

<http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/8088-847-0.06>

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## **Conclusions**

The Visegrad countries share some marked similarities which differentiate them from most West European states. In the Communist era these countries were closed to large-scale immigration and the possibility of emigrating to the West was also limited and mostly illegal. The freedom of movement was neither codified, nor respected. Therefore, compared to most West European societies, the countries in this region had a rather limited experience with immigration and each of them demonstrated a relatively high level of both ethnic and cultural homogeneity.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain the laws and the institutions dealing with migration were adjusted to the new, democratic environment. Travelling within, from and to the former Communist block became easier and legal migration started to intensify. The nature of emigration changed: the earlier importance of political motivations faded away, whereas economic considerations turned to be the main and often the only inspiration for leaving the homeland. The prospect of gaining more income and better living conditions was particularly attractive for the Polish citizens (who had already demonstrated a considerably higher level of mobility in the 1980s than their Hungarian and Czecho-Slovak fellows).

The low living standards as well as the cultural (mostly linguistic) difficulties did not attract a high number of immigrants to these countries. The only exceptions to be noticed here were the waves generated by the Balkan wars in the 1990s and the mostly ethnic Hungarians moving from the neighbouring countries to their mother country. The former group partly sought (and found) refuge in Western Europe, partly returned home after the war. The latter group in the late 1980s was mostly composed of politically excluded and ousted ethnic Hungarians escaping from Romania, while in the 1990s the influx was primarily driven by economic motivations. Since the overwhelming majority of economically motivated immigrants arriving to Hungary were also ethnic Hungarians, their social integration was a relatively smooth process, largely facilitated by the lack of linguistic and cultural barriers.

At the time or shortly after the regime change, all Visegrad countries signed the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol. New legal terms and more precise definitions were introduced and institutions dealing with repatriation, immigration and asylum-seeking were established and designated. In 2004 the Visegrad countries joined the European Union and in 2007 they

became members of the Schengen area with the implication of giving up internal border control and – in case of three out of four countries – imposing tighter control over the external Schengen borders. The membership in the EU required the transposition of the corresponding EU directives; at the same time, it has also improved the attractiveness of the Visegrad region and the originally insignificant percentage of voluntary legal immigrants increased. Nevertheless, as the living standards and the social benefits in the V4 countries were among the lowest in the EU, it is not surprising that the number of immigrants fell far behind the figure of those who left the region. Driven mostly by economic motivations, migration from the Visegrad countries increased considerably after EU accession since it facilitated job taking in the old member states. The increasing number of legal immigrants, on the other hand, offered the opportunity for the V4 countries to gain direct experience about what it means to be a transit and a destination country. The overwhelming majority of foreign-born inhabitants were of European origin and their integration proved to be generally unproblematic. The number of third country communities (Muslims population included) remained very small in the V4 countries; therefore the integration of such immigrants was not among the main issues to be dealt with regards to migration. Although the V4 governments adopted respective strategic documents and formulated key policies, some shortcomings – despite the definite progress in this area – continued to provide reasons for critical assessments.

After the turn of the century, the number of asylum seekers increased in the Visegrad countries as well, but the dramatic increase started only with the escalation of the Iraqi and Syrian crises. Mass immigration to the region reached its climax in 2015. Of the V4 countries, however, only Hungary was hit directly and severely. Lying on the Western Balkan route, Hungary experienced a large-scale influx of irregular migration with more than 400 thousand immigrants arriving at its southern border. Many of them had no valid documents and crossed the borders illegally. Due to the relatively lower living standards as well as to the limited subsidies available for asylum seekers, they perceived Hungary, and the other Visegrad countries, as a transit area. They mostly applied for international protection only when detained by the authorities. Most of them claimed to arrive from the war zones of Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, nevertheless, the bulk of the claims could not be justified; the cases were usually terminated without being processed as the applicants had left for West European countries (most typically for Austria, Germany, Denmark and Sweden). In 2015 in Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia the number of asylum-seekers did not change significantly; whenever the number of illegal immigrants increased, it was either the result of overstaying foreigners from the East (most typically

from Ukraine) or a faction of migrants aiming to reach Northern Europe. It became apparent that most foreigners who would have otherwise been expelled for overstaying or who were detained for illegal border crossing (ab)used the legal opportunities and applied for international protection in an attempt to avoid their return. In the light of those circumstances and due to the changing nature of migration the international legal framework of asylum proved to be obsolete.

At the time of the crisis the V4 governments became the most outspoken opponents of the EU policies on migration. The dispute between Brussels and the V4 countries was partly provoked by the different assessment of the nature of immigration. While the EU institutions and most Western governments persistently talked about refugees and those in need of international protection, the Hungarian government – later also backed by its Visegrad counterparts – described the wave of immigrants as a product of economic migration. The divergent interpretations also led to a dispute regarding the competences as asylum is mostly regulated by international and EU laws, while migration policy continues to fall into national competences. As the Schengen mechanisms could not withstand the pressure of mass immigration and both international and European asylum regulations proved to be an easy prey for abuses, the Visegrad states introduced their national responses. In their national legal systems the Visegrad countries amended the corresponding acts and usually made them stricter from the asylum seekers' point of view. The ultimate objectives were to reduce the pull factors and to prevent the abuse of asylum rules.

The Hungarian government, partly in recognition of security risks presented by irregular migration and partly in fear of the potentially high number of Schengen returns, decided to impose obstacles to stop (or at least to divert) the flow of uncontrolled mass migration and restrict the number of those who could enter the territory of Hungary. The primary means applied by the government to achieve these goals were the installation of physical border barriers, the criminalization of the damaging of the fence and illegal border crossing as well as the establishment of transit zones in which a daily cap on the number of newcomers was introduced. The capacities in the reception centres were at first reduced, then eliminated altogether, while the numbers of personnel deployed at the borders were expanded. The policy of artificial bottlenecks was accompanied by the curtailing of the entitlements of those under international protection. The motion towards sealing the green borders and strengthening the control over border crossing enjoyed the support of the other Visegrad governments, which also enhanced the protection of their external Schengen borders. The concentration of more control capacities at the

external borders was also accompanied by more intensive internal checks. With respect to accommodating the asylum seekers and those under international protection the patterns were somewhat more divided as the Visegrad governments did not share unanimously the restrictive Hungarian policy line.

Although the V4 countries tend to experience increasing labour shortages in some sectors and foreign labour might be needed for their long-term economic development, the governments demonstrated different levels of openness to economic immigration. While they generally accept – in some cases even explicitly encourage – the introduction of foreign-born employees to the labour market, the overall number of immigrant workers in this part of Europe has remained limited. The V4 governments jointly rejected the motion towards presenting the most recent wave of immigration as a possible solution to employment problems. Their position was based on the main sociological characteristics of recent immigrants: compared to earlier flows driven primarily by economic motivation, the educational level of and the knowledge of the language of the host countries possessed by recent immigrants were much lower than in the previous decades.

Another common characteristic of the V4 countries was the markedly lower recognition rate compared to the receiving states of Western Europe. This was partly because of the numerous claims which were not assessed, but the application of the first safe country principle and the rejection of citizenship-based eligibility were also accountable for the differences. The sharp contrast in the recognition rates was similarly influenced by the different attitudes of the respective governments: while the immigration issue was initially approached from the humanitarian perspective in all European states and this has remained the dominant principle in most receiving countries, the governments in the Visegrad region were the frontrunners in changing the discourse and stressing the security dimension of the migration crisis as well as its political implications.

At European level the V4 countries demonstrated a very high level of unity and pushed for more effective border protection and more restrictive immigration policies. The V4 governments wished to see a more proactive EU policy and wanted to send less attractive messages to irregular/illegal migrants. They became the advocates of renewing the Schengen cooperation, establishing hotspots outside the European Union, implementing the repatriation decisions, giving financial, personnel, material assistance to the countries of origin as well as a better targeting of international humanitarian and development aid to those regions where the roots and the causes of the refugee crisis could be addressed. The Visegrad governments repeatedly warned about

the security threats that uncontrolled mass immigration to Europe might present. They argued in favour of preventing the import of ethnic and religious conflicts to the European Union. They cried for an effective border control and refugee registration to ensure the proper filtering of those eligible for international protection and thus fulfil the humanitarian obligations in cases of immigrants fleeing from war-torn areas.

The V4 countries – in line with the preferences of their population – were united in criticizing both multiculturalism and the policy of hosting irregular immigrants. They unanimously rejected the mandatory quotas for the resettling of refugees. The V4 governments expressed their intention to support voluntary schemes only. On the other hand, they showed less unity regarding the EU decision on the compulsory relocation of asylum seekers: while both the Slovak and the Hungarian governments decided to submit a motion to the Court of Justice to challenge the legality of the relocation decision and get it annulled, the Czech and Polish governments did not join this motion. Despite the change in government, the new Polish administration had initially also committed itself to the obligations of its predecessor, but after the terrorist attack in Paris (and later in Brussels) the Sydlo cabinet decided to turn against the relocation decision and refused to implement it. The lack of implementation of this particular decision provoked harsh criticism from both the European Commission and the Western governments and it resulted in a rather negative perception of the Visegrad governments. The stance of the V4 countries on mandatory relocation and resettlement, along with some national policies and the high proportion of rejected asylum claims, were interpreted by the EU institutions and host country governments as a lack of solidarity with those countries which had come under extreme pressure generated by the massive flows of irregular migration. The Visegrad governments rejected such accusations by pointing out the impropriety of the EU policies, and by recalling the assistance they provided to countries located in the conflict zones and on the migration routes. In case of alleged anti-discrimination (deriving from the preference for Christian asylum seekers), the Slovak government referred to national sovereignty claiming that any state should have the right to decide freely on the conditions of allowing foreigners to enter its territory. This argument was also picked up by the Hungarian and Polish governments, when they defended their position on compulsory relocation and resettlement. In their stance against EU policies, the V4 government could also refer to the preferences of their electorate as the societies in these countries tend to embrace culturally more traditionalist views on immigration.

The recent migration crisis became one of the central issues in Hungary, the most affected Visegrad country, but it was also highly placed on the political agenda of the other V4 countries, where the number of immigrants remained rather low. The overwhelming majority of the V4 population was afraid of newcomers with their very distinct ethnic and religious background. Generally speaking, the more the cultural distance of the immigrants was, the more negative the attitudes became. Such feelings were reinforced by terrorist attacks and crimes committed by migrants and foreign-born citizens in Western Europe which also contributed to the perception of a link between migration and dangers to security. Those assumptions explain why most citizens have opposed immigration from the Middle East and Africa, even though they had not encountered with asylum-seekers. In case of Hungary, the country with by far the largest number of immigrants among the V4 countries, similar reservations could be detected even among those who did have direct experience with immigrants. Another source of fears was of a financial nature: some worried about the possibility of increasing unemployment, many others disagreed with the budgetary implications of free medical services, legal and financial assistance, education and other integration programmes offered to immigrants. The general assessment of EU responses to the migration crisis was rather negative in all V4 countries. Nevertheless, most citizens preferred to see a more active role of the EU in protecting the external borders, although the influence of supranational bodies over national issues was not necessarily welcome. The mandatory quotas, for example, were regarded as the limitation of national sovereignty.

In Hungary the government policies on migration enjoyed broad public support as they resonated well with the citizens' preferences. Moreover, the government actions contributed to a more effective border control: they stopped and diverted the flow of migration and resulted in a major drop in the number of arriving immigrants. These factors offered the governing Fidesz party a good opportunity to stabilize and increase its popularity. The left-wing parties, on the other hand, mostly stuck to the humanist position and could not adjust their platform and rhetoric to the new discourse that had emerged after the terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels. Jobbik, the party of the extreme right, attempting recently to soften its tone, viewed migration very much in line with the policies of the government, but it could not capture the momentum from the Fidesz party. Enjoying the advantages of its governing position and the benefits of strong influence over the political agenda, Fidesz was not merely able to neutralize the opposition, but also attracted some of the former supporters of Jobbik party. The government is likely to continue to face legal and political disputes at EU level, but such conflicts – as they seem to make Fidesz

supporters even more committed and determined – can serve the governing party as a valuable political asset ahead of the 2018 elections.

In Poland the PO's stance on migration was much in line with the EU mainstream, whereas the harder line of the PiS was a perfect match with the values of the majority Polish population. The change in government also meant a shift in Poland's EU and regional relations: with the replacement of the PO by the PiS the conformity with the EU and the emphasis on the Weimar Triangle (of Germany, France and Poland) lost their edge, whereas the tightening of V4 cooperation gained a higher priority. In Slovakia the main parties rejected the mandatory quotas and advocated European and international assistance to the migrant sending and transit countries. The differences among the party platforms on migration were mostly centred on the future of already registered asylum seekers. In the Czech Republic the firm anti-immigration and EU critical positions were occupied by smaller parties, but some mainstream politicians also tried to benefit from the issue. Although the fear of immigrants was widespread among the public, the anti-immigration parties could not benefit enough from the issue to occupy a position that would be politically decisive. While the issue of migration could remain on the political agenda, its domestic impact – being the strongest in Hungary and the faintest in the Czech Republic – does and will vary from country to country.

The migration crisis had a number of important impacts on domestic politics, but the international consequences were even more significant. The regional – and European – importance of the migration issue stems from its main political implication: the crisis brought the Visegrad countries to the same platform, made them capable to (re-)establish closer cooperation and formulate joint policy proposals. The V4 cooperation now serves as a platform facilitating the articulation and the representation of the jointly shared interests of its member states. Since the migration crisis began, the prime ministers of the Visegrad countries hold regular meetings ahead of the European Council summits. The more frequent consultations and the closer cooperation among the ministers and other government bodies have made the V4 platform in the EU louder and stronger than before and offered the possibility of transforming the Visegrad states from policy-takers to policy-makers within the European Union.