

MERCHANTS OF FEAR. DISCURSIVE SECURITIZATION OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN THE VISEGRAD GROUP COUNTRIES

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Background

The so-called refugee crisis of 2015, when the number of asylum and first-time asylum seekers in the European Union (EU) increased more than twofold compared to 2014 and more than threefold compared to 2013 (Eurostat, 2018a), hardly affected any of the Visegrad group countries (V4: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland), with the exception of Hungary, which was however mostly treated as a transit country. Indeed, even at the peak of the crisis, the increase of the asylum applications – again with the exception of Hungary – was barely noticeable (see Table 1). Despite this, from the beginning V4 governments were reluctant to accept even small number of asylum seekers and were among the most vocal opponents to the refugee quotas system proposed by the EU.

Table 1. Asylum and first-time asylum applicants (non-EU) annual aggregated data (rounded)

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018*
EU	431 095	626 960	1 322 845	1 260 910	712 235	444 865
Czech Republic	695	1 145	1 515	1 475	1 445	920
Hungary	18 895	42 775	177 135	29 430	3 390	560
Slovakia	440	330	330	145	160	110
Poland	15 240	8 020	12 190	12 305	5 045	2 765

Source: Eurostat, 2018a

*until 09/18, for the Czech Republic and Slovakia until 07/18, for Poland until 08/18

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Rationale and methodology

Against this background, in this policy brief we explore the migration-security nexus, i.e. how migration and security have become interconnected in the current political discourse in the Visegrad group countries. To this end, we apply the methodological framework developed by the Copenhagen School of security studies, according to which the concept of security is understood as a social construct, articulated through discourse (Buzan, 1983; Waever et al., 1993; Buzan et al., 1998). Securitization of migration is therefore a “‘top down’ process, in which various political, societal and security elites present migration as an existential threat to fundamental values of (...) societies and states” (Lazardis, 2011).

As the portrayal of refugees as danger is performed through speech acts, in our work we examine utterances (interviews, speeches, reports etc.) of the leading politicians (presidents, prime ministers, party leaders) in the V4 countries between January 2015 and October 2018. In order to identify them, we screened local and international media outlets as well as official governmental websites using the keywords “refugee(s)”, “asylum seeker(s)” and “migrant(s)” (interchangeably used by politicians in question without differentiating between the two groups) together with the names of the selected politicians both in the national languages and in English.¹ In this brief, we present a selection of the speech acts identified, alongside analysis of how the process of discursive securitization progressed and its consequences.

Speech Act Analysis

Czech Republic

Political establishment in Prague focused to a large extent on threats related to public security. Czech Republic President Miloš Zeman has been particularly vocal about the danger that refugees posed. He famously argued that there are terrorist groups among them and by accepting “the wave of migrants”, European countries would be doing a favour to the so-called Islamic State, helping it to expand its influence (“Zeman: Accepting refugees plays into Islamic State’s hands”, 2016). According to Mr. Zeman, refugees were carrying out an “organized invasion” orchestrated by the Muslim Brotherhood (“Czech president Zeman says”, 2015). Indeed, at one point he compared them to a tsunami (“Czech President: The refugees will invite their relatives!”, 2015). For Mr. Zeman, refugees were criminals that illegally crossed the Czech border and violated the Dublin regulation (“Czech President Miloš Zeman:”, 2015). His frustrations were echoed by Andrej Babiš, who prior to becoming Czech Prime Minister in December 2017, in his capacity as Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister for Economy, insisted that immigrant ghettos represent a growing danger for Europe and that Brussels has become the centre of terrorism (“Czech Deputy Prime Minister Babiš:”, 2015). As such, Europeans should focus

¹ In fact, we find that the majority of the identified speech acts was available in English as well.

on defending their continent from “the influx of refugees” and “deal with the illegal migration outside the continent” (“Babiš at Globsec”, 2018).

Refugees from the Czech politicians’ speeches were more often than not Muslims, for whom – as Mr. Zeman put it – it was “practically impossible” (“Zeman odsoudil chování Kramného.”, 2016) to integrate into Europe as they would “not respect Czech laws and habits”, having come from a “totally different culture” (Parlamentní Listy, 2015). A culture, which – given its way – would deprive the Europeans of “the women’s beauty since they will be shrouded in burkas from head to toe, including the face” (“Zeman: Refugees will apply Sharia law”, 2015). Such rhetoric became so prevalent in the Czech Republic that during the presidential elections of 2018 even Mr. Zeman’s opponent from the second round, Jiří Drahoš – generally perceived as a more moderate figure – talked about a need to “preserve [Czech] identity” and “defend [Czech] culture” (“Exclusive: Jiri Drahos”, 2018). Czech Interior Minister Milan Chovanec warned that accepting refugees by the proposed EU quotas could lead to a “collapse of the society” (“Which refugees are ‘threatening’ the Czechs?”, 2015).

The quota was rejected – albeit in a less dramatic manner – even by one of more balanced amongst the analysed Czech politicians, former (January 2014-December 2017) Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka, who dismissed comments by Mr. Zeman as “prejudices and his habitual simplification of things” (“Czech president: Migrants should be fighting Isis”, 2015). Mr. Sobotka argued that (besides that fact that refugees would not want to stay in the Czech Republic) imposition of the quotas was a breach of Member States’ sovereignty (“EU Ministers agree to migrant quota plan”, 2015).

Sovereign decision on whether to accept asylum seekers was especially important since, as Mr. Zeman insisted, a crashing majority (“90%”; Stroehlein, 2015) of those who posed for refugees were in fact economic migrants with iPhones and “thousands of euros and thousands of dollars” (“Zeman: Most refugees do not deserve compassion”, 2015) in their pockets, who upon arrival in Europe would live on welfare.

Hungary

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán made his position on refugees clearly early in 2015, when he proclaimed that Hungary was reluctant to welcome “minorities with different cultural characteristics and backgrounds (...) [in order to] keep Hungary as Hungary” (“Islamophobia and xenophobia are now official in Hungary”, 2015). He depicted refugees as a danger to Europe and the European nations, way of life, and values (“Europe is at stake today”, 2015). As such, Mr. Orbán saw himself as a warrior, a guarding upholding the European (Christian) values (“I maintain the basic values of Europe”, 2016). Indeed, he vowed to protect his own people from “thronging with people from different cultures, with different customs, who are unable to integrate” (“The next years will be about hardworking people”, 2015), threaten Hungary’s cultural homogeneity and distort “the ethnic, cultural and religious profile of Hungary” (“Decision to hold referendum”, 2016).

According to another prominent Hungarian politician, Minister of Justice László Trócsányi, the proposed refugee quotas threatened not only the above-mentioned Hungary's identity, but also constitution and sovereignty (Bayer, 2017). Refugees would exploit Hungary's social welfare system and become a burden for the country's economy ("I love this country", 2016), jeopardizing people's jobs and wrecking "everything which we [Hungary] have built over the last few years" ("Prime Minister Viktor Orbán", 2015).

More than that, accepting refugees was tantamount to turning a blind eye to the fact that they were in fact immigrants occupying European territories ("I love this country", 2016). Mr. Orbán dubbed migration as "the Trojan wooden horse of terrorism" ("A migráció a terrorizmus trójai falova", 2017) and his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Péter Szijjártó, complained that because of the refugees "the security situation has never been that bad in Europe" ("Peter Szijjarto: Why we fight the EU on refugees", 2017).

To make sure the message soaked in, government installed over 1,000 billboards all around the country warning (in Hungarian): "If you come to Hungary, don't take the job of Hungarians"; "If you come to Hungary, you should respect our laws!"; "If you come to Hungary, you should respect our culture!" (Carrero, 2016).

The anti-immigration rhetoric became even harsher during the pre-election campaign for the parliamentary elections held in April 2018. During his annual state-of-the-nation speech in February 2018, Mr. Orbán anticipated the end of nation states and fall of Europe, which is currently being invaded by Muslims (Walker, 2018). He warned against "our own colour (...) [being] mixed with those of others" ("Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech", 2018) and women and girls being "hunted down" (Gorondi, 2018). In an interview with a German daily, he explained that asylum seekers were not "Muslim refugees" but "Muslim invaders" and underscored again that "Christian and Muslim society will never unite" ("Hungary's Orban tells Germany", 2018). Later that year, in July, Hungary's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Péter Szijjártó, when announcing his country's withdrawal from the adoption process of the Global Compact for Migration, argued that agreement was "in conflict with common sense and also with the intent to restore European security" ("Hungary is exiting the adoption process", 2018).

Slovakia

The majority of the key Slovak parties and politicians – with the notable exception of President Andrej Kiska – adopted anti-immigration and anti-refugee rhetoric ("Transformation Index BTI", 2018). The most outspoken among them was arguably the Prime Minister Robert Fico. Shortly after the Paris terrorist attack in November 2015, he announced that state intelligence services were following "every single Muslim" in the country in order to make sure they were not terrorists ("Fico: Security more important than migrants' rights", 2015). Two months later, he argued that "the only way" to eliminate terrorist risk in the country is to prevent Muslims

from creating “compact” communities. This statement, which although was subsequently under scrutiny of Slovak Prosecutor’s Office on account of constituting hate speech and inciting hatred (“Prosecutor’s office deals with Fico’s statements”, 2016), was shared by many other Slovak politicians, for instance the Minister of Interior at the time, Robert Kaliňák, who argued that acceptance of refugees, among whom terrorist may have been hiding, was related to “gigantic risks” to national security (Todova & Cokyna, 2015). It was Prime Minister Fico’s belief that Muslims, as people of other religion and culture, could not integrate into Slovak society (“Islam has no place in Slovakia”) and in any case their rights, as migrants, were of lesser importance than those of Slovak citizens and their safety (“PM Fico: Islam has no place in Slovakia”, 2016). Similar logic was displayed in August 2015 by the then Slovak Ministry of Interior spokesman, Ivan Netik, who announced only Christians could be accepted to Slovakia under the EU relocation scheme, as Muslims would “not feel at home” in a country without mosques and would threaten cohesions of the Slovak society (“Migrants crisis: Slovakia will only accept Christians”, 2015).

Mr. Fico dubbed the EU’s migration policy a “ritual suicide” and harshly criticized Brussels for trying to impose the refugee quotas without understanding the particularities of situation in Slovakia and other Central European countries (“Fico: EU’s migration policy is ‘ritual suicide’”, 2016). Indeed, during the 2015 Parliamentary Elections one of the main campaign slogans of Fico’s party, the Direction –Social Democracy (SMER-SD), was “we are protecting Slovakia”, presumably from migrants who would “harass Slovak women in a vulgar manner” and endanger the country’s social system (Zuborova & Borarosova, 2017).

Under Mr. Fico’s successor, Peter Pellegrini,² rhetoric changed only to some extent. While he did agree to accept 1,200 refugees, he strongly underlined that each single person will need to be a governmental consent and rejected any “mandatory re-distribution” (“PM Pellegrini: Slovakia will accept migrants”, 2018). He also stressed the importance of protecting Slovak and Schengen borders [from the refugees] (“Slovak commercial television channel TA3’s interview”, 2018), applauding Italy’s decision not to admit at its territory 600 asylum seekers rescued in the Mediterranean and criticizing the current situation when “[everybody jumps in the water, our people catch them, fish them out of the water and automatically they are basically ferried] [into the EU]” (“Hungary and Slovakia back tough stance on migrants”, 2018).

Poland

In Poland, the anti-refugee and anti-migrant rhetoric has been embraced by most of the politicians in the Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS, Law and Justice) party, ruling the country since October 2015. In fact, the refugee crisis was oftentimes referred to by PiS politicians during

² Mr. Fico resigned from his position in March 2018, following the scandal related to the murder of an investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová, and was replaced by Peter Pellegrini. At the same time resignation was made by another politician quoted in the text, the Minister of Interior Robert Kaliňák. His place was taken by Denisa Saková.

campaign before the victorious parliamentary elections in 2015. Jarosław Kaczyński, PiS leader, harshly criticized the government at the time for expressing willingness to accept refugees “under foreign, external [i.e. EU’s] pressure” and thereby endangering Polish citizens’ safety, freedom and right to self-determination “in their own country” (“Statements at meetings of the Sejm”, 2015). Half year later, shortly after Brussels terror attacks of March 2016, PiS government’s spokesperson Rafał Bochenek, proclaimed that in the light of “recent events” and due to the fact that the issue of security was “of paramount importance” to Polish authorities, Poland would not be able to accept any migrants (“Rzecznik rządu: Systemy bezpieczeństwa nie działają”, 2016). This position was reiterated early in 2018 by Joachim Brudziński, Minister of Interior and Administration, who refused a plea (issued in early 2017) by a President of a Polish city of Sopot wanting to accept a small number of Syrian children injured during the battle of Aleppo in order to provide them with medical treatment. Mr. Brudziński argued that admission of the children in question would in practice mean admission of adults who accompany them as well, and that would be unacceptable on the grounds of security and due to the “critical level of terrorist threat in Europe, (...) undeniably linked to the arrival of migrants from the Middle East in the EU” (Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2018). Refugees were portrayed as violent criminals also in a recent (October 2018) campaign spot by a PiS (unsuccessful) candidate for a President of Warsaw, Patryk Jaki (PiS Official Twitter Account, 2018).

In the eyes of Mr. Kaczyński, the danger posed by the refugees was also of epidemiological nature. A couple of days before the elections of 2015 he made his infamous remarks about dangerous diseases like cholera or dysentery that could be spread by the refugees, as well as “various parasites [and] protozoa” that, although may not pose threat to “these people’s” [refugees] organisms, are dangerous to Poles (“Cholera na wyspach greckich, dezynteria w Wiedniu”, 2015a). Concerns about health safety were also raised by President Andrzej Duda (“Andrzej Duda in “Kawa na ławę”, 2015).

Under threat were also supposedly Polish culture and traditions. Mariusz Błaszczak, acting as a Minister of Interior and Administration between October 2015 and January 2018, warned that not only “[n]ewcomers from North Africa do not respect [Christian, European] values” but also impose their own culture, which cannot co-exist with the European one as “[t]wo terrorist attacks in Paris, attacks in Brussels and Nice clearly show[ed]” (“Błaszczak: Polska znalazłaby się w takiej sytuacji, jak Francja,” 2016). His misgivings were shared by Mr. Kaczyński, who warned that accepting refugees could cause “kinds of social catastrophes” and force Polish people to “radically change” their culture (“Kaczyński: Nie możemy w to wchodzić”, 2017).

Conclusions

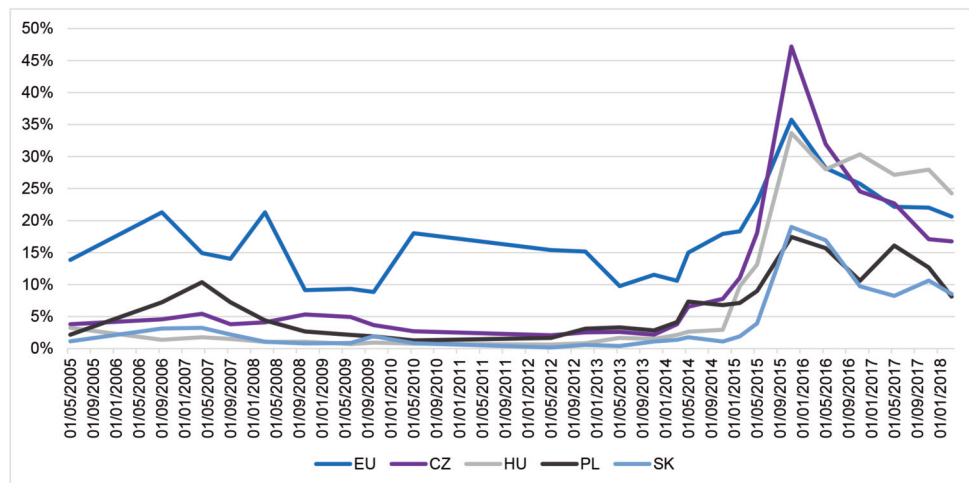
As it has been thus portrayed while discussing individual country case studies, the securitization of the refugee crisis was implemented through employment of speech

acts portraying migrants and asylum seekers as a threat to the respective countries' i) internal security (including economic security) and sovereignty (i.e. state security), and ii) (Christian) culture and identity (i.e. societal security). Refugees and migrants were depicted as terrorist wishing to impose their own (Islamic) values and culture and benefit from V4 welfare, all with a blessing from Brussels attempting to impose refugee quotas against the will of the Visegrad countries' governments (and people).

According to the Copenhagen School of security studies, this securitization process may be deemed successful if the audience (the people) acknowledge the concept being securitized as an existential threat (Bigo, 2002) and, as a result, legitimize taking extraordinary measures, "putting the issue on top of the agenda and even breaching the rules which would normally be binding for the securitizing actor" (Benam, 2011).

Analysis of the percentage of V4 citizens that commenced to perceive immigration and terrorism as two most important issues in their countries from 2015 on – despite that fact that, as already has been mentioned, none of those countries was directly affected by the refugee crisis (with the exception of Hungary) or terrorism – allows to conclude that politicians in the countries in question did achieve their goal. Indeed, between May 2014 and May 2015 the number of those believing migration was one of the two most important issues facing their homeland increased from 11% to 47% in the Czech Republic, 10% to 34% in Hungary, 7% to 17% in Poland and 2% to 19% in Slovakia (against the EU average growth from 18% to 36%; Eurostat 2018b, see Figure 1).

Figure 1 What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment (%)?

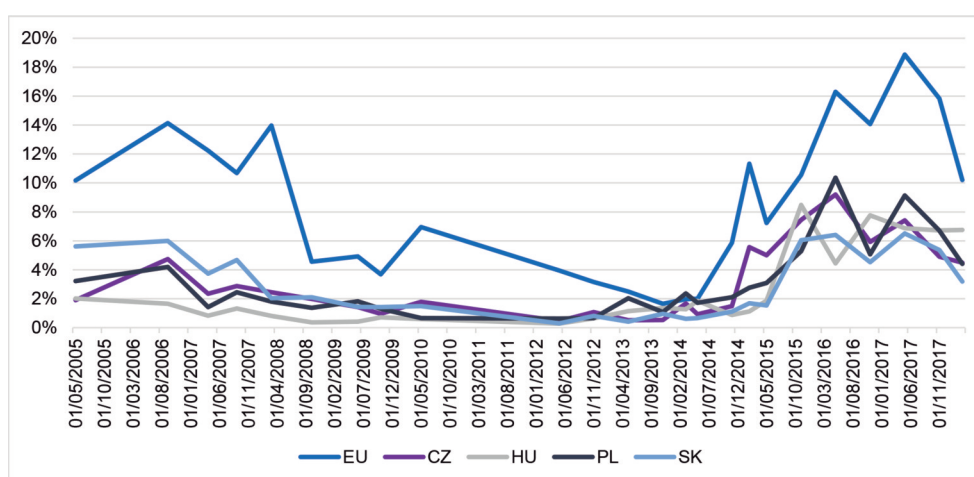


Source: Own compilation based on data from Eurobarometer 2005-2017.

The 2018 special edition of Eurobarometer showed that 63%, 54%, 49% and 37% of Hungarians, Slovaks, Czechs and Poles respectively were of opinion that immigration from outside the EU was more of a problem than an opportunity for their respective countries (Eurostat, 2018c). Same poll showed that full 68% of Hungarians, 67% of Czechs, 58% of Slovaks and 33% of Poles thought their country should not help the refugees (against the EU average of 27%).

At the same time, the percentage of those who placed terrorism among top two issues facing their country, while between April 2008 and November 2014 oscillated between 0% and 2% in all countries in question, between February 2015 and November 2017 peaked at between 7% and 9% (Eurostat 2018b, see Figure 2).

Figure 2 What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment (%)?



Source: Own compilation based on data from Eurobarometer 2005-2017.

PEW Research Center 2016 Global Attitudes survey showed that 71% of Poles and 76% of Hungarians believed refugees would increase domestic terrorism (PEW, 2016). In September same year, the vast majority of Czech citizens were concerned that refugees pose a threat to the security of their country (77%), the EU (92%) and peace in the world (81%) (“Postoje České Veřejnosti K Cizincům”, 2018). Hungary even held a referendum on refugee quotas in 2016, with 98% of the participants voting against admission of the refugees to the country. However, because of the low turnout (below the 50% threshold), the result was declared as constitutionally null and void (Kingsley, 2016).

Both the reasons behind and consequences of this successful securitization process in the Visegrad countries are manifold. While, as it has already been pointed out, politicians in V4

states have been ostensibly refusing to accept refugees and migrants on account of them posing a threat to their respective countries societal and state security, in fact asylum seekers were scapegoated so that the policy makers in question could capitalize on people's fear. Immigrants have been presented as a dangerous "others" against whom electorate – grateful for protection and united against a common enemy – could be mobilized.

As an immediate result, next step – non-discursive securitization or the already mentioned "measures beyond the daily routines" – could be made the Visegrad political leaders. Hungary installed a barbed wired on the border with Serbia and Croatia and detained refugees in shipping containers, as well as criminalized helping asylum seekers ("Hungarian government marks world refugee day", 2018). Poland has been refusing to accept asylum applications from asylum seekers at the border with Belarus (Wilczak, 2018). Slovak border police opened fire at asylum seekers attempting to cross the border from Hungary, wounding a young Syrian woman ("Syrian refugee shot by Slovakian border guards", 2016). Czech authorities were locking migrants and refugees in closed detention centers, where they were "stripped-searched" for money and forced to pay EUR 9 per day for their involuntary stay (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015).

Politicians in the V4 countries continue to employ securitizing rhetoric against both migrants and asylum seekers, even as the numbers of those wishing to reach Europe and dwindling and sometimes even if their actual policies in the field of migration are at odds with their official rhetoric (as in Poland, which in 2017 issued the largest number of residence permits in the entire EU [Eurostat 2018d]). Achieving their proclaimed goals of long-term state and societal security and integrity would, however, be much better achieved through engagement in a fact-based, pragmatic debate about migration, both forced (asylum seekers) and voluntary (mostly economic) one. Otherwise, the only real gains are borne by themselves in the form high popular support rates; even that, though, is only in a relatively short term.

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