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Migration as a Security Risk and its Handling by the Governments of Hungary and Slovakia from the Viewpoint of Communication

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Abstract

With the global financial crisis and a recession-hit Europe, a coordinated safety policy is needed more than any time before. Humanitarian catastrophes surround Europe and the rise of terrorist groups can be observed. Hundreds of thousands of people are migrating from the countries of Africa and the Middle-East, fleeing poverty and war.

2014 saw more international conflicts than the previous years. This resulted in a rise in migration, especially towards Europe, with more than 100,000 people trying to enter the European Union in the first six months of 2015 through Italy, Hungary and other border countries, and in total more than 1,800,000 migrants and refugees crossed into Europe in 2015 (Frontex, 2017a). Under these circumstances European relations with International parliamentary institutions (IPIs) and regional alliances are even more important than they previously had been.

The four countries on the Eastern border of the Schengen area, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia form the regional alliance of Visegrad 4 (V4) countries. Such cooperation is extremely powerful, especially with Donald Tusk from Poland being the President of the European Council since 1 December 2014. These countries are especially exposed to illegal immigration. Hungary alone sees more illegal immigrants than any other European country. With the Dublin III agreement (604/2013/EU) including the EURODAC rules, under some circumstances illegal immigrants can be sent back to the country where they were first registered by the authorities. Finally, Hungary decided on building a Security Fence along its border with Serbia in order to prevent illegal immigration from outside the Schengen Area.

The European Commission's first proposal to regulate asylum and immigration through a quota system among the EU member states caused conflicting reactions on part of the governments. How have the V4 acted in this special case and how do they join their forces in cases of such political issues? And how have the governments of Slovakia and Hungary

communicated the issue of migration to their citizens in order to lower the security risks connected to the mass migration?

With a large-scale migrant crisis unfolding on the EU's doorstep and insufficient support for the Commission's proposal of the burden-sharing mechanism among member states, a short-term solution is necessary to win Brussels time to create a long-term strategy. This paper will address the partnership and mutual acting of the V4 countries within the EU regarding the current issues with a critical explanation of results and goals, with special emphasis on how the migration challenges were addressed and communicated in Hungary and Slovakia by the governments of these countries.

Keywords: safety, safety policy, immigration, migration, asylum seekers, communication, social media, Visegrad Four, Hungary, Slovakia

Research

Mass migration threatens several dimensions of safety. On the one hand, it constitutes a military threat as at its root are countries torn by wars and civil wars; on the other hand, terrorists can gain access to the territory of the EU unchecked so there is a risk that they will commit terrorist acts within the EU. Those who arrive *en masse* due to a shaken sense of security may jeopardize political security and may change the economic dimensions of safety in the host countries. Because of their different culture they may undermine the social dimensions of safety as well if the integration process remains incomplete, and since terrorist acts are often organized via the internet, even cyber safety may be jeopardized.

In the year 2014 we witnessed more international conflicts than in the previous years altogether, as a result of which illegal migration has dramatically increased, in particular toward Europe, with 1.8 million new arrivals in the year 2015 (Frontex, 2017a). The majority of them tried to get into Europe through Italy, Greece or Hungary (Frontex, 2015). In these circumstances, transnational cooperation became a priority and the same is true of regional cooperation as well.

At the eastern boundary of the Schengen area, in the context of their cooperation, Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, i.e. the Visegrád Four, tried to exert serious pressure on European policymakers. Their collaboration has been successful in many cases—in which it may be an important factor that since December 2014 the president of the European Council has been Donald Tusk from Poland, who is capable of giving more weight to every action proposed by the V4 using his personal influence within the EU.

Because of their geopolitical situation, the Visegrád countries are particularly exposed to migratory pressure. Only in 2015, Hungary registered more than 330 thousand illegal border crossings (Police.hu, 2017). In that year the number of first-time asylum seeker applications was the highest in Hungary among the EU countries: 1770 per 100 thousand inhabitants which is three times that of Germany (540) and seven times the EU average (250) (Eurostat, 2016). Finally, Hungary decided to stop the flow of migration by building a security fence along the southern border with Serbia. This fence is not meant to reduce the migratory pressure but the scale of illegal immigration—the applications of people coming from third countries officially entering Hungary and applying for asylum are still processed smoothly, officially and according to all international regulations and standards.

In line with the Schengen requirements, this process protects the external borders and is meant to reduce the scale of illegal immigration.

The first proposal of the European Commission for managing the migratory pressure was the quota system which would have allocated asylum applicants among the member states of the EU. This process, however, which reflects the spirit of solidarity of the EU, raises the questioning of the nation state level decision-making power of member states. Member states which, due to the migratory pressure, had to guarantee the inclusion of immigrants in a higher proportion according to the framework of the Dublin III agreement, have joined political forces in order to make their voices heard even better among European decision-makers. Nevertheless, with the intensification of the flow of migration it became evident that the earlier quota numbers were not sufficient for the allocation of all the refugees even at the time of their adoption. The Schengen border states would have liked to manage the situation at nation state level as well and explain to their voters how the immigration pressure and the quota system proposed by Brussels affects them from the point of view of safety policy. Therefore the V4 countries acted jointly while managing the situation from the point of view of national policy. In my study, I investigate this dual system of measures.

Lately, the international community has been experiencing a level of migratory pressure which has no precedent since the establishment of the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This was induced by the global financial crisis and its aftermath, the wars and uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa and the resurgence of the activities of non-state actors and terrorist groups which were only topped by climate change. These factors all led to the deterioration of the human rights situation and forced hundreds of thousands, even millions of people to flee their homes.

In order to deal with such international issues, sovereign states must cooperate to find efficient solutions, to formulate strategies and to develop joint action plans. For such transnational cooperation, joint work plans have been developed, a decision community has been formed in order to enable member countries to articulate their position more efficiently than the nation states alone. This is particularly true of the EU which is one of the most efficient political actors of the world and is based on a broad consensus.

Main results

Over the last years, humanitarian disasters which surround Europe culminated in a flow of migration whose main target was Western Europe, Germany in particular (Frontex, 2017b). Migration generated heated debates throughout Europe: even the semantics describing the situation implied a judgment in itself and the incomplete or independent legal system permitted to different interpretations as well as to abuse.

As the transit states of the Mediterranean migration route, the countries situated at the eastern border of the Schengen area faced great exposure and a high safety risk. In order for them to be able to comply with the obligations set out in international treaties, the Schengen states had to introduce emergency measures: one of them being the safety fence built along the Hungarian–Serbian border, whose technical measure was reinforced by further personal and legal instruments.

Since the approach applied by Brussels and Berlin for managing the migration situation was different from what the other member states took, it became important at the international level that cooperations like the V4 could effectively state their unified positions. The EU's draft measures were far behind reality and Hungary—which experienced the pressure of migration on a daily basis—in partnership with the other three Visegrád countries was able to effectively articulate its position and enforce their common intention.

In the V4 countries, however, emergency measures had to be explained to the local voters: in our studies it could be observed that Slovakia and Hungary handled the situation in a very similar way from the point of view of communication. It should be noted that government communication can never ignore the characteristics of its country and the traditional attitudes toward certain issues: the explaining-orienting opinions underlined by the government only correspond to its voters' assessment of reality, otherwise the communication and opinion orientation would not be effective. Therefore, thoughts appearing in governmental communication may only express voters' existing attitudes and they certainly do so in the cases under examination.

From a political point of view, in both countries under examination the governments successfully took over the roles of case officers while the opposition and the extreme right were unable to formulate substantive and effective messages. Traditional media had the greatest effect on the voters; however, in Hungary an organization that was an online grassroots organization was even able to collect enough resources for a traditional poster campaign. Opposition parties not only failed to influence the assessment of the issue, but they even resorted to using the terminology originally established by the government.

In the given circumstances, from the point of view of safety policy the management of the migration crisis was effective and efficient: V4 member countries drew attention to the security challenges linked to migration and proposed meaningful solutions the majority of which were adopted in Brussels over time. Building the border barrier also addressed the legal shortfalls, and afterwards the number of illegal border crossings fell sharply. The legislative changes were appropriate and well-founded, and the communication of the government met the voters' existing beliefs and experiences. As a result of the EU's decision-making practice, member states may not interfere with other countries' decisions; however, they may exert pressure, either by way of national consultations, referendum or inter-parliamentary associations.

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