	**1437**	**3527**	**5227**	**19117**	**43355**	**11355**	**6645**	**6715**	**4340**

[2]In addition to the reception of 16 refugees - mothers with children, the Slovak Republic, unlike the other V4 countries, has made other commitments to relocate refugees.

MIGRATION STRATEGIES OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP COUNTRIES: PERCEPTION *VS.* POLITICIZATION

Using Hungary as an example, we may see growing migratory pressures, notably in 2014-2016. In 2014, the Hungarian border with Serbia, which forms the EU's external border, became the entry point for tens of thousands of illegal migrants using the migration route through the Western Balkans to the EU Single Market (Frontex 2020). To alleviate migratory pressures and reduce illegal migration of third-country nationals who do not intend to seek asylum in Hungary, the Fidesz government has approved a proposal to build a 177 km long border fence on the southern border with Serbia. The construction of the border fence represents one of the most important milestones of the politically motivated xenophobic campaign of the Fidesz, initiated in early 2015 (Hungarian Helsinki Committee 2015). The legislation adopted included Serbia's inclusion in the list of safe countries, which at the time was at odds with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) position.

Hungary's new asylum policy thus enabled the immediate rejection of asylum applications submitted by third-country nationals who reached the Hungarian border via the Western Balkans, referring to the obligation to apply for asylum in Serbia first. The controversial legislation that came into force in early August 2015 was also in breach of EU law (Hungarian Helsinki Committee 2015). While constructing the fence on the Hungarian-Serbian border, the government approved the construction of additional barriers on the border with Slovenia and Croatia. The EC also opposed the construction of the border fence between Hungary and Slovenia and challenged the Hungarian government to refrain from conduct that is contrary to the rules of operation of the Schengen system. In the end, constructing the border fence between Slovenia and Hungary was only temporary (Buckley and Spiegel 2015). In 2015, the Fidesz government launched a multi-media populist campaign against illegal migrants of Islamic origin in the country, invoking the protection of the Hungarian population and the Hungarian state border (Bauerová 2018). Hungary is one of the most homogeneous EU Member States regarding ethnicity. As many as 97% of the population is of Hungarian nationality (European Commission 2015).

Taking into account the Hungarian migration strategy adopted in 2013, which was approved without significant media coverage and public debates, the Hungarian government at the time called for the integration of immigrants for economic and demographic reasons (Juhász 2017). However, following the high influx of illegal migrants and asylum seekers into EU Member States after 2014, the strategy de facto lost its significance, and migratory pressures, together with Orbán Fidesz's populist campaign, led to the creation of additional fertile ground for xenophobic sentiment growth in the country. Since the end of the 1980s, Hungary has been continuously marked by growing trends in intolerance and xenophobic manifestations. While in 1992, xenophobic manifestations were present in 15% of the population, after the outbreak of the migration crisis, xenophobic temper was present in more than half of the population, according to surveys (Endre *et al.* 2016). Since 2013, the Hungarian government, led by V. Orbán, has not revised the country's migration strategy. The migration crisis was reflected in the adoption of controversial immigration laws, which led to the initiated infringement procedures against Hungary led by the EC (Court of Justice of the EU 2021).

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Within the V4, the Slovak Republic is the EU Member State with the lowest long-term number of asylum applications. One of the lowest number of asylums granted over the past decades compared to other EU Member States, resulting from strict conditions for assessing applications. The Slovak Republic cannot be considered a destination country for migrants heading for the EU Single Market. Unlike Hungary, it was not a country of transit for third-country nationals heading to the western Member States. As in the case of Hungary, the Migration policy strategy of the Slovak Republic with a view to 2020 contains some strategic goals aimed at managing legal and illegal migration or the asylum process. It also includes international migration in the context of the Slovak Republic's membership in the EU, for the effective management of which active cooperation and mutual solidarity are essential in the Slovak interest (Migration policy of the Slovak Republic with a view to 2020, 2011). However, the outbreak of the migration crisis in 2015 resulted in significant differences between official strategy and political practice. The high influx of migrants and asylum seekers has become one of the main topics of discussion before the forthcoming parliamentary elections in early 2016. According to available surveys, the level of xenophobic sentiment in Slovakia in the pre-crisis period and at the time of the crisis can be compared mainly with Hungary and the Czech Republic, while concerns about increased migratory pressures in Europe have remained the most moderate in Poland (Freedom House 2016).

The governing coalition led by the largest left-wing Smer - Social Democracy party, led by R. Fico, unequivocally rejected the EC's proposals to redistribute refugees in May and September 2015. Slovak Prime Minister began to link illegal migrants heading for the EU Single Market with the threat of terrorism and the potential Islamization of society. Smer's negative opinions and election campaign consisting of references and a manifesto supporting the protection of the Slovak nation and its interests led to the repeated election win and another government coalition by R. Fico after March 2016 (Mihálik and Jankoľa 2016). In addition to Smer's rhetoric, the redistribution and reception of refugees have become part of several parties' nationwide debates and election campaigns. The election result has seen an increase in the political capital of several movements rejecting the EU's anticipated interim mechanisms until EU migration and asylum policies are reformed to ensure effective management of future migratory pressures in Europe (Dubéci 2016).

Shortly after the beginning of the term of the new Smer-SD coalition, the six-month presidency of Slovakia in the EU Council began in the second half of 2016. The main drivers of the presidency were the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain from the EU and the EU Migration and Asylum policy. The rhetoric of the governing coalition began to moderate gradually after the elections, but the opposition to European migration management proposals persisted. During the ongoing presidency, the Slovak Republic introduced an effective solidarity mechanism representing an alternative solution to the migration crisis and its consequences. The Slovak proposal for resolving the migration crisis was based on a three-pillar strategy of measures according to the seriousness of the migratory pressures. In general, the proposal presented options for solidarity between EU Member States, in which standard refugee redistribution mechanisms could be replaced by other assistance most acceptable to individual Member States, aiming for financial and technical assistance (Euractiv 2016). The Slovak proposal was presented with the strong support of the V4 but did not reach a consensus on the

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European level. In 2017, Slovakia's attitude towards the relocation of refugees began to differ slightly compared to other V4 countries. Despite the continuing refusal to meet the allocated refugee admission quota in the country, the Slovak Republic, as the only V4 country, presented the EC with an envisaged plan for future refugee reception, thus avoiding EC infringement procedure against the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland in 2017 (Bauerová 2018). Unlike Hungary, the Slovak Republic adopted a new migration policy strategy with a view to 2025. Taking into account the adoption of the new document in late 2021, the strategy also focuses on emerging circumstances associated with the outbreak of pandemic and armed conflicts in third countries (Migration policy of the Slovak Republic with a view to 2025, 2021).

According to data from the Czech Statistical Office, the Czech Republic is ethnically homogeneous. Most foreigners living in the Czech Republic are unevenly distributed in several central regions, especially Prague (Statistical Office of the Czech Republic 2020). As in the case of Slovakia, the Czech Republic cannot be described as a destination for migrants heading for the EU Single Market from North Africa and the Middle East because of the outbreak of the migration crisis. Moreover, none of the main migration routes to the country's western and northern EU Member States. The increase in migration pressures after 2014 led the government coalition of B. Sobotka and the Czech Social Democratic Party to redefine the priorities of the Czech Republic's Migration Policy Strategy (Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic 2015). The new document, which considers the unprecedented development of migration affecting the EU Single Market, was adopted in July 2015. Based on the document, the Czech migration policy intends to provide other adequate instruments of cooperation reflecting the solidarity of European countries. The official statements of government elites since 2015 have indeed begun to copy the content of the adopted document. In the statements of the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic concerning the solution to the migration crisis in Europe, it is possible to observe a slightly more moderate, pragmatic character in comparison with other countries of the V4 region. Despite repeated calls by the Czech government to change the mandatory status of relocation quotas to voluntary and calls by coalition partners of B. Sobotka, the Czech Republic did not join the lawsuits filed against the EC in 2015. Since 2015, Czech President M. Zeman has also begun to participate in the public debate and the formation of public opinion on the possibility of resolving the migration crisis. In critical statements about the solidarity required by the EC, he linked migrants and asylum seekers with the threat of Islamising society and the growth of terrorism in a secure and stable region (Nexera and Krčál 2018). B. Sobotka's government sent a clear message to Brussels in June 2017. After almost two years, the government decided to suspend the implementation of the temporary relocation of refugees adopted in 2015 due to the deteriorating security situation within the EU Single Market and the overall dysfunction of the mechanism that does not solve causes of migration of third-country nationals and thus began to face infringement procedure led by the EC (Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic 2018).

After the parliamentary elections in 2017 and the formation of the first minority government of A. Babiš, the Czech Republic's opposition to the relocation mechanism, remained unchanged. From the initially allocated redistribution quota for refugees from Greece and Italy until 2017, the Czech Republic received (unlike Hungary and Poland) 12 Syrians from Greece.

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In the period after its establishment, Babiš´s cabinet did not present any new reception plan and constantly referred to the level of financial and technical assistance provided to selected EU Member States and called for the causes of migration in third countries to be addressed (Bauerová 2018). As in several EU Member States, the migration crisis has created a breeding ground for the growth of far-right movements in the Czech Republic. The growing support, which manifested itself, especially in the Czech regional and parliamentary elections in 2016 and 2017, reflected a significant level of Euroscepticism and growing xenophobic sentiments in the country (Freedom House 2016). Since 2015, the migration policy strategy of the Czech Republic has not been subject to revision and updating of new circumstances in recent years.

The issue of religion is an essential aspect that has a significant impact on Poland's Migration and Asylum policy. The Church and the intensity of the religion among the Polish population during the accession process and the period of the country's membership in the EU together influenced several opinions on selected European policies or obtaining opt-outs to the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The religious issue has thus become an active criterion in assessing asylum applications during the growing migratory pressures after 2014. Poland was initially the only V4 state that did not vote against the first EC plan to redistribute refugees among individual EU Member States. Considering the number of registered asylum applications in the table above and the map of the main migration routes to western and northern EU Member States, it is evident that Poland, like its southern neighbors, was not a destination for migrants or refugees or a significant country of transit. Over the past decades, however, the originally purely emigrant state has become a state with an influx of immigrants from third countries exceeding the outflow of emigrants from Poland abroad (Pachocka 2016). Following the introduction of the relocation mechanism for Italy and Greece, the center-right coalition of the Civic Platform and the Polish People's Party adopted the first partially rejecting stance on the mandatory relocation of refugees just ahead of the 2015 parliamentary elections. The position of the former government, led by Prime Minister E. Kopacz, did not reject the overall participation of Poland in the relocation of refugees. The dissenting position was based primarily on the established resettlement criteria. An integral part of the reception of refugees in Poland has become the Christian origin of people, which has excluded many asylum seekers within the EU Single Market (Euractiv 2015). The issue of migration and asylum has become an essential topic of the election campaigns ahead of the forthcoming parliamentary elections in Poland. The overall change in Polish rhetoric and the unification of the V4's common rejecting position on the EC's proposals took place at the end of 2015 after the parliamentary elections, which brought victory to Law and Justice. The newly elected government opposed the relocation mechanisms and retroactively entered a dispute between the Slovak Republic and Hungary *vs.* EC as an intervener (Bauerová 2018). Thus, the Polish position has evolved after an unprecedented increase in migratory pressures. Given the political developments in the country after 2015, it has remained unchanged since the inauguration of Prime Minister B. Szydlo's government.

In 2012, the previous Polish government led by Donald Tusk approved a strategic plan for Poland's migration policy (Ministry of Interior and Administration 2012). As in other V4 countries, the migration crisis has highlighted the differences between the content of the

strategy paper and the current political practice of government elites. Following the inauguration of the new government of Prime Minister B. Szydlo, the document was annulled in October 2016 and, according to PiS, was to be replaced by a new strategy reflecting the interests of the new government. An integral part of the populist rhetoric of PiS, led by J. Kaczynski, was the statement against foreigners who had been accused of terrorism and attempted to Islamize Europe as part of a government discourse (Kindler 2018). After almost three years of preparing a new Migration and Asylum policy, the Polish proposal has been criticized by several Polish and European institutions. An essential part of the proposed strategy is the still strong position of the religious issue in treating the asylum seeker. The Islamic religion remains repeatedly associated with security threats, terrorism and fundamentalism.

Moreover, the proposal's anti-immigration rhetoric against Islamic refugees or illegal migrants is underlined by the fact that the proposal does not explicitly mention any other religion (European Commission 2019). A revised version of Poland's migration strategy, modified by some critical remarks, was finally adopted in July 2021. The strategy document Migration Policy of Poland - Directions of Activities 2021-2022 was adopted for two years solely due to the difficulties associated with the spread of the pandemic (not only) in Europe (Ministry of Interior and Administration 2021).

The Stalemate in the Reform of EU Migration and Asylum policy

To define measures eligible for all EU Member States as a counterweight to ad hoc migration and asylum management solutions within the EU Single Market, the EC presented a new vision for EU Migration and Asylum policy in September 2020. The New Pact on Migration and Asylum, together with the five main legislative proposals for reforming the EU's asylum policy, thus aims to replace previous solutions and attempts to unify Member States' EU Migration and Asylum policy, taking into account new challenges arising from the spread of Covid-19 pandemics and other turbulent events (e.g., at the EU's external borders with Belarus, the departure of allied troops from Afghanistan, etc.) which have repeatedly increased the influx of migrants or asylum seekers. The presentation of a new framework strategic non-legislative document has also led to a renewed recovery of the migration and asylum-related discourse in the V4 countries. Following the presentation of the document, the V4 leaders, accompanied by the representatives of Estonia and Slovenia, proceeded after more than three years to issue a joint statement summarizing the central reservations of the countries mentioned above to the proposed regulations. The common reservations concern, but are not limited to:

- Lack of an appropriate balance between the principles of responsibility and solidarity;
- Refugee distributions are solely based on the GDP and population of individual Member States;
- Mandatory nature of relocation and other forms of assistance in receiving migrants;
- Obligations to accept migrants whose return to their country of origin has not been successful within eight (in the event of a crisis four) months (Visegrad Group 2020).

The V4 leaders' statement can be seen as the first major case of coordination of common positions on EU Migration and Asylum policy in recent years. The leaders further agreed in the

statement, mainly on strengthening the external borders and the external dimension of migration and asylum management in detecting and addressing its causes directly in third countries. An important element of the declaration compared to the previous declarations was the intention to protect the public health of the citizens of the individual Member States.

Apart from the coordination of the common position in the form of the declaration mentioned above of the leaders and the meeting of ministers of the interior of the V4 countries in March 2021 on addressing migratory pressures at the external borders, the migration and asylum agenda has disappeared from the agenda of the V4 representatives in recent years.[3]

The latest demonstration of the consistency of the V4 countries' positions in the reform of the EU's Migration and Asylum policy took place at the end of 2021, when three of the countries voted against the establishment of a new EU Agency for Asylum to replace the temporary European Asylum Support Office, while the Czech Republic abstained (Council of the EU 2021). The common denominator of the V4 states' positions has become the preference for a package approach to the adoption of the reform, as opposed to the gradual adoption of reform legislation.

Migration and asylum remain a relatively active topics used in the national political discourse in the individual V4 countries. In contrast, Hungarian Prime Minister V. Orbán remains the region's prominent leader of the migration agenda. According to available polling studies (Bíró-Nágy 2021), the political jackpot in the form of a successful politicization of the migration crisis in Hungary significantly contributed to Fidesz's victories in the last parliamentary elections, and the government actively began to use migration in statements related to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. The first confirmed case in the country in March 2020 created a sufficient breeding ground for re-strengthening anti-immigration sentiments. On the contrary, migration has gradually disappeared from the Polish public discourse in recent years. Its return to the priority domestic policy topics did not occur even before the previous parliamentary or presidential elections (Kozlowska 2019). A significant revival of Migration and Asylum policy did not occur until the end of 2021 due to a rapid increase in migratory pressures, especially from the Middle East on the Polish-Belarusian border. The politicization of the migration crisis in the Czech Republic was characteristic of the pre-election political struggle both in the parliamentary elections in 2017 and in the election of the president a year later. As a counterpoint to pandemic management, EU Migration and Asylum policy have repeatedly returned to political discourse just before the October 2021 parliamentary elections, with former Prime Minister A. Babiš underlined the anti-immigration position on EU policies using two meetings with the Hungarian Prime Minister during one week in Budapest and Prague. As in the case of Poland, the topic of Migration and Asylum policy, apart from criticism of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, gradually began to fade in Slovakia, and the rejection of mandatory quotas in the election campaigns before the last parliamentary elections in 2020 was very similar across the political spectrum.

The declining trend in the use of EU Migration and Asylum policy in the national political struggle is accompanied by a decline in public interest in migration issues, confirmed by opinion

[3]The negotiations at various levels on the New Pact during 2021 did not bring any significant progress, and the issue of reforming the EU's Migration and Asylum policy thus became one of several initiatives largely overshadowed by addressing the effects of the pandemic.

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polls in EU Member States in recent years. According to standard 'autumn' Eurobarometers in recent years, the issue of migration has become the most critical issue in terms of EU and national policies in individual Member States in 2015 (European Commission 2016). Taking into account the V4 countries, the challenges arising from the growing influx of migrants were considered to be the most significant problem at the national level, especially among Czechs and Hungarians.

There have also been growing concerns about mass immigration in Poland and the Slovak Republic, but unemployment and economic trends have remained to be prioritized. Especially in the case of the two latter states, the topic of immigration disappeared a year later from the list of priority problems that the states, according to public opinion, faced at the national level, and its importance continued to decline over the following years. On the contrary, based on the results of the standard Eurobarometer, we observe that the influx of migrants was a slightly more sensitive topic of domestic policy in the Czech Republic. At the same time, Hungarian citizens advised migration among Hungary's main problems until the end of 2018.

In general, however, based on the results of the standard Eurobarometer, there have been more moderate concerns in recent years among the V4 population (especially compared to the southern Member States forming the EU's external border) about the importance of migration policies at the national level. Moreover, as in the case of many other Member States, events arising from the spread of the pandemic have led to a significant change in citizens' priority concerns on both national and EU levels. As in the case of several EU Member States, concerns about mass migration have been pushed away, at least until the current invasion of Ukraine began.

Table 2: Proportion of V4 and EU27 Nationals Identifying Immigration as One of the Two Main Public Problems at the National Level (Source: Author's own work 2022)

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Czech Republic	47	25	17	16	15	2
Hungary	34	30	28	21	14	7
Poland	17	11	13	9	5	4
Slovak Republic	19	10	11	9	6	4
EU27	36	26	25	23	17	7

THE OUTBREAK OF ARMED CONFLICT IN UKRAINE: VISEGRAD U-TURN ON MIGRATION?

On 24 February 2022, a new chapter of the modern international order in Europe began to be written. Since then, the ongoing conflict to the east of the EU has resulted in millions of Ukrainians leaving Ukraine immediately. Many European countries initially opposing any redistribution and reception of migrants during the second decade of the 21st century have thus become the countries receiving millions of Ukrainians, enabling them to enter the EU Single Market. According to the United Nations, 6.3 million Ukrainians have left their homeland between the outbreak of the conflict and 17 May 2022 (UNHCR 2022). More than 85% of them have entered the EU Single Market through Poland, Romania, Hungary and the Slovak Republic. The three V4 states alone have admitted more than 4.4 million Ukrainians to the Schengen area,

as a result of which the group is currently experiencing an unprecedented influx of third-country nationals. The pressures at the external borders were particularly noticeable in March when almost half of the aforementioned number of citizens left Ukraine (UNHCR 2022). As a result of the relentless influx of Ukrainians into the individual EU Member States forming the external border, the EU Member States began to call for solidarity and assistance from other Member States and the EU itself. The V4 countries, particularly Poland, which has received the largest number of refugees, are no exception.

Table 3: Total Refugee Influx from Ukraine in Neighboring Countries (24 February 2022 - 17 May 2022) (Source: Author's work based on UNHCR data 2022)

	Number of Ukrainians Entering Neighbouring Countries
Poland	3,396,792
Romania	930,341
Russian Federation	863,086
Hungary	615,256
Republic of Moldova	465,435
Slovak Republic	426,605
Belarus	27,308

Based on the unprecedented expressions of solidarity in the V4 region and the provision of refuge to third-country nationals compared to the situation that arose in the middle of the last decade, the opposite rhetoric of government elites, including Hungary and Poland, was outlined. In the search for the causes of the different positions and changes in the rhetoric of the leaders of the V4 countries on the issue of opening the borders for people fleeing the conflict, several important explanatory aspects can be described:

- The composition of refugees from Ukraine differs significantly compared to the last decade's migration waves to Europe. The V4 states with a (strong) Christian tradition thus face an influx of refugees from a geographically close region characterized by much greater cultural and ethnic similarities. The structure of people entering the Schengen area is also different, as in recent months, according to available data, they have been almost exclusively women and children. According to several studies, cultural and ethnic proximity (often *de facto* linked to geographical proximity) is an important aspect of positive attitudes toward migration (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014).
- The outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine immediately became an event portrayed as a war against Europe. Thus, Russia ended a period of peace on the European continent, resulting in the war becoming a reality in the European Union's neighborhood. The proximity of the armed conflict in a geographically close region has thus contributed to the intensity of rapid aid and the opening of borders for refugees. An integral part of this aspect is the long-term state of bilateral relations of individual states of the grouping with the Russian Federation. Apart from V. Orbán, the governing elites of the V4 states have communicated their positions since the beginning of the invasion and supported all the sanctions packages against Russia without hesitation.

- The military dimension of the conflict and the intensively promoted heroism of the Ukrainian army, especially during the first weeks of the conflict, also played its role and, to some extent, influenced the moods in the individual V4 states. According to European polls, Ukraine's signal of national identity in the struggle for stability and security has reached out to the broad masses, including the conservative right-wing spectrum, which is traditionally skeptical of immigration (Pettrachin and Hadj-Abdou 2022).

Despite the high number of Ukrainians crossing the borders of Hungary, Poland and the Slovak Republic at the EU's eastern external border, it is currently unclear how many of them remain or plan to remain in the V4 countries, including the Czech Republic. Accession to the Schengen area results in partial loss of sight of the actual physical presence of refugees until individuals decide to address their presence in the EU administratively. The influx of Ukrainians to the individual V4 countries decreased by 60% during April and 80% during May (UNHCR 2022). At the same time, some of the earlier refugees are gradually returning to their country of origin. The media coverage and public attention paid to the external borders of individual EU Member States are gradually beginning to decline.

CONCLUSION

Even after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the outbreak of the conflict to the east of the EU, the EU Migration and Asylum policy and its reform continues to be one of the few EU policies characterized by the consistent position of the V4 countries. The initial consensus and coordinated position of leaders since 2015 during the mass influx of migrants and asylum seekers from third countries remain recently coordinated, unlike many other European policies where the V4 countries do not promote shared national interests and visions of the EU competencies. After a partial decline of the migration and asylum agenda in the individual states of the grouping, at the beginning of 2022, the issue of mass migration returned to the main points of public discourse. This time, however, it takes on a different contour, as migrants and refugees have become much more related, as a result of which the reaction of individual V4 governments has been entirely different from the earlier reserved or opposing positions since 2015 despite the difficult socio-economic times of the past years. The migration strategies of the V4 countries have been revised only partially and are still miles away from some other European countries promoting the open-door welcoming policy. However, the Ukrainian crisis has undoubtedly provided a new impetus for further negotiations on a Common Migration and Asylum policy within the EU.

On the one hand, the resulting impulse can contribute to the acceleration of negotiations on the form of European policy, against which the individual V4 states have long held reserved or opposing positions. The redistribution of third-country nationals in the countries that make up the EU's external border and the improvement and transparency of the management of migration flows and their financing became an issue in the Eastern EU Member States after February 2022. In light of past events, this creates a promising space for addressing migration and asylum issues at the EU level, as the V4 countries finally also experience the lack of assistance from the EU Member States voluntarily.

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