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The Political Importance of the Visegrad Cooperation[1]

The migration crisis along with the sluggish and ineffective response by the European Union increased the relative political weight of the Visegrad Countries (V4). Resolute and united in their opposition to key elements of EU migration policy, the V4 introduced the Visegrad brand at European level. One should not overvalue the importance of the V4 cooperation, but it reaches well beyond diplomatic declarations, protocol events and subsidiary projects. The political collaboration of the V4 transformed the Visegrad countries from policy takers to policy makers: their joint actions can now shape EU policies substantially.

TOGETHER, WHEN IN LINE WITH THE NATIONAL INTERESTS

When the modern Visegrad cooperation was launched in 1991, the leaders of the involved states, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, set out five basic objectives (Visegrad Group, 1991):

- The restitution of state independence, democracy and freedom;

- The elimination of all aspects of the totalitarian system;

- The construction of parliamentary democracy and the government of laws, respecting human rights and freedoms;

- The creation of market economy;

- Involvement in the European political, economic, security, and legislative systems.

Except for the last one (i.e. "European involvement"), the above objectives emerged from the economic and political goals of the regime change. Such objectives, in principle, could have been attained without institutionalized regional cooperation. In consequence, the European/Euro-Atlantic integration was considered as the cooperation's most substantial objective and it was also declared to be a key priority in the respective foreign policy strategies of the participating governments. Not surprisingly, harmonizing "their activities to shape cooperation and close contacts with European institutions" took the first place in the Visegrad declaration among the steps stipulated to be taken to realize the basic objectives of the cooperation. The other seven steps included the aiming at free trade agreements in the economy; the supporting of the development of lower level and non-governmental relations; the synchronized development of the participants' infrastructure networks; and the extension of their cooperation to other areas (culture, ecology, and minority protection).

From the very beginning, commitment to the Visegrad cooperation has been expressed in forms of high-level political declarations and meetings, coordination at various levels

of government, regular exchanges of information, joint professional programmes, such as research and other projects. Formal and informal proposals were put forward to set up joint institutions, but for long, nothing followed the establishment of the International Visegrad Fund, which finances cultural and academic cooperation.[2] In 2016, however, it was decided that a V4 battle group would be launched and equipped (Visegrad Group, 2016). Plans to create Television Visegrad were revealed and in 2018 public televisions started to air a news programme built on their cooperation (V4TV, 2018; 444.hu, 2018). The same year intentions to set up a regional development bank were declared and some discussions already took place.[3] Joint political actions, on the other hand, were, from the very beginning, greatly limited. As expressed in the Visegrad Declaration, the harmonization of V4 activities aimed at their European integration was pursued "in accordance with the interest of the particular countries". And the (national) interests of the Visegrad states more often led to rivalry than to cooperation.

RIVALRY AND SHARED OBJECTIVES

Accession to the European systems symbolized a "return to Europe" for the Visegrad states. Some scholars (Whitehead, 1996: 19; Bozóki 2004 quoted by Giusti, 2007: 9) viewed EU membership as a symbol and a guarantee for the irreversibility of post-communist changes. Such understandings originate from the accession requirements since successful applicants are required to establish a democratic political system that honours minority rights, creates a functioning market economy that can stand international competition, adopts the European community law, and demonstrates the ability to fulfil the duties of membership.[4] In most cases, applicants adopted a new constitution or extensive constitutional amendments; provided legal and institutional guarantees for the division of power, for the rule of human and minority rights, for equal rights, for free and fair elections; privatized major chunks of earlier public and state owned assets; guaranteed the protection of private property; liberalized the prices, the wages, the trading and the establishment of enterprises; founded financial market institutions and rules; opened their domestic markets; made their currency convertible; reduced government subsidies; and joined several international and European organizations.[5] Those reforms were introduced by the EU candidates with different speed and outcome, therefore accession negotiations with the applicants did not begin at the same time. The European Commission produced annual progress reports on the preparedness of the individual applicant country. The more prepared applicants like the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland belonged to the "Luxemburg group";[6] they were invited to start the negotiations in 1998. Those lagging behind, including Slovakia, a country troubled with state and nation building, constituted the "Helsinki group".[7] They were invited to open the first chapters of negotiations in 2000. The European Commission conducted the negotiations with the candidate countries bilaterally. Due to the uncertainty of the accession date and to the probability of enlargement in more rounds,

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[2] Information about the Fund is available at its webpage (International Visegrad Fund, 2018).

[3] Among others, a Hungarian economic site called Portfolio (2018) reported on those intentions.

[4] The conditions of accession (European Council, 1993b) were accepted by the leaders of the EU at the Copenhagen Council (1993a). NATO membership is also conditioned to the territorial integrity of the prospective member.

[5] For an overview, see e.g. Wolchik – Leftwich Curry (2004)

[6] See point 27 of the communication published on the European Council's relevant decision (European Council, 1997).

[7] See point 10 of the communication published on the European Council's relevant decision (European Council, 1999).

the negotiating countries were eager to close the chapters as quickly as possible. Thus, instead of coordinating their position and negotiation strategy, they sought to maximize their access to EU funds and pursued individual exemptions ("derogations") to meet their particular interests.

Poland, after its successful economic recovery from the transformation recession, believed to join in the first possible round. This hope was built on the substantive size of the country, which made its markets more attractive to investors and increased its political leverage. Nevertheless, the high regional disparities, the badly structured agriculture, the overly subsidized heavy industry and the relatively underdeveloped infrastructure were considerable challenges to tackle (European Commission 2000c). The Czech governments tended to consider their country as the forerunner of the region. They were right to point out their very central location, the advanced industrial traditions, the preserved fiscal balance, and the gradual reforms that held back the increase of social inequalities and contributed to a higher level of social cohesion. On the other hand, the Czech Republic was lagging behind both Poland and Hungary in the area of privatization and public sector reforms (European Commission, 2000a). The Hungarian leadership also emphasized the leading regional position of their country. Governmental stability, rapid economic restructuring, extensive privatization, and the amount of the received FDI (then exceeding the total amount of that of the other Visegrad countries) supported such views, but the considerable state debt and the almost continuous lack of financial balance were major weaknesses (European Commission, 2000b). Slovakia was initially lagging behind the other Visegrad states in several dimensions of the transformation (European Commission, 2000d). In addition, the nationalist and authoritarian turn under Mečiar left Slovakia out of the first round of NATO expansion to the East, and allowed the country to start the EU accession negotiations only after the change of government in 1998. Despite such differences, the Visegrad countries joined the Europan Union all at once, on May 1, 2004. Obviously the EU's decision on the *big bang*[8] was politically driven. Despite the head start of the other Visegrad countries, Slovakia was the first – and to date remained the only – to join the Eurozone and introduce Euro to replace its national currency.[9]

OBSTACLES TO ENHANCED POLITICAL COOPERATION

By obtaining NATO and EU membership, the V4 countries achieved their most fundamental jointly shared objective. Although the Visegrad frame remained in place after EU accession, and the heads of the V4 governments came together for mini-summits before the European Council meetings (Grúber – Törő, 2010), the coordination of EU policies remained limited, and the Visegrad countries continued to act as competitors in several areas including access to EU funds and the promotion of foreign investments. Except for efforts to join the Schengen area and for issues where the Eastern governments felt being treated as secondary members, the political cooperation of the V4 countries was restricted to general declarations and diplomatic courtesy. Enhanced political collaboration was not only prevented by economic competition; other political factors and diverging interests also explained the narrow scope of joint platforms and actions.

In Poland, the Tusk government pursued policies which aimed at turning the country into a member state of weight on the European level. The size of Poland, both in terms of area and population, exceeds the aggregated size of the other Visegrad countries. Tusk

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[8] The formal decision was made at the Copenhagen European Council on December of 2002 (European Council, 2002).

[9] Basic information on the Eurozone: European Union (2017)

and the senior governing Civic Platform (PO) party attributed far less importance to regional cooperation than to the revival of the so-called Weimar Triangle of Berlin, Paris and Warsaw[10] and to the turning of the Polish-German relationship into a strategic alliance, particularly after it had suffered a severe deterioration during the previous term dominated by the Kaczynski twin brothers and their Law and Justice (PiS) party.[11]

The Czech governments of the time were also more open to Western Europe, but their foreign policy activities were confined by their struggles with domestic hardship. Topolánek found it rather difficult to form his government, but it was even harder to keep the heterogeneous coalition together. The early failure, then the provisional nature of both the Fischer and the Rusnok governments, followed by an unexpected and scandalous departure of prime minister Nečas all demonstrated the weakness of the Czech executive.[12] On top of that, from 2008 onwards the Czech governments were heavily burdened by crisis management.[13] While the Polish economy did not fall into recession,[14] the Czech economy was hit severely by the international financial crisis. The Czech government needed to devote much of its energy and resources to economic crisis management, which reduced further its ambitions to promote deeper cooperation among the Visegrad states.

Between 2006 and 2010 nor could the Slovak government become the engine of the V4 political cooperation as its foreign policy leeway was considerably narrowed by the composition of the coalition. The invitation of Mečiar's Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and the extremist Slovak National Party (SNS) into the government was not in line with Western democratic values. This was the opinion of the Party of European Socialists which suspended the membership of the senior governing Smer (Direction) party for the period of 2006 and 2009.[15]

The Hungarian prime minister of 2006 also became a lame duck in international politics, as his credibility was undermined by the leaking of his campaign lies and the way he and his government responded to the subsequent disturbances, and also by supporting the Russian South Stream project over the EU-sponsored Nabucco pipeline. The economic situation of the country was also very demanding: since becoming an EU member, Hungary was subject to the excessive deficit procedure for the higher than allowed budget deficit and the regular government failures to accomplish the presented convergence programmes. Not surprisingly, when hit by the international financial crisis, Hungary was the first country to apply for a bailout to prevent insolvency. Following the departure of the prime minister[16] and an interim year of crisis management, the Fidesz-led government, elected in 2010, gave a successful EU Presidency in 2011, yet it got isolated on both the European and the Visegrad levels since it was portrayed as the "black sheep"[17] of the EU for its unorthodox economic policy and the drastic changes it introduced to public law. The isolation of the Hungarian government was broken over the issue of EU sanctions against Russia when it took the same position as the Slovak government. Although the two governments had major disagreement over Hungary's citizenship law,[18]

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[10] For its importance, see e.g. EurActiv (2014).

[11] A summary of their foreign policy was written by Bobiński (2007) and published by the Polish Institute of Public Affairs.

[12] For the terms of the prime ministers, see Drahokoupil (2017).

[13] For the effects of the crisis on the Czech Republic: Tvrdoň (2010).

[14] In a nutshell, see IBTimes (2012).

[15] The Slovak Spectator (2006) discussed the decision and its consequences in length.

[16] On the circumstances of the prime minister's fall, see Origo (2009).

[17] The Economist (2013) also used this expression along with Nouvelle Europe (2012).

[18] On the Slovak reaction: Index (2010).

both of them believed that imposing economic sanctions on Russia were not the right tool to solve a conflict of political nature (Mandiner, 2014).

POLITICAL UNITY ON THE MIGRATION ISSUE

Year 2015 resulted in an unexpected breakthrough in the cooperation of the Visegrad countries. The European migration crisis and the Polish change in government created favourable conditions for an enhanced political collaboration of the V4. On the one hand, the Visegrad countries were of the same opinion on the wave of irregular migration. On the other hand, the new PiS-led Polish government viewed regional cooperation and unity much more important than its predecessor.[19] As a result, the Visegrad group gained more political weight than before and became capable of shaping EU policies.

When the Council of the EU adopted the relocation quota decision (2015/1601), three of the four Visegrad countries voted against the proposition, while Poland voted in favour.[20] The countries against referred to an earlier European Council position which envisaged consensus behind the prospective quota decision by the Council of the EU. They opposed the quotas for their mandatory nature too, as they saw it in conflict with the sovereignty and safety of their countries. They also warned that it would be impossible to implement the quotas, since most of the asylum seekers did not wait for the decision on their claim, but leave the country of registration, and head towards the destination country of their dream.[21]

The Polish government was of the same opinion and agreed to the joint position of the Visegrad countries ahead of the Council meeting, yet its representative came to vote for the relocation proposal at the Council vote. According to the official explanation, Poland – seeing the comfortable majority in favour of the proposition – remained constructive to preserve its influence over the EU's asylum policy (Kobierecka et al., 2017: 176). However, one should not fail to recall that Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council, who openly supported the Commission's relocation proposal, was the former president and prime minister of the PO party. Although not documented, presumably, this also influenced the position of the PO-led Polish government.

After the change of government, Beata Szydło, the prime minister of the PiS party first declared to fulfil Poland's international commitments and assured the EU of implementing the 2015/1601 Council resolution. Later, however, following the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, she referred to the security and sovereignty of her country, and announced to withdraw the Polish support of relocation[22] to guarantee that Poland would decide freely on who could enter its territory (Kobierecka et al., 2017: 183-184). Moreover, the Szydło government submitted a draft resolution to the Polish parliament to proclaim that mandatory quotas violated the principle of subsidiarity, a corner stone of EU politics. Interestingly, every parliamentary group supported the resolution. Thus, the Civic Platform gave up supporting the relocation quota, and adhered to the values of the Polish population (Kobierecka et al., 2017: 185).

Public security and security policy concerns were expressed by both the Szydło and the Hungarian governments. Nevertheless, Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán cited the security risks of economic migration before the major wave of irregular migrants could have reached Europe: after the terrorist attack against the Charlie Hebdo editorial

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[19] All this as part of a foreign policy correction: Newsweek (2015).
[20] On the decision and its precedents see the summary published on the homepage of the European Parliament (2015).
[21] For the arguments, see Reuters (2017)
[22] On the changed position, see Daily Mail (2015)

office in January 2015, Orbán was the first European leader to make statements of the kind for which he received very strong criticism.[23] A few months later, the Hungarian government conducted an intense anti-immigration campaign and introduced legal measures to protect the borders more effectively and reduce the pull factors as much as possible.

The immigration problem in Hungary was originally discussed in economic and cultural terms but then it acquired security dimensions (terrorism, public security and public sanitation), and by the end irregular mass immigration was presented as a threat to the European civilization (Gallai et al., 2017: 144-145). In contrast with the anti-immigration and anti-Muslim extremists of Western Europe, the Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary) party, the radical right-wing opposition of the government, mostly attacked the Roma and the Jewish communities with racist comments (Bíró Nagy – Róna, 2011: 254-255). The party president even made pro-Arab and pro-Islamic statements,[24] which – despite the changing rhetoric – did not facilitate for Jobbik to give consistent and credible responses to the harsh anti-immigration policies of the government. And as the other opposition parties only expressed humanitarian arguments, while waiting for EU policies, the governing Fidesz party was in the position to control the agenda and benefit from the politics of the migration crisis (Gallai, 2017: 145-146).

In Slovakia, the issue of irregular mass migration was taken to the political agenda when the parties started their long campaign ahead of the 2016 parliamentary elections. In the campaign the migration crisis was not merely seen as an EU affair but it was presented as a major (national) security issue. The most significant parliamentary parties shared the same opinion on the EU's mandatory resettlement proposition as the governing Smer party and its prime minister Robert Fico: they all emphasized national sovereignty and opposed to any mandatory scheme of resettlement and neither the election, nor the declining number of asylum seekers submitting their claim in the European Union made any change to that situation (Balečekova–Olejarova, 2017: 221).

In the Czech Republic some of the smaller old parties and a few newly established political parties established harsh anti-immigration platforms in 2015. They tended to associate mass immigration and the Islam with the risk of terrorism. As opposed to them, the large parties continued to focus on economic issues even at the worst time of the migration crisis. From their point of view this was rational and completely understandable, since the predominant cleavage of the Czech party system has traditionally been the economic divide (Bértoa, 2014: 20). Nevertheless, some politicians and local branches of the major parties were concerned about host facilities in their own settlements and used similar rhetoric to those of the smaller anti-immigration parties. Therefore, both migration and the associated risks remained present in the political discourse and often surfaced in the election campaign of 2016, sometimes in form of overly heated discussions (Bečka et al., 2017: 54–58). The presence of characteristic anti-immigration parties and president Zeman echoing similar voices also led some members of the government to take a more marked stance on the migration issue (Bečka et al., 2017: 56).

Despite its more modest tone on migration, the Czech government – serving the V4 presidency from the summer of 2015 – played an active and considerable role in establishing the political unity of the Visegrad states. During its presidency, the Czech government initiated and conducted V4 reconciliations before every EU council meeting addressing foreign, domestic, and judicial affairs (Bečka et al., 2017: 59). The primary

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[23] For example: Boell (2015), Craigwilly (2015), EUObserver (2015a).
[24] See MoroccoWorldnews (2013), Jobbik.com, (2010).

objective of the V4 meetings was to deliver unified positions and develop the supporting argumentations. In some areas, such as the relationship with Russia and the future of the European Union, the Visegrad countries have rather divergent views. However, in the migration issue, they were able to represent a unified position for the most part and demonstrated a high level unison in criticizing and rejecting several crucial elements of the EU asylum policy.

Just like most of the other member states, the Visegrad countries did not fulfil their mandatory quotas stipulated in the Council's relocation decision (on the reception of asylum seekers from Italy and Greece). During the two years of the relocation mechanism, 12 and 16 were taken by the Czech Republic and Slovakia, respectively, while Hungary and Poland took none of such asylum seekers. (Although the other EU member states carried out more, the number of total implemented relocations barely surpassed one fourth of the originally planned 120 thousand.)[25] Slovakia and Hungary filed two separate cases in the Court of Justice of the European Union to contest the relocation decision of the Council, but their claims were rejected.[26] Right before the court decision, the European Commission launched an infringement procedure against the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. Since this action met the disagreement of the affected Visegrad governments, the Court of Justice had the final word in this matter as well.[27]

The V4 governments were unitedly against the European Commission's quota proposal on the resettlement of refugees under international protection, and also opposed to the mandatory nature of an automatic redistribution mechanism that would not place a ceiling on the takeovers (EUObserver, 2015b; HungarianSpectrum, 2017). The Visegrad countries held that member state sovereignty only allowed voluntary solutions, and they responded to the last scheme of such nature by a zero offer from each of the four countries.[28] What they wanted to see instead was "flexible solidarity", conveyed through various means and instruments.[29] They advocated that the all-European solution should be based on the effective control of the Schengen borders, joint actions carried out in partnership with the sending and the transit countries, and reception centres established and operating outside the territory of the European Union. The Visegrad states also supported joint actions to provide financial help to the source and the transit countries in order to alleviate their situation and terminate the causes of fleeing by improving the efficiency of international cooperation and development, registering and supporting people seeking international protection, establishing reception centres for them as close to their homeland as possible, while controlling the EU borders effectively, taking firm actions against those participating in trafficking and organized crime, operating effective deportation procedures of denied asylum applicants, and making readmission agreements with the sending countries.[30]

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[25] Data per each country is available at the EASO (2018) homepage.
[26] Summary on the decision of the Court of Justice (2017).
[27] For the news and the court decision, see Hirado.hu (2017) and ECRE (2018).
[28] The communication of the European Commission (2017) talks about this scheme and the steps of the proposed legislation.
[29] For details, see Visegrad Insight (2016).
[30] For unified concepts, see Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrad Group (2015); Visegrad Group (2015a).

EU CRITICISM AND V4 ASSISTANCE

The larger and traditionally more influential governments in the EU were astonished to experience the V4's joint and persistent opposition to the quota proposals of the European Commission. Up to the migration crisis, the Eastern member states had generally less influence on EU decision making amidst the asymmetric power relations within Europe. Moreover, the divergent national interests used to prevent the evolution of such political unity and determination among the Visegrad states. The migration issue and the political responses have broken the usual pattern and the fierce opposition by the V4 countries to the quota propositions introduced the Visegrad brand into EU decision making (Bečka et al., 2017: 71). On the other hand, their opposition to the proposed joint policies prompted very strong criticism on the part of those forming and supporting the majority view within the EU. The criticism articulated by EU institutions and several Western governments emphasized the breach of shared European values, the renouncement of the principle of solidarity, and the failure to meet EU obligations and implement joint decisions (Bečka et al., 2017: 71). Many state officials, including the French president,[31] stressed that EU membership was not only about rights as the member states also had obligations. Some prime ministers and other members of Western governments went further and threatened the Visegrad states to make the implementation of the common European asylum policy a condition for the access to EU structural funds.[32]

The Visegrad countries protested against the "unacceptable financial pressure" and the "extortion",[33] and referred to the notion and the various forms of flexible solidarity. They claimed that the rejection of individual components of the common EU policy did not constitute a lack of solidarity. To demonstrate their constructive opposition, they tried to fulfil their obligations in other areas of crisis management and assistance. In the autumn of 2005, Czech, Slovak, and Polish border guards were deployed to Hungary to help their Hungarian counterparts in protecting the external Schengen borders. The V4 countries also provided joint assistance to Slovenia in fulfilling similar responsibilities. The Visegrad states sent a relatively large number of officers and policemen to the EASO and FRONTEX for border protection enhancement, and raised the amount of their financial contribution to the EU emergency fund for Africa (Visegrad Group, 2015b). Except for Slovakia, they also sent officers to the Coastguard Rapid Border Intervention Teams and made additional contributions.[34] At the peak of the European migration crisis, on a bilateral basis they offered help to Bulgaria, Macedonia, and Greece as well, but those countries turned down the initiative. The Czech Republic expressed its voluntary commitment to participate in the relocation programme, and although it did not fulfil its share completely, the country took over several dozens of refugees. The country also participated in the humanitarian inclusion programme and the voluntary offers of the EU–Turkey agreement, receiving refugees in that framework as well. Most of the Visegrad countries increased their support given under the international development cooperation. Hungary decreased its financial contribution, but tried to help countries and the population in the crisis zones with targeted assistance provided on a bilateral basis in a framework programme.[35]

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[31] For his views, see Nič (2016).
[32] Members of the Finnish, Italian and Austrian governments of the time made similar declarations (EurActiv, 2017; The Guardian, 2017; DW, 2016).
[33] News about the reaction: Ekathimerini (2017).
[34] As indicated by the data of the European Commission (2017a: 17; 21).
[35] The programme is called "Hungary helps". Details at its homepage, AboutHungary (2018).

V4 PARTIES AND THE PUBLIC AGAINST THE EU ASYLUM POLICY

The critical attitude of the V4 governments towards the EU asylum policy and the conflicts they undertook in the area of irregular migration did not undermine their domestic popularity. On the contrary, the popularity of PiS, the Polish governing party increased above the level at which it won the parliamentary elections of 2015.[36] The parties that favoured EU migration policy lost ground at the election, and the ones that entered parliament for the first time, even if originally more permissive, took a stricter position due to the terrorist attack in Brussels and to the mandatory quota proposal (Kobierecka et al., 2017: 181–183). In Hungary, Fidesz, the party that won the 2010 and 2014 elections, recovered from a momentary loss of popularity thank to its marked anti-immigration policy, and has preserved its lead in the polls ever since,[37] and obtained yet another two-third majority in parliament in the 2018 election.

Smer, the predominant party of Slovakia, lost many of its former voters by the 2016 election, but remained the largest party, and continued to be in power, albeit in a coalition. As it was not the reason of Smer's loss of popularity, the election did not change the government's rigid migration policy, which enjoyed such a broad public support that nearly all the other relevant parties (except for Most and Siet') perceived irregular mass immigration as a threat to security. In addition, several parties that were either new in the parliament or able to gain additional seats compared to the previous election, opted to stand expressly against mass immigration. Thus, Smer rather lost popularity as a result of unsatisfactory services and employee discontent in education and health care.[38] However, the party got into even more serious trouble after the explosion of a political crisis caused by the murder of an investigative journalist (and his bride), inquiring into the high political connections of the Italian mafia. The assassination of the journalist was followed by mass mobilization and intra-coalition conflicts forcing prime minister Fico to step down to prevent the breakup of the government coalition.[39]

Of the large parties of the Czech Republic, the most critical voice against the EU' migration policy was that of the party called Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) and its leader, Andrej Babiš.[40] In contrast with the views of the Social Democratic prime minister and foreign minister of the previous coalition government, finance minister and deputy prime minister Babiš was much less welcome. In fact, his stance was much closer to that of the president of the republic, Miloš Zeman, who spoke against both the Islam and mass immigration openly and regularly.[41] Although the ČSSD-led government repeatedly distanced itself from the president's views,[42] yet, Zeman could start his second term of office, after winning the presidential elections in January 2018. The election of the lower house of parliament in 2017 was won by ANO, and an openly anti-Islam party, Okamura's Freedom and Direct Democracy obtained 11%. The party of Babiš, with the external support of the Communist Party, formed a minority government in coalition with the Social Democrats.

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[36] Results of the last poll: TheNews.pl (2018).

[37] For party preference trends, see Közvéleménykutatók.hu (2018).

[38] Articles on the same topic: Euractiv (2016) and Reuters (2016a).

[39] On the case and the coalition crisis, see for example Origo (2018) and Dehir (2018).

[40] Babiš demanded a stop to migration, did not think there was place in Europe for people arriving from Syria and the Czech Republic should follow the same trend of resistance as Hungary and Slovakia (Reuters, 2016b).

[41] See The Guardian's (2016) interview with him or these articles: France24 (2018) and Financial Times (2016).

[42] This happened after the president participated in an anti-immigration political demonstration (Bloomberg, 2015), and after his Christmas message (DW, 2015).

As described above, in Poland and in Hungary the migration crisis has given additional popularity to parties with strong anti-immigration appeal, while it undermined the support for those representing the humanitarian view, and compelled some of them to self-correction. Anti-immigration parties in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia have generally advanced also, therefore the migration crisis contributed to the realignment of the Visegrad party systems: parties rejecting mass immigration and mandatory quotas as a key elements of EU policy responses were mostly able to increase their popularity,[43] while those taking the opposite views tended to lose from their support. One can easily explain the reasons after examining survey results of public attitude towards migration.

In January 2016, the Czech Sociology Institution reported the results of a national survey with the finding that 61% of the respondents were of the opinion that refugees – even if coming from war zones – should not be accepted. Another survey at the end of 2016 measured 64% in the same category. A third survey conducted in February 2017 indicated that about every third voter (31%) perceived migration as a serious threat (Bečka et al., 2017: 52). In Slovakia, based on a 2016 survey, 63% of the respondents saw a security threat in immigration from third countries, and 70% opposed the resettlement based on mandatory quotas. Another Slovak survey found that 70% of the respondents feared the immigrants (Balečekova – Olejarova, 2017: 212–213).

In Hungary, the Migration Research Institute and Századvég jointly carried out a public opinion poll, in which 90% of the respondents objected to irregular migration, 71% rejected the EU's proposition of relocation based on mandatory quotas, and 78% saw a direct relation between the wave of migration and the increased number of terrorist acts. 83% thought that mass immigration would contribute to the spread of radical Islam, 90% thought that it would lead to extremist anti-Islam groups gaining more strength, and 70% believed that it would result in the deterioration of public security (Gallai et al., 2017: 115–117).

In a Polish survey, 65% of the respondents approach to the Arabs negatively, and 56% considered them dangerous to Poland's security (Kobierecka et al., 2017: 175). Based on the results of Eurobarometer surveys and Századvég's Project28 survey,[44] we can establish that anti-immigration sentiment tend to be significantly higher in the Eastern part of the EU, and the same stands to fear from the consequences and discontent with the EU's management of the migration crisis. Such diversion naturally relates to the Eastern societies' higher level ethnic homogeneity than in the Western states, the isolation of societies in the communist era, and the fear from losing sovereignty, regained not so long ago, with the change of the regime.

THE POLITICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE VISEGRAD COOPERATION

The above presented survey results give a clear explanation to the reason for the strength of fellowship among the Visegrad governments concerning the fundamental values and policies related to migration. A strong political cooperation and pursuing joint actions along with shared interests can greatly increase the influence of the V4 block in the EU, and their unity can reduce the asymmetry between the Western (or "old") and the Eastern (or "new") member states. In the Council, the aggregated votes of the four Visegrad countries (58) is equal in weight to the formal weight of votes of Germany and France

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[43] The two major exceptions were SMER and Jobbik, but as we could see, the former lost support for other reasons, while the latter suffered heavy losses as the governing Fidesz proactively gained control over the issue of migration and left no room for alternative anti-immigration approaches.
[44] The latter is available at Project28's (2018) homepage, the former at the Eurobarometer's homepage (European Commission, 2018).

(also 58), the two members considered to be the engines of integration. This indicates a good reason for the German-French axis, with a decisive influence on EU policies and similar ambitions for the future, having a kick against the Eastern member states, once their stable backyard, becoming united and forming a political opposition to their ideas.[45]

In the political culture of the European Union, consensus is still considered a basic value in formulating and shaping EU public policy. Thus, seeking an agreement and aiming at compromising are expected in EU decision making even in areas where decisions can be adopted by (qualified) majority. The Eastern (newer) member states of less informal influence, handled as second-class members upon their accession, were particularly expected to facilitate decision making by pliable attitude. Member states obstructing the reach of a consensus take serious political risks with their objection. The context of EU policy making has been shaped by and built upon the necessity of multi-governmental cooperation. Therefore, isolation in the EU means loss of influence, since no country can have a substantive impact on decisions without building coalitions and alliances. By forming a cohesive political block, the Visegrad countries can reduce the risks of objection, strengthen the legitimacy of their position, increase their negotiating power, and present alternative propositions against the suggestion of others.

During the PO government, the Weimar Triangle set Poland out of the Visegrad block; this is symbolized by Jerzy Buzek being the president of the European Parliament, and Donald Tusk the president of the European Council. A closer cooperation between the Fidesz and the PiS governments and the emergence of the Visegrad anti-immigration platform can have more substantial consequences than what would naturally come from the V4's relatively low level of institutionalized cooperation. In the rule of law procedure, the Polish–Hungarian collaboration can save the two governments from the declaration of a systematic infringement. In the issue of the future of the EU, three Visegrad governments[46] oppose the excessive deepening of integration, and would leave more competences to the national governments and parliaments. Regarding migration, the Visegrad countries are unified in criticizing the multicultural ideology, in rejecting uncontrolled and mass immigration, and in dismissing the mandatory resettlement quotas. Today we can find governments taking a similar position in Austria and Denmark, and partly in Italy.[47] Such views gain extra weight by Austria providing the EU presidency.[48] In addition, similar attitudes are represented by many West European parties that are expected to increase their share of votes in the 2019 election of the European Parliament, which can lead to a new political situations in EU decision making.[49] At this time, one shall not exclude the possibility of a blocking minority achieved by such parties in the Parliament. In the Council the joint support of Italy, Austria, the V4

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[45] And they are not passive bystanders: in 2009, well before the migration crisis, President Sarkozy objected to the institutionalization of V4 reconciliations before the Council meetings, although the same is natural between German and French leaders (EUObserver, 2009). From this perspective President Macron's selective negotiations in the region can be interpreted as a similar attempt to divide (Intellinews, 2017); nevertheless, Slavkov can hardly become an alternative to the Visegrad cooperation for several reasons, see OSW (2015).

[46] The exception is Slovakia, the only Visegrad member of the eurozone.

[47] Such developments are also reflected in the public opinion: the 88th Standard Eurobarometer indicated that most of the Italians considered immigration the top issue of the EU, and the main concern at national level after unemployment. In the same survey, the Austrians placed the immigration to the top in both national and EU level (European Commission, 2017: 7–11).

[48] The Austrian Chancellor reaffirmed the similarities after conferring with the Hungarian prime minister (Politico, 2018).

[49] For an overview of the expectations, see Votewatch (2018).

countries, Romania, and Bulgaria would be sufficient to reach a blocking minority.[50] The views of those governments on the issue of irregular migration are close enough to take joint actions on EU level. Working together, those countries could impede *any* EU decisions. Even if such coalitions are temporary, formed along issues and policies falling into the interests of the respective governments, the alternative views and the ground for a blocking minority on migration can set an important political precedent. Therefore, the V4 cooperation in the issue of migration goes way beyond asylum applications and resettlement quotas, and has very substantial and long-reaching political implications.

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[50] See the voting calculator (European Council, 2018).

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