



Disintegration through Integration? Turning to the Transnational Approach to Study National-Populism on the Example of the Visegrád Group

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Abstract

The Visegrád Group (V4), once united to facilitate integration to the EU, jointly disapproved of refugee policies and quotas adopted at the EU level. At the same time, all the four states have seen the resurgence of Eurosceptic sentiments in relation to first- economic and then, migration crises over the last 10 years. The paper categorizes Visegrád countries, especially the contemporary Hungarian and Polish political elite’s discourses, under soft Euroscepticism and analyses the national-populist discourse within the group from the transnational theoretical perspective. The study dwells on the following main argument: an alternative process of sub-regional integration, although itself unstable and unstructured, is grounded on national-populist, precisely on anti-immigration and (soft) Eurosceptic discourses/politics. It is argued, that the emergence of national-populist discourse/politics is taking place on an expanse of recontextualizing the way the European values and integration have been communicated in the region. The analysis traces the integration within V4 in relation with EU integration and focus on the radicalization of national-populism there as it relates to the ‘immigration crisis’ and EU integration processes. While it might not turn into an alternative to the EU integration, the Euroscepticism embedded in national-populist discourses provides a room for these powers for using a platform of the V4 for reinterpreting discourses about European integration and the connotation of it in rather exclusionary and xenophobic terms, while staying members of the EU. The study evolves around the concepts such as (soft) Euroscepticism; national-populism and strategic cooperation.

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New Populism in V4—A Frame for Integration?

The “Fourth Wave” of populism radicalization, as contemporary resurgence of exclusionary discourses was coined from a historical perspective,¹ has been garnered with an immense scholarly, as well as public attention in Europe and beyond, yet attended by a noticeable conceptual bewilderment. In this sense, the shaky state of the post-World War II “liberal consensus” is usually in the centre of the analysis. Within these discourses, the resurgence of exclusionary politics in the post-socialist states of East Central Europe (ECE) have been discussed through the concepts such as “rollback, hollowing or backsliding of democracy”.² If the European Union (EU) was considered as the main pushing actor towards democratic end of transition in the ECE countries during the pre-accession period, a few years after the Eastern enlargement, this thesis ceased to be applicable, since the EU was not able to hold a similarly strong leverage against the already member states due to its limited institutional constrains.³ These limitations are currently being tested on the examples of Polish and Hungarian political developments and their transformations towards the electoral authoritarian governing systems. At the same time, these ECE states remain full members of the organization, which stands for the values such as rule of law, freedom of media, gender equality along with the fundamentals of multiculturalism and deep integration in the region.

The Visegrád Group (V4), once united to facilitate integration to the EU, jointly disapproved of refugee policies and quotas adopted at the EU level. Since 2015, the Group has also received the biggest media coverage throughout the entire period of its existence.⁴ Arkadiusz Nyzio called this joint development “the second revival [of the Group] in the years 2015-2017.”⁵ That was followed by the rise of both right-wing parties and nationalistic sentiments in speeches of

¹ Agnieszka Stępińska et al., “Poland: A Fourth Wave of Populism?,” in *Populist Political Communication in Europe* (Routledge, 2016), 321–335.

² László Bruszt, “Regional Normalization and National Deviations: EU Integration and Transformations in Europe’s Eastern Periphery,” *Global Policy* 6 (2015): 38–45; Béla Greskovits, “The Hollowing and Backsliding of Democracy in East Central Europe,” *Global Policy* 6 (2015): 28–37.

³ Bruszt, “Regional Normalization and National Deviations.”

⁴ Milan Nič, “The Visegrád Group in the EU: 2016 as a Turning-Point?,” *European View* 15, no. 2 (December 1, 2016): 281–90, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-016-0422-6>.

⁵ Arkadiusz Nyzio, “The Second Revival?,” *Politeja - Pismo Wydziału Studiów Międzynarodowych i Politycznych Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego* 14, no. 50 (2017): 47–98.

politicians of the V4 countries, especially those of Poland and Hungary. Post-Maastricht calling for a more integratory philosophical underpinning of the Union, based on embracing shared European values, was therefore accompanied by the “global rise of populism”, as Moffitt put it in the title of his important book.⁶ Within this “new populism”, as Taggart positions it, the countries of so-called “New Europe” are demanding greater independence from the bloc that, on almost any scale, has ushered their economic and democratic prosperity since 1989.⁷ Through this paper, I argue that the domain of exclusionary populism, to be referred as national-populism hereafter, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of these developments via the transnational approach, which has been largely overlooked in studying the “politically contested concept”⁸ - populism. In all four states, the electoral rise of populist and Eurosceptic parties started concomitantly over 2009-2011 and intensified from 2015 (Figure 1).⁹ The periods relate to firstly the financial and secondly to the migration crises that became main mobilizing tools for the national-populist powers in these countries.

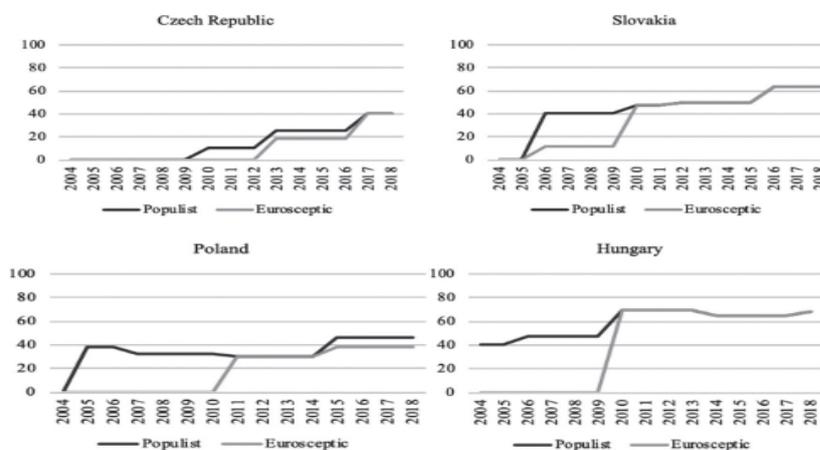


Figure 1 PARLIAMENTARY POPULIST AND EUROSCPTIC PARTIES IN CEE¹⁰

⁶ Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism : Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford, Calif. : Stanford University Press, 2016, 2016).

⁷ See for example, Martin Hudec, “Development of the Visegrad Group in the Context of Efforts to Accelerate the Convergence Processes by Joining the European Union,” *Studia Commercialia Bratislavensia* 9, no. 33 (2016): 26–35.

⁸ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Penguin UK, 2017), 9.

⁹ Ana BOJINOVIĆ Fenko et al., “Euroscepticism as a Function Pretext for Populism in Central and Eastern European States: The Eurozone, Migration and Ukrainian Crisis,” 2019, 27.

¹⁰ Fenko et al., 399.

I claim that an alternative process of sub-regional integration, although itself unstable and unstructured, is grounded on national-populist, precisely on anti-immigration and (soft) Eurosceptic discourses/politics. In this regard, I propose that the emergence of national-populist discourse/politics is taking place on an expanse of recontextualizing the way the European values has been communicated in the region. Theoretically, I intend to argue that the domain of national-populism could provide a more comprehensive understanding of these developments via the transnational approach, which has been largely overlooked in studying populism. The transnational approach — tactical alignments, external legitimizations and convergence around the discourses — enables to comprehend the diffusion of national-populist discourses against the background of intensified European and sub-regional integration. With this intention, I will be dealing with concepts such as (soft) Euroscepticism; national-populism and strategic cooperation.

The analysis would trace integration within the Visegrád Group in relation with EU integration and focus on the radicalization of national-populism in the V4 as it relates to the ‘immigration crisis’ and EU integration processes. While it might not turn into an alternative to the EU integration, as headlines of journalistic reports signal, the Euroscepticism embedded in national-populist discourses provides a room for these powers for using a platform of the V4 for reinterpreting discourses about “Europe” and the connotation of it in rather exclusionary and xenophobic terms, while staying members of the EU. Worth remembering is that the Group is structurally flexible enough to transit into a passive mode every time interests of the leading figures or nationalist discourses themselves cease to coincide. Thus, the strategic component shall not be overseen in the analysis.

With this intention, I will briefly analyze the concept of populism drawing commonalities from different epistemological approaches and establish national-populism as an analytical category. Consequently, I will locate the concept of Euroscepticism applicable for the case. Proceeding from this analysis and review of the related literature, I will illustrate the applicability of the concept and the transnational approach to the case of V4 countries. Finally, I draw an example via big brush analysis of integration dynamics within the Visegrád group - yet sort of an

informal cooperation - as a prominent case for deploying a transnational approach in further inquiries in the study domain of national-populism.

Euroscepticism, Populism and National-Populism as the Analytical Concepts

Long before ‘Populism’ would become a buzzword of the year 2017,¹¹ Euroscepticism had been part of the discussions related to European integration and EU’s future. Taggart was one of the first authors to conceptualize Euroscepticism as “the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration”.¹² Over the course of this development, the connotation of the phenomenon has also expanded tempting the researchers to categorize it. As a result, the soft and hard versions of Euroscepticism¹³ are incorporated into relevant studies along with further subdivided groups of “Euroenthusiasts” (EU-optimists and Europhiles) “Eurorejects” (EU- pessimists and Europhobes), “Eurosceptics” (Europhiles but EU -pessimists) and “Europragmatists” (EU-optimists, but Europhobes).¹⁴ If we draw the differing line on the *Brexit* precedent of exiting and suspended membership, then perhaps only the “Eurorejects” (arguably, in some aspects, “Eurosceptics”, as well) represent the “hard” version of Euroscepticism within Kopecký and Mudde’s categories. Hence, the “soft” form reveals itself within three remaining categories. It is worth noting that Eurosceptics are not against the idea of European integration per se, but are rather opposed to the current course of the EU.

¹¹ “‘Populism’ Revealed as 2017 Word of the Year by Cambridge University Press,” University of Cambridge, November 30, 2017, <https://www.cam.ac.uk/news/populism-revealed-as-2017-word-of-the-year-by-cambridge-university-press>.

¹² Paul Taggart, “A Touchstone of Dissent: Euroscepticism in Contemporary Western European Party Systems,” *European Journal of Political Research* 33, no. 3 (April 1, 1998): 366, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1006853204101>.

¹³ Aleks Szczerbiak and Paul Taggart, “Theorising Party-Based Euroscepticism,” *Problems of Definition, Measurement and Causality*, Brighton, 2003.

¹⁴ Petr Kopecký and Cas Mudde, “The Two Sides of Euroscepticism: Party Positions on European Integration in East Central Europe,” *European Union Politics* 3, no. 3 (2002): 297–326.

Throughout this paper, I propose to categorize Visegrád countries, especially the contemporary Hungarian and Polish political elite's discourses, under soft Euroscepticism, insofar as the high criticism of EU common policies and the prioritization of national interests are not directed to the potential leaving of the Union, but rather to objecting a deeper political integration vis-à-vis framing of national interests. This type of Euroscepticism is a considerable part of the populist rhetoric as it appears in Central and Eastern European contexts and falls under the repertoire of protectionism (economic, cultural and *securitarian*).¹⁵ However, there has hardly been consensus achieved about the concept of populism itself.

Populism has been approached as a political style, discursive system, a syndrome or (thin) ideology. Considering the theoretical discussions from dissimilar scholarly approaches, there are omnipresent elements of populism that are alike throughout the patchworks of ideologies. Even Muller, expressing his scepticism about populism being a doctrine, accentuates *anti-elitism* and *anti-pluralism* as the common components for populism on different ends of the political spectrum. For him, populism is focused around/on the notion of “the people” and is a “moralistic imagination of politics”,¹⁶ by which he implies a bellicose language and Manichean division between the pure people and corrupt *elite*. For Taggart, populism is an ideology lacking core values and having the chameleon affect over divergent contexts, it opposes representative politics, concentrates on the feeling of crisis and idealizes the ‘heartland’ - an evocation of that life and those qualities worth defending.¹⁷ Moreover, the articulation of crisis and polarization of society alongside the normative divisions also constitute specificities of populism.

As populism can be ascribed to the actors as different as, for instance, Podemos from Spain and Law and Justice Party (PiS) from Poland, it is reasonable to specify the divergence by their ideological cores. I subscribe to the idea, argued by Rydgren, that most of the times populism is rather a secondary feature of the units commonly referred to as ‘populist’. According to him, in setting their agenda populism is not a determinative ideology for ‘populist’ powers, but rather

¹⁵ Rogers Brubaker, “Why Populism?,” *Theory and Society*.

¹⁶ Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Penguin UK, 2017), 19.

¹⁷ Paul A. Taggart, *Populism, Concepts in the Social Sciences* (Buckingham : Open University Press, 2000, n.d.), 95.

those other elements which populism is aligned with.¹⁸ Hence, it is significantly important to approach populism as a generic phenomenon, although yet in a nexus with other ideological families due to its ideological ‘thinness’.

Most Eastern and Central European cases have been classified within ethnic type of nationalism informed by legacies of communist rules.¹⁹ At the same time, populism came to be an inevitable perspective in studying the contemporary right-wing in Europe.²⁰ For these reasons, I propose to approach the emergence of populist rhetoric in the Visegrád states within the notion of *national-populism*, which also assists to comprehend the nature of soft Euroscepticism - along which the group seems to have revived lately. The concept of national-populism has been deployed in several contexts starting from Germani’s work about populism in South America and continued by Taguieff’s notion of exclusionary “new populism”.

Considering the exclusivist nature of the mentioned discourses, I follow the later conceptualization adopted and modified by Brubaker.²¹ Thus, *national-populism* is defined by confronting polarization between “us” and “them”. Brubaker underlines vertical and horizontal dimensions of the polarization offered by Taguieff.²² In the former, national-populists tend to claim representation of “the ordinary people” vis-à-vis the “elite”, both the categories being discursively constructed. As for the horizontal dimension the boundaries of polarization are constructed along the rather cultural lines of “people like us”, sharing and praising our way of life and “outsiders”. The ‘outsiders’ are not necessarily defined by the national borders, but rather by the perceived threat of the inside group related to hazards of “our” culture, customs, and lifestyle.²³

¹⁸ Michał Krzyżanowski and Ruth Wodak, “Right-Wing Populism in Europe & USA: Contesting Politics & Discourse beyond ‘Orbanism’ and ‘Trumpism,’” *Journal of Language and Politics* 16, no. 4 (January 2017).

¹⁹ For example: Michael Minkenberg, “Leninist Beneficiaries? Pre-1989 Legacies and the Radical Right in Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe. Some Introductory Observations,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 42, no. 4 (2009): 445–458; Rogers Brubaker., “Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.,” *American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 3 (November 1999): 844–45, <https://doi.org/10.1086/210362>.

²⁰ See Marco Tarchi., “Italy: A country of many populisms.” *Twenty-First Century Populism*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2008. 84-99.

²¹ Rogers Brubaker, “Between Nationalism and Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 8 (June 21, 2017): 1191–1226.

²² Pierre-André Taguieff, “Political Science Confronts Populism: From a Conceptual Mirage to a Real Problem,” *Telos* 1995, no. 103 (March 20, 1995): 9–43, <https://doi.org/10.3817/0395103009>.

²³ for more see Brubaker, “Why Populism?”

National-Populist Integration –Missing Link in the Studies

Populism in the Central and Eastern European countries is formed mainly in a national-populist frame. The parties that have long been the prominent reference points for scholars of the domain currently govern two out of four Visegrád states. *Fidesz* in Hungary and *PiS* in Poland are perhaps the two cases that normally appear together within the analysis concerning challenges of EU integration or emergence of exclusionary politics in Europe.²⁴ The emergence (or resurgence) of national-populist discourses is generally connected to the following factors: economic decline or the recent economic crises, immigration and the feeling of political and socio-economic exclusion triggered in some segment of society.

The emergence of exclusionary populism in the ECE region is linked to the notions of democratic backsliding and backlash. Even though the democratic end of transition in these states is still a contested subject, populism itself is definitely considered to be an integral part of democracy as a “shadow”²⁵ or “illiberal democratic response”.²⁶ A considerable period of the liberal left’s government in post-socialist eastern European states appears to have provided a fertile ground for emergence and legitimacy of national-populist discourses in these states. Even though the future of EU integration has not been seen similarly from the V4 countries’ perspective,²⁷ soft Euroscepticism, especially, revealed through anti-immigration discourses, have demonstrated a degree of convergence upon the matter of antagonism towards EU integration.

The entire focus on threats of immigration along with socio-economic problems are believed to have enabled French Front National to achieve its electoral breakthrough in 1984.²⁸ Since then,

²⁴ Nóra Lázár, “Euroscepticism in Hungary and Poland: A Comparative Analysis of Jobbik and the Law and Justice Parties,” *Politeja - Pismo Wydziału Studiów Międzynarodowych i Politycznych Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego* 12, n. 33 (2015): 215–33. And László Bruszt and David Charles Stark, *Postsocialist Pathways: Transforming Politics and Property in East Central Europe*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁵ Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 2017, 20.

²⁶ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat Or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 23.

²⁷ M. Nič and V. Dostál, “Central Europe’s Outlook on the EU and Foreign Policy,” *Strategic Europe Blog, Carnegie Europe* 8 (2016).

²⁸ Michelle Hale Williams, “DOWNSIDE AFTER THE SUMMIT,” *Mapping the Extreme Right in Contemporary Europe: From Local to Transnational* 16 (2012): 263.

the focus on immigration emerged as an omnipresent element of European right-wing groups achieving increasing representation by the beginning of 21st century.²⁹ Moreover, the breakdown of social order (sharp economic decline/ (constructed) crisis) accompanied by a distrust towards the political establishment's capacity/willing to resolve it, are labeled as imperative accelerators for populism to grow. Albertazzi and McDonnell explain the rise of populism in Western European democracies as “a reaction to the failure of traditional parties to respond adequately in the eyes of the electorate to the series of phenomena”.³⁰

In addition to resentments connected to “unrepresentativeness”, the feeling of being disenfranchised from socio-political benefits offers populist actors to mobilize different groups of society. This matter is usually also linked to considerably decreased trust in the mainstream political parties, also referred as “anti-establishment identity”³¹ and “political malaise” in the literature.³² Here, the birth of populism is associated with the inclusion of the ‘excluded’ part of society within the unity of “the people”.³³ However, this feeling of exclusion and their particular demands that are not met by the establishment are ‘awoken’ and mobilized from outside of this segment.

The above-discussed factors are generally approached from and located in a domestic perspective. Due to their nature, most of them are in fact constructed and escalated locally. At the same time, the cases are often discussed in regional and/or ideological categories. However, the European integration, strategic alignments, the increasing role of non-traditional media and transnational flow of ideas and practices are largely overlooked in comprehending the processes of national-populist revival. Thus, I propose that the transnational approach that would focus on transfers of ideas, mutual references and cooperation based on exclusionary politics is a missing link in understanding emergence and structure of the national-populists in a European

²⁹ Elisabeth Ivarsflaten, “What Unites Right-Wing Populists in Western Europe? Re-Examining Grievance Mobilization Models in Seven Successful Cases,” *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 1 (2008): 3–23.

³⁰ Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (Springer, 2007), 1.

³¹ Carlos Meléndez and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, “Political Identities: The Missing Link in the Study of Populism,” *Party Politics*, November 23, 2017, 1354068817741287, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068817741287>.

³² For example Albertazzi and McDonnell, *Twenty-First Century Populism*.

³³ Ernesto Laclau, “Populism: What’s in a Name?,” *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* 48 (2005).

context. Even though the initial integration of the Visegrád states was based on the shared aspiration towards Europeanization, the prominence of exclusionary politics in these states, especially in Hungary and Poland, have created new possibilities of spontaneous or long term integrational aspects. Throughout the next section, I attempt to demonstrate the relevance of the transnational approach on the example of contemporary convergences of V4 states on the issues reflecting soft Euroscepticism.

Applicability of Transnational Approach on Visegrád Four

The analysis is being written in parallel to the developments regarding the joint action of Hungary and Poland towards the EU's long-term budget plan of economic recovery introduced in November 2020. The plan — in need of unanimous vote from all 27 countries of the EU — was blocked by the two countries opposing the 'rule-of-law mechanism' that enables to cut subsidies on the grounds of eroding democratic standards linked to using such subsidies by the member states.³⁴ The representatives of these states interpret the mechanism as “an institutional, political enslavement, a radical limitation of sovereignty.”³⁵ I believe this passage demonstrates well the relevance, as well as continuity and the character of the “de-integrating strategic integration” of the V4 countries vis-à-vis the prominence of national-populist discourses. For understanding the dynamics of integration and the character it has transformed into currently, it is important to look at the timeline and development of the V4 integration.

The Visegrád Group used to be discussed through their convergence on the ways of economic development and shared enthusiastic inclination towards Europeanization in the period of establishing this non-institutional cooperation.³⁶ However, ironically, the very soft Euroscepticism might have become a new point of convergence at this point of EU integration.

³⁴ Deutsche Welle (www.dw.com), “Poland and Hungary Veto EU Budget Plan | DW | 16.11.2020,” DW.COM, accessed November 25, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/poland-and-hungary-veto-eu-budget-plan/a-55618272>.

³⁵ Kafkadesk, “Hungary and Poland Veto EU Recovery Fund over Rule-of-Law Issue,” Kafkadesk, November 17, 2020, <https://kafkadesk.org/2020/11/17/hungary-and-poland-veto-eu-recovery-fund-over-rule-of-law-issue/>.

³⁶ Hudec, “Development of the Visegrad Group in the Context of Efforts to Accelerate the Convergence Processes by Joining the European Union”; Tomáš Strážay, “Visegrad Four in 2007: Revitalization after the Post-Enlargement Fatigue,” *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2007*, 0, 52–61.

While a few researchers talk about the national-populist backlash to the intensified integration, through this section I intend to take the issue a bit further by focusing on the matter of parallel developments in contemporary Europe that might find their common ground on shared exclusionary discourses, *recontextualizing* the idea of “Europe” and integration more generally.

The Visegrád cooperation, initiated in the early 1990s, aimed at facilitating cooperation across Eastern European post-Socialist states in their common aspiration towards “Western integration”,³⁷ namely into EU and NATO. This type of integration was widely appreciated for an exemplary independent (without foreign aid) cooperation for the common interests.³⁸ The cooperation has so far not transformed into an institutional collaboration and the personal contacts remain significant for the dynamics of this non-structuralized³⁹ group from the establishment up until now.⁴⁰ The Group has appeared on the international arena via Joint Statements mostly proceeding from meetings of the country-leaders. Besides aiming at preventing any conflict with “democratic peace” across Visegrád states, the group also established a framework for economic relations in the form of the Central European Free Trade Agreement signed in 1992, which after their accession to the EU, was also expanded to other countries further to the Eastern peripheries. Moreover, the matter on which V4 vocalized was support for the EU’s “open doors” policy towards the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan states, on top of expanding the Visegrád Fund’s cultural and educational programs to these regions.⁴¹ Hence, security, environmental issues, educational and cultural cooperation were in focus of the V4 agenda.⁴² Furthermore, even if transiting post-socialist states are generally referred to in the context of ethnic type of nationalism upon their transition, in the Founding

³⁷ As Schmit notes, Europe for the former Warsaw Pact states become associated with the “West” and associated political values. Source: A. Schmidt, “The Consequence of the EU Enlargement—the New Borders of the European Union,” *Challenges for the European Union in the Next Decade. A View from the Danube Region*, Ed. by I. Tarrósy, S. Milford, Pécs, 2013.

³⁸ Andrea Schmidt, “Friends Forever? The Role of the Visegrad Group and European Integration,” *Politics in Central Europe* 12, no. 3 (December 1, 2016): 113–40, <https://doi.org/10.1515/pce-2016-0019>.

³⁹ The group lacks the following structural elements that make it a rather flexible cooperation than a structuralized collaboration: written rules of cooperation; an organization structure; official headquarters; strict agenda. Source: Schmidt, 120.

⁴⁰ Géza Jeszenszky, “Visegrád – Past and Future,” *Hungarian Review* II, no. 04 (2011): 20–23.

⁴¹ Strážay, “Visegrad Four in 2007.”

⁴² Schmidt, “Friends Forever?”

Declaration, the Visegrád states declared common (progressive) policies towards national minorities.⁴³

The V4 integration has not ceased, but taken different directions after the EU membership of the countries. In the post-accession 2004 declaration, also known as the Kroměříž declaration, the states agreed upon enduring V4 cooperation that “...will continue to focus on regional activities and initiatives aimed at strengthening the identity of the Central European region.”⁴⁴ However, alongside the regional integration, the continuous commitment to the EU integration took a considerable part of the declaration by stating: “The Visegrád Group countries are strongly determined to jointly contributing to the fulfilment of the European Union's common goals and objectives and to the successful continuation of the European integration”.⁴⁵ As Dangerfield noted — in the study analyzing the retained potential of the V4 as a platform for post-accession cooperation — the flexible nature of the collaboration opened up more diverse avenues and rather changed and expanded the essence of the cooperation than entirely eliminated it.⁴⁶ For instance, one of them was a common foreign policy dimension, that according to Lazar, facilitated formulation of joint interests as well as the promotion of the V4 itself.⁴⁷

Even though the Kroměříž declaration reflected quite a courageous attitude towards post-accession collaboration of the V4, in fact this collaboration did not deepen much beyond cultural and educational cooperation in addition to the common stance towards supporting an implementation of the Eastern Partnership program. A notable activation of the only permanent institution of the Group – the International Visegrád Fund - in 2010 (founded in 2000),

⁴³ “The Visegrad Group: The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia | Visegrad Declaration 1991,” text, August 24, 2006, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-2>.

⁴⁴ Webra International Kft, “The Visegrad Group: The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia | Visegrad Declaration 2004,” text, August 24, 2006, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-1>.

⁴⁵ Ibid 44.

⁴⁶ Martin Dangerfield, “The Visegrad Group in the Expanded European Union: From Preaccession to Postaccession Cooperation,” *East European Politics and Societies* 22, no. 3 (2008): 661.

⁴⁷ András Máté Lázár, “Post-Eu-Accession Visegrád Cooperation—Results, Rhetoric, Prospects,” *BiztPol Affairs* 2 (n.d.): 22–44.

constituted perhaps the most obvious and stable outcome of the cooperation: strengthening cultural and educational ties within the region as well as beyond, to the Eastern peripheries.⁴⁸

The V4 was not famous for speaking in one voice on various issues in the EU, such as attitudes towards the EU reforms and anti-missile defence systems, as well as position towards Kosovo.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the attitudes towards Russia (in relation with the Ukraine crisis) have also divided positions on the matter, especially, the Polish and Hungarian ones.⁵⁰ Przybylski, the editor of *Visegrad Insight*, started off the journal in 2012 with the article titling as “V4 Dead or Alive”.⁵¹ Thus, since the accession, the V4 integration has not appeared to be a contested subject of discussion, except the cases when the actual potential of this integration was questioned.⁵²

The migration crisis contributed to bringing the matter of the V4 “revival” into discussion. The authors go as far as to claim that “[t]he refugee crisis has led to a renaissance of the Visegrád Group”.⁵³ In these terms, the one voice of the Group was revealed in the joint declaration adopted in February 2016, when the V4 celebrated its 25th anniversary and expressed dissatisfaction towards the EU relocation program. On the matter, another resolution was adopted in 2015, which underlined the need for a common EU-wide solution to the migration issue. Even though the latter declaration stressed the importance of common action, in fact the content of the declaration rather outlined the alternative ways of solution than those proposed by the Commission. The attitude was reflected in the alike negative statements of the governing leaders of the Group (except the Polish) and the actual numbers of the migrants the V4 states received in the years of 2015 and 2016.⁵⁴ If the situation in Poland differed from the predominantly negative position across the remaining V4 countries, the parliamentary elections

⁴⁸ Dangerfield, “The Visegrad Group in the Expanded European Union.”

⁴⁹ Strážay, “Visegrad Four in 2007.”

⁵⁰ In 2014 meeting held in Bratislava, Polish prime minister Donald Tusk stressed an issue of standing together in supporting sanctions towards Russia, while other V4 countries and especially Hungary had been working on economic cooperation with Russia in the recent years. Source: Schmidt, Andrea. “Friends Forever? The Role of the Visegrad Group and European Integration.” *Politics in Central Europe* 12, no. 3 (December 1, 2016): 113–40. <https://doi.org/10.1515/pce-2016-0019>.

⁵¹ Wojciech Przybylski, “V4 Dead or Alive,” *Visegrád Insight* 1, no. 1 (2012).

⁵² For example: Dangerfield, “The Visegrad Group in the Expanded European Union”; Also, Nyzio, “The Second Revival?”

⁵³ Schmidt, “Friends Forever?,” 132.

⁵⁴ For the extensive analysis and data see Nyzio, “The Second Revival?”

in November 2015 provided a fertile ground for the convergence. As a result of this election, the national-populist *PiS* achieved 2/3 majority in parliament and the new prime minister, Beata Szydło announced that she “could not see a possibility to accept refugees in Poland” and harshly criticized their predecessor – Civic Platform – for “deceiv[ing] the Visegrád Countries”.⁵⁵ After the second relocation scheme was adopted at the EU level, the criticism towards “obligatory measures” got even harsher within V4.

Euroscepticism in ECE countries is played out on both internal (domestic) and external dimensions of politics serving political, economic and ideological interests.⁵⁶ This works particularly well for anti-elitist construction and appeal to direct politics used by populist leaders. In Slovakia, the 2016 elections were dominated by balancing between the pro-EU general sentiments and the straightforward criticism of the EU for its migration policy, backed by Hungary and the Czech Republic.⁵⁷ Even though after the elections, such a negative rhetoric was softened, the migration issue played a role for feeding into the Eurosceptic discourse on national, as well as V4 level. While, generally, EU common policies were directly applied to the pre-accession V4 states, in this case the dissatisfaction landed precisely on the “non-negotiated” nature of the decision. Underlining the financial benefits of the EU, the leader of the Czech ANO — PM Babiš — selectively criticized the EU for the quota system inserting it within their anti-immigration and xenophobic discourses.⁵⁸

Thus, if during the post-socialist transition period the “return to Europe” was a dominant political narrative, associated with European integration and spreading of Western values and living standards,⁵⁹ nowadays, the leadership of the Law and Justice party advocates “the own path of Central Europe” instead of “catching up” with the Western world necessarily.⁶⁰ As a

⁵⁵ Nyzio, 68.

⁵⁶ Fenko et al., “Euroscepticism as a Function Pretext for Populism in Central and Eastern European States: The Eurozone, Migration and Ukrainian Crisis.”

⁵⁷ “Refugees, Asylum and Migration Issues in Hungary | Heinrich Böll Stiftung | Prague Office - Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary,” Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, accessed December 12, 2020, <https://cz.boell.org/en/2017/12/28/refugees-asylum-and-migration-issues-hungary>.

⁵⁸ Fenko et al., “Euroscepticism as a Function Pretext for Populism in Central and Eastern European States: The Eurozone, Migration and Ukrainian Crisis.”

⁵⁹ Lázár, “Euroscepticism in Hungary and Poland.”

⁶⁰ Schmidt, “Friends Forever?,” 130.

replacement for the “return to Europe”, the contemporary dominant rhetoric, at least shared by *Fidesz* in Hungary and *PiS* in Poland, would be “Europe of nation states”.⁶¹ The discourse on re-nationalizing politics is illustrated in Orbán’s annual State of the Nation speech in 2018 where he highlighted that Hungary got rid of “euro blah blah” and “liberal sweet-talk”,⁶² mentioning on another occasion that the time had arrived for “Christian and national” perspectives on politics.⁶³ Thus, the securitization argument constructed through the soft Eurosceptic rhetoric is played out on a domestic level, - to say the least – that included the Quota Referendum of October 2016 in Hungary and the amendments in the immigration policies of Poland and Hungary in succession. Bruszt’s following remark is illustrated in these states: “After accession, no party can win without presenting itself as the leading defender of national interests within or against the EU.”⁶⁴

Furthermore, the authors even name soft Euroscepticism among the factors leading to the success of right-wing actors across Europe, which further connects to the importance of transfers of ideas and practices among national-populist actors.⁶⁵ While the process of transnational exchanges of ideas is inevitable against the background of globalization and borderless communicating means, the basis of even non-structuralized regional integration, such as the V4, offers a room for observing the parallel integration around the national-populist discourses. The migration issue indeed provided a room for this convergence reflected through not only congruent discourses and politics, but also in common statements and proposals (e.g. “flexible [effective] solidarity” or Migration Crisis Response Mechanism (MCRM)) within the EU and mutual admiration on regional platforms.

In addition to the mutual support during the discussions concerning triggering of the Article 7 procedure towards Poland and then Hungary, Andrea Schmidt explains the “revived friendship” of Hungary and Poland with the shared attitudes towards migration issue vis-à-vis the EU

⁶¹ Aleks Szczerbiak, “Polish Euroscepticism in the Run-up to EU Accession,” *Euroscepticism: Party Politics, National Identity and European Integration*, 2004, 247–268.

⁶² “About Hungary - PM Orbán: ‘For Us, Hungary Comes First,’” accessed November 25, 2020, <http://abouthungary.hu/blog/pm-orban-for-us-hungary-comes-first/>.

⁶³ “Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 14th Kötcse Civil Picnic,” accessed November 25, 2020, http://2010-2015.miniszterelnok.hu/in_english_article/viktor_orban_s_speech_at_the_14th_kotcse_civil_picnic.

⁶⁴ Bruszt, “Regional Normalization and National Deviations,” 39.

⁶⁵ Szczerbiak, “Polish Euroscepticism in the Run-up to EU Accession.”

regulations towards it.⁶⁶ Hence, the matter of the parallel integration further reveals itself through not only converging national-populist sentiments and re-nationalization of politics, but also — and importantly — via positive mutual references amongst the leaders of the V4 allegedly directed at legitimizing domestic exclusionary policies and narratives of Euroscepticism. The process is also referred to in the literature as “shallower integration” vis-à-vis its traditional sense.⁶⁷

The regional congruence of the national-populist and shared Eurosceptic political discourses has to be connected to *example-setting* by a particular national development in the region. Pappas even claims that “it has been largely due to Orbán’s influence that the four Visegrád countries have emerged as a nationalistic and largely illiberal group within the EU, blocking further European integration and abetting Russia’s expansionist strategy.”⁶⁸ These developments illustrate the attainable balance between the domestic electoral success and the position on the European level.⁶⁹ This was illustrated well throughout the case of the Polish responses towards triggering Article 7, which later was also activated towards Hungary. It is worth mentioning, however, that Slovakia and Czech Republic do not quite comply with the level of national-populist discourses as Warsaw and Budapest,⁷⁰ but the stance on immigration that they have subscribed to, and as it has been played out on EU platform, contributes to re-considering this regional integration in regards with the Eurosceptic rhetoric.

Even though a separate integration quite like one within the EU is fairly unlikely, one should also take into consideration that EU integration policies and corresponding structures are claimed to be as much part of the problem of democratic backsliding, strategically mobilized by the national-populist leaders. Thus, such institutionalization of the V4 is rather unlikely as the transnational cooperation takes up a more strategic outlook in this case. The issue of “institutional mono-cropping” related to the imposition of standardized institutions and norms

⁶⁶ Schmidt, “Friends Forever?”

⁶⁷ Bruszt, “Regional Normalization and National Deviations,” 43.

⁶⁸ Takis S. Pappas, “Populists in Power,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 2 (April 13, 2019): 79, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0026>.

⁶⁹ Bruszt and Stark, *Postsocialist Pathways*.

⁷⁰ “As the host of the meeting,[at the meeting marking 25th anniversary of the Group] Czech Foreign Minister Lubomír Zaorálek was the last to speak, and tried to offer a moderate voice: both the EU and the V4 share a common fate, and neither can succeed without the other.” Source: Nič, “The Visegrád Group in the EU.”

on divergent states is one of the most important matters to be considered in analysing the limits of integration policies, as well as of the rise and success of national-populists discourses. The rollback of democracy is in this way related to the institutional limitation of the EU and the room for externalizing local grievances by blaming *extranational* units, such as the EU itself.

Conclusion

The study departs from establishing analytical concepts of soft Euroscepticism and national-populism, further analysing the missing link in studying the emergence and increasing representation of national-populist actors in Visegrád countries. The general idea of the paper goes along with illustrating importance of applying the transnational approach to studying contemporary processes of alliance building around exclusionary populist discourses in a regional context of V4. In such milieu, the importance of cross-national tactical collaboration, transfer of ideas and mutual admiration based on exclusionary and Eurosceptic policies are outlined. Thus, the matter of the parallel integration is revealed through not only converging resurgence of national-populist and Eurosceptic revival reflected in the re-nationalization of political discourses, but also through positive mutual endorsements on V4 level purportedly directed at legitimizing domestic exclusionary policies and narratives of Euroscepticism. Hence, it is argued, that an alternative process of integration, although itself tactical, unstable and unstructured, is grounded on national-populist, precisely on anti-immigration and (soft) Eurosceptic discourses/politics.

For demonstrating the relevance of the theoretical argument, the paper traces integration within the Visegrád Group in relation with their EU integration and focuses on the radicalization of national-populism in the V4 as it relates to immigration crisis and EU integration processes. Thus, the national-populist stance revealed towards immigration appears to be one of the uniting matters of the V4 vis-à-vis the EU common policies. Even though the alignment seems essentially strategic, the consequent developments, particularly those between Hungarian and Polish political elite, demonstrate the perpetual practice of alliance over Eurosceptic discourses as well as particular policy decisions in relation to the EU.

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