History and Political Geography of Central Europe: Explaining the Rise of Euroscepticism and Nativism in Visegrád 4 Countries

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Abstract

The rise of the far right is one of the significant challenges facing European countries; the growing Eurosceptic and nativist attitudes in Central Europe have resulted in transforming regional alliances according to anti-immigration concerns. Despite the fact that the Visegrád 4 group, (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia), was founded in the early 1990s with the aim of detaching itself from the legacy of communism and pushing towards the Western liberal democracy, it has recently become a base to oppose EU and promote nativism and illiberal democracy. Adopting a descriptive-analytical approach, this paper reviews the rise of nativism and Euroscepticism with a historical perspective, through an examination of the political geography of Central Europe. Findings reveal that the influxes of refugees to Europe and increasing xenophobia, along with cultural concerns, specially about Muslims, have been the driving force behind the growth of the far-right parties. Additionally, the geopolitical situation of these countries and the external borders of the European Union have an important role in turning the refugee crisis into a driving factor of Euroscepticism.

1. Introduction

Throughout the recent years, Europe has witnessed a rise in far-right parties, which have become a challenge for the mainstream European politics (McDonnell & Werner, 2019). An important characteristic of these parties is nativism, which is a combination of nationalism and xenophobia (Mudde, 2019). Moreover, most of these parties have some form of opposition toward the EU, as well as substantial skepticism toward its performance, which ranges from trying to exit the EU to reforming its structure. (McDonnell & Werner, 2019, p. 1775). The European far-right parties accuse the Union of dismantling European values and identity, and hold it responsible for the influx of foreign migrants and refugees. Although Euroscepticism has had important international consequences such as Brexit, few regions match Central Europe, where this factor has managed to link, unite and bring countries closer, propelling populist politicians to gain political power through anti-immigrant promises (Cave & Roberts, 2017). This is in stark contrast to a Central Europe that was eager to join Western liberal institutions three decades ago upon the collapse of the Eastern Bloc (Kazharski, 2017).

The Central European region has unique social, political and cultural characteristics. One of the commonalities of the countries of this region is the mutual experience of four decades of Communist rule. This region, according to research (Haghshenas & Bavir, 2011) is referred to as Eastern Europe, which is not an accurate interpretation; this political division is irrelevant today, as it fails to capture the geographical facts of the day and is essentially driven by the separation of Europe into two blocs, East and West during the Cold War era, which is not the case anymore. Eastern Europe and Central Europe, therefore, are now two separate regions. Historically, Central Europe has been the center of a

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rivalry between Germany and Russia, and at times has served as a buffer zone between the two. However, it was first considered as a separate region in terms of international relations during World War I (Kazharski, 2017, p. 5). In addition, as far as identity is concerned, perhaps no other region in Europe has evolved as much as Central Europe in the wake of the collapse of Communism. As a matter of fact, Central Europe in the post-Cold War period based its identity on membership in Western international organizations (Kazharski, 2017, p. 1). For this, in 1991, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary stablished the Visegrád Group, whose primary goal was to try to facilitate the transition from communism to the principles of the Western Liberal system (Visegrad Group, 2017). In a volte-face, Central Europe has now become a pivot based on the growth of populism and nativism fed by illiberal democracy, anti-immigration, authoritarianism and skepticism toward the EU, as well as restrictions on individual freedoms.

This paper applies a descriptive-analytical approach to define the Central Europe region, review its history and political geography, and demonstrate the correlation between migration and the rise of far-right politics in Visegrad 4 countries, specially Hungary and Poland. It discusses the refugee crisis and the anti-immigrant attitude of far-right parties, which have eventually made this regional alliance of four countries a challenge to EU liberal policies. The data used in this study consists of library resources, including review of publications, news articles, official statistics, etc.; no new data are therefore gathered for the analysis presented in this paper.

Although many studies have been conducted on the rise of Euroscepticism and nativism in Europe in recent years, most of the literature focuses on Western European countries. An important

book that deals with Central Europe is authored by Pirro (2015) under the title of *The Populist Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe: Ideology, Impact and Electoral Performance*. In this book, Pirro examines Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia in detail. The research period begins in the mid-2000s, and the main question addressed in this research is: How to explain the ideology of the far-right parties in Central Europe? This study's author believes that despite many historical similarities among the central European countries, these nations are different in terms of far-right attitudes. One of the highlights of this article is the change in the attitude of the Fidesz party in Hungary, which evolved from a center-right party to a party with deep nationalist, anti-immigrant and anti-EU tendencies as a case study of how far right politics shifted the mainstream parties' policies toward the right. The author shows that the underlying reasons behind this phenomenon are more understandable by recognizing issues related to minorities and immigrants residing in each country; however contrary to most of the scholars on far-right politics, such as Mudde (2007, p. 119), Pirro concludes that for these parties, socio-economic factors are as important as sociocultural policies. Research literature reveals that the politics, history and geography of Central Europe have their own problems. When it comes to research on Central European countries, Michael Minkenberg (2002, p. 361), one of the experts in far right in Europe, believes that the study of the far right in Central and Eastern Europe is complex and difficult. He likens research in this area to situations such as shooting at a moving target in a dark, clouded area (Mudde, 2005, p. 247).

The overall study of the rise of nationalism and far-right has been more dedicated to Western Europe. As most of the research conducted from socio-political perspective, has focused on dividing the reasons behind the rise of the far-right parties into demand-side

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and supply-side causes, this paper does not focus on the social bases of supporters or party organization and electoral systems. Instead, it aims to highlight the role of common history and political geography of Central Europe in addition to cultural concerns and anti-immigrant tendencies, which have made the Visegrad 4 transform to Eurosceptic and nativist regional group.

Furthermore, the amount of information about the history and events of Central Europe in other parts of the world and even in Europe and the United States itself is relatively low, while from the media perspective, its developments have not received considerable attention, even though this has been changing in recent years, not least after the 2015 refugee crisis.

The current paper uses both Cultural Backlash theory and Neorealism to explain the rise of anti-migrant attitudes in Central Europe, as the latter clarifies how the migration crisis as a security issue played an important role in order to make it a foreign policy priority against the EU. Furthermore, the Cultural Backlash Theory reveals how cultural factors influence the populist vote in Central Europe. Immigration and specially refugee crises of 2015 also resulted in the rise of Euroscepticism, as they raised questions about the way in which the European nations have the right to keep their cultural identity, traditions and lifestyle, and newcomers, specially the Muslims, are seen as a threat to cultural identity.

2. Concepts

2. 1. Nativism

According to Mudde "nativism" is a combination of nationalism and xenophobia, in which foreigners, such as immigrants, are seen as a threat to the country (2012, p. 2) and therefore subsequent

policies are enforced to maintain the safety of the indigenous people. Based on this definition for nativism, citizenship in a country excludes "the others within the society", whose cultural background is different (Cagatay Aslan, 2012), for example, within a nation, the national priority is to create jobs and housing for indigenous peoples and hence the rejection of multiculturalism and European convergence is a feature of modern European nationalism. This is in contrast to globalism, which calls for reduced power of countries while promoting the role of regional and international organizations (Scotto, Sanders & Reifler, 2017).

2. 2. Populism

Mudde defines populism as an ideology with a relatively thin and insignificant core, in which society is divided into two parts: the pure people, who are normally opposed to a corrupt ruling elite, and demand politics to be placed under the public will. Populism, therefore, rejects both elitism and pluralism (2019). In fact, for populists, pluralism creates a multicultural society that contradicts the homogeneous structure they seek. This ideology is based on the opposition of the people to the ruling power structure. Although populism may also be seen in the left parties, its primary user is the far right. Rydgren (2017, p. 491) also believes that populism is a host ideology that combines with other ideologies such as nationalism.

2. 3. Euroscepticism

Euroscepticism is a political doctrine that advocates disintegration from the European Union and is skeptical toward the EU performance. Opposition to the EU has risen sharply since the bloc expanded eastward in 2004 to add 25 countries to its initial 15

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members. Some see the rapid growth of the integration project as fueling opposition to the EU. At the transnational level, this may lead to leaving the European Union. In general, Euroscepticism can be divided into two categories: soft and hard. While the former seeks the reform of the European Union towards the sovereignty and independence of most countries, the latter wants to leave the European Union completely (as in the case of Brexit).

2. 4. Cultural Backlash Theory

According to the Cultural Backlash Theory, cultural issues, rather than purely economic ones, have become the key to catapulting the far right into the political forefront, and immigration has triggered a backlash among Europeans who feel threatened by the new developments in Europe (Rzayev, 2017). Therefore compared to other theories, such as Realistic Conflict Theory, which is valuable in explaining the economic reasons for the rise of the far right, the Cultural Backlash Theory attempts to clarify the role of refugee crises in the rise of the anti-immigrant tendencies in a society that benefited the far right parties, and helped them to take advantage of fear, xenophobia and national identity concerns to gain political support and enter the executive position in their countries. Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris believe 'the cultural backlash thesis suggests that the surge in votes for populist parties can be explained not as a purely economic phenomenon, but in a large part as a reaction against progressive cultural change' (Inglehart & Norris, 2017, pp. 2-3; Esteban, 2019).

2. 5. Neo-realism Theory

Neorealism or structural realism is a theory of international relations, according to which power is the most important factor in

international relations (Humphreys, 2012). Many considered the cross-border movement of people a consequence of globalization. Migration has not been on the top of the agenda for neorealism, since it was considered to be a part of "low politics". Nevertheless, after 1990 – due to theoretical advancements and the growing volume of the cross-border movement of people – the question became securitized in the West, especially after 2001 (Szalai, Csornai & Garai, 2017), (Hyndman, 2012, p. 246-247), and was considered to be related to state security and sovereignty (Zogata-Kusz, 2012). From their perspective, mass migration primarily means an external process that challenges the control over the state's territory and emphasizes the physical safety of borders (Szalai et al., 2017).

3. The Political Geography of Central Europe

Regions are geographical spaces with a specific significance, which could appear on sub-national or supra-national scales. In the first case, regions appear in a territory smaller than one country, but at the same time may continue beyond the borders. *Silesia* is a good example of this category, part of which is in Poland and part in the Czech Republic. The second category, in contrast, includes several countries, including Scandinavia, the Balkans or Central Europe (Ruzicka, 2003, p. 2).

Central Europe is one of the regions for which there is no single and universally recognized definition. The definition of the concept of Central and Eastern Europe is politically different from its geographical meaning. Due to their affiliation with the Eastern Bloc and the Communist camp, they were considered Eastern European countries with a political (rather than a geographical) connotation.

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Based on such categorization, Czechoslovakia was considered as an Eastern European country due to its being a constituency of the communist bloc, while Austria was a Western European country owing to its presence in the Western bloc, despite the fact that Prague (the capital of Czechoslovakia at that time) is geographically 200 km further west than Vienna (the capital of Austria). Therefore, the identity of Central Europe was then temporarily removed from the field of international politics and somehow slipped into oblivion during the Cold War.

On the other hand, in terms of size and number of countries, there is no single definition of Central Europe: in the broadest sense, Central Europe is the border between Russia and Germany, extending to the area between the Baltic Sea and the Aegean Sea. This region was the site of the historical invasion of the great powers in the west and east, which stretched from the Ottoman Empire to the Soviet Union.

In general, the four countries of Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland can be considered as Central European countries, although in some definitions, Slovenia meets the criteria as well (Cave & Roberts, 2017, p. 3). In certain studies, Central Europe is equivalent to Visegrád 4. (Kazharski, 2017, p. 2; *The Economist*, 2005). In other sources, Central and Eastern European countries are collectively referred to as CEEs (Central and Eastern European Countries).

It should be noted that the reason for placing these countries in the Central European complex includes not only geographical, but also cultural affiliations, common history and shared political and economic characteristics (Cave & Roberts, 2017, p. 3). Central Europe (in its broad sense) has historically been a crossroad for different nations, and cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity can be

seen as an important feature of this region (Jeszenszky, 2016, p. 384). It has also been the birthplace of important writers and poets, and the site of religious reformation, Herzl's Zionism, the Vienna Circle, Freud, Kafka, and Hitler's nationalism (Ruzicka, 2003, p. 6).

Therefore, due to the absence of a single opinion on the exact boundaries of the countries of the Central European region, and to avoid ambiguity, the countries of the Visegrád Group 4 (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia) as one of the most widely used definitions among researchers, are investigated in this research. The Visegrád 4 is chaired by each member for each one-year term on a rotational basis, and these countries carry out various activities to deepen regional cooperation (Nič, 2016, p. 284). Visegrád 4 has a population of 65 million people.

4. History of Central Europe

Familiarization with the history of Central Europe, is an important element in gaining a deeper understanding of the strategic importance of this region because of its unique political geography and special cultural feature. In Central Europe, Christianity spread from the end of the first millennium, agriculture was the main occupation of the people until modern times, and feudalism ruled the region until the nineteenth century (Jeszenszky, 2016, p. 383).

After the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, there was a widespread change in European countries' borders , and from then on, respect of one's nation came to replace loyalty to one's family. In 1815, the Congress of Vienna sought to divide Central Europe between Russia, Prussia, the Habsburgs and the Ottomans. However, the concept of the nation gradually took root in Central Europe and became apparent over the following decades. The Hungarians gained some independence within the Habsburg

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Empire in 1867, and the Congress of Berlin in 1878 recognized the independence of Serbia, Romania and part of Bulgaria. Finally, the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 dislodged the Ottoman rule.

World War I that highlighted the importance of Central Europe for European security and peace; numerous scholars considered this war to be the most important part of the region's history. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was a turning point in the history of Central Europe (Jeszenszky, 2016, pp. 384-385). After the end of World War I, Hungary lost 75% of its territory under the Treaty of Trianon, and its population was reduced to one-third under the new borders (Jeszenszky, 2016, p. 384), which is to this date, a source of discontent and strong national sentiments for Hungarians. After a short time, first Nazi Germany and then the Soviet Union occupied the region. During the Second World War, the region suffered heavy casualties, and to make the matters worse, it fell in the clutches of communism after the end of World War II. The concept of Central Europe in the German view refers to an identity between Western and Eastern Europe, but at the outbreak of the Cold War and the division of Europe into Eastern and Western blocs, the concept of Central Europe was almost forgotten due to this new division (Neumann, 1999).

During the Cold War, several attempts were made in the region to break from the control of the Eastern Bloc; for example, the 1956 Hungarian uprising was one of the most important attempts to counter the Soviet influence, which was suppressed. In 1968, the reformation in Czechoslovakia, known as the Prague Spring was suppressed by the military intervention of the Warsaw Pact (Cave & Roberts, 2017, p. 4).

Despite these repressions, many continued to hope for liberation from Moscow's domination, and these efforts continued into the

following decades. The works of Milan Kundera and his publication in 1983 played a seminal role in representing the concept of Central Europe. For Kundera, the region and nations such as the Poles, Hungarians, and Czechoslovakians belong to Western political culture and have been kidnapped by the Russians (Kundera, 1984).

In his article, titled "A Kidnapped West," Kundera called the region Central Europe, and claimed that it has always belonged to the Western world, but has been taken from it. In his definition, he refers to the common concerns and culture and identity, rather than geographical boundaries. However, there has been no consensus on the exact inclusion of countries in that agreement, although a common factor linking this definition was its opposition to Soviet-influenced Eastern Europe (Ruzicka, 2003, p. 6).

However, the 1989 revolutions in Central Europe can be considered a turning point in the continent's contemporary history, which was rare and never before had non-violent revolutions overthrown governments on this scale. The non-violent nature of the 1989 revolutions was not their unique feature. The events of 1989 are sometimes referred to as Europe's intellectual revolution, given the prominent role played by the public, creative thinkers and political activists such as Václav Havel in Czechoslovakia and Adam Michnik in Poland. Upon the conclusion of the Cold War, the race to join the West and embrace the values of Western liberal democracy swept throughout Central and Eastern Europe. In fact, complete westernization was the fundamental goal of the 1989 revolutions. In those years, freedom meant imitating Western political models created at the same time as Soviet forces pulled out of the region (Krastev & Holmes, 2019).

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4. 1. The Visegrád 4 Group

The inception of cooperation between the countries of Central Europe and the creation of the Visegrád 4 dates to the collapse of communism. Czechoslovak President Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa met with Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall in a small town with the same name (Visegrád) in February 1991. The reason for choosing this venue lay in a historical and symbolic reference to the congregation of the kings of Central Europe in 1335 AD, which, at that time was arranged to resolve disputes and trade agreements. This time, the effort was aimed at disengagement from Russian influence and Soviet legacy (Nič, 2016, p. 283). In fact, the raison d'être and the basis of the formation of the Visegrád Group 4 was based on the efforts to facilitate the transition from a communist society to the principles of a Liberal democracy (Visegrad Group, 2017).

In the 1990s, Central Europe was one of the axes of regional building (Kazharski, 2017, p. 6). Therefore, the post-Cold War era can be marked as a period in Central Europe, during which identity played an important role and its ultimate goal was to help Central Europe join the institutions of the Western world. Central Europe belonged to the West, which had been artificially separated from it for four decades, and now it was time to re-embrace Europe. This, of course, was not an easy task, as the Visegrád 4 countries were terrified of becoming second-class citizens in the West (Vachudova, 2005).

At the time, the prevailing view was that these countries, while joining the European Union, would not only free themselves of the Russian influence, but would gradually keep pace with other Western European countries by moving towards liberal democracy. However, in practice, a different path was taken. In fact, advancing

regional cooperation based on the Visegrád Group 4 has not been easy due to differences in the interests of each member (Nič, 2016, p. 283).

The year 2004 can be considered a turning point in the history of Central European countries. This year, the countries of the region joined the European Union, which was an important step on the path to liberation from the domination of the legacy of communism and the Russian influence. At the time, Romano Prodi, then President of the European Commission, congratulated the new members and announced that the wartime divisions were over. This, however, proved to be optimistic with the elapse of time. Still, what unfolded after their joining the European Union was unexpected and unprecedented in its kind. Gradually, these countries not only distanced themselves from their aspirations to join Western liberal democratic institutions, but also took steps to counter them, which eventually became central to anti-liberal nationalism.

5. Rise of the Euroscepticism and Nativism in Visegrad 4 Countries

To gauge the rise of right-wing attitudes in European countries, several factors have been considered as a representation of this concept, the most important of which can be the extent of anti-immigrant tendencies and opposition to the entry of refugees. This is revealed in the context of issues such as public opinion polls on immigration, Visegrád 4 immigration policies, and their practical measures (such as border fencing), stronger Euroscepticism and pessimism about the EU, and the rising growth of the illiberal democracy.
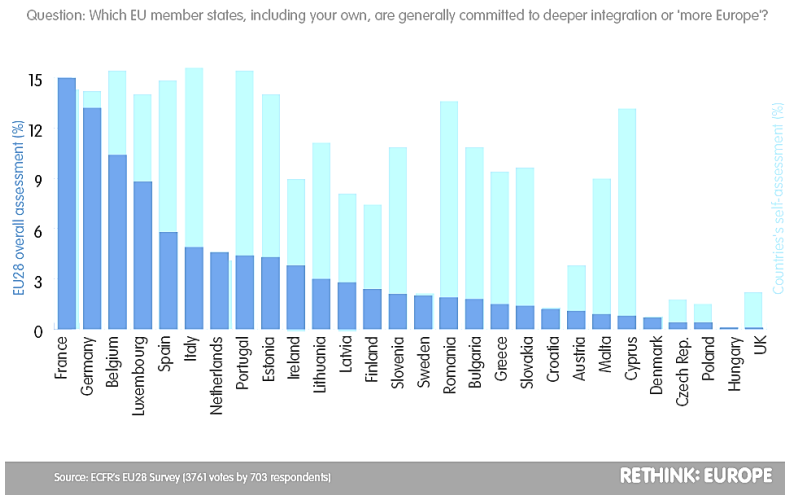
Opposition to the EU is not synonymous with opposition to Europe, because, in most Eurosceptic parties, such as Fidesz

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(Hungary) and Law and Justice[1] (Poland), the EU is seen as a corrupt and bureaucratic imposed structure that destroys borders, erodes national identity, serves as the point of entry of immigrants and boosts the rising crimes, while the concept of Europe alone is a Christian civilization heritage and advocate of the national values of European countries that must be revived (Csehi & Zgut, 2020).

Although the European Union has succeeded in creating a common political and administrative structure, and has been able to create symbols such as the single currency, passport, citizenship rights, flags, etc., but it has failed to fashion a single European identity (Stokes, 2009, p. 7).

The following figure illustrates that countries such as Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic are among the least committed countries to deeper integration and the European project.

Figure 1: European Countries attitude toward a deeper integration

(Source: Janning, 2018)

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1. (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość or PiS)

It should be noted that nationalist and far right parties, who were critical of the European Union, such as Marine Le Pen's National Rally (France) usually secure better results in the European Parliament elections, to which they are an opponent, as in the 2019 EU election (Willsher, 2019), (Walker, 2019). In fact, despite opposition to the EU, they use all the possibilities and opportunities provided by this union to oppose it.

Several studies indicate that the immigration crisis played an important role in the rise of nationalism in the Visegrád 4 countries (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017, p. 171). However, it should be noted that the growth of anti-immigration tendencies in Central Europe has not exhibited a consistent and steady trend, and at some points has been accompanied by more rapid growth. Consequently, it can be argued that the migration crisis has acted as a catalyst in the eruption of differences between Central and Western Europe (Kazharski, 2017, p. 2).

The following features show how the population's fearing of cultural marginalization plays an important role in the rise of the far-right tendencies in Central Europe.

5. 1. The Growth of Anti-refugees' Tendencies

Unlike Western Europe, Visegrad 4 countries did not have much experience with Muslim immigrants prior to the influx of refugees into Central Europe in recent years. Accordingly, some critics believe that Central European countries do not have the necessary preparation and infrastructure to take in refugees. There are even those who cite Muslim immigrants as a security risk and even a threat to health (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017, p. 171). *Uchodźcy.info* has collected thousands of Polish politicians' statements on refugees and immigration since 2015, comparing them to the results of regular sociological research. This study

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reveals that the negative opinion of the ruling party of Poland towards refugees has had a profound effect on the rise of anti-immigrant tendencies in public opinion. As an example, one can cite the leader of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) Kaczynski, who said in his October 2015 election rally that refugees could bring "dangerous diseases, parasitic or microbial diseases" to Europe. In April 2017, at a dedicated epidemiological center in Biala Podlaska, where refugees are being examined in Poland, it was announced that no case of a serious infectious or parasitic disease was detected among this population (Strzałkowski, 2018).

About 66% of Poles, 83% of Hungarians, 88% of Slovaks and 91% of Czechs now have completely opposite views on the phenomenon of immigrants (while the EU average is 63%). This cultural threat is seen by them even beyond the danger of terrorism, while Islamism is also seen by many EU residents as a threat. The figure is two-thirds in Poland and Hungary, 78 percent in Slovakia and 85 percent in the Czech Republic, a country with virtually no Muslim population (Bault, 2016). In fact, far-right parties, along with the media and public opinion, significantly contributed to the development of a negative view on accepting immigrants (Guasti, 2017).

According to a poll conducted by the Polish Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) in December 2017, 63% of respondents in Poland said they did not want people fleeing war in their countries to enter Poland and only 33% agreed with accepting refugees. This was in stark contrast to the mid-2015 poll, when only 21 percent of respondents were opposed to accepting refugees, while 72 percent supported it (Strzałkowski 2018).

5. 2. Rise of Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism

Another manifestation of the growth of far-right nativism in

Central Europe is the anti-minority tendencies of certain countries, especially towards Muslims, Jews and the Roma. They portray refugees as a multitude of evil and irrational people and a great threat, who cannot adapt themselves to the European culture and lifestyle (Cave & Roberts, 2017, p. 11). It should be noted that the national identity in Central Europe was able to amass power with the notion of a common enemy. One of the elements that facilitates the inception of national identity is the existence of the enemy. On the other hand, anti-Semitism in these countries has a long history, according to some studies, which has had its roots long before the Nazi occupation. For example, in the Czech literature, music and art of the 19th century, there are various cases of anti-Semitism (Sayer, 1998, p. 113).

In Hungary, anti-Semitism was one of the main reasons for Hungarian cooperation with the Nazi Germany during World War II (Hirschberger et al., 2016, pp. 32-43). Critics of the Justice and Law Party in Poland have accused it of promoting anti-Semitism (Inotai & Ciobanu, 2020, p. 8). Germany's *Die Zeit* weekly called Hungary a country with widespread far-right tendencies, with neo-Nazis attacking Gypsies, Jews and immigrants (Schmidt-Häuer, 2009).

However, certain far-right groups, who have grown in recent years, have replaced anti-Semitism with Islamophobia. They believe that the real threat now is Islam, particularly after 9/11. Accordingly, most studies support the view that Islamophobia has increased in the far-right discourse in recent years (Bari, 2012).

Eurabia, which is coined from blending Europe and Arabia is one of the terms exploited by far-right parties in Central Europe to denote the threat of Muslim immigrants. According to this view, Muslims and their presence pose a major threat to European independence. Meanwhile, mosques are one of the symbols used by

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Islamophobists to show the increasing presence of Muslims and the rejection of the culture of the host society, while in practice many Muslims have accepted European principles despite performing religious duties (Moreno, 2010).
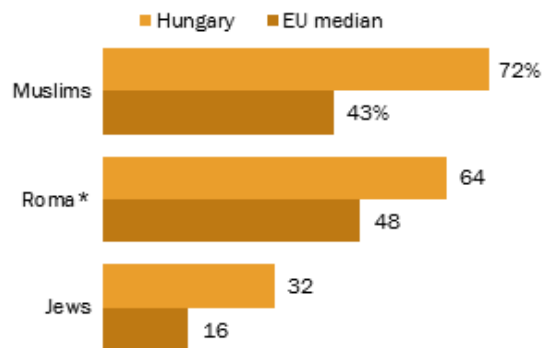
Another point is comparing the birth rate of Muslims with Europeans. This, which is often accompanied by exaggeration, is one of the manifestations used in the discourse of Islamophobia in Central Europe. Moreno believes that after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, Europe needed a new hypothetical enemy (Moreno, 2010, p. 74).

The figure below shows Hungarian's attitude toward minorities, which is far more negative than average results in the EU.

Figure 2: Xenophobia in Hungary

(Source: Manievich, 2016)

However, the issue of Islamophobia is too complex to be equated with the far right in central Europe. The traditional and historical relationship of the far right with Islam has existed for a long time; even now, some extreme right groups have good relation with Islamists. The most important link between neo-Nazis and Islamist groups has been their anti-Semitism (Mareš, 2014). Accordingly, some far-right supporters have supported Iran's stance on confronting Israel. The neo-Nazi NPD (Germany) website defended Ahmadinejad's reelection and described him as the "true leader of his people", the German far right first looked to Ahmadinejad when he said he wanted to destroy Israel, and then in 2006 organized a conference for Holocaust deniers (*The Local*, 2009; Mamedov, 2017). However, none of this means that far-right groups will tolerate the presence of Islam in Europe as a political force (Cave & Roberts, 2017 p. 14).

5. 3. The Divergence between the Visegrád 4 and the EU on Immigration

Although the Cultural Backlash Theory explains how the cultural threat (rather than the economic concerns) drive the voters to support the far-right parties on the national scale, in international relations and foreign policy, the Neorealism theory can clarify how the anti-immigrant policies became security related issues and national interests. The immigration crisis has served as a factor in the dispute between Central European countries and Brussels, and as a matter of greater solidarity between the members of the Visegrád 4 countries, Although before the 2015 refugee crisis, there were various traces of disagreement between the members of the Visegrád 4 and major European powers such as Germany, this crisis made the differences widely public. In the meantime, the Visegrád Group, and in particular Hungary, was openly opposed to

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel's policy of accepting foreign immigrants (DW, 2016). This was evident in the dispute over the quota of refugees in each country. In September 2015, member states agreed to transfer 120,000 refugees from Greece and Italy, a decision rejected by the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania (Kazharski, 2017, p. 9).

Poland joined these countries after a while. The European Union's decision to introduce a certain quota for the admission of refugees to Visegrád 4 countries was met with harsh opposition. They accused the European Union of violating their national sovereignty. Opposition from Hungary and Poland, meanwhile, was fiercer; these two countries therefore decided not to submit to the quota decision at all costs (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017, p. 172). Some see 2016 as a turning point in expanding cooperation within the Visegrád Group to counter the European Union (Nič, 2016, p. 282). Immigrants as "*other*" have played an important role in creating solidarity and shared identity among members of the Visegrád Group (Kazharski, 2017, p. 18).

The populist and far-right leaders of Central Europe have played prominent roles in opposing the admission of foreign immigrants, including the President of the Czech Republic, Ziman, who has always blamed the presence of foreign immigrants for terrorist activities in Europe. These leaders have seized the opportunity to strengthen their anti-structural discourse, accusing political elites of corruption and inability to pursue national priorities, and claiming to represent the masses who stand up to the demands of Brussels and multiculturalism (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017, p. 172).

In order to alleviate the pressure of the immigration crisis, the Visegrád countries believe that solutions should be sought outside the EU, an idea that consists of two parts. First, the root causes of

migration must be identified and tackled. This means "continuing to support the International Coalition against ISIS in Iraq and Syria and providing various tools (political, military and humanitarian) and stabilizing Iraq as tangible ways of tackling the root causes of the migration process" (Visegrad Group, 2015a). Second, the Visegrád countries need to provide financial and professional support for countries of origin and countries of transit for refugees (Visegrad Group, 2015b). Accordingly, they welcomed the agreement between the EU and Turkey in this regard.

Pessimism about the performance of the European Union is one of the important factors in bringing together the Central European countries. When the first group of Central European countries joined the European Union in 2004, over half of the citizens of Central European countries expressed their satisfaction and trust with the EU, with Hungarians leading the way with 63%, Slovaks 61% followed by Poles and Czechs with 51%. This amount showed a sharp drop in the 2017 survey (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017, p. 173).

On the other hand, it should be noted that the European Union is considered the most important foreign influential structure in the field of politics in the Visegrád countries after 1989 (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017, p. 170). The incumbent governments in all four countries are politically considered Eurosceptic or anti-EU (Nič, 2016, p. 282). Visegrád leaders challenge traditional German-French hegemony in EU and criticize multiculturalism at the same time. They are mainly critical of the discrimination and the second-rate attitudes towards them within the union. The danger of sanctioning union members under Article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty has always been a threat to the Visegrád Group 4. However, at least the leaders of Hungary and Poland have stated that they would veto any sanctions against each other by Brussels.

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5. 4. Fencing Borders and Stricter Controls

Protecting the EU's external borders has been at the cornerstone of Visegrád's immigration policy. Here, it is important to pay attention to the Schengen and the Dublin Agreements. Schengen aims to facilitate the free movement of citizens within the territory of the member states (which are mainly EU member states), while the Dublin Convention addresses the issue of refugees. The immigration crisis in 2015 challenged these laws and made them rather difficult to implement, particularly due to the different and at times conflicting approaches of the member states. Members of the Visegrád Group 4 believe that more measures are needed to prevent the agreement from collapsing as well as protecting the external borders of the Schengen area, which is why Hungary closed its borders with Serbia and Croatia, and Slovakia did the same to its borders with Croatia. It should also be noted that the Visegrád 4 countries consider the current rules of the Dublin Commission as unacceptable (Visegrad Group, 2016).

Accordingly European countries can be divided into different categories regarding their border type, Hungary and Poland are among those with massive external EU borders, as they are more likely to consider the mass influx of people a security threat, (Szalai et al., 2017). As a result, immigration crisis is now considered as a national threat and at least from the neo-realist point of view, this has made the Visegrad Group a common affair for a stronger alliance against the EU open-door policies.

Orbán, fenced its borders after a wave of refugees entered Europe in 2015. This move has been heavily criticized by some, noting that Hungary opened its borders in 1989, when communism collapsed, allowing many to flee to Austria, and that Orbán has now betrayed that legacy. In defense of his actions, he declared that

the 1989 borders and the Iron Curtain were against us, but the current border is for protecting us. Another joint effort to counter the influx of asylum seekers was the formation of the Visegrád Police, which works to assure the ultimate protection of Hungary's borders (Kazharski, 2017, p. 19).

Figure 3: Visegrad 4 Countries and fencing the borders

(Source: *The Economist*, 2016)

The figure above shows the Hungarian border fences (red), which explains this countries' anti-immigrant policies as a result of its political geography. The border between Hungary and Serbia as an external EU border was of the main routes during the 2015 refugee crisis.

The Hungarian-Serbian border is the external border of the Schengen area. Prior to 2015 and the break-out of the refugee

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crisis, local police forces used to poorly monitor the border, and illegal entry would be fined between € 100 and € 200 (Kékesi, 2017, p. 2). The biggest immigration crisis in Hungary erupted in May 2015, when hundreds of Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis entered the country through Serbia. This number rose to 8,000 people a day in September when fencing off the borders was commenced.

The idea was first mooted by Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán in June 2015. For this project, which costed 30 million Euros and stretched as long as 175 KMs, the government enlisted the help of more than 900 members of the country's military. The second layer of the fence, which was equipped with more reinforcement features and monitoring means, was put into operation in the spring of 2017. Despite these efforts, refugees still continue to cross these fences. These fences have been designed to remain between 5 and 10 meters inside Hungarian territory. If refugees are arrested, they will be sent back to the other side of the fence, which is still a few meters inside the territory of Hungary; as a result, such cases would not legally constitute expulsion to Serbia. The cost of maintaining the fence has risen to € 1 billion in the first two years since its inception (Kékesi, 2017, pp. 3-5).

5. 5. The Growth of Illiberal Democracy

Across Central and Eastern Europe, many of the democracies that emerged at the end of the Cold War have now given way to authoritarian regimes, believing in conspiracy theories. In these regimes, the political opposition is denounced, the non-governmental media, civil society and independent courts are deprived of influence, and the government resists pluralism and frowns at the tolerance of opposition or minorities. In the early years after 1989, liberalism generally made sense with issues such

as individual opportunities, freedom of movement, access to a fair judiciary, and government response to public demands. In Central Europe, however, liberalism in 2010 led to increased social inequality, rampant corruption, and the unfair distribution of wealth to a particular minority. The economic crisis of 2008 also created a deep distrust of the business and financial elite. Liberalism in the Central European region has lost much of its credibility since the 2008 financial crisis (Krastev & Holmes, 2019).

The concern about the rule of law is another issue that has been drastically undermined in Central Europe. Former Hungarian President László Sólyom, one of the founders of the country's Constitutional Court, announced in 2013 that the "rule of law has ceased to exist in Hungary" (Rupnik, 2018). It is important to note that these attacks on the manifestations of Western liberalism and civil society are usually carried out in the name of the will of the people, which is expressed through ballot boxes. The main characteristic of populist parties is the claim of exclusive representation of the people. Winning a majority in an election allows for the removal of parts of the constitution. Political scientists have long studied the crisis of representative democracy and the rise of populist parties. It is less common for politicians to use concepts that were first described by political scientists. Victor Orbán borrows the concept of "Illiberal democracy" from Farid Zakaria (2018, p. 27), coined by him twenty years ago:

> I have been going to Brussels regularly for eleven years," Orbán said. "European elites, political decision-makers, people who run the media imagine that the development of humanity requires the liquidation of our identities, that it is not modern to be Polish, Czech or Hungarian, that it is not modern to be a Christian. A new identity appeared instead, that of European. We wanted to rush things. And what does Brexit tell us? The British said 'no'. They wanted to

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remain British. European identity does not exist, there are Poles and Hungarians. The crisis strengthens our argument. All these phenomena observed today in Europe show that a cultural counter-revolution is in proce*ss* Rupnik.

Undoubtedly, many scholars emphasize the infirmity of the Hungarian civil society as a result of half a century of communist rule (Molnár, 2015, p. 166).

6. Conclusion

In recent years, many European countries have seen the rise of nativism, Euroscepticism and far-right populist parties. The Visegrád Group 4 (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia) - which was equated with Central Europe in this study - embarked on a path of joining Western liberal organizations after the collapse of communism in the 1990s, which bore fruit in 2004. Nevertheless, in an unexpected about-turn, the ruling parties in these countries have taken the path of illiberal democracy instead of liberal democracy, in which individual freedoms, minority rights, and civil society have been undermined.

On the other hand, one of the differences between nativism and populism in Central Europe, compared to other European countries, is that they are present in governments and not the opposition. One of the challenges for far-right populist parties is the international cooperation between them, which has often made this path more difficult due to conflicting interests or differences in priorities. As examined in this study, the Central European region is one of the few regions that have been able to become a single axis for the propagation of nativism, Euroscepticism and anti-immigrant policies. This could be the second different pattern

compared to western Europe, to which far right parties are either in opposition or contribute as a minor participant in coalition governments. Surveys also have revealed that the Visegrád 4 Group, despite their differences with Brussels, entertain no intention to leave the EU and instead aim to reform and restructure the EU from a liberal organization to a nationalist one. This could have more severe consequences for the European Union than those of the Brexit.

The anti-immigration debate and opposition to the entry of refugees, in fact, as a mutual issue among the ruling parties in these countries, has led to further cooperation between the Visegrád 4 Group to overshadow the differences and disagreements among the members of this regional group. Even in some cases, any attempts to impose sanctions on them by the European Union due to their failure to apply the rule of law has brought them closer to each other. Additionally, xenophobia in Central Europe, unlike in Western Europe, which usually includes only Muslims, also contains Jews and the Roma.

Consequently, the 2015 refugee crisis played an important role in the growth of the far-right parties in Central Europe. The review of the findings reveals that after the recent crisis, immigration became related to security issues and national sovereignty in this region. One reason for this phenomenon was the political geography of Central Europe and the external borders of the EU as one of the main routes in refugee crises, in which all according to neo-realist theory played an important role in transforming the Visegrád 4 alliance to a regional group based on anti-immigration and Eurosceptic attitudes. In fact, there had been a shift towards the right in the political spectrum, as even some mainstream parties tried to avoid pro-migration policies to prevent the far right from gaining more support. The far-right parties, however, as single-

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issue parties, benefited from these crises as they successfully mobilized their supporters on anti-immigrant fears.

The paper concludes therefore that examining the main feature of far-right politics in Central Europe, socio-cultural motives appear to have been the main reason behind the rise of anti-immigration and Eurosceptic attitudes among the Visegrad countries, rather than the economic ones.

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