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Politicization of Migration Policies in the Visegrad Group's Member States: A Means of Creating External Enemies of the Political system?

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Abstract

The main purpose of this article is to examine whether the process of politicization of migration policies in the member states of the Visegrad Group is used to create the image of external enemies of these societies. The main assumption is that the leaders of the V4 states intentionally politicize migration issues and use them to achieve internal objectives. The official migration strategies of these states conform to generally accepted norms. Yet, the narrative of executive bodies fosters the 'we-they' division and the negative image of immigrants. Migrants are shown as external enemies and a source of potential threats to state security. The main theoretical contribution of the article is the original typology of creating the image of migrants as enemies of the state. The empirical contribution, in turn, is based on an in-depth analysis of a selected case, a group of V4 countries that so far have not been compared in terms of the dominant arguments serving to create the image of migrants as enemies of the state. The main research hypothesis is as follows: the politicization of migration issues in the V4 countries serves to create specific types of images of external enemies and is used instrumentally to achieve objectives in domestic politics.

Keywords: Visegrad Group, Migration policy, Politicization, V4, Migrants

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Introduction

For many centuries, migration issues have aroused a lot of emotions both in the origin countries of emigrants and among the societies receiving immigrants. The right to stay and enjoy various social or economic advantages or privileges sometimes causes tensions between members of different communities, fosters internal divisions, strengthens stereotypes, and even leads to outright hostility and acts of violence. All these negative aspects of migration processes can be effectively prevented or at least limited. In this case, however, much depends on the official policy of the host country, as well as the narrative that dominates the mass media.

Central European countries, which were in the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union during the Cold War years, for a long time did not experience the phenomenon of mass immigration, characteristic and discernible in many Western European countries at that time. This lack of experience was not conducive to the development of procedures or solutions that could help take in immigrants in the future. Moreover, the process of socialization did not include issues related to accepting immigrants, creating safe and friendly living conditions for them, and social sensitivity to issues related to religious, ethnic, or racial diversity.

During the last decade, migration issues have regained importance in the European Union. The main source of the increase in the number of people seeking refuge in Europe was the process of rapid socio-political changes in the countries of the Middle East and North Africa. It was the conflicts and the economic instability in many of them that forced many of their citizens to look for a better future and security in Europe. For the first time, the challenges related to the uncontrolled influx of immigrants also began to affect the new EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe.

This article is devoted to four of those countries that are grouped within a sub-regional international organization, the Visegrad Group. The organization was founded in 1991 and groups four states, namely the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland. Initially, its founders were motivated by the idea of coordinating mutual efforts to obtain membership in NATO and the EU. Once these goals were achieved, the leaders of these countries began, with varying degrees of intensity and effectiveness, coordinating their actions within the EU so that the voices of the countries in the region were heard more clearly.

The process of politicization of migration policies in the V4 states is a relatively new phenomenon. In 2012, Agnieszka Zogata-Kusz pointed to the specificity of immigration policies in these countries, paying particular attention to the relatively low number of immigrants, the lack of a strategy for their admission and integration with the rest of society, and the lack of politicization of migration issues (Zogata-Kusz, 2012, p. 18). Since then, mainly due to the increasing influx of immigrants to Europe due to violent armed conflicts and the deteriorating economic situation in developing countries in Asia and Africa, the situation has changed significantly.

The current positions of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary differ substantially from those presented, for example, in the EU by the countries of Western Europe. At the same time, it is worth paying attention to how instrumentally they use

migration issues to achieve specific goals within the framework of internal policy. In this context, one can talk about the phenomenon of deliberate politicization of the discourse on migration processes, in which the challenges related to the influx of immigrants are used to present the migrants as external enemies of the political system and a real threat to public order. The adopted narrative fosters the feeling of uncertainty and even fear of strangers who are to pose a threat to the democratic foundations of the state. At the same time, it is to strengthen ties between members of dominant national groups and convince them of a kind of moral or civilizational superiority.

As far as the paper structure is concerned, the first part is dedicated to theoretical aspects of migration policy and the process of its deliberate politicization. The analysis is based on concepts formulated by the field's leading scholars. The second part is empirical and deals with a detailed analysis of the official migration strategies of the V4 states and their comparison with declarations and narratives applied by their political leaders between 2015-2021.

Migration Policy, Its Politicization, and the Creation of External Enemies of A State

Studies on the contemporary migration processes and migration policies of individual countries are very extensive and varied. Eytan Meyers points to three major groups of theories explaining immigration control policy. The first focuses on the economic competition between native-born citizens and immigrants. The second highlights the importance of the cultural discord between these two groups, while the third deals with the impact of international relations and international law on national immigration policies (Meyers, 2004, p. 6). For this article and the adopted methodological assumptions, the second theoretical approach is adopted as best reflecting the mainstream narrative and the selection of arguments in the public debate on migration processes in the Visegrad Group countries. As will be shown in the empirical part, the V4 leaders most often refer to cultural, religious, and racial differences, thus pointing to them as sources of potential external threats to public order, national identity, the homogeneous nature of societies in Central European states, and social stability.

It is already known which theoretical approach to migration issues is applicable in the analyzed case. How, then, can this approach be linked to the process of politicization of a migration policy? Such considerations call for the definition of politicization. According to Warren J. Samuels, politicization can mean incorporating actions or beliefs that were not previously in the political domain. It can also mean incorporating an issue that has been ignored for a long time, but for some reason has suddenly become important again (Samuels, 1980, pp. 67-68). The latter approach can be applied to the immigration phenomena to the European Union before 2015, when the politicians of the host countries, except for radical and chauvinist parties, rarely used it as a means of conducting internal politics. The situation changed with the migration crisis in the summer of 2015. This issue was then highly politicized and became a permanent element of public debate, even in those countries where the number of immigrants was not that high at the time, for example, Slovakia or Poland. Thus, it can be concluded that in the case of the V4 countries, the migration problems were ignored for a long time, which allows the use of the second approach to politicization proposed by W. Samuels.

In turn, Michael Zürn defines politicization not only as the transfer of a given issue to the political sphere resulting from objective circumstances but also as the will to take such action, i.e., the deliberate politicization of an issue that has not been the subject of a political debate so far (Zürn, 2019, pp. 978). It can be indicated that this was the nature of the politicization of migration issues in the V4 countries after 2015. It did not result so much from the mass influx of immigrants, as from the need to use the potential inflow of immigrants to shape specific social attitudes, and especially to strengthen national identity.

Zürn also indicates the stages of this process. First, something is transferred to the sphere of public policy, thanks to which there is the possibility of making the collective decisions related to it. In most political systems, collective choice is based on prioritizing an issue on the agenda of the most important politically important issues, discussing it, working out different stances, and then making decisions. The more salient a given issue is subject to public debate and consideration, the greater the polarization of positions on this issue, and thus the greater the degree of politicization of the decision made (Zürn, 2019, pp. 978-979). Such stages of politicizing migration issues could also be observed in the countries of the Visegrad Group after 2015.

In this context, it is worth mentioning the publications, among others, by authors such as Wouter van der Brug, Gianni D'Amato, Didier Ruedin, Joost Berkhout (2015), Swen Hutter (2021), Bern Simon and Olga Grabow (2010) who researched theoretical aspects of the politicization of migration. One can also point to selected case studies such as Nathan Lauwers' (2021) analysis of the parliamentary discourse on the European Union Trust Fund on migration or a paper on the politicization of migration issues during the refugee crisis in the UK and Denmark published by Trisha Meyer, Jamal Shahin, and Sevgi Temizisler (2022). The above-mentioned research on the politicization of migration processes can be complemented by a case study of the Visegrad Group member states. Migration issues were not of political importance for a long time and were not the subject of public debate until the V4 leaders noticed how these issues polarized societies and were used politically in Western or Southern Europe during and after the 2015 migration crisis. For this reason, 2015 was recognized as the starting point for the analysis. The collected data, covering the years 2015-2021, prove that during this period the process of intensive politicization of migration issues in the V4 took place.

Methodological Assumptions

The main purpose of this article is to verify whether the process of politicization of migration policies in the member states of the Visegrad Group serves to portray migrants as external enemies of a political system. The main assumption is that the leaders of the V4 states intentionally politicize migration issues and use them instrumentally to achieve internal objectives. The official narrative of executive bodies in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary fosters the 'we-they' division and the negative image of immigrants. At the same time, measures to limit the influx of immigrants, especially those of a very radical nature, are presented as necessary to protect public order and the democratic foundations of political systems as well as to preserve national identities.

The main research hypothesis is as follows: the politicization of migration issues in the V4 countries serves to create specific types of images of external enemies of a

political system and is used to achieve objectives in domestic politics. In this case, it can be assumed that there is a process of deliberate and very selective politicization of issues related to migration processes. Thus, it becomes a useful tool for distracting citizens from current social or economic challenges and problems under the guise of the need to guarantee internal security. It may even result in restrictions affecting the citizens themselves. In this case, such activities are also presented as necessary and justified to protect the V4 states from potential external threats.

The author applied to process tracing as the main research method. According to Andrew Anguko, it is a qualitative research method that attempts to identify the causal processes between potential causes and the outcome (Anguko, 2019, p. 21). During the research process, it is necessary to determine what actions have been taken, what are their results, and how significant the impact of these actions on the presented results is. The main purpose of the selected method was to establish whether the politicization of migration policies in the V4 states influenced the creation of the image of external enemies. Legal acts and speeches related to the migration processes and published in the Visegrad Group member states between 2015 and 2021 were collected from governmental webpages of the V4 member states. The other source of information was excerpted from public speeches of prime ministers published by renowned press agencies like Reuters and Deutsche Welle. They have all been analyzed in terms of the language used to describe migrants and the migration processes, especially conecerning words or phrases that, directly or indirectly, can be interpreted as attributing hostile or dangerous characteristics to migrants. On this basis, they were assigned to the appropriate type of creation of the image of migrants as enemies of the state within the framework of the author's typology proposed below. The most representative, i.e. the most frequently repeated examples were included in the article and compared with similar ones in other V4 countries. Such action allowed us to compare them and determine which type of creating image of migrants as enemies of the state was dominant in a selected V4 state. Adopting such a qualitative method allows for replication of the research in the case of another group of countries.

The start date of the analysis is the beginning of the migration crisis in the European Union in 2015, which resulted, inter alia, in a political debate on the migration processes in individual member states and the future of EU migration policy. The end date is 2021, which saw the migration crisis on the eastern border of the EU, especially on the Polish-Belarusian border. The analysis does not include the events and consequences of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, which resulted in an influx of a few million refugees to the V4 countries, especially to Poland. This immigration wave differs significantly from those observed in the EU after 2015 due to the lack of significant religious, cultural, and racial differences, not to mention the very circumstances and the scale of this refugee process.

The main theoretical contribution of the article is the original typology of creating the image of migrants as enemies of the state, taking into account the subject criterion. On this basis, four types of creating such an image can be distinguished: (1) migrants as a threat to security and public order; (2) migrants as a threat to values, the dominant religion, and cultural patterns; (3) migrants as a threat to the economic well-being of citizens; and (4) migrants as a threat to public health. The empirical contribution, in turn,

is based on an in-depth analysis of a selected case, namely the group of V4 countries that have not been compared so far in terms of the dominant arguments serving to create the image of migrants as enemies of the state.

Politicization of Migration Issues in the Czech Republic

The Official Stance on the Migration Issues

The Czech Republic is a parliamentary democracy. The last parliamentary elections were held in October 2021. As a result, a coalition government was formed that grouped the SPOLU coalition (Civic Democratic Party – ODS, Christian Democratic Party KDU-ČSL, and TOP 09) with the Czech Pirate Party and STAN (Mayors and Independents) coalition. It is headed by prime minister Petr Fiala.

According to data from 2020, migrants accounted for 5.9% of the population in the Czech Republic. Their number increased by 6.5% compared to the data for 2019. The main reason for the choice of the Czech Republic by new immigrants was economic, above all the desire to find a job. In turn, the number of asylum seekers fell by as much as 39.4% (Situation of foreigners, 2020).

According to Maciej Skrzypek, there is a number of elements in the Czech politics that testify to the crisis of democratic values and the growing importance of populism (Skrzypek, 2022, p. 149). Such circumstances are conducive to the emergence of xenophobic attitudes based on prejudices and stereotypes. As the historical experience of many countries proves, creating the image of an external enemy is helpful when the rulers want to divert the citizens' attention from current internal problems or indicate their source in external variables. The increase in populism in the Czech Republic was consistent with the strengthening of anti-immigrant attitudes.

The official Czech migration policy is based on the following principles. First, the Czech Republic consistently fosters government control in the field of migration notwithstanding international obligations, for example, those resulting from membership in the European Union. Second, the country's migration policy is based on the coordinated approach of all state administration bodies and local governments. Third, the main goal is to eliminate illegal immigration by a variety of measures at both international and national levels. Fourth, national migration policy, however, does not exclude supporting controlled immigration to the Czech Republic, especially one that is beneficial from a social point of view. Fifth, the implementation of the country's migration policy is conditional upon the mass involvement of non-governmental and other organizations of the civic society. Sixth, the Czech Republic is involved in global and European communities' efforts aimed at coping with migration-related consequences of humanitarian crises and eliminating the reasons for such phenomena (Czech Government's Migration Policy Principles, 2022).

In 2018, the Czech Republic rejected a UN migration pact (Czech Republic rejects, 2018). This decision was interpreted as a manifestation of the overtly anti-immigration policy of the Czech executive bodies. It was also one of the proofs that despite the assumptions contained in the strategy, the Czech Republic does not pursue an immigrant-friendly policy.

Politicization of the Migration Issues As a Means of Creation of External Enemies

Andrej Babiš's government politicized the migration issues and made them an important element of domestic policy. In 2018, the Czech prime minister commented on immigrants from the MENA countries as follows: "These people should stay home and we should help them in Africa. The people around Syria … would like to return home. (…) They have their culture, we have our culture. They have their values, but we want to keep our values" (Wintour, 2018). In these words, he emphasized the irreconcilable cultural differences which, in his opinion, prevented a common, peaceful coexistence within one society.

The Czech prime minister did not reject the possibility of helping immigrants but suggested many times that it would be safer to do so outside the EU. At the same time, he emphasized his opposition not only to the admission of more migrants but went a step further by proposing the expulsion of those who had already found refuge in the EU. In 2020, during a visit to Warsaw, he said as follows: "We have to change the system of grants and the quota system, it's unacceptable for us. That's why we should keep negotiating... the strategy should look like this – the people coming from these countries, they should be stopped and turned back to their countries and be given help there" (Migrants should be returned, 2020). He also refused to accept Afghan refugees who fled the country after the Taliban took power in August 2021. Referring to this issue, he made the following very clear: "There is no place for them in Europe. (…) An option is to lead talks with (Turkish) President (Recep Tayyip) Erdoğan, like in the past, but I don't think that's a good alternative. A better alternative is a solution making the people stay in Afghanistan" (Czech PM says, 2021). Earlier Czech Interior Minister Jan Hamáček openly referred to potential security threats and suggested that the Afghan migrants pose such threats: "I will not bring 18-year-old Afghans to the Czech Republic because I consider it a security risk" (Jurečková, 2020).

When Babiš launched his election campaign in September 2021, he made anti-immigration policy one of the pillars of the electoral agenda of his populist ANO party. During the inauguration of the campaign, he stated: "This is the last chance to protect our national interests, living standards, our culture. (…) As long as I am prime minister, we will not accept a single illegal migrant" (Muller, 2021).

The same approach to immigration was represented by President Milos Zeman. In 2015, he openly criticized welcoming refugees from Middle Eastern countries fleeing the threats of the so-called Islamic state. Zeman even suggested that they should stay in their countries and fight against the fighters of this terrorist organization. Moreover, he described the mass influx of refugees as an organized invasion: "I am profoundly convinced that we are facing an organized invasion and not a spontaneous movement of refugees. A large majority of the illegal migrants are young men in good health and single. I wonder why these men are not taking up arms to go fight for the freedom of their countries against the Islamic State" (Viner, 2015). Such a position was at the same time a clear suggestion that the refugees constituted a threat to the security of Czech citizens and that they did not need any help.

All the above-mentioned statements clearly show the negative attitude of Czech decision-makers towards migrants. They emphasized migrants' cultural diversity, as well as portraying them as sources of threats to the security of the state and citizens.

This attitude served to create an image of an external enemy, which was used to achieve domestic policy goals, for example, to achieve the highest possible result in the last parliamentary elections. In the case of the Czech Republic, one can say that the adopted hypothesis has been positively verified concerning to the analyzed period in 2015-2021. Two types of creating the image of migrants dominate, i.e. migrants as a threat to security and public order as well as migrants as a threat to cultural patterns and social values.

Politicization of Migration Issues in Hungary

The Official Stance on the Migration Issues

Hungary has been a parliamentary republic since 1989. Nevertheless, the political situation in this country began to change dramatically after Viktor Orbán became the prime minister. The Fidesz-KNDP party has been in power since 2010. The party dominates the Hungarian political system and is led by Viktor Orbán (Fidesz) and Zsolt Semjén (KDNP). Orbán as the prime minister modified the system in a very significant way, seriously restricting civil liberties and the possibility of equal competition for power between various political groups. Such a policy meant that Hungary is now classified as a flawed democracy and is officially criticized by the European Commission. Fidesz promotes national values, and populism, and refers to Hungarian nationalist traditions. Such an approach influences the position of the ruling party regarding the migration processes.

The Hungarian migration strategy for 2014-2020 covered mainly procedural issues, with particular emphasis on the rights and obligations of refugees. However, it does not contain specific information on the forms of support and integration of newcomers with the rest of society (Governance of migrant integration in Hungary, 2022). In 2018, the number of foreign nationals residing legally and permanently in Hungary was 156,000, this is 1.6% of the country's population. This number increased in 2019 to 180,773 and in the first half of 2020 to 200,150 (Hungary: Population, 2021). In 2021, only 38 people managed to apply for asylum in Hungary, eight of whom came via the Embassy procedure (Country Report: Hungary, 2021, p. 13).

According to the official strategy on migration adopted by the Hungarian government, "the document clearly envisages the potential societal, social and budgetary effects of migration, emphasizes the requirement of fair treatment and the human rights dimension of migration, and provides firm responses to the risks of national security, public order,and public policy related to illegal migration" (Hungary's migration strategy, 2014). Such an approach suggests that the migration policy is to respond to potential threats related to migration processes, rather than constitute an effective tool of assistance for people forced to migrate and stay on the territory of Hungary. Many of the actions and statements of members of the ruling party often prove this, especially of the prime minister.

One of the characteristic elements of Hungarian policy during Orban's rule is the creation of internal and external 'enemies' of the state. One of the layers of enemy creation is presenting people of a different sexual orientation, culture, or race as sources of threats to traditional values, and the populist, homogenous vision of the people and the nation (Drinóczi, Mészáros, 2022, p. 110). Orban treats immigrants very instrumentally and has contributed to a significant politicization of migration issues in Hungary.

Politicization of the Migration Issues As A Means of Creation of External Enemies

In 2018, Orbán described immigration as 'an invasion' and migrants as 'a poison.' He even went so far as to make the following highly controversial comment: "We don't see these people as Muslim refugees. We see them as Muslim invaders. We believe that many Muslims inevitably leads to parallel societies because Christian and Muslim societies will never unite. Multiculturalism is only an illusion" (Viktor Orban's most controversial, 2018). Such a narrative did not leave the public with any doubts as to who and what posed a threat to the security of the state and its citizens. Moreover, the politicization of migration issues and the presentation of migrants as enemies were to justify the introduction of restrictions to the democratic system. Among the limitations was the restriction of the possibility of obtaining asylum in Hungary, a decision which was met with harsh criticism from the European Union for not meeting EU standards (Hungary asylum, 2021). The situation did not change even after the EU court ruling in December 2021. At the same time, during the election campaign that was taking place at that time, the Hungarian prime minister indicated two most important issues during the campaign – migration and the rights of LGBTQ groups (Hungary to defy EU court ruling, 2021). Thus, he indicated two parallel groups of enemies of the system: internal enemies – LGBTQ, and external enemies – migrants. He made the restriction of the rights of members of both groups equal and justified it by the necessity to protect the foundations of the functioning of the state and society.

In June 2021, Viktor Orbán proposed to ban immigrants for two years. He justified the closure of the EU against the influx of immigrants for security reasons. The Hungarian prime minister said as follows: "Migrant armies are banging on all the gates of Europe. (…) Migration is inherently bad. " He also referred to migrants as 'Muslim invaders' and suggested that "all terrorists are basically migrants" (Hungary's Orban, 2021). Apart from the very controversial tone and the wording used, there was another attempt to politicize the migration issues and use them as an excuse to introduce restrictions on civil rights. In this case, the Hungarian prime minister justified the need to introduce them under the pretext of defending public order and democratic values. This is an element of thinking typical of neo-militant democracy systems.

The statements of the Hungarian prime minister quoted above clearly prove that he is using the politicization of migration issues to create external enemies of Hungary. He presents them as a threat to the ethnic homogeneity of society and national values. Such actions are aimed at gaining the citizens' support, especially during elections. They also make it possible to gain support for current political projects that have nothing to do with migration processes. On the other hand, the very existence of a potential external threat mobilizes citizens to support certain ideas or solutions. For this reason, the adopted hypothesis has been positively verified with Hungary in the analyzed period between 2015 and 2021. Two types of creating the image of migrants dominate, i.e. migrants as a threat to security and public order as well as migrants as a threat to cultural patterns and social values.

Politicization of Migration Issues in Poland

The Official Stance on the Migration Issues

Poland is a parliamentary republic. The country underwent a process of systemic transformation in the 1990s and since 1989 it has been classified as fully democratic. However, the situation began to gradually change after 2015. Since that year, the Polish political scene has been dominated by the United Right, led by the Law and Justice party headed by the charismatic leader Jarosław Kaczyński. The parliamentary majority and successive governments of the United Right began to gradually take control of the judiciary, and public media and took over some private media. The control over the public media made it possible to create the image of the internal and external enemies of the state. The latter group included immigrants and refugees, although during the migration crisis in 2015 and later, few refugees reached Poland. When that happened, they generally arrived following the law. The situation changed only in 2021 when immigrants began to attempt to cross the Polish-Belarusian border on a mass scale outside the border control points.

Compared to the Civic Platform ruling in the previous period, members of the United Right share a very critical attitude towards immigration, especially from non-European countries. However, the right-wing government began to pursue an ad hoc migration policy during this period, without a dedicated strategy or even indicating the most important goals. The ruling party's politicians also reacted to the current events in the geopolitical environment of Poland, rather than preparing the state for possible scenarios and the need to accept large groups of immigrants or refugees.

In 2020, the Team for Migration presented a document entitled Migration Policy of Poland – Diagnosis of the Initial State. Yet it does not serve as an official migration strategy for Poland. It only constitutes the basis for such a strategy document which is currently being drafted (Governance of migrant integration in Poland, 2021). Until the autumn of 2021, such an approach seemed justified, and the situation did not require the Polish government to take special measures regarding migration issues. The situation began to drastically change only in the fall of 2021, during the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. By 2022, i.e. the mass influx of war refugees from Ukraine, the share of migrants in the total number of 38 million Polish citizens was insignificant, especially when compared to other EU countries. As of 2021, non-Polish residents numbered 111,800, up from 55,400 in 2011, with Ukrainians accounting for 47.4 percent, almost a four-fold increase from 2011 (Poland unveils, 2022).

Politicization of the Migration Issues As a Means of Creation of External Enemies

One of the main features of contemporary political debate in Poland is a very high level of emotionality. This phenomenon gained importance and was exacerbated after the Law and Justice party took power in 2015. According to Joanna Rak and Roman Bäcker, the emotional narrative began to dominate the political discourse, the development of which was supported by the clear domination of the ruling party over the public media and state institutions (Bäcker, Rak, 2022, p. 95). This domination of emotions over factual arguments has become particularly evident in the public debate related to migration

phenomena. Stereotypes and prejudices began to dominate in it, as well as strongly emphasizing the potential threats related to the influx of immigrants of a different culture or religion.

The best proof of this was the resignation of the government of Beata Szydło, the first prime minister of Law and Justice after 2015, from the commitments made by the previous prime minister Ewa Kopacz. The head of the government on behalf of the Civic Platform agreed to Poland's participation in the quota refugee distribution system during the migration crisis in the summer of 2015 (Cienski, 2016). However, her decisions were changed by Szydło. At the same time, the new head of government clearly emphasized that Poland would prefer the immigration of Christians, but would not accept followers of other religions. It was an obvious allusion to Muslims who dominated the 2015 migration wave.

When the European Union attempted to exert pressure on the Polish government, Szydło officially declared as follows: "We cannot be blackmailed by the threat that part of our EU funds will be cut off as punishment, because we don't agree to the forced relocation of migrants from North Africa and the Middle East" (Polish PM rejects, 2017). Migration issues became even more politicized in the fall of 2021 when thousands of immigrants coming mainly from the MENA countries began to storm and attempt to illegally cross the Polish border from Belarus. Prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki became the main promoter of this policy. In this context, however, the radical measures taken by the Polish government met with approval from the European Union and even tacit approval from the opposition groups. At stake, at least officially, was the defense of the EU's external borders, as well as the European identity and security of EU citizens. As part of the aforementioned activities, a state of emergency was introduced in the border area, which contributed to a serious limitation of the possibility of exercising civil liberties (The safety of Poland, 2021). Even journalists could not appear in the zone for a long time, which in practice prevented the public from accessing reliable information on the actual state of emergency.

In November 2021, Morawiecki linked the immigration crisis with the safety of Poland and the EU. In addition, the Polish prime minister compared the crisis to a hybrid war. He stated as follows: "Lukashenko launched a hybrid war against the EU. This is the greatest attempt to destabilize Europe in 30 years. Poland will not yield to blackmail and will do everything to defend the EU's borders" (Poland says border crisis, 2021). The close connection of migration issues with the security of the state and its citizens has thus become an argument that is difficult to undermine in the public debate. Anyone who called for humanitarian aid to immigrants at the border exposed themselves to criticism and accusations of acting to the detriment of the state. The policy of the Polish government towards the influx of immigrants from Belarus was also in line with the policy consistently pursued by Law and Justice since 2015. This policy assumed a strict and very restrictive migration policy, except for facilitating access to the labor market for those foreigners who could fill the gaps in the domestic labor market. At the same time, the migration crisis of 2021 contributed to an increase in political tensions between the government and the opposition, and an increase in anti-immigration sentiment in Polish society (Majority of Poles, 2021). Moreover, many citizens were willing to agree to the

introduction of a state of emergency in the border area and the restriction of civil liberties, adopting the official argumentation and narrative of the executive actors (Majority of Poles support a state of emergency, 2021). Therefore, it can be assumed that the politicization of migration issues was conducive to the introduction of restrictions characteristic of the neo-militant democracy system.

In Poland, after 2015, migration issues were highly politicized. The politicians of the ruling United Right began to use them instrumentally to create external enemies of the Polish state. Migrants were presented as strangers, people who are unable to function following local values and rules. Also as a source of potential threats to state security. As was the case in the Czech Republic and Hungary, also in Poland, migration issues were used by the ruling party during the 2019 election campaign. Moreover, the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border was used as a pretext to introduce a temporary state of emergency in the border zone. This type of restriction was applied for the first time in the history of democratic Poland after 1989. However, they affected not so many migrants as residents of nearby towns and journalists who were effectively prevented from observing and reporting the situation from the scene of the events. For the above-mentioned reasons, the adopted hypothesis has been positively verified with Poland in the analyzed period between 2015 and 2021. Two types of creating the image of migrants dominate, i.e. migrants as a threat to security and public order as well as migrants as a threat to cultural patterns and social values.

Politicization of Migration Issues in Slovakia

The Official Stance on the Migration Issues

Slovakia is a parliamentary republic with a multi-power system. It has been unsustainable in recent years, as evidenced by the frequent changes in government. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, the anti-corruption movement Ordinary People OL'aNO and the Social Democrats received the most votes. The current prime minister, Eduard Heger, comes from the populist OL'aNO.

Foreigners constitute about 3% of the population in Slovakia, which places it among the countries with the lowest percentage of foreigners in the European Union, just ahead of Poland and Romania. The main reason for choosing Slovakia as a place of stay is economic. Incidentally, it is worth noting the exceptionally low number of asylum applications – 370. Even more striking are the statistics for granting such status. Throughout 2021, only 29 people received it (Migration in Slovakia, 2022).

In September 2021, the Slovak government adopted a new strategic document related to migration issues, namely *The Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic: Perspective until the Year 2025*. The new strategy clearly emphasizes that the government prefers targeted, economic immigration. The main goal is to attract potential employees in industries where their shortage is particularly noticeable. At the same time, it is recommended to manage migration processes in such a way that secures the interests and security of Slovak citizens and legal migrants and simultaneously does not lead to any tensions or social conflicts (Slovakia adopts, 2021). The adoption of this strategy was a tribute to communities reluctant to accept large groups of immigrants and striving to limit the influx of people of different cultures and religions.

In Slovakia, as in other previously discussed countries of the Visegrad Group, one can see the domination of emotions and various prejudices in the public debate on migration phenomena. Over time, after 2015, this dominant narrative began to translate into specific political decisions and changes in legislation, including those that introduced restrictions on civil liberties. According to Max Steuer and Martin Kovanic, one of the main challenges to Slovak democracy was a response to the post-2015 migration crisis that linked migration issues with terrorist threats. The adoption of such a narrative later served as a justification for the introduction of counter-terrorist measures, which at the same time limited civil liberties. (Steuer, Kovanic, 2022, p. 165). It was the first proof of the politicization of migration issues to create an external enemy, which in turn was to achieve internal political goals, such as greater control over society.

Politicization of the Migration Issues As a Means of Creation of External Enemies

In 2016, Slovak prime minister Robert Fico linked refugees with terrorist attacks in Europe. He openly stated as follows: "Many things are being said and written, but the Slovak government sees a direct link between the current migration flows and the (November) attacks in Paris and recent events in Germany" (Gabrizova, 2016). At the same time, he announced that Slovakia would not accept Muslim immigrants because of their different attitudes towards women and "diametrically opposed values and ways of life" that make their integration into Slovak society impossible (Gabrizova, 2016). This way, Fico was part of the xenophobic and anti-immigrant narrative that dominated the political discourse in all V4 countries during the migration crisis. Although Slovakia was not affected by the influx of immigrants like neighboring Hungary, it did not prevent its prime minister from instrumentally using the migration issues. Their politicization allowed the Slovak leader to create the image of an external enemy in difficult times, to unite citizens around shared values, and to strengthen a sense of national community.

Compared to Robert Fico's rule, the situation improved significantly after Peter Pellegrini took office in 2020. He represented a more liberal stance on migration issues and was more open to cooperation with the EU. Pellegrini did not use anti-immigration rhetoric like Fico and did not try to gain political support by appealing to prejudices or stereotypes. Yet his successor, Igor Matovič, was not open to immigration and tried to stop it. His opinions were anti-immigrant (Slovakia's populist, 2020; An anti-corruption campaigner, 2020).

The positive trend in avoiding the politicization of migration issues is visible in the current government of Eduard Heger. In 2021, prime ministers of the Czech Republic, Austria, and Slovakia adopted a joint statement against illegal immigration (Central Europe takes, 2021). But Heger mainly criticized the actions of the Belarusian president who tried to use immigrants to destabilize the situation in Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. He did not attribute any negative traits to immigrants and did not try to create the belief that they were people with bad intentions. During this period, Slovakia's politics began to differ from the politicization of migration issues in the other V4 countries.

The case of Slovakia is therefore different from that of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. The negative narrative and the politicization of migration issues were noticeable in the discussed period only during the rule of prime minister Fico. He used migrants as

external enemies of the Slovak state and thus tried to mobilize his electorate and win new supporters. His successors were either far from such activities (Pellegrini, Heger) or used them to a very limited extent (Matovič). The level of corruption and the economic problems of Slovakia during Fico's rule became such social problems that the ruling camp was unable to obscure them with anti-immigration rhetoric. In this case, creating an external enemy has failed in the sense that it has not obtained enough votes to maintain power. Proof of this can be, for example, the successful election campaign of Igor Matovič in 2020, which focused primarily on corruption issues (Slovakia parliamentary elections, 2020).

For the above-mentioned reasons, the adopted hypothesis has not been positively verified about Slovakia in the analyzed period between 2015 and 2021. The politicization of migration issues was used to create the image of the Slovak state's external enemies only during the rule of Robert Fico. Before 2018, two types of creating the image of migrants dominated, i.e. migrants as a threat to security and public order as well as migrants as a threat to cultural patterns and social values. However, both disappeared from the official government narrative after prime minister Fico lost power.

Conclusion

The presented arguments allow us to state that in all four member states of the Visegrad Group (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) the phenomenon of politicization of migration processes was noticeable after 2015. Yet the Slovak case differs from the remaining three because after the rule of prime minister Robert Fico, his successors did not use the politicization of migration processes to create the image of an external enemy. Two out of four proposed types of creating the image of migrants dominated, namely migrants as a threat to security and public order as well as migrants as a threat to cultural patterns and social values.

The harsh rhetoric and politicization of the migration policies in the V4 states were used mainly to introduce significant restrictions and seriously limit immigrants' access to these states as well as to gain public support. Such activities strengthened the 'we-they' division and did not foster the integration of those immigrants who already live in the analyzed V4 countries. The ruling parties and their leaders presented immigrants as a source of potential threats to the security of the state or its citizens, often also to justify the introduction of significant restrictions, such as freedom of movement. Such a situation arose, for example, when the state of emergency was introduced in the border area in Poland during the migration crisis in 2021. Such actions proved that the leaders of the Visegrad Group countries instrumentally used migration issues, leading to a high degree of their politicization, which in turn was to justify socially unpopular actions.

It should also be noted that the heads of governments in all V4 countries emphasized cultural and religious differences, making their very existence a source of potential threats. The thesis about the incompatibility of immigrants with social systems and standards in the V4 countries is not so much controversial as it is dangerous. Such an approach to this issue is evidenced by the statements of the leaders of individual countries cited in the text, often diverging not only from the principles of political correctness but also from basic humanitarian values. This way, the leaders of these countries, except for of Slovakia in

the last few years, have created an image of external enemies for democratic systems that strongly influences public opinion. This is evidenced by the fact that migration problems are one of the main issues in election campaigns, and anti-immigration groups continue to win the elections.

Definitions of politicization proposed by W.J. Samuels and M. Zürn were fully applicable to the migration issues in the V4 countries. Under the influence of the events related to the migration crisis in 2015, these issues, which until then had not been of interest to politicians, were suddenly included in the political discourse. Importantly, in the case of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, it happened even without an influx of immigrants. However, even then they were presented in a negative way that reinforced stereotypical divisions and prejudices. At the same time, the ruling parties in the V4 countries used the uncontrolled influx of immigrants to the EU as a pretext to strengthen their nationalist narrative and their political position.

Immigrants as external enemies were convenient because they could not in any way related to such formulated arguments. Leading politicians in the V4 countries did not refer to any data or factual arguments. Their views on migrants were purely speculative. One of the approaches to the migration policy proposed by E. Meyers, formulated based on cultural differences, is certainly applicable in the case of the V4 countries. As it shown in the quoted statements, the leaders of these countries refer mainly to cultural, religious, and different values. Interestingly, they ignored economic issues. This is another argument that proves that their goal was not to discuss the data in a matter-of-factly, but to appeal to citizens' emotions and to unify them in the face of the alleged threat posed by migrants.

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