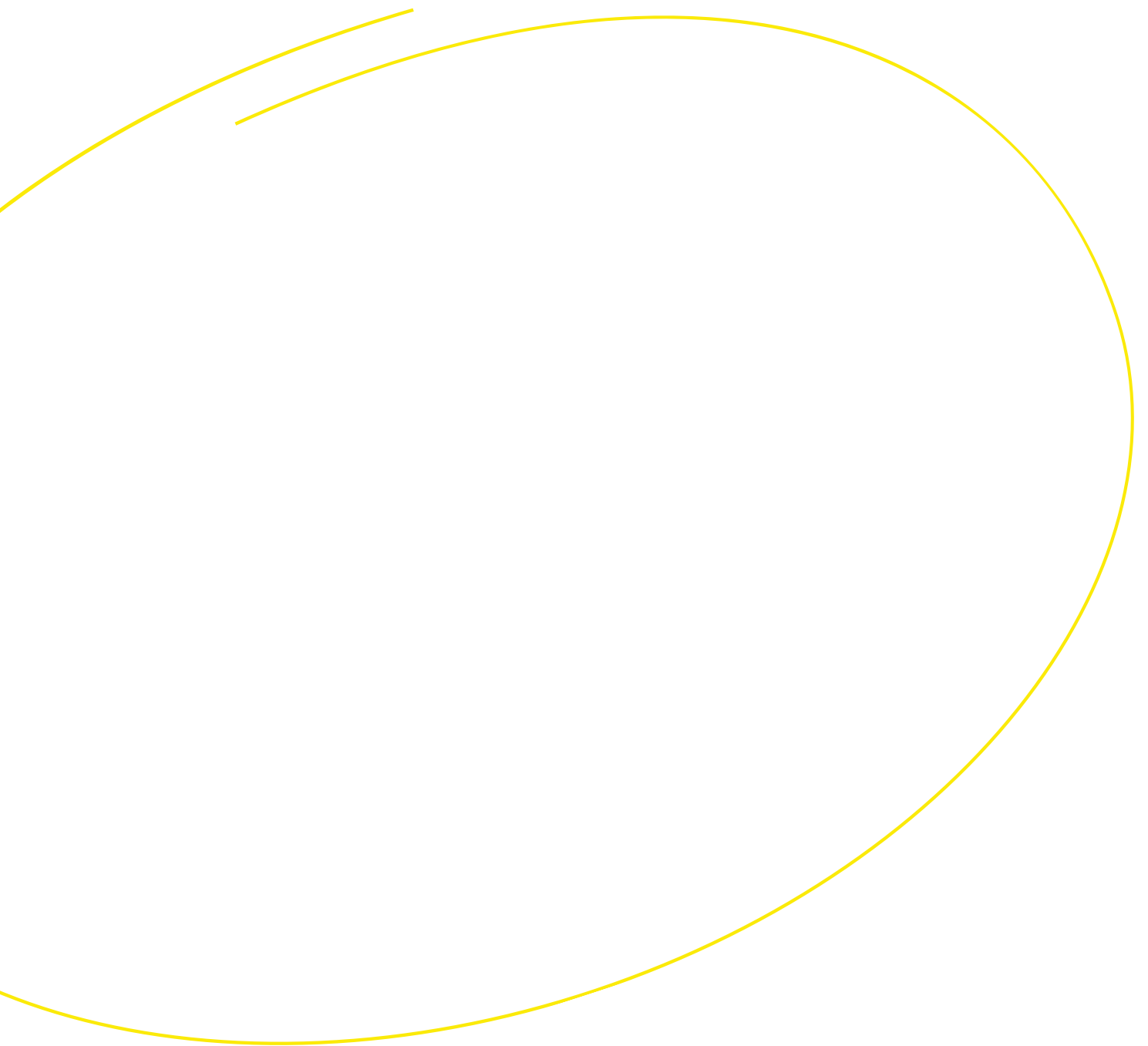


**United in Fragmentation:
Comparing Migration,
Climate, Post-Pandemic
Recovery and Rule of Law
Policy in the V4**



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FOREWORD: Bruised but not broken: Reviving the appeal of the EU in the minds of V4 citizens

“Reviving the appeal of the EU in the minds of the V4 citizens”: This ambitious idea provided the starting point for our 2-year RevivEU project, funded under the European Commission’s CERV citizens’ engagement grant. The project was born from the realization that the EU stands on the verge of transformative changes, poised to reshape not just the EU itself but also that of European societies as we know it today. Of all the challenges, EU climate policies, migration, the Rule of law, and the post-pandemic recovery policy are undoubtedly the most contentious and politically toxic topics, both in the EU and within the CEE region.

A year of research- carried out by experts from 4 think tanks in the V4- culminated in the publishing of this report that comprises a comparative analysis of the V4 countries towards these four crucial topics, which compares the discourses and policies of Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary. Despite having a shared history, similar levels of economic development, and being geographically and culturally close, our experts found both unexpected similarities and differences in policies and discourses. As such, the comparative analysis helps us bring nuance to a region that is sometimes regarded as a monolithic and unanimous block from outside of the CEE.

Naturally, writing a foreword for this report means the length of this publication cannot be left unaddressed. It leads us to a fundamental question: Why dedicate your time to delve into this substantial analysis? The answer is straightforward: because it is important. In this publication, we confront issues that arguably represent the biggest challenges in the CEE and, therefore, also EU politics in the years to come. The CEE region is known for the volatility of its political systems, authoritarian tendencies in some countries, and a unique history – that of 40 years of an autocratic communist regime- which influences the economic structure, development, and organization of civil society in these countries until today. The CEE region is important for the stability of the entire EU project and for the success of the various unfolding transformations and the flagship projects that embody them. This publication is, thus, important for every reader wishing to gain a better understanding of the challenges the EU faces in the years and quite possibly even decades to come.

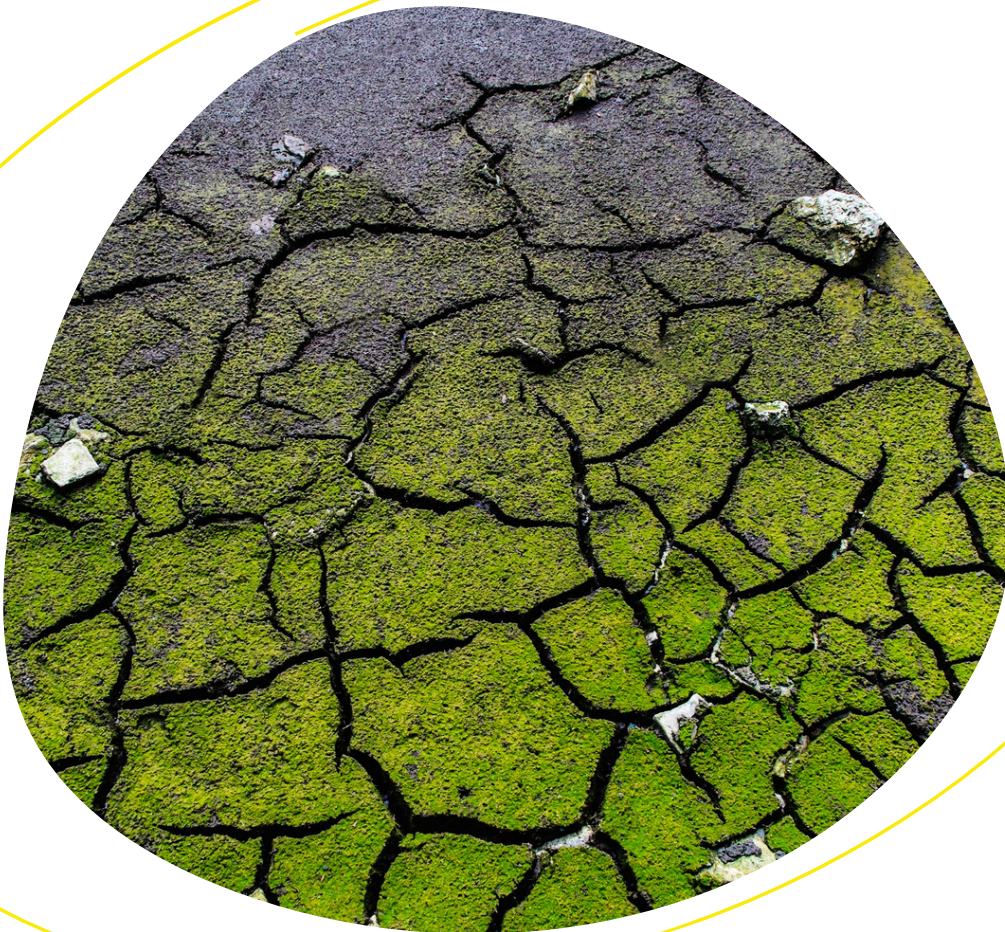
Recently, the V4 region has been much discussed in the EU political and media sphere, especially in relation to the alarming Rule of law situation in some of its member states. While much debated, the region is often insufficiently or even misunderstood. Too often, the countries are wrongly lumped together (by journalists and policymakers alike), and the conclusion about 'politics in the V4' does often not do justice to the complexities of its politics. This, in turn, leads to a failure to understand V4 national policies and discourses, their origin, and the connection between them, and ultimately, a failure to revive the appeal of the EU in the eyes of the V4 citizens.

For this reason, this project provides insights into the four different topics but also into the interconnections between them, unveiling the intricate web of relationships underpinning these challenges. For example, the readers will explore how the Rule of Law mechanism and NGEU are interlinked, both exemplary for the supranational tendencies of the EU, which the V4 governments resist. The analysis will also shed light on the intricacies of intra-V4 cooperation and divergence on the different EU topics. Furthermore, this report will delve into the interactions between the EU and the Member States, examining how the EU is portrayed - and at times used as a scapegoat - in domestic politics and, conversely, how governments and oppositions leverage EU policies to highlight successes and failures. Finally, we cast our gaze toward the future, contemplating the potential impact of the 2024 elections on the region's political landscape. What themes are likely to dominate the agenda, and how might they shape the trajectory of the V4 nations? These are questions that demand our attention as we navigate the ever-evolving political landscape of the V4 and strive to revive the appeal of the EU in the minds of V4 citizens.

It is for the first time that such a comprehensive and timely analysis of the four major topics dominating the EU and V4 agenda has been provided. This report - which is part of a series comprising a policy, discourse, and comparative analysis - is the outcome of extensive research conducted by experts from each of the V4 countries. The comparative analysis represents the final capstone of a year of research. It provides an information gem for experts, policymakers (in Brussels), and, more generally, everyone who tries to gain a better understanding of the political climate of this diverse and crucial region within the EU. In the pages that follow, the reader will find a wealth of insights that offer a deeper understanding of four critical issues dominating political discussions in the V4 and the EU: Migration, Rule of law, climate, and the

Post-COVID recovery. We invite you to explore this publication, engage with its findings, and join us in the ongoing discussion surrounding the V4 and its place within the broader European context.

Climate Champions vs Sceptics: Comparative Study on Climate Policy and Discourse in the V4



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Climate Champions vs Sceptics: Comparative Study on Climate Policy and Discourse in the V4

An introduction to climate policy in the V4

In recent years, climate action has come high on the political agenda of the European Union. In 2019, the EU leaders committed the EU to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. To meet the ambitious targets, significant investment in the restructuring and decarbonization of member states' economies will be necessary in the coming years.

This analysis examines how Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary positioned themselves in the EU climate debate and analyzes the **similarities and differences** in the policies and discourse. It summarizes and compares national reports on policy and discourse in the V4 countries, which were published separately within the RevivEU project.

The national reports on discourse analysis cover a period from June to December 2019, encompassing two crucial European Council meetings where the EU committed itself to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. The national reports on policy analysis cover a larger timeframe ranging from 2015 until the present, allowing to identify the evolution of policies over a longer period.

Shared history

Before looking into the discourse and policy positions of the V4, it is crucial to address the shared history of communism and post-communism, which has undoubtedly shaped these states' economic structure, energy mix, and subsequent policy preferences. All V4 countries met the 2020 targets for greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. However, rather than a result of conscious government climate policies, this decrease in emissions can in large part be attributed to a decline of heavy industry during the post-communist transition, which led to the closing of energy-heavy industries and a sharp decrease in emissions between approximately 30 to 40%

(36% in Czechia¹, 41% in Slovakia², 36% in Poland³ and 32% in Hungary⁴ in 2020 compared to 1990).

Despite the economic restructuring after 1990, the added value from manufacturing is still above the EU average for all V4 countries, having a clear impact on the energy intensity of the local economy (Vienna Institute for International economic Studies 2022).

Energy mix

While the structure of the V4 economies is comparable, significant differences can be found concerning their energy mix. The table below gives an overview of the countries' reliance on coal, renewables, and nuclear energy for electricity generation ("IEA – International Energy Agency" n.d.).

Table 1: energy mix for electricity generation

| Country | coal | renewables | nuclear |
|----------|----------------------------------|------------|-------------------------|
| Czechia | 46% | 13% | 37.5% |
| Slovakia | Closing last coal mine this year | 25% | 58,5% |
| Poland | 68 % | 20% | No nuclear power plants |
| Hungary | 11% | 10% | 46% |

To see how these historical and material realities translate into the political arena, the next part of this analysis will give a summary of V4 policy and discourse positions.

Summary of V4 policy and discourse positions

In the investigated period, climate policy was a relatively marginal topic in most V4 countries. With the exception of the Czech Republic, discussions on the subject were left mainly to minority groups of party experts or opposition parties.

¹ (UNFCCC 2022a)

² (UNFCCC 2022d)

³ (UNFCCC 2022c)

⁴ (UNFCCC 2022b)

Slovakia presented itself as the V4 country most in favor of climate policies. The country was the only of the V4 to agree to the EU neutrality commitment already in June 2019, introduced additional legislation at the national level,⁵ and adopted a text to tighten Slovak climate goals after a public petition was submitted to the Parliament (although the content of the text was watered down in later versions). The public debate in 2019 focused mainly on the investigation of corruption scandals and the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. Therefore, the topic of climate neutrality remained largely non-politicized. If it was addressed, Slovak politicians, especially former PM Peter Pellegrini (SMER), tried to place Slovakia in a group of states that have no problem with the EU's climate policies. However, at the same time, economic growth and security considerations took precedence over climate commitments.

In **Hungary**, climate regulation was equally a marginal topic. While having a damaged image internationally, the country recently took action on the climate front by introducing a rather ambitious national climate law in 2021 that aligns with the EU and UN targets. While some regard the law as a sign of Hungary's resolve to transition, others have questioned the government's willingness to reach the targets, characterizing the move as a "political gimmick rather than a sincere commitment"⁶. The climate discussions in Hungary in 2019 were also non-politicized. PM Viktor Orbán rarely addressed the topic, leaving it to the then President János Áder, who tried to depict himself as a green president and Hungary as a climate leader.

Of the V4, the issue of climate neutrality was discursively the most contentious in **Czechia**. In 2019, the country was critical of the EU's climate policy, which would not sufficiently consider the Czech context, and many influential actors even challenged the existence of anthropogenic global warming. Despite the strong rhetoric of both the then government of Andrej Babiš (ANO) and most of the right-wing opposition, Czechia remained open to compromises in its policies as long as Czech interests were served and the role of member states was respected. With the change of the government in December 2021, the harsh rhetoric relented somewhat, as the new ODS-led right-wing government adopted a more constructive approach. However, the

⁵ including the introduction of carbon tariffs to lower emissions

⁶ See Hungarian Discourse chapter published under the RevivEU project: [Research \(reviveu.net\)](https://reviveu.net)

policy positions, as represented in the framework positions⁷, remained largely the same as those defined by the Babiš administration.

While climate neutrality is more salient in Czechia, practical opposition to an ambitious EU climate policy is undoubtedly the hardest in **Poland**, which has so far not factually committed to climate neutrality by 2050. This is because the transition to a climate-neutral economy will have particularly severe consequences for the Polish economy. Due to its heavy reliance on coal, climate policies would require major structural changes and incur great social costs. Unsurprisingly, Poland has a long-standing opposition to EU-level climate initiatives dating back far before the adoption of the European Green Deal. While attitudes are slightly evolving, there are questions about the feasibility of the EU's ambitious plans. Therefore, the Polish approach remains to “hinder, moderate, and delay” initiatives against climate change.

Comparative Analysis

In what follows, a comparative analysis of the climate discourses and policies will be made. Seven relevant themes have been identified and will serve as a basis for the comparison.

1. Avoiding controversy and highlighting achievements

The general absence of polemic and politicization of climate policy in most V4 countries is the first finding that stands out. Interestingly, the dominant rhetoric in the V4 throughout the analyzed period **recognized the threat posed by manmade climate change and overall agreed that there is a need to act** (although to different degrees). While not always reflected in their policies, countries generally did **not seek controversy** on the topic and instead tried to **highlight their achievements** in the field of climate action.

For example, Slovakia emphasized that it was the first V4 country to subscribe to the climate neutrality goal. Similarly, Hungary promoted itself as a “climate champion” and highlighted its achievements at the UN summit in 2019 as an international selling point. Even Poland, the only EU country that refused to join the

Interestingly, the dominant rhetoric in the V4 throughout the analyzed period recognized the threat posed by manmade climate change and overall agreed that there is a need to act.

⁷ Framework positions outline the Czech government's official position towards individual EU policies and guide the country's negotiating positions.

climate neutrality commitment, even during the December 2019 European Council summit, generally focused on the government's accomplishments in the field of climate change. When criticized, the Polish government tried not to enter into polemics with climate activists but instead resorted to pro-climate rhetoric by emphasizing that they are "on the same side"⁸.

A possible explanation for the absence of controversy at the time is that climate policy was a **topic in the margins of the political discussions** of most V4 countries. Therefore, government parties chose not to politicize the issue and instead focused on themes that are more central to them, like migration and the rule of law. When governments received criticism for opposing EU climate policies, their resistance was usually not framed as opposition towards the principle of climate mitigation but justified by (financial) feasibility concerns over the new ambitious measures. They further reinforced this argument by referring to the structure of their economy, a legacy from the communist period, or to their relative economic backwardness compared to Western Europe.

Czechia was the only exception from this non-politicized discourse in 2019. The dominant discourse (of the ODS and SPD parties and the then president Miloš Zeman) perceived climate **neutrality as a threat**, arguing that manmade climate change is a myth, blaming climate activists for creating hysteria, and arguing that the focus on climate distorts the attention from real problems such as migration and Islamization. However, despite this skeptical discourse, both the current and the former Czech governments remained open to compromises in their policies.

2. Under pressure: a V4 perspective

Secondly, the analysis points out that the V4 members, Czechia and Poland in particular, feel under **pressure** by the EU's ambitious policy. In the Czech context, emphasis is put on the increasingly strict measures imposed by the EU. Also in Poland, initiatives such as the increase of ETS prices put considerable financial strain on the Polish industry.

⁸ See Polish Discourse chapter published under the RevivEU project: [Research \(reviveu.net\)](https://reviveu.net)

The V4 members, Czechia and Poland in particular, feel under pressure by the EU's ambitious policy.

In addition, it is felt that the **national context and specificity are not sufficiently taken into account** in the EU approach. The Czech position is that it is especially hard for its industry-reliant economy to make the transition to climate neutrality. Similarly, Poland points out that its industry structure, and especially its reliance on coal, limits the country's ability to engage in ambitious policies. It is, therefore, argued that the EU should consider the states' different starting points and transformation costs.

Thirdly, the two countries emphasize that **the current policy favors other, non-industry heavy and fossil-reliant member states** (Czechia) and that the policies are pushed by rich countries with another energy mix, notably France and Germany (Poland). To mitigate the adverse effects of the current policies, Czechia and Poland demand more sensitivity to the national context, the inclusion of a clear impact assessment (Czechia), and cost calculation (Poland) of the EU climate policies.

Slovakia and Hungary put less emphasis on the arguments put forward by Czechia and Poland. They do, however, share the concern for **technology neutrality**. The V4 argues that countries' flexibility in choosing their own energy sources is necessary to carry out local decarbonization. According to them, flexibility guarantees that no member state is forced to make costly investments in renewable energy, which could lead to skyrocketing energy costs. As such, all V4 governments, Czechia and Slovakia in particular, have insisted that member states should have the right to choose their own energy mix and that nuclear energy and natural gas should be classified as "green energy sources" during the European Council meetings.

3. Moderation, concrete solutions, and the responsibility of global players

Besides emphasizing technology neutrality, all V4 members pointed to the potential adverse consequences of climate policies, which could harm the national and EU economy and competitiveness. While the V4 is willing to engage in EU climate policy, it is emphasized that an ambitious climate policy cannot come at the expense of economic stability, growth, and competitiveness and cannot deepen energy poverty. Thus, **economic concerns take precedence over climate action**.

In addition, all V4 states refer to the **responsibility of other global actors** in climate change. In their 2019 discourse, politicians often emphasized the limited role of the EU, which is responsible for only 9% of global carbon emissions (Eurostat 2022). Big polluters like China and India bear a larger responsibility for climate change and should, therefore, step up their efforts. Lastly, the Czech and Polish governments prefer **concrete policies** that focus on specific problems such as droughts, land depletion, or plastic waste. These concrete environmental problems were often not painted as a consequence or a cause of the climate crisis. The solution, therefore, demands less far-reaching and costly economic restructuring, making it more acceptable to the population, local actors argued.

4. The 'nuclear' option

As highlighted above, significant emphasis is put on technology neutrality, or the freedom of countries to determine their own energy mix. Interestingly, in all V4 countries, nuclear energy is perceived as the way to bring emissions down and materialize the green transition. A possible explanation could be that replacing coal-fired power plants with nuclear has only a limited impact on the socio-energy regime⁹, as the energy production remains centralized and the regulated monopoly in production and distribution can remain in place (Wagner, Grobelski, and Harembski 2016).

Hence, for countries with coal power plants and a high proportion of electricity generation from coal, a transition that includes nuclear is often deemed beneficial. Unsurprisingly, therefore, this strategy is used in **Czechia and Slovakia**, which currently rely on both coal and nuclear power plants for their electricity production (Kochanek 2021). For **Poland**, on the contrary, the emphasis on nuclear to achieve carbon neutrality is less straightforward. Poland currently has no nuclear power plants, and transitioning to nuclear would require a costly and long-term investment.

All V4 countries currently are currently building or considering building new plants to increase the share of nuclear in their energy mix. However, the Hungarian initiative is undoubtedly the most controversial. Hungary's Russia-backed expansion of its only nuclear power plant at **Paks**

⁹ the interconnection between the design of energy systems and the design of societal arrangements. It refers to the way the production, consumption, and distribution of energy are organised in the supply chain.

has sparked criticism and raised security concerns (Morgan 2019), and neighboring Austria even took the matter to court (Kurmayer 2022).

5. Funds for change: a pragmatic approach to climate regulation

Besides reliance on nuclear energy, country analyses show that EU investments are also considered crucial to materialize decarbonization in the V4. It is, however, important to note that the debate on the climate neutrality commitment in 2019 coincided with the negotiations on the 2021-2027 **multiannual financial framework**. Consequently, the discussions on the long-term budget undoubtedly played a role in how the V4 states positioned themselves vis-à-vis the climate neutrality commitment.

Czechia fears that, due to its industry-heavy economy, the cost of transition might be too high and will affect the **competitiveness** of the Czech economy in the EU. While there was no principled opposition to climate action, the government has been making the case that they do not have the financial nor administrative means and that the country would only agree to climate initiatives if it could rely on EU financing for its economy's transition. Meanwhile, in **Hungary**, the veto of the EU climate neutrality commitment in June 2019 was used as a bargaining chip to obtain more money from EU funds.

Similarly, in **Poland**, the approach to EU climate policy is transactional, with Poland, to some extent, willing to accept climate policies if the EU supports the country in its transition. However, it should be noted that, especially in the Polish case, substantial investments will indeed be necessary to materialize the just transition of the coal-powered economy.

6. Progressive voices

While the V4 countries are traditionally not at the forefront of climate action in the EU, there is an increasing consciousness that, even though the transition will be costly, the cost of non-transition might be even higher. More progressive pro-climate voices consequently also appeared in the political discourse of the V4 in the analyzed period.

For example, the main **Polish** opposition platform, the Civic Coalition, argued that the government policy lacks a long-term vision, that the transition is a necessity and opportunity, and warned that with rising emission fees, coal-fired power generation would not remain profitable. While the opposition favored more ambitious climate action, its arguments were

mainly economic. Emphasis on the global threats of climate change was limited to smaller and weaker opposition groups.

Similarly, in **Czechia**, the Pirate Party presented the green transition as both a necessity and an opportunity. It further accused the then PM Babiš of hindering climate action and destroying the environment and stressed the need for Czechia to commit to climate neutrality. As in the case of Poland, emphasis was put primarily on the economic cost of non-transition for an outdated and non-competitive economy.

Interestingly, opposition to the government's climate policies was also visible in **Hungary**. For the discussions on migration, the rule of law, and the NGEU recovery plan, the opposition had difficulties being heard in the political debate. However, PM Victor Orbán remained largely silent on climate issues, not employing his “master frame of the declining west”¹⁰ and allowing for rare visibility of opposition voices. While there was no big debate between the Hungarian government and the opposition over the problems and solutions for climate policies, the green and democratic opposition was slightly more ambitious, rejecting the prioritization of economic growth over climate change.

7. Vetoes and Victories: climate discussions as a political tool

‘Vetoes and victories’ summarizes the last theme of this comparative analysis, which refers to the use of the climate issue as a political tool by the V4 governments. The EU negotiations on climate neutrality, in particular, were used by all governments as a political opportunity to present themselves as defenders of the national interest.

¹⁰ Orbán's frame of the declining West is an overarching narrative that conveys the idea that Western Europe, having lost its values and mired in migration and crisis, no longer acts as a role model for Central Europeans.

At the European Council summit in June 2019, –Poland, Hungary, and Czechia initially refused to subscribe to the commitment of climate neutrality by 2050, leading to tensions in Brussels. When **Czech** PM Andrej Babiš finally endorsed the deal in exchange for technology neutrality commitment in December 2019, he portrayed himself as a successful fighter for Czech positions¹¹. Similarly, the **Slovak** government presented the deal as a victory for all Slovaks and used its position as a tool to promote the strength of the country as a European nation¹². **Hungary** also voted in favor of the commitment in December 2019 in exchange for extra support to finance the green transition, which the government presented to the citizens as its success (Magyari 2019). Lastly, also **Poland's** sustained opposition to the climate neutrality goal after December 2019 – resulting in the permission to achieve the EU targets at a slower pace and the creation of a fund with significant resources for Poland's transition – was painted as a success by the governing party.

The EU negotiations on climate neutrality, in particular, were used by all governments as a political opportunity to present themselves as defenders of the national interest.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis has aimed to give an overview of the similarities and differences in the policy and discourse of Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary. The takeaway messages are the following:

- **The transition towards climate neutrality is more difficult in the V4 compared to some other EU states.** While the V4 countries are not frontrunners in EU climate efforts, they have shown a reasonable amount of activity to fulfill the decarbonization goals. To understand the region's preferences, one must understand the specifics of the local economy as well as the energy mix. The region is still highly reliant on manufacturing, particularly the automotive industry, and (at least in the case of Czechia and Poland) coal-generated energy. Therefore, the green transformation will likely be relatively more costly and potentially

¹¹ See Czech Discourse chapter published under the RevivEU project: [Research \(reviveu.net\)](https://reviveu.net)

¹² See Slovak Discourse chapter published under the RevivEU project: [Research \(reviveu.net\)](https://reviveu.net)

endanger a larger number of jobs. Furthermore, these countries have already undergone one difficult economic transformation in the last 30 years, making them more cautious of another economic overhaul.

- **Climate policy has so far been largely non-politicized in most of the V4.** This is slightly different in the case of Czechia, where climate neutrality has been more salient in the public discourse, forming an outlier. However, in general, other concerns – like migration (Czech Republic and Hungary), political scandals and corruption (Slovakia), or the rule of law (Poland and Hungary) – tended to dominate the political agenda. It remains to be seen whether climate will become more politicized as concrete measures with real impacts on local economies will be rolled out.

- **Climate policy is subjected to other policy goals.**

The existence of anthropogenic climate change is usually not contested by the core actors in governments. However, climate policy is often subjected to other policy goals, including foreign policy contacts (Hungary's relationship with Russia), the strive to secure more EU funding, economic growth, innovation, and competitiveness. Sometimes, climate policy is also used by national leaders as a political tool to present themselves as defenders of the national interest or else as a justification for strong rule and national exceptionalism (as is the case in Hungary).

- **The war in Ukraine is an important factor in decarbonization.**

The war in Ukraine has provided a political imperative to reduce dependency on Russia, adding additional pressure to the debate on energy transition, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. In **Poland**,-which has long neglected the issue of the energy transition, the war has provided an important impulse to search for alternatives to the current coal-based energy model, justifying policies that would not be possible under normal circumstances. Also in **Czechia**, the international developments sparked debate on energy security and the necessity to strengthen its energy independence through, amongst others, nuclear energy or diversification of energy suppliers (Nattrass 2022). In **Hungary**, the war in Ukraine equally had repercussions. The heavily import-dependent economy experienced soaring electricity and gas prices after the invasion. While the benefits from increased domestic production could be significant, the Hungarian government has prioritized foreign policy contacts over energy autonomy and climate considerations, preferring to strengthen its ties with Putin.

What do the results mean for the 2024 European Parliament elections?

The RevivEU national reports and this comparative report analyzed both the discourse and practical policy of V4 states vis-à-vis climate neutrality. In this final part, we draw implications for the upcoming 2024 European Parliament elections:

Czechia

- Climate neutrality and Fit for 55 proposals, particularly the ones related to automotive (Euro 7, CO2 emission standards), are likely to be among the most salient topics ahead of the European Parliament elections.
- With the exception of Pirates, the main Czech political actors (ANO, ODS, SPD) are going to adopt, at best cautious, at worst alarmist discourse regarding the EU climate goals, claiming it threatens the EU competitiveness and strategic autonomy.
- As evidenced during the Czech 2022 EU Presidency, the shift in local energy mix towards non-emission sources is going to be framed mostly as a matter of energy security and independence from Russia.

Slovakia

- Climate policies have been perceived rather positively by Slovaks, but it has, so far, not been one of the main political topics. However, a recent proposal on car emission standards will likely cause new societal conflicts and make climate topics more politicized.
- EU climate policy will probably not be among the main political topics of the European Parliament election campaign.
- The Slovak Republic has invested much of its recovery plan in supporting the green economy and decarbonization. Individual measures within the country can become a topic in the pre-election debate.

Hungary

- In Hungary, the issue of climate neutrality has been deliberately kept away from the political agenda, and it is unlikely to resurface in the European Parliamentary elections campaign (though the summer heatwaves might give the issue a renewed salience).

- While the opposition will try to link the climate goals to the imperative of energy independence from Russia, the government will likely emphasize the merits of the Paks 2 project as an important contribution to that goal.
- Climate action is a rare exception that doesn't fit neatly in the opposition-government cleavages, in contrast to many cultural issues (such as LGBT rights, immigration, or gender-related matters). Though most Hungarians are committed to the cause of carbon neutrality and climate change mitigation, it is unlikely for either the opposition or the government to mobilize many voters on this issue alone.
- While some opposition parties (LMP, PM, and, to some extent, Momentum) will proactively try to craft a "greener" image in the eyes of the anti-Orban liberal opposition, their green agenda competes for a relatively narrow bloc of the urban middle and upper classes, whose votes are likely to splinter, as a result.

Poland

- The circumstances surrounding the war in Ukraine may make the topic of climate neutrality more relevant in Poland than in earlier years. Climate neutrality is likely to be raised mainly in the context of Poland's energy security, the war in Ukraine, and independence from Russia.
- The previously neglected topic of nuclear energy may gain importance, as the Law and Justice government has emphasized the necessity of introducing nuclear energy in Poland with its decisions in the first half of 2023.

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V4 and Migration: A Rare Case of Unity

Comparative Study on Migration Policies and Discourse in the V4



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V4 and Migration: A Rare Case of Unity - Comparative Study on Migration Policies and Discourse in the V4

Introduction to migration policy in the V4

After the rising number of immigrants in 2015, the implementation of the Common European Asylum System became a priority for EU member states. However, it has been documented by many studies that the V4 group countries drifted away from these intentions (Nagy 2017). A historical overview of the V4 countries' policies on refugees shows that the Visegrad Group has not yet experienced mass influxes of asylum seekers before. Not only the Orbán government and Slovak Prime Minister at that time, Robert Fico, but also the newly elected Polish PiS government and the Czech Republic have contributed to the shift in the national security approach. During 2016, the members of the Visegrad group worked together as a united bloc on migration issues in Brussels. However, while in Poland and Hungary, the illiberal sovereignist narrative prevailed, the Czech and Slovak governments took a more pragmatic approach to the EU generally (Kiner 2022).

How do the Visegrad countries perceive the question of migration? This analysis examines how the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary have positioned themselves in relation to the adoption and implementation of Frontex and looks at the similarities and differences in policies and discourse. It summarizes and compares national reports on policy and discourse in the V4 countries, also published as part of the RevivEU project.

The national reports on discourse analysis cover a period from June to December 2018. Mass immigration has caused the issue to feature in many media and political discourses in the member states. The time frame covers European Council conclusions from June 28-29, which confirmed that relocation and resettlement of refugees should take place only on a voluntary basis. (European Council 2018). The negotiation process about the UN's Migration Compact can also be dated to the same time interval. Various important events within member countries were included in the discourse analysis, such as the Hungarian parliamentary elections in the Spring of 2018 and the EP debate on the Sargentini report.

The policy analysis looks at a larger period, from 2015 to the present, which allowed the researchers to trace policy developments over a longer period. Since both the policy and

discourse analyses are looking back in time, changes in government in the Czech Republic and Slovakia had to be taken into account. By contrast, the same leading party has been in office in Poland since 2015 and in Hungary since 2010. In the Czech Republic, the ANO Andrej Babiš, Prime Minister since 2017, was replaced by the right-wing coalition led by Petr Fiala’s ODS at the end of 2021, while Babiš became the leader of the opposition. Yet the critical actors in the Czech political scene have largely remained the same. In Slovakia, the SMER government of Peter Pellegrini, in office between 2018 and 2020, was replaced in 2020 by the government of Igor Matovič (OĽaNO), and since then, there have been two more changes of prime minister. The period since the 2020 elections until today has been dominated by the disintegration of parliamentary parties. A fundamental transformation of the party-political scene is expected after the September 2023 elections.

The number of asylum seekers

In the year of 2015, which marked the start of the migration crisis, over a million people fled to the EU, mostly from the Syrian civil war, but asylum-seekers also arrived from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran (Witold et al. 2018). It is important to clarify that the crisis has impacted member states unevenly. Among the V4, Hungary has clearly been the most affected in terms of numbers. The percentage share of the V4 in the total number of asylum applications in the EU in 2015 demonstrates this: Hungary received 13.4% of applications, Poland 1.3%, while the Czech Republic’s and Slovakia’s shares remained marginal, between 0.3-0.1% (Mohay 2021).

| | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|----------------|-------|---------|--------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Czech Republic | 905 | 1235 | 1200 | 1140 | 1350 | 1570 | 790 | 1055 | 1335 |
| Hungary | 41215 | 174 435 | 28 215 | 3115 | 635 | 465 | 90 | 40 | 45 |
| Poland | 5610 | 10 255 | 9780 | 3005 | 2405 | 2765 | 1510 | 6240 | 7700 |
| Slovakia | 230 | 270 | 100 | 150 | 155 | 215 | 265 | 330 | 500 |

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF ASYLUM APPLICATIONS IN THE V4 MEMBER STATES FROM 2014-2022. DATA SOURCE: EUROSTAT- ASYLUM APPLICANTS BY TYPE OF APPLICANT, CITIZENSHIP, AGE, AND SEX - ANNUAL AGGREGATED DATA¹³

¹³ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/migr_asyappctza/settings_1/table?lang=en

| | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Czech Republic | 375 | 460 | 435 | 145 | 155 | 135 | 105 | 260 | 325 |
| Hungary | 510 | 425 | 430 | 1290 | 365 | 60 | 130 | 40 | 30 |
| Poland | 720 | 640 | 295 | 510 | 375 | 265 | 370 | 2155 | 3870 |
| Slovakia | 170 | 80 | 210 | 60 | 45 | 35 | 40 | 45 | 70 |

TABLE 2. FIRST INSTANCE DECISIONS ON ASYLUM APPLICATIONS BY TYPE OF DECISION - POSITIVE DECISIONS ANNUAL AGGREGATED DATA. SOURCE: EUROSTAT¹⁴

Summary of V4 Policy and Discourse positions

During the period under review, the increased number of asylum seekers was a highly politicized and significant issue in all V4 countries.

In the **Czech Republic**, it is an extremely culturally rooted topic, and the acceptance of refugees is strongly dependent on their country of origin. There is a strong leaning towards securitization of the admission of asylum seekers and a strong resistance against any form of solidarity clause within the common EU asylum policy that would lead to a redistribution of refugees. As in all V4 countries, the Frontex mandate reform encountered resistance in the Czech Republic. Although the new mandate addresses the main Czech concern- protection of the common border- there were concerns about a potential breach of sovereignty of the member states. The Czechs eventually consented but opposed the possibility of deploying an EU border guard without the approval of the hosting country. Regarding the discourse in the country, a vast majority of actors (ANO, ODS, President Zeman, SPD) depict the arrival of Middle Eastern/African refugees as a threat, call for stopping them at the Schengen borders, oppose refugee quota, claim the V4 in 2015 showed foresight and that its positions are now adopted across the EU. For the far-right SPD, migration is an existential threat and an inherent plan of the EU elites to denationalize the member states. SPD advocated for Cxexit and claimed that Western Europe is becoming dangerous due to ‘criminal migrants’. Due to overwhelming

¹⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00192/default/table>

opposition to migration shared by the Czech politicians and also the public, as well as disinformation, it was very difficult to formulate a liberal and/or more solidaristic approach to asylum seekers. Consequently, the liberal Pirates chose not to talk so much about the topic.

Hungary has become one of the most vocal critics of international migration, even though it is a transit country. The ‘threats’ posed by migration to the country’s national values have become the government’s main narratives since 2015. The communication on refugees became an instrument of prime minister Viktor Orbán’s political strategy, echoed by the media and billboards across the country. In 2015 the Government ordered the creation of a temporary security border barrier to close the so-called “green border”. They expected the EU to contribute to the costs. However, the EU declined to contribute as, from their point of view, this was not the appropriate method to control the migration pressure. In 2021, Frontex announced its withdrawal from Hungary. As Hungary failed to implement the European Court of Justice’s ruling, it was declared that Hungary unlawfully restricts the access of foreign citizens to international protection and returns people without a valid visa to their country of origin without following the expulsion procedure.

The Hungarian government’s approach to the issue is best understood through Orbán’s master narrative: migration is the primary weapon of the enemies of Hungary: it can be used to “reshape” Hungary through “population exchange”. Every criticism and condemnation that Orbán and his government receive is just a political attack aimed at forcing migration on Hungary. The central position of migration as a weapon in Orbán’s master frame can be explained by the extraordinary success of his anti-immigration campaign launched in early 2015. By applying the toolkit of anti-immigration campaigns from all around the world, Orbán framed refugees and migration as a threat to the national security in Hungary (DW 2018). Only the liberal Democratic Coalition party (DK) had a counternarrative, every other opposition party relied on the government’s framing of events and merely reacted to them. Democratic Coalition meanwhile constructed a counternarrative, adopting a staunchly humanitarian, pro-European position where the focus shifts from national security to the security of refugees who suffer from the “inhumane” policies of the Orbán government.

In **Slovakia**, almost the entire political scene fought against any possibility of asylum seekers coming to the country during the 2014-2016 migration crisis. Robert Fico’s government filed a

lawsuit against the European Commission for its attempts to enforce the so-called quotas, the prime minister wanted (unsuccessfully) to close the border with Austria and Hungary, and he advocated the protection of the external Schengen borders or the creation of various detention centers, e.g. in the Middle East. The Slovak position towards migration rapidly changed by the time of Russian invasion to Ukraine (the tendency was also observed in the other V4 countries). The border regime was relaxed, the government granted asylum to practically every Ukrainian refugee, integration efforts began in education, and the parliamentary parties jointly supported almost all of the proposed legislative aid to refugees.

In terms of public discourse in Slovakia, parliamentarians tended to evade the issue of migration altogether and shied away from making strong statements. However, they collectively rejected the acceptance of refugees based on the quota system while portraying the issue as a responsibility of the countries directly affected by migration. They tried to put Slovakia in a position of a country helping other European countries most affected by the migration flow. Still, the European Union should not see this as welcoming refugee seekers into European territory but instead as a voluntary humanitarian act to help their European neighbors. Some representatives, especially members of the Slovak National Party, portrayed the Global Migration Pact as a threat to national sovereignty regarding Slovakia's right to decide who can or cannot enter the country. They also defended their position through the frame of "cultural otherness" of Central Europe, meaning that Central Europeans are different from people coming to Europe from other continents, and they are also different from Western European people. Similar to Hungary, the anti-Brussels narrative was also present here. This rhetoric has dominated the (far) right of the political-ideological spectrum- the SNS, but also Smer-SD.

In **Poland**, the issue of Middle Eastern migration was an external problem: in practice, the country did not feel any significant migration pressure from that direction. In view of the fact that refugees did not seek to go to Poland, they were in a position of voluntary assistance- to border countries on the one hand and to destination countries receiving asylum seekers on the other. The dilemmas that resulted from this position were addressed differently by different political groupings. Civic Platform, in power until 2015, betted on cooperation with big EU countries, albeit with reservations, and yielded to the expectations of stronger European partners. Law and Justice, which took over from it, on the other hand, weaponized this issue as a tool in domestic politics. The political debate over attitudes towards refugees from the Middle

East resurfaced in 2021, as illegal crossings of the Polish-Belarusian border by migrants from the Middle East increased significantly from the spring of 2021 onwards. First, left-liberal organizations and opposition groups began to criticize Polish border services for their brutal treatment of people trying to secretly cross the Polish border and accused them of failing to follow the routine procedures when dealing with refugees. The problems escalated, however, and events on the Polish-Belarusian border became subject, to an even greater extent than in 2015, to an aggressive media exchange of blows between leading political forces in the country. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the consensus in Poland among all major political forces around the need to support Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees have largely muted earlier disputes over migrants from the Middle East.

The Polish discussion on migration began in 2015 when the issue became the subject of the election campaign. On the one hand, the logic of the campaign pushed parties into opposing corners, and their migration-related messaging became sharply delineated, and their mutual antagonisms were highlighted as a result. In the following years, on the other hand, the topic lost its salience. The influx of Middle Eastern refugees into Poland was a settled thing of the past, and the ruling camp, led by PiS, could present itself as the victor who defended the country against the threat posed by asylum-seekers. By this time, the government and the opposition expressed similar views on the influx of Middle Eastern migrants into Poland. As in the other V4 countries, public opinion was clearly against immigration, and no serious political force was interested in putting up a fight. The governing party, as in Hungary, emphasized conservative and cultural values, which the majority of the public could identify with. The opposition camp was less coherent, as its political pragmatism (imposing restrictions on the influx of refugees) was not fully compatible with the liberal philosophy it advocated. This led to occasional accusations against the main opposition party in various media outlets and also from its own core supporters.

Comparative Analysis

Throughout the country-specific policies and discourses, a number of common themes emerged that we shall elaborate on below. Specifically, we shall highlight five relevant issues that form the basis for comparison:

1. Framing migration as a cultural threat

The member states' concern about possible cultural threats is the first finding that stands out when analyzing the discourse of incumbent governments. In the Czech Republic, the African origin and Muslim faith of refugees, as culturally incompatible and unable to adapt to a Czech social environment based on Christian values and customs, have become the main public narrative in the debate on migration management (Witold et al. 2018). Comparatively speaking, migration has not been addressed as a topic of major significance in Slovakia. While the V4 countries all emphasized that national sovereignty must be protected against multiculturalism, Slovakia took a more moderate stance in publicly expressing its view on the issue, especially compared to Poland and Hungary (Glied and Zameczki 2021). In practice, Poland did not feel any significant migration pressure around 2015. Middle Eastern migration was an external problem for the country, nevertheless, there are more similarities between Hungary and Poland regarding the issue of migration than between any other V4 member states. According to the literature, within the V4, Hungary and Poland were the two opinion leaders (Glied and Zameczki 2021). Right-wing political ideology mobilizes negative attitudes towards refugees, leading to the rejection and discrimination of these groups through the perception of symbolic threat, which may center on culture or religion (Davidov et al. 2020). Since the first large waves of the migration flows in 2015, the Law and Justice party has emphasized cultural and political autonomy in Poland. Based on this narrative, refugees from the Middle East were presented as groups not only foreign and unwilling to integrate but also hostile to the Christian tradition. Several examples were presented by the party from Western countries of why immigration has been a problem in these regions in order to highlight the potential dangers that Poland could face. Jakub Skiba, vice-minister of internal affairs and administration of the Law and Justice government, stated: *"As for the Middle East, and Arab cultures, I am much more reserved. The experience of Western countries is not positive in this regard. Just look at France or the UK. The process of acculturation and integration is unbelievably difficult and generates huge problems."* (dzieje.pl 2016).

Political leaders claimed that it was their moral duty not to give in to Western pressure and thus to prevent asylum-seekers with different cultural backgrounds from entering. A similar tendency occurred in Hungary. Orbán framed migration as a threat to Christian and cultural values from the beginning. He states that *"(...) in reality migration means population exchange,*

(...). This will change our culture, and in a few years we won't recognize our own village, our own town, our own country, and our own continent." (Orban 2018).

2. Rejection of the Quota

The idea of the redistribution of refugees within the EU on the basis of binding quotas has been met with strong opposition from the V4 countries (Kiner 2022). A proposal from the European Commission included redistributing 120,000 refugees from the most affected areas: Greece, and Italy (European Council 2018). It was adopted by a qualified majority with the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia voting against it. Poland voted in favor of the decision. From the beginning, Hungary and Slovakia have had a negative attitude toward the relocation of refugees from Greece and Italy. They voted against Council Decision 2015/1523/EU and Council Decision 2015/1601/EU (Zdanowicz 2021). The controversial referendum in Hungary against a mandatory EU refugee quota was a further act of the "cultural counter-revolution" (Nič 2016).

For the V4 countries, the common political success would have been to offer an alternative and reference point for other countries within the EU, and to be able to influence Community policy and force policy change (Glied and Zameczki 2021). In fact, arguments that Central Europe had understood early that migration had to be handled through hard-line policies, and now the Western European states were following this lead, were widespread in the V4. A common policy of the V4 countries on migration instead of an 'open-door' policy is to address effectively the root causes of migration flows, i.e., to address the drivers of migration, to support countries of origin and thereby reduce migration towards the EU (Szalai et al 2017).

3. The Anti-Brussels Narrative

V4 countries have expressed concerns and criticisms regarding the European Union's handling of the migration crisis in 2015. One of those was based on the need to protect values such as Christianity and the sovereignty of states. The literature observes that Poland and Hungary's expressions are more militant against Brussels and that the two countries' condescending language is more likely to hinder real debate than to advance it. Moreover, one cannot ignore the Rule of Law process concerning these two countries as they are closely linked to the issue of migration. By contrast, Slovakia has been more open to compromise and has used less harsh language (Glied- Zameczki 2021). However, even these countries were reluctant to accept a

significant number of refugees and have criticized what it perceives as an imposition of decisions by Brussels on matters of national sovereignty. Slovakia has argued that member states should have greater control over decisions related to accepting refugees.

4. Ukrainian refugees

The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine has dramatically increased migration flows to Europe. The UNHCR estimates that by August 2022, more than 6.6 million Ukrainians had been seeking asylum across Europe, most of them temporarily settled in Central and Eastern Europe. Poland and the Czech Republic are currently hosting the largest group of refugees, with significant numbers also in Hungary and Slovakia. In October 2022, nearly 2 million Ukrainian refugees were registered in the Visegrad countries under temporary protection: 30,000 in Hungary, 96,000 in Slovakia, 442,000 in the Czech Republic, and 1,422,482 in Poland. (Pędziwiatr 2023). This subsection outlines how the V4 countries are positioned in the context of the current refugee crisis compared to the migration situation before the outbreak of the war.

The V4 countries emphasized the need for enhanced EU measures to protect the external borders of the Schengen Area. They advocated for increased resources, technology, and personnel to support border control operations and prevent unauthorized entry.

The Visegrad Group (V4) countries have generally displayed different attitudes towards refugees from different regions, including Ukraine. Poland has historically had a more positive stance towards Ukrainian refugees, particularly due to the historical and cultural ties between the two countries. Poland provided aid to most of the Ukrainian refugees in absolute numbers, while the Czech Republic had the highest number in the EU considering the size of population. Hungary has been more receptive to Ukrainian refugees compared to refugees from other regions. Due to geographical proximity and historical connections, Hungary has implemented specific policies to provide temporary protection to Ukrainian asylum seekers during the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Slovakia and the Czech Republic also have been more accepting of Ukrainian refugees than of asylum-seekers from the Middle East (Pędziwiatr 2023). Contrary to Hungary, Slovakia also extended temporary protection to non-Ukrainians with Ukrainian residence permits. Already a few days after the beginning of the conflict, the Czech government ordered on 2

March to issue Ukrainian citizens coming to Czechia special visas for the purpose of an “enduring stay” over 90 days, thus fully opening its borders to Ukrainian refugees (OECD 2022).

5. Safeguarding external borders

Overall, the V4 countries are almost identical in their approach to migration. Their common ground has been the rejection of quotas linked to the mandatory redistribution of refugees and prioritizing the safeguarding of the internal security of their countries.

The V4 countries emphasized the need for enhanced EU measures to protect the external borders of the Schengen Area. They advocated for increased resources, technology, and personnel to support border control operations and prevent unauthorized entry. Among the members of the V4, Hungary has been the most openly critical of the EU’s response to the crisis in the context of border security. This has led Hungary to

take unilateral measures, often presented as a reinforcement of Hungary’s historical role as a ‘bastion of Europe’, which have culminated in the construction of a fence on its southern border (Glied- Pap 2016). External border control is inseparable from the maintenance of the Schengen area. In Slovakia’s discourse the best strategy to secure the Schengen border and minimize the migration flow to the European countries lies in the capacity of the EU to build refugee camps outside of Europe. Both sides- opposition and coalition- supported this statement. In February 2023, at the border management conference, Slovakia reaffirmed its position supporting the protection of external borders and the use of European resources to provide funding to countries on the external borders of the EU. V4 countries stressed the importance of cooperation with the EU border agency, Frontex (now the European Border and Coast Guard Agency), to strengthen border control and enhance the security of the Schengen Area’s external borders.

Conclusion

The objective of the analysis was to overview the similarities and differences between the policies and discourses of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. The main findings are the following:

- Overall, the V4 countries are almost identical in their approach to migration. Their common ground has been the rejection of quotas linked to the mandatory redistribution of refugees and prioritizing the safeguarding of the internal security of their countries.

During the 2015-2016 migration crisis, the Visegrad countries coordinated their political communication through quasi-identical communication strategies. The approach of the V4 was to reject the open-door policy advocated by the European Union. Our main findings are that

The general view of the V4 countries is that while refugees of African origin and/or Muslim religion are seen as a threat to national security and cultural unity, their Ukrainian “brothers” deserve immediate assistance and asylum.

the migration crisis has strengthened cohesion among the V4 countries. The V4 countries’ more negative attitudes towards migration were based on shared historical experiences rooted in their geographical location. However, their reactions differed during the migration crisis. While in Poland and Hungary, the illiberal sovereignist narrative prevailed, the Czech and Slovak

governments took a more pragmatic approach to the EU. These differences were the most visible in the realm of political discourse. Another significant difference is that Hungary undertook the most tangible anti-immigration measures, partly due to its geographical position in the Schengen zone and its transit country status.

- The general view of the V4 countries is that while refugees of African origin and/or Muslim religion are seen as a threat to national security and cultural unity, their Ukrainian “brothers” deserve immediate assistance and asylum.
- The V4 issued several common positions in 2015 and 2016 outlining their policy on migration. The three central points are:
 - Safeguarding external borders
 - Rejecting the quota and Germany’s ‘open-door’ policy
 - Managing effectively the root causes of migration flows, i.e., addressing the drivers of migration, supporting countries of origin, and reducing migration to the EU.
- The general view of the V4 countries is that while refugees of African origin and/or Muslim religion are seen as a threat to national security and cultural unity, their Ukrainian “brothers” deserve immediate assistance and asylum.

2024 European Parliament elections

Slovakia

- The topic of migration is expected to be among the electoral issues of the campaign for the European Parliament in 2024. The topic has re-entered the political discourse after the negotiations on the new asylum and migration system in the EU, which were discussed by the interior ministers of the member states this summer. The topic of migration is mainly brought up by populist politicians.
- Politicians rejecting immigrants in Slovakia do not have such a negative attitude towards Ukrainian refugees as towards refugees from the Middle East or North Africa. Thus, it is expected that scaring the voters against mass migration will mainly refer to refugees from the Middle East and Africa, while refugees from Ukraine will not be a topic of the campaign.
- The position of the Slovak Republic towards the new Migration Pact will largely depend on the results of the elections that will be held in September 2023. In the event of a victory by the Smer-SD party and the formation of a government with parties close to it, a complete rejection of the pact is expected, as party chairman Fico and others already communicate this way today. If a government is formed from the center-right and pro-Western parties, we can expect constructive negotiations on this pact.

Czech Republic

- As one of the most politicized EU policies, migration from outside the EU will likely be misused by Czech politicians to stir anti-EU sentiments and score cheap votes in the 2024 European Parliament elections.
- Particularly Andrej Babiš, now leader of the opposition, is likely to stir debates around the currently negotiated EU Pact on Asylum and Migration and paint the current right wing government as being pro-migration. He has already used this tactic in the 2021 parliamentary elections, where he accused his opponents of inviting migrants, while painting himself as the one who effectively “stopped the migration quota in 2018”.
- The current right wing government assumes a more pragmatic position vis-a-vis migration. The Czech interior minister was the only one in the V4 to vote in favor of the

EU Pact on Asylum and Migration in June 2023. Still, the possibility of mandatory migrant relocation and resettlement is strongly opposed by the current government, as this is firmly opposed across society.

- The massive influx of Ukrainian refugees into Czechia can be used by the government to “absolve” the Czech Republic from any responsibility vis-a-vis other groups of refugees. The topic of Ukrainian migration itself is not perceived as an EU issue and thus will probably not figure in the EP election discussions.

Hungary

- Almost certainly, the Hungarian government will attempt to put the topic of migration in the center stage of the European Parliament elections campaign, regardless of the receding problem pressure.
- The main line of attack will probably center around the recently proposed Migration Pact by the European Commission. This will allow the government to attempt to replay the 2015-2016 asylum debate, presenting the Hungarian position as a matter of sovereignty and security.
- The government will try to avoid intertwining the issue of migration with Ukrainian refugees as the latter continue to enjoy a considerable level of sympathy among the Hungarian public. The rhetorical distinction between “good” and “deserving” migrants (e.g., Ukrainian refugees) and “bad” and “illegal” migrants will likely resurface in the campaign.
- Another prominent thread of the government’s narrative will be the EU’s alleged incompetence in dealing with the migration flow via the Mediterranean Sea, as evidenced by a number of boat accidents.

Poland:

- The issue of migration is not particularly important in Poland at the moment (July 2023). Opinion polls show that voters are currently focused on rising prices, the effects of inflation, state security, and health, and not on the issue of migration.
- The contrast between the main political forces, the government (Law and Justice) and the opposition (Civic Platform), is not very visibly outlined and, therefore, may have less mobilization significance among voters.

- The relevance of the issue of migration to the public debate may change due to the dynamic socio-political situation (including low fertility rates, current and future problems with the lack of “hands to work”) and the parliamentary elections in Poland in the autumn of 2023, which may change the existing balance of political forces and influence the public debate.

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Rule of Law in the V4: Family of Awkward Uncles at the Wedding? Comparative Study on Rule of Law Policy and Discourse in the V4



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Introduction to the rule of law policy in the V4

For the European Union, the rule of law is one of the core values that should be respected in every member state. It fosters mutual trust among member states EU budget. In recent years, the topic of the rule of law has become pressing in the European Union due to the tendency of several Central and Eastern European countries to diverge from democratic values. As a solution, the European Union introduced the Conditionality Regulation that enables the union to withdraw funds from states breaching rule of law principles. This has sparked controversy among EU member countries, causing tensions with Poland and Hungary.

The problem of the rule of law in V4 countries was discussed thoroughly in the national reports of the RevivEU project, which analyzed both discourse and policy on rule of law in targeted countries. The aim of the following paper is to summarize these national reports and identify similarities and differences in discourse and policy in Hungary, Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia.

The rule of law part of the discourse analysis was set between July and December 2020. At the time, the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and Next Generation EU (NGEU) negotiations were being finalized at the European Council. Hungary and Poland opposed conditioning the provision of EU funds on respecting the EU rule of law principles, and even threatened to veto the entire EU budget at one point. Simultaneously, the regulation on the protection of the EU budget in case of generalized deficiencies as regards the rule of law (the “Conditionality Regulation”) was being finalized by the European Parliament and the Council of the EU. Finally, both the EU long term budget and the regulation were approved in December 2020.

The policy analysis looks at a larger period, from 2015 to the present, which allowed the researchers to trace policy developments over a longer period. Since both the policy and discourse analyses are looking back in time, changes in government in the Czech Republic and Slovakia had to be taken into account. By contrast, the same leading party has been in office in Poland since 2015 and in Hungary since 2010. In the Czech Republic, the ANO Andrej Babiš,

Prime Minister since 2017, was replaced by the right-wing coalition led by Petr Fiala's ODS at the end of 2021, while Babiš became the leader of the opposition. Yet the critical actors in the Czech political scene have largely remained the same. In Slovakia, the SMER government of Peter Pellegrini, in office between 2018 and 2020, was replaced in 2020 by the government of Igor Matovič (OĽaNO), and since then, there have been two more changes of prime minister. The period since the 2020 elections until today has been dominated by the disintegration of parliamentary parties. A fundamental transformation of the party-political scene is expected after the September 2023 elections.

The rule of law was an important topic among the V4 countries during the period studied. However, Poland and Hungary remained the key actors, as their difficulties with respecting the rule of law were the most pressing at the time. The subject was widely discussed among the ruling parties as well as the opposition in all countries.

This part will present a summary of V4 policy and discourse positions.

Poland's non-compliance with the rule of law has been ever-present in the public debate since 2015, when the Law and Justice party won the elections. The ruling party gradually introduced judiciary reforms, including changes in the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, and the National Council of the Judiciary or combining the function of the Prosecutor General with that of the Minister of Justice. As a result, the topic of the rule of law in Poland has become relevant not only at the national level but also internationally. Domestically, the changes made to the judiciary system sparked strong protests coordinated by the opposition. The opposition Civil Platform party accused the ruling groups that their legislative measures went beyond the existing constitutional order. The actions of Law and Justice have not escaped the attention of the European Commission, which opened proceedings of Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). In response, Law and Justice pushed the narrative about defending the empowerment of Union member states. They questioned the legitimacy of subjecting their decision to external institutions' scrutiny. PiS argued that European institutions have no legitimate power to express an opinion on the judicial system. In their narrative, the introduced legislation was "expected by Poles" (TVP INFO 2020) and did not differ from procedures applied in other countries. During the enactment of the conditionality regulation in the second half of 2020, the Polish government announced a veto of the EU budget to oppose the procedures for

control of the rule of law. However, in the end, they agreed to introduce the conditionality mechanism. At the time, the subject of the rule of law caused a clash in the ruling camp between the Prime Minister and the leader of the Sovereign Poland party, which pursues a strongly Eurosceptic policy (Wolska 2020). Strong criticism of Law and Justice was also evident at the time in the opposition's discourse. However, the opposition's statements were not always consistent, and they didn't present any serious solutions to support EU values.

Like Poland, **Hungary** has been facing tension with the European Union regarding the rule of law and securing funds from the MFF and NGEU. Viktor Orbán, during his tenure, implemented constitutional amendments that altered the electoral system, compromising local democracy. However, the discourse analysis showed that any problems with the rule of law were denied by the local politicians. According to the ruling party, Hungary remains a bastion of democratic values, and the cause of the conflict with the EU is purely ideological and political (Orban 2022a). In the debate over the rule of law, a frequently identified enemy is George Soros, who would "fund the EP" to achieve a "population exchange" by admitting migrants (Orbán 2020a). In Orbán's narrative, Hungary is punished by the EU because of its reluctance to accept Muslim refugees and for its defense of Christian values (Orbán 2020a). The European Union was portrayed as a group of dangerous elites who wanted to weaken Hungary and Poland in the fight against the enemy (Orbán 2020f). The opposition, in contrast, was critical of Orbán's autocratic rule and emphasized its European values. The November 2020 Hungarian and Polish veto of the MFF and NGEU package was perceived as a harmful act against Hungarians by the opposition (Schmuck 2020). By them, Conditionality Regulation was seen as a necessary tool that can protect funds from Orbán's corruption. (Donáth 2020)

In the **Czech** domestic politics, the rule of law was discussed in the context of corruption and (to a lesser extent) the efficiency of public administration and the judicial system. The European Union has never formally initiated rule of law procedures against the Czech Republic. However, the Czechs had their challenges when it came to this topic. Notably, its 2017-2021 Prime Minister Andrej Babiš was also the owner of a large agricultural corporation Agrofert, which receives subsidies from the EU (#Žtopek 2017, #Urbánek 2020). In 2018- 2021, this conflict of interest was repeatedly addressed by the European Commission and Parliament. The Babiš government was supportive of their leader, but they were unable to stop the European Union from intervening and withholding funds from the company (ČTK 2021). Meanwhile, the

opposition portrayed the Prime Minister as a threat to the Czech Republic and its international position in Europe. On the European level, the Czechs referred to the rule of law mostly in relation to the disputes between the EU and Hungary and Poland. The European Union's conflict with Poland and Hungary has raised divided opinions among Czech politicians. In the discourse analysis, it was possible to find neutral statements as well as these supporting or openly criticizing the EU's actions. An additional challenge in Czech foreign policy was the simultaneous need to maintain good relations with the European Union and Poland. Poland was (and remains) an important neighbor for the Czechs because of the country's defense. For this reason, many politicians have refrained from forming strong opinions on the rule of law conflict between Poland and the EU.

Like in the Czech Republic, the rule of law in **Slovakia** was debated at two levels – domestic and EU. In the context of domestic politics, Slovakia discussed rule of law issues in relation to the fight against corruption. This was particularly evident during the campaign for the 2020 parliamentary elections when the OĽANO party of Igor Matovič won. After the elections, constitutional changes were introduced, including judicial reform, which resulted in the arrests of judges, prosecutors, and police forces. The arrival of right-wing conservative parties into the post-2020 parliament influenced discussions on the restriction of minority and women's rights. Addressing the topic of the rule of law in the EU politics, most Slovak politicians showed consensus. During the 2020 discussion, they emphasized the significance of upholding the rule of law between member nations. They also supported the implementation of a conditionality mechanism and taking appropriate measures to address the situation in Poland and Hungary. However, some politicians, including the leader of SMER (and the winner of the 2023 parliamentary elections) Robert Fico, defended the stance of Poland and Hungary against any interference by the European Union in the sovereignty of member states. The parallels in the rhetoric of Robert Fico and Viktor Orbán were evident, as they both stirred up conspiracy theories of George Soros' influence on the European Union and claimed that the rule of law conditionality is a punishment for Central European states not wanting to admit non-European migrants.

Comparative analysis

In the upcoming chapter, a comparative analysis of discourses and policies related to the rule of law will be conducted. Five key themes were identified that will be used as the foundation for the comparison:

- Central and Eastern Europe is tired of imitation
- Poland and Hungary as the last bastion in the fight for right-wing views and national sovereignty
- Avoiding strong opinions on rule of law conflict
- Rule of law discussion as a political tool for migration issues
- Introduction of the conditionality regulations

1. Central and Eastern Europe is tired of imitation

In the 2010s, the power of attraction of the Western European values and way of living has reached its limit in the Visegrad 4. Leading politicians like Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Jaroslaw Kaczynski in Poland, Robert Fico in Slovakia, and Andrej Babiš in Czechia have more or less openly started to antagonize the EU, its principles and values. Instead, they started to promote an alternative “Central European” identity rooted in illiberalism and “traditional values” and informed by the experience of communism and post-communism. This shift can be largely explained by local frustration at not reaching Western European standards of living, as the V4 citizens refuse to feel like second-rate EU citizens. The medicine local leaders are prescribing to this inferiority complex is nevertheless nationalist and, in many cases, incompatible with the rule of law standards of the EU. Hungary and Poland, in particular, are currently conflicted with the European Commission over access to funds due to their failure to fulfill the EU rule of law principles. Concerning trends also exist in Slovakia, where anti-democratic statements from politicians resemble those of Poland and Hungary.

In the analyzed period, the moving away from EU values is recognized as a threat by the opposition and liberal parties in all V4 countries. In the **Czech Republic**, the Pirate Party underlined the need for the European Union to protect its fundamental rights. They pointed to the threat posed by authoritative regimes, referring to both Poland and Hungary, as well as Prime Minister Babiš’s corruption problems. Similarly, the value of the rule of law was emphasized by **Slovak** politicians opposed to Fico. They accused the politicians but also the

governments of Poland and Hungary of undermining democratic principles at the national and the EU level, damaging its unity. **Poland's opposition** also stated that **political cooperation between Poland and Hungary on the subject of the rule of law was harming the entire CEE region. The Hungarian opposition** acknowledged that their democracy is at risk, and Orbán has “failed the test of Europeanness” (Ujhelyi 2020a).

The tendency to stop imitating Western Europe, which leads to encroaching on the EU rule of law principles, is noticeable in all the V4 countries. This trend is causing concern and protests among liberal-oriented parties, which are generally in opposition to those in power. This is because liberal parties are closer in their views to Western European countries, and thus pro-European values are more likely to be visible in their narratives. Interestingly, both Orbán's party and the Law and Justice party deny departing from democratic values, which will be discussed in more detail in the following subsection.

2. Poland and Hungary as the last bastion in the fight for right-wing views and national sovereignty

There are some politicians in Poland and Hungary, as well as in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, **who see the proposed mechanisms by the European Union as a threat to their sovereignty and views.** They are creating narratives that position the EU as the main enemy who wants to control the independent countries of Central and Eastern Europe. **However, Poland and Hungary deny that the rule of law is being violated in their countries and claim to be defenders of democracy and right-wing views.** The narratives associated with a hostile European Union vary in terms of the intensity and content of the opinions.

Specifically, **Hungarian Prime Minister** rhetoric indicated that it is the EU that does not care about democratic values but pursues imperialism (Orbán 2020e, 2020h). He compared the European Union's actions to *jihad*, which was supposed to be negatively associated with unwanted immigration and foreign influence (“For them, the rule of law is a tool that they can use to reshape us into something similar to them”) (Orbán 2022a), and his actions with *Reconquista*, as a historical analogy that suggested that he is going to win.

In comparison, representatives of **Poland's** ruling camp, although they used similar rhetoric, did so in a more gentle and measured manner. They claimed the right to defend their own right-wing and conservative views in a world where the Union would like conservatives to “have been

wiped out by the wave of progress” (rlegutko.pl 2019). PiS even **explicitly advocated for continued presence in the European Union while only opposing mechanisms that would force Poland to adopt a foreign vision (Polska Agencja Prasowa SA 2020) or would lead to unjustified interventions in Polish autonomy.**

The Hungarian and Polish ruling party views are in turn taken over by far-right parties in other V4 states. In the **Czech Republic**, SPD President Tomio Okamura was directly critical of the EU, which he accused of blackmailing disobedient countries by using the conditionality mechanism and withholding subsidies. He pointed out that Poland and Hungary want to protect their national identity and values and are taking care of their electorate. He also compared the conditionality mechanism to the Brezhnev Doctrine, equating the European Union with the former USSR (Okamura 2020d).

Robert Fico, the **Slovak** leader of the opposition party SMER, strongly defended Poland and Hungary’s veto of the NGEU and MFF negotiations in November 2020, and in Conditionality Regulation discussion. His arguments highlighted the **potential risks of punishing these countries and how it could impact the ability of less significant EU members to voice their concerns against the policies of larger members in the future.**

3. Rule of law discussion as a political tool for migration issues

Continuing the theme raised in subsection 2.2. in **Slovakia and Hungary**, one can see a **tendency to interconnect debates on migrant admission with those on the rule of law.** During the period analyzed, this matter was a highly emotionally charged topic among countries with negative attitudes toward Muslim migrants. Probably for this reason, it was easy to combine the two issues and thus strengthen anti-European attitudes among citizens, who were said to fear manipulation by the EU and George Soros. **Soros was often pointed out by Orbán and Fico as a dangerous enemy**, aiming to carry out a “population exchange” that poses a threat to traditional Christian values (Orbán 2020a). Similar theme appeared also in the Czech far-right discourse, whose local leader Tomio Okamura similarly claimed that rule of law conditionality will serve to punish states who do not want to take in migrants. Interestingly, **the rule of law was not framed in relation to migration in the Polish discourse**, although this country was also radically opposed to the admission of migrants.

4. Avoiding strong opinions on rule of law conflict

As mentioned in subsection 2.1, some of the more liberal-leaning parties advocated strongly for the conditionality mechanism and respect for the EU's core values. However, there were also moderate and neutral voices among politicians who did not take a side in the conflict. During the negotiations of MFF and Conditionality Regulation in 2020, the then Czech PM Andrej Babiš focused on the financial interests of the **Czech Republic**, withholding any support to Poland or Hungary (Babiš 2020c). This was in stark contrast to the praise he directed at his V4 squat during the migration crisis, showing a streak of pragmatism in Babiš's behavior.

In **Poland**, the opposition advocated for European values but mainly through the lens of self-interest. Initially, in 2018, they did not explicitly support the implementation of a conditionality mechanism. However, their stance changed in the 2020 discourse when Poland threatened to veto the MFF and NGEU. Nevertheless, they did not present a clear plan on how to proceed in this situation.

5. Introduction of the Conditionality Regulation

The question can be asked how the introduction of the Conditionality Regulation that can block the access to EU funds has affected Polish and Hungarian actions and their approach toward the rule of law. Despite their initial disapproval of the EU's actions, both countries prioritized receiving funds for post-COVID recovery. After the 2020 MFF and NGEU negotiations, Morawiecki and Orbán claimed victory. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki even called it a "double victory," referring to changing the criteria of the Conditionality Regulation and saving money for Poland (Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów 2020b). However, other political figures had different reactions. Zbigniew Ziobro, from the ruling political camp, criticized the adoption of the Conditionality Regulation without legally binding safeguards (Wolska 2020), while Péter Jakab, then Chairman of Jobbik, mocked Orbán's previous fighting attitude and emphasized his failure (Jakab 2020). Nevertheless, it is essential to remember that the issue of respecting the rule of law in Hungary and Poland remains unsolved. Both Poland and Hungary have agreed to comply with the conditions set by the European Union to receive the funds but have failed to fulfil the requirements so far.

Conclusion

This analysis aimed to give an overview of the similarities and differences in the policy and discourse of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary regarding the EU rule of law policies. The takeaway messages are the following:

- **Compliance with the rule of law is a present concern in the Visegrad countries.** Several countries in Central and Eastern Europe are struggling to respect the principles of the rule of law. The situation is particularly alarming in Poland and Hungary, where their governments are gradually moving away from democratic practices and embracing authoritarianism. The Czech Republic and Slovakia are also facing challenges related to corruption, although it has not reached the systemic threat as in the case of Hungary, for example. The issue of the rule of law has been widely debated in all V4 countries, especially in light of the conflict between Poland/Hungary and the European Union. The stances of the key actors in Czechia and Slovakia on the political scene varied and ranged from neighborly support to a neutral stance or harsh criticism.
- **The rule of law is the bone of contention between conservative and liberal parties, as well as the “progressive” West and “traditional” East.** The subject of the rule of law was discussed both at the EU level and in domestic politics between the ruling parties in each country. The topic often divided politicians into two camps- one supporting EU action in restoring the rule of law, or the other – anti-EU, in which EU intervention appeared to be an unjustified interference in the independence of member states. The conflict between the “pro-EU progressive and liberal West” and “the anti-EU conservative East” may be a result of the Central European strife to stop imitating the Western Europe and create its own identity, which is nevertheless often clashing with the EU values and principles. In general, this conflict resulted in a frequent shift of the topic from the rule of law to more ideological matters.

The rule of law is the bone of contention between conservative and liberal parties, as well as the “progressive” West and “traditional” East.

Rule of law policy is combined with other policy goals. The EU was to become, in the eyes of its electorate, an institution that aims to implement a mechanism of conditionality to pursue its hidden interests.

- Rule of law policy is combined with other policy goals. In the narratives of Hungary and Slovakia, the rule of law was often linked to the topic of admitting refugees. Orban and Fico used the EU's actions against Poland and Hungary for their anti-refugee narrative. They pointed to the European Union as the main enemy funded by George Soros. The EU was to become, in the eyes of its electorate, an institution that aims to implement a mechanism of conditionality to pursue its hidden interests. Similar narrative was pursued by the far right in Czechia.

- The introduction of the principle of conditionality has affected the actions of countries that do not respect the rule of law but has not solved the problem. The conflict over the rule of law and the introduction of the Conditionality Mechanism ended in 2020 with the loss for Poland and Hungary. Both countries had to adjust to the compromise and accept EU conditions to get the MFF and NGEU funds. However, as an analysis of Hungary's and Poland's current policies shows, despite the acceptance of the conditions, the situation in the said countries has not visibly improved, and the funds are still not granted.

The introduction of the principle of conditionality has affected the actions of countries that do not respect the rule of law but has not solved the problem.

Implications for the 2024 European Parliament elections

What do the results mean for the 2024 **European Parliament elections**?

The RevivEU national reports and this comparative report analyzed both the discourse and practical policy of V4 states vis-à-vis the rule of law. In this final part, we draw implications of

these reports towards the future, notably in relation to the upcoming 2024 European Parliament elections:

Poland

- From Poland's perspective, one of the most significant topics that is expected to be discussed in the upcoming European Parliament elections is the rule of law and its connection to the funds from the EU budget.
- It is expected that the current Law and Justice government will prioritize obtaining EU budget funds, possibly by taking minimal steps toward addressing issues concerning the rule of law and the judicial system.
- It appears that the Civic Coalition is the political party that is most aligned with the EU rule of law values and opposes the actions of PiS, particularly in the context of not fulfilling the conditions set by the EU.

Czech Republic

- In Czechia, the EU rule of law principles are not a bone of contention and are not likely to enter the 2024 European Parliament election campaign in any significant way.
- As he assumes a progressively more anti-EU, nationalist stance, Andrej Babiš of ANO may become more vocal in supporting Hungary and Poland in their rule of law disputes with the EU. Similar stance is to be expected by any far-right parties, including Tomio Okamura's SPD.
- For the ruling right-wing coalition of Petr Fiala (ODS), Andrej Babiš is likely to play a scapegoat representing all Czech troubles with rule of law – be it corruption, conflict of interest or existing or presumed friendliness towards Eastern autocrats like Viktor Orbán or Vladimir Putin.
- Hungary and Poland are likely to be painted differently in the EP elections campaign, particularly by the representatives of the ruling right-wing coalition. This coalition often sidelines Polish rule of law deficiencies, as Czech and Polish governments hold similarly conservative, anti-Russian positions. Furthermore, Poland is an important defense ally in the context of Ukraine war. Contrarily, due to its more pro-Russian

stance, Hungary has lost a lot of powerful fans in the Czech Republic since the invasion of 2022.

Slovakia

- It is expected that the chairman of the SMER party, Robert Fico, as well as smaller parties, such as The Slovak National Party or the Republic, will continue to attack any possible concerns of the European Commission about the state of the rule of law in Slovakia even in the pre-election campaign in the elections to the European Parliament.
- A large part of the Slovak political spectrum has a negative or lukewarm attitude toward the principles of the rule of law. Political parties defending these principles currently do not have a majority, which may worsen after the parliamentary elections in September 2023. This may also reflect in the election campaign for the European Parliament elections.
- At the moment, the European Commission is not conducting any proceedings against Slovakia related to the rule of law. However, this may change after the parliamentary elections in September. Therefore, the fight to protect these principles will very likely be one of the main topics of the European Parliament elections.

Hungary

- Rule of law related issues are likely to become central to the European Parliamentary campaign in Hungary.
- The specific angle of the debate is likely to be shaped by whether the Hungarian government manages to secure the flow of EU funds that are currently frozen because of rule of law violations in the country.
- The main opposition parties (with the exception of Mi Hazánk) will likely send a central message in the campaign: a successful EP elections performance will put them in a better position to demand redress from the government for its rule of law violations and secure the badly missing EU financing in the Hungarian economy. They will also attempt to frame the rule of law shortcomings of the government around the corrupt practices and enrichment of pro-government cronies (including members of Orbán's family).
- The government in turn will try to strike a balancing act between two competing narratives: first, they will argue that they have satisfied all the EU's demands and rule

of law concerns have been addressed. Second, they will continue to accuse the EU of interfering with Hungarian sovereignty and applying double standards because of historical spite and ideological disagreements.

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Money to Rule Them All, In Federation Bind Them: Comparative Study on Post- Pandemic Recovery Policy and Discourse in the V4



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Introduction to NGEU policy in the Visegrad Group

The COVID-19 virus, which rapidly spread through Europe in the spring of 2020, caused **one of the largest health and economic crises in the history of EU integration** and had far-reaching effects on all aspects of society. The economic downturn handicapped the V4 countries, revealing vulnerabilities¹ and forcing painful cuts when stimulus was needed most. As authorities across the EU grappled with the scale of the crisis, the support for a common response grew, eventually leading to the establishment of the Next Generation EU recovery fund, the flagship initiative of the EU post-pandemic recovery.

The recovery fund, approved along with the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), will almost double the EU's budget to €1 824 Billion for 2021-2027 (European Council 2023). To finance the package, the member states agreed, for the first time in history, to jointly borrow from the financial market. In addition, the national plans financed by NGEU are adjusted to the EU's long-term economic priorities, focusing on investments in the green and digital transitions. The establishment of NGEU is, thus, a historical event which will have a **lasting impact on the EU integration process**. This analysis will show how the V4 states reacted to this instrument and shed light on how they might react to future proposals leading to - de facto - greater federalization of the EU.

The publication examines how Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary positioned themselves in the NGEU debate and analyzes the **similarities and differences** in their policies and discourses. It summarizes and compares national policy reports on the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary that were also produced as part of the RevivEU project. For the political discourse on the NGEU topic, we analyzed the **time frame** from April to the beginning of August 2020, encompassing both the moment when the Commission first presented the idea of NGEU and its final approval at the EUCO on 21 July. The policy analysis covers a larger timeframe, also including the developments in 2021 and 2022, when the national recovery plans were prepared and approved.

Finally, for the investigated period, **changes in government** have to be considered for Czechia and Slovakia. In Czechia, the right-wing coalition led by Petr Fiala's ODS succeeded Babiš' government in 2021. In Slovakia, the government of Igor Matovič (OĽaNO) was succeeded in 2020 by his party member Eduard Heger and subsequently replaced by the caretaker government of Ľudovít Ódor in 2022. In contrast, the same leading parties have been in office in Hungary and Poland since 2010 and 2015, respectively.

In what follows, a comparative analysis of the climate discourses and policies will be made. **Seven relevant themes** have been identified and will serve as a basis for the comparison.

Focus on the money

All V4 countries considered the NGEU, to some extent, as a way to save domestic resources in the post-pandemic recovery and as an opportunity to invest in the economy without further burdening the state budget. During the negotiations about both NGEU and the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, all V4 states tried to maximize their allocation of funds (see Table 1). This manifested, amongst others, in the states' focus on money for cohesion during the negotiation process and their preference for direct grants over loans in the form of Invest EU.

Enthusiasm was undoubtedly the highest in **Slovakia**. Despite inter-party conflicts, there was broad support for NGEU. In the context of the country's rising debt and the prospect of activating the so-called debt brake-severely limiting the possibilities of investment from the state budget- NGEU represented a particularly good opportunity to draw funds for further investments. As such, the fund was considered by many politicians as the solution to all problems and a way to modernize the economy and ensure parity with the core EU member states.

Also in **Hungary**, both the government and opposition considered NGEU as a means of obtaining additional funding for some sectors of the economy. During the negotiations, the government tried to further maximize the net benefits from the recovery fund. Together with other net beneficiaries, it did so by advocating for a stronger link of the package with the MFF, which- contrary to the RRF- is largely based on the level of economic development. Moreover, because the MFF was more favorable than the RFF, it was also in Hungary's interest to ensure that NGEU was temporary (de la Porte a Jensen 2021).

Poland held a similar view, resulting in a strategy that tried to maximize the funds for the country. The government also viewed positively the decision to use the collective borrowing power of the EU. Finally, while favoring the establishment of the fund, the Polish government also warned that it could not come at the expense of previously allocated funds to central Europe.

Lastly, the position of the **Czech Republic** was more ambivalent, resulting from its unique economic position. Currently, the country is at 93% of the EU average GDP, and in the near future, it could have a balanced position in the EU budget or even become a net contributor. Consequently, the Czechs tried striking a balance between acquiring as much funding in the national allocation as possible while also considering that a larger EU budget might mean more Czech contributions in the future. Czechia, therefore, positioned itself “somewhere in the middle” during the budget negotiations and concentrated on those chapters – such as cohesion policy – where the country was set to obtain the highest national allocations. Should the Czech Republic converge with the EU average GDP in the near future, it can be expected the country will oppose a further increase of the EU budget, moving even closer towards the position of the frugal states, with which the country already shares similar views regarding internal market policies and free trade.

Table 1: Recovery and Resilience Plan approved by the European Commission:

| | Grants | Grants as % of GDP (2021) | Loans | Loans as % of GDP (2021) | Total |
|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| Czech Republic | EUR 7.03 billion | 2.95% | 0 € | 0 € | EUR 7.03 billion |
| Slovak Republic | EUR 6.33 billion | 6.42% | 0 € | 0% | EUR 6.33 billion |
| Poland | EUR 23.85 billion | 4.14% | EUR 11.52 billion | 2% | EUR 35.35 billion |
| Hungary | EUR 5.81 billion | 3.77% | 0 € | 0% | EUR 5.81 billion |

Source: (Boris Julien-Vauzelle 2023)

Opposition to federalization

A second prevalent argument during the negotiation process, especially in the Czech Republic and Poland, was that **the NGEU mechanism should not lead to further federalization of the European Union.**

The Czech Republic reluctantly accepted the joint borrowing to finance NGEU. It stressed, however, that NGEU should be a one-off decision whose sole purpose is to fund the post-COVID recovery. There could, thus, be no question of a Hamiltonian moment. In addition, the Czech Republic stressed that the EU budget should be primarily financed from Member State contributions and not collected through EU taxes. This approach grants greater authority to national governments in determining the EU budget's size and allocation of funds. The right-wing ODS party was especially vocal on this topic. In its discourse, ODS argued that the pandemic was misused for a federalization and green agenda. It also firmly opposed the introduction of new EU-level taxes, which would create a tax Union, and criticized debt mutualization, which came at the expense of the East. While PM Andrej Babiš focused primarily on the Czech's net position in the NGEU budget discussions, he nevertheless denied that NGEU would lead to more federalization or that it would lead to the creation of new taxes.

Poland voiced similar concerns. During the negotiations, the country advocated for introducing a legal framework to ensure that NGEU would be a one-time instrument and would not set a precedent for further federalization. The government also unequivocally denounced that NGEU represented a Hamiltonian moment or would move away from the logic of negotiating national contributions. The government equally spoke out against centrally collected taxes that would give the EU a federalist dynamic. Lastly, while **Hungary** mainly criticized the Rule of Law conditionality, it also stressed that NGEU should be a one-off mechanism.

Who gets what? Limits to (southern) solidarity?

A third point of contention among the V4 states concerned the distribution of money over the various member states. Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary made, to varying degrees, economically responsible and irresponsible member states.

Firstly, **Czech** PM Babiš heavily opposed the initial distribution key, based not on the slump in GDP during the pandemic but on the previous unemployment rate². The prime minister argued

it would favor southern member states, which were less successful in managing the pandemic and overall economic output. He further claimed that, unlike Czechia, still recovering from its communist past, the South was living above its means³.

Interestingly, a similar discourse was employed in **Slovakia**, where then-Prime Minister Igor Matovic used the populist dichotomies of rich versus poor, West versus East, and responsible versus irresponsible. He lamented that several countries, despite having a similar or even higher GDP, tried to secure a greater share of funding than Slovakia. Matovic pointed specifically towards Southern European countries, accusing them of being less diligent in managing their spending and parasitizing on EU generosity⁴.

Also, **Hungary** employed this argument of responsible versus irresponsible states. On multiple occasions, Orbán stated that NGEU was needed because Western and southern European states (like Italy, Greece, and France) had mismanaged the pandemic, causing them economic hardship. Orbán further pointed out that the countries in economic trouble were not Central European states and that those countries had been underperforming independently of the pandemic. Orbán further claimed that while Hungary should not be made responsible for helping out those (underperforming) large and southern countries, it was pressured by 26 member states into accepting NGEU. As such, Orbán successfully applied the narrative of central European exceptionalism to the debate on the post-pandemic recovery.

Lastly, **Poland** was less vocal about the states deserving versus undeserving of EU funds. Nevertheless, like the other Visegrad countries, its government also pointed to the waning credit capacity of the southern EU member states.

Approach of the Visegrad Group states to the green and digital transitions within NGEU.

NGEU aims not only to revive EU economies; it also prescribes that 37 and 20 percent must be invested in the green and digital transitions, respectively (European Commission 2023). Slovakia and Hungary viewed this decision positively, whereas the Czech Republic conveyed its concerns over the requirements.

More than any other Visegrad member, **Slovakia** viewed NGEU as an opportunity to modernize its economy and work towards economic parity with Western European states. With money for investments into the digital and green transition, NGEU was portrayed as a chance to foster innovation and create jobs with a higher added value. The idea that NGEU presented a historic opportunity to turn Slovakia into a “European economic tiger”, constituted the dominant frame in the Slovak political discourse.

Also in **Hungary**, the government was constructive in adjusting the national plans to the NGEU’s required investments in the green and digital fields. Even though the national plan had to be discussed and modified several times due to insufficient funds for the green and digital transitions, there were no signs that Orbán’s government would have preferred infrastructure spending (Tóth-Biró 2021).

Contrary to Slovakia and Hungary, the priorities under NGEU were viewed more negatively in **the Czech Republic**, which publicly voiced its reservations over the fund. Its main argument was that national governments know best where to allocate funds to recover from the pandemic. Instead of directing investments towards the green and digital transitions, the Czech government preferred using the funds to support large-scale infrastructure projects, such as new motorways and railway lines. Yet, it did not succeed in obtaining greater discretion in the allocation of funds. Finally, while the dominant narrative in Czechia argued for a more bottom-up approach and freedom for member states to decide how the funds should be used, the progressive Pirate Party conveyed an alternative voice. Their discourse was more in line with the Slovak discourse, considering the fund as an opportunity to modernize the economy and reduce the country’s dependency on fossil fuels.

Implementation difficulties

The NGEU plan, which, together with the MFF, will double the overall EU budget to €1 824 Billion for 2021-2027 (European Council 2023), has been characterized as one of the most ambitious EU integration projects so far. However, the unprecedented investments have been met with implementation challenges in several V4 countries. **Practical problems in implementing the NGEU national plans** became apparent, particularly in the Czech and Slovak cases.

In **Slovakia**, the implementation of NGEU faced two significant challenges. Firstly, the previous government underestimated the implementation of NGEU investments, making it increasingly difficult to adhere to the established timelines. For example, to prevent the loss of funds, the government led by PM Ľudovít Ódor requested last-minute changes in various areas, including healthcare, to secure the Commission's approval. The second reason relates to the country's political reality, where certain essential laws were either not approved or passed only with a narrow majority. This poses a challenge, as some of these reforms represent crucial steps toward accessing the disbursement of NGEU funds. After an in-depth audit, the current finance minister⁵ estimated that Slovakia might lose up to a third of the total NGEU funding due to these.

Also in **the Czech Republic**, the practical implementation of the EU recovery plans caused concerns. Already in May 2020, PM Babiš expressed himself rather critically towards the EC's proposal and warned that no country was ready to absorb the recovery money this quickly. While the plan has the potential to boost the Czech economy, the country needs to utilize the funding more extensively and upscale its absorption capacity for the recovery money to reach its full potential. The latter has been a continuing problem in the Czech Republic. In addition, Czechia is not particularly strong in developing mid and long-term strategies to base the disbursement of EU funding. Consequently, EU funds are sometimes disbursed without a concrete aim or strategy.

The shadow of the Rule of Law

In addition to practical challenges, the discussions on NGEU and 2021 – 2027 MFF were held in the shadow of an **ongoing conflict on the Rule of Law** and the finalization of the Rule of Law conditionality mechanism, making the two topics inseparable in Poland and Hungary.

According to the European Commission, the Rule of Law situation was the most problematic in the case of **Hungary**. While Orbán's initial discourse (during the June 2020 EUCO) towards the NGEU had been one of a superior and generous Hungary willing to help other EU states in economic distress, the discourse took a substantive turn in the months that followed. This shift was triggered by the inclusion of a clause making the funds conditional on the respect of the Rule of Law, which Orbán characterized as a political attack by Western corrupt elites on Hungary. In the months leading up to the December 2020 EUCO, the main objective of the

negotiations between the Orbán government and the European Commission was to reduce the strictness of the Rule of Law conditions and to limit oversight by the European Commission in drawing funds from NGEU. The process escalated to the point where Orbán threatened to veto the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework in November 2020.

During the negotiations, the government characterized tying economic policies and crisis mitigation to political conditions as irresponsible and even dangerous for the economy, arguing it would create the risk of mispending money and driving future generations into debt. More importantly, the Hungarian government considered EU funds and the possibility of non-

The Hungarian government considered EU funds and the possibility of non-disbursement as a control tool against individual member states and an act of revenge for Hungary's ideological standpoints.

disbursement as a control tool against individual member states and an act of revenge for Hungary's ideological standpoints. According to Orbán, the conditionality regulation was not about the defense of the Rule of Law and democracy but rather stemmed from opposition to Hungary's migration policies⁶, its view on the nation-state and family values. It is, thus, impossible to separate the topic of NGEU from the Rule of Law issue. Both were portrayed as a combat against the EU's supranational tendencies and its

repeated attempts to destroy nation-states (especially in Central Europe). As such, while NGEU received less attention than the general Rule of Law debate, Orbán managed to cleverly tie the NGEU budget debate to the broader **hostile empire narrative**.

A similar problem regarding the Rule of Law occurred in the case of **Poland**. However, unlike the Hungarian government, which used NGEU as an example to reinforce their argument of the EU as a hostile empire, the Polish government instead tried to paint NGEU as a major success on their government's part. Rather than focusing on the ongoing Rule of Law conflict, the ruling party stressed that Poland-thanks to the government's efforts- would be one of the largest beneficiaries of the fund, after Spain and Italy (Boris Julien-Vauzelle 2023). In addition, the government argued that it had successfully defended the interests of the Polish population by increasing funding in those domains most important to the country, including cohesion and agricultural policy.

In conclusion, while Orbán's ruling party tied the NGEU budget debate to its broader hostile empire narrative, the Polish government tried to stress its achievements. In both cases, however, **the opposition** characterized the blocking of funds as a **major failure** from their respective governments, which both failed to receive any funding as of October 2023⁷. In Hungary, the opposition pointed to the irresponsibility of Orbán's rule, arguing that the PM's preoccupation with destroying democracy led to his failure to govern. The opposition also argued that conditionality is a tool to protect EU funds from Orbán's corruption and promotes the interest of the people. It, therefore, argued for strong EU institutions and a strong European Parliament in particular. Similarly, in Poland, the blocking of the Polish NGEU plan is considered a major failure in Polish society and has become a symbol of the failure of the Law and Justice Party government. Finally, to a lesser extent, the opposition in Czechia also linked the NGEU discussions to Rule of Law concerns. Referring to then-PM Babiš, the progressive Pirate Party warned that important (agro) businesses should not misuse the NGEU funds and that the Rule of Law principles should be observed.

Absence of V4 cooperation

A final theme in this comparative analysis concerns V4 Cooperation. The negotiations on NGEU were characterized by a lack of cooperation and coordination among the V4 countries vis-à-vis the fund. States did not have a common approach or the same views on where to target individual investments. Likewise, states did not support each other in case of problems. **Poland** was the only one that tried to persuade the V4 states to adopt a common and unified position in the initial stages of the negotiations but ultimately failed. The biggest discord between V4 countries concerned the issue of **the Rule of Law**. In the past, it was common for the V4 countries to help each other at the European level. An example is the unity and the coordination of common positions during the migration crisis. However, in the case of the NGEU, neither Slovakia nor the Czech Republic supported Hungary and Poland in their efforts to relax the Rule of Law conditions for the disbursement of NGEU funds.

In the case of **Slovakia**, while the country did not criticize its neighbors explicitly, governmental actors considered Hungarian and Polish vetoes to the MFF and NGEU package in November 2020 as a barrier to receiving its much-needed funds to finance the recovery and modernization of its COVID-19 ravaged economy. Finally, **Hungary**, which found itself isolated during the

negotiations, blamed the lack of V4 coordination on the Brussels elites, who conspired to divide the V4 in the budget negotiations, driving a wedge into the historical CEE alliance.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis has aimed to give an overview of the similarities and differences in the policies and discourses of Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary towards NGEU. Two main conclusions can be derived from the discussions on this historical initiative, which will undoubtedly shape the EU's future.

- Firstly, the approach from all V4 states towards NGEU can be characterized as a **“focus on the money” strategy** aiming to maximize the net benefits – through of strategy focusing on cohesion and by distinguishing themselves from the other (southern European) semi-peripheries. While trying to maximize the allocation of funds to their economies, V4 governments remain **wary of further federalization**. Poland, Hungary, and Czechia emphasized that the instrument should be a one-off tool and voiced their preference for a Union budget based on member state contributions rather than own EU resources. Meanwhile, Hungary continues its combat against the EU's supranational tendencies and its repeated attempts to “destroy nation-states”. From the V4's “focus on the money without federalization” approach that characterized the negotiations on NGEU, lessons can be drawn for the future. Firstly, the Czech Republic might develop into a fifth frugal member in the years to come. In addition, the negotiations clearly showed that the V4 favor a union with a strong role for the member states and resistant to federalization. Yet, despite these reservations, NGEU was unanimously adopted. With several significant taboos broken, it is, therefore, not unthinkable that this tool has set a precedent for a stronger EU role in the future.
- Secondly, in Poland and Hungary, the debates on NGEU were overshadowed by **Rule of Law discussions**. As a result of the EU's increasingly strong stance on the respect of Rule of Law, neither country has received NGEU funds to this day. In both countries, the opposition has used the blocking of funds to point out the incompetence of their respective governments to rule. The Rule of Law conditionality created disagreement, not only within Poland and Hungary, but also among the V4 countries during the negotiations. While Hungary blamed the lack of V4 coordination on the Brussels elites,

who conspired to divide the V4 in the budget negotiations, Slovakia, in particular, considered the Polish and Hungarian veto as a barrier to receiving its much-needed recovery funds. The lack of cooperation, in turn, weakened the V4 negotiation position, in which neither country succeeded in playing a significant role in shaping the setup of the historical instrument.

- In conclusion, it is still unclear whether NGEU will fundamentally change the course of the Union in the future. It also remains to be seen whether the V4 will manage to coordinate its position better and exert greater influence on forthcoming historical decisions or if, on the contrary, the Rule of Law will continue to hamper cooperation in the years to come.

What do the results mean for the 2024 European elections?

The national reports of RevivEU and this comparative report analyzed the discourse and practical policy of the V4 countries towards Next Generation EU. In this final section, we draw the implications for the upcoming European Parliament elections in 2024 for individual Visegrad Group countries.

The Czech Republic:

- The NGEU is fait accompli in the Czech Republic. There cannot be expected any discussion about the utilization of the funding scheme.
- Major political parties, both ANO and ODS, are likely to oppose any form of further integration of the EU, including future joint borrowing or the establishment of the EU's own resources.

Slovakia:

- The current official government of Prime Minister Ódor had to make several more fundamental changes in the Slovak NGEU after the government of Eduard Heger. It is possible that the government formed after the September parliamentary elections will have to make further changes. Given the change in investments or locations where investments will go, we can expect the opposition to use this topic before the European Parliament elections in 2024.
- It can be expected that NGEU will not be among the main topics of the 2024 European Parliament elections. Voter turnout in elections to the European Parliament has

consistently been the lowest among the EU member states. If investment from NGEU becomes, to some extent, a pre-election issue, it will play out at the level of political parties between the then-ruling parties and those who tried to push through versus opposition parties that criticize how individual projects were conceived.

Hungary:

- In Hungary, the NGEU issue is so closely linked to other forms of EU funding in the MFF and the corresponding Rule of Law mechanism that it is highly unlikely that NGEU as such will have a significant and autonomous role in the European Parliament's 2024 campaign.
- The government will try not to discuss the issue of NGEU's lack of funding publicly and instead focus on cultural and symbolic issues. To the extent that it is forced to deal with this subject, it is likely to blame the EU and link underfunded social systems (especially the education sector) with the EU's refusal to open the taps.
- The opposition (except for the radical right-wing Mi Hazánk party) will try to point out the government's incompetence to draw on NGEU and link this dispute to the underperformance of the Hungarian economy in the years leading up to the 2024 EP elections.
- Hungary's lack of access to Next Generation EU funds only has the potential to change the EP campaign to the extent that the economic situation continues to deteriorate, and the Hungarian government fails to alleviate the EU Rule of Law concerns.

Poland:

- The NGEU issue is unlikely to be an important topic during the EP campaign.
- The issue of NGEU can come to the fore if one of the political forces can link it to rising prices and the effects of inflation.
- The topic of NGEU in Poland is intricately linked to the issue of the Rule of Law and is likely to be raised in such a relationship during the EP elections. However, it should be borne in mind the elections to the Polish Parliament which may be a crucial factor in changing this situation (autumn 2023).

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About the project

“Bruised but not broken: reviving the appeal of the EU in the minds of V4 citizens.”

This project reacts to the upcoming 2024 European Parliament elections and focuses on researching and addressing the most contentious topics within the European Union, mainly focusing on its newer member states – V4 countries. These countries have been experiencing some forms of democratic backsliding, such as low participation in elections, tendencies towards Euroscepticism, high levels of distrust in authorities, or a resurgence of populism. Overall, these signals suggest a detachment from the European project.

Therefore, understanding the needs, concerns, and fears of V4 citizens is essential. It is also timely – Europe now stands on the verge of numerous transitions – chief among which is the green transformation intended to combat climate change.

The goal of the project is to gauge citizens’ attitudes and preferences towards four broad policy domains that played a pivotal role in the European Union’s quest to adapt to a new policy environment in the recent past: decarbonisation policies, migration, the COVID-19 pandemic, and debates over the rule of law.

During the project’s first phase, we have conducted qualitative and quantitative research into citizens’ attitudes to the four core topics of the project. Furthermore, we have looked into the V4 governments’ approaches to the topics via analyses of policy and discourse in the V4 countries. The project’s second phase will build on the realised research and engage with various stakeholders and policy-makers to share the findings and prepare communication- and engagement strategies before the 2024 European Parliament elections. Finally, we will disseminate the results and knowledge via public discussions, workshops, podcasts, and media outputs to the public.

The project is carried out by leading think-tank and research institutions in each of the V4 countries: EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy in Czechia; Bratislava Policy Institute in Slovakia; 21 Research Center in Hungary; The Projekt: Polska Foundation in Poland; and is supported by the European Union.



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