Beyond Populism: Sources of EU-Skepticism in the Visegrad Group

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Abstract: Within the European Union (EU), the Visegrad Group (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), known as the V4, has gained the reputation of being a troublemaker because of its opposition to further European integration. Scholars have studied sovereignism among the V4 countries—which is manifest in their EU-skepticism, anti-immigration stance, and political and social conservatism— predominantly on the premise that it stems from the influence populist parties and their leaders have exerted on domestic audiences. This chapter contends that recent sovereignist trends are better explained by the presence of grassroots-level discontent, as citizens' reservations toward the EU within the Group have emerged regardless of the rise of populist parties in the region. Through descriptive and interpretative quantitative methodologies, this research uses EU cross-national public opinion survey data to examine the political, social, and cultural contexts in which public attitudes toward European integration are shaped in the V4. Findings show that, although people there want to limit the power of the EU—in alignment with mainstream populist parties—they do not wish for their respective countries to leave the Union, realizing that the EU provides economic benefits. The study shows that people's rejection of immigration and multiculturalism does not depend on their support for right-wing populist parties, instead stemming from their perceived threat of terrorism and loss of national identity. Conclusions thus debunk the notion that it is the V4's populist parties that create an East-West divide in European values. Although Eastern Europeans are more conservative about social and political matters than Western Europeans, these attitudes are unrelated to party politics.

In 2016, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared that "there is no free Europe without nation states" (Dunai 2016). Moreover, at an event to commemorate the Maastricht Treaty, former European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker protested that "we won't exist as single nations without the European Union" (*Reuters* 2016). These quotes illustrate the divide among European Union leaders and those of several countries in Central Europe, which was particularly acute in the immediate aftermath of the migrant crisis but remains a pertinent political issue today. Although they once led the process of democratic transition following the fall of the communist system, Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland—which joined the EU at the same time in 2004—gained the reputation of being "troublemakers" in the EU in the period

following 2015 because of their nation-centric governments and rebellion against certain common EU policies (Kajánek 2022; Zalan 2021; Végh 2018). In these four countries—jointly known as the Visegrad Group, Visegrad Four, or V4 (Figure 1)—concerns over the future of European integration have developed over the past decade, as parties described as populist and Euroskeptic have become mainstream politically, often forming governments. This study inspects whether the positions of political leaders in the V4 countries regarding European integration correspond to the views of their respective populations.

Figure 1. The Visegrad Group in Europe

Source: The author (MapChart)

The Visegrad Group has operated as an informal coalition within the European Union. However, the four neighboring member states making up the group do not share the same positions on policy, and thus do not constitute a uniform bloc. For example, Slovakia joined the Eurozone, while the other three states have not; and V4 countries' foreign policy with regard to the Russian Federation has differed. Yet, all four have cooperated based on their shared history, cultural values, and economic and security goals. Diplomatic intergovernmental cooperation among the V4 countries has developed out of a desire to amplify the four countries' respective voices within the EU and to join forces to promote their regional positioning.

Since at least three of the V4 states are smaller than many other European states, during the initial years of their EU membership, it was implied that they would accept the leadership of more established and larger Western member states and adjust to the

expectations that were set for them from the outside. However, over time, V4 leaders have become more vocal about EU policies, increasingly wishing to influence the future of the EU as a whole. The migrant crisis of 2015 exposed stark differences among member states, in particular when the V4 countries unilaterally opted to close their respective borders and refused to comply with top-down instructions coming from the European Commission about receiving the quota of migrants they were allocated. Furthermore, the political leadership in each of the V4 countries has resisted proposed plans to further cede sovereignty to EU institutions for the purpose of establishing common border control and immigration policies.

While the EU has worked toward normalizing common regimes and shared sovereignty and reducing state competences in several spheres, such as monetary and immigration policy (Keating 2008), political elites in the V4 countries have often been critical of these regimes, rejecting the idea of a federalist project led by "unelected bureaucrats" who impose "Western" values on populations in the V4 countries. Populists in these four nations have not, however, opposed the idea of European integration per se but rather the neo-liberal model the EU proposes. These populists have aimed to shape the EU from within, so that it remains true to what they believe was its initial function: a loose association of sovereign states collaborating on trade and economic matters. The EU, in turn, has accused the V4 countries—particularly Hungary and Poland—of "democratic backsliding."

Debates about recent nationalistic tendencies in the EU have predominantly relied on the premise that the ruling populist parties influence the general public. After all, it is evident that these parties enjoy significant public support in V4 countries and, in some cases, they have even won consecutive elections there. While a number of scholars have accepted this premise (Pirro and Van Kessel 2017; Guerra 2013; Kopecký and Mudde 2002), this chapter proposes the argument that such analyses are too simplistic because they do not account for intrinsic divergences in political cultures and value systems among different European societies, in particular when comparing established and newer EU member states. Therefore, it is both timely and relevant to investigate public attitudes in the Visegrad Group toward European integration and to unveil the extent to which people's political, social, and cultural attitudes align with the stances of their political leaders.

Scholars Blame it on the Populists

The EU has faced multiple crises in the past decade, starting with the Eurozone crisis, which was followed by the migrant crisis and Brexit. Academic debates about how these crises have affected public support for European integration have been fruitful, both from a theoretical (Rosamond 2019; Schimmelfennig 2018; Tosun, Wetzel, and Zapryanova 2014) and empirical perspective (Harteveld et al. 2018; Serricchio, Tsakatika, and Quaglia 2013). Initially, scholars explored the binary division between public approval

and disapproval of European unification and EU membership in general (McLaren 2006; Hooghe and Marks 2004; Gabel 1998). Later, studies explored the multidimensional and policy-oriented aspects of people's attitudes toward integration (De Vries and Steenbergen 2013; Stöckel 2013; Boomgaarden et al. 2011). In their seminal work, Hobolt and De Vries (2016) differentiated between regime support (i.e., membership in the EU) and policy support, which they defined as "support for the content of collective decisions and actions taken by EU actors" (Hobolt and De Vries 2016, 416). This notable distinction has invited the question of whether Euroskepticism in the Visegrad Group means that people in those countries wish an exit from the European Union.

With the rise of nation-centric politics in EU member states in recent years, most texts on Euroskepticism have equated sovereignism with populism (Basile and Mazzoleni 2020; Kallis 2018; De Spiegeleire, Skinner, and Sweijs 2017), thus attributing the pushback against any incremental ceding of powers to the EU to the influence of populist parties. In the case of the V4 countries, scholars have indeed found links between populist parties, anti-EU narratives (Pirro and Van Kessel 2017; Guerra 2013; Kopecký and Mudde 2002), and the extent to which Euroskeptic publics vote for populist parties (Santana, Zagorski, and Rama 2020; Treib 2014; Werts, Scheepers, and Lubbers 2013; Lubbers and Scheepers 2007). However, scholars have disagreed about the nature of these links. While some scholars have argued that populist nationalism has been driven by an anti-establishment sentiment (Lovec et al. 2019), others have refuted this finding (Santana, Zagorski, and Rama 2020). Since Euroskeptic parties in the V4 countries have fared well in general elections, the question arises about whether these parties have triggered certain public attitudes vis-à-vis the EU, or vice-versa.

This chapter advances four hypotheses to investigate current patterns of public opinions in the V4 about the EU and national interests, the relationship between these opinions and support for populist parties in those countries, and the socio-political factors that drive contestation within the EU.

Hypothesis 1: Most V4 citizens oppose the transfer of additional policy-making powers to the EU and believe their respective countries would have a better future outside the EU.

Hypothesis 2: Greater support for populist parties in V4 countries is consistent with greater opposition to the transfer of additional policy-making powers to the EU.

Hypothesis 3: Increasing support for right-wing populist parties is consistent with increasingly negative opinions about migrants and religious minorities.

Hypothesis 4: People in V4 countries support conservative political and social positions more often than people in Western Europe do.

Scholars have commented on the cultural element of populism in the V4 Group: populists depict cosmopolitan values and multiculturalism as threats to national identities, which people previously had to defend from the influence of the Soviet Union (Krastev

2017). Although V4 countries have experienced negative net migration, receiving little inward migration, research has shown that negative attitudes toward immigration are good predictors of voting patterns there (Santana, Zagorski, and Rama 2020), because "what matters for cultural attitudes and electoral behavior is not just the number of migrants that [sic] arrive, but public perceptions of them…" (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 181). The conservatives in V4 countries have presented immigration as proof of the failure of Western "multiculturalism" and a threat to the perpetuation of the Christian world (Bluhm and Varga 2020). These parties commonly exploit citizens' belief that the EU threatens people's traditional values and cultural identities (Styczyńska 2017). Thus, scholars have held populist parties in the V4 responsible for the hostile response to the distribution of migrant quotas during the refugee crisis.

A notable development in the last decade has been the emergence of a new brand of conservatism in V4 countries, promoted by various political leaders, think tanks and intellectuals (Bluhm and Varga 2019; Buzogány and Varga 2018). This brand of conservatism opposes the political centrism and social liberalism typical of most Western European conservative parties. Political ideology in the V4 has aimed at establishing strong state autonomy and prioritizing national interests in decision-making. Proponents of social conservatism in the V4 have promoted the traditional family as the core of society, re-embracing religiousness and national identity, which they see as endangered by supranational entities (Bluhm and Varga 2020). Unlike proponents of Western conservatism, who favor small government and oppose interventionism, proponents of conservatism in the V4 blame the "weak" state for failing to effectively promote national interests (Buzogány and Varga 2018). They prefer a strong, centralized government and the pursuit of economic nationalism (Harmes 2012).

Hungary and Poland, where this type of conservatism is the most prominent, have been dubbed "illiberal democracies" by scholars and policy-makers. The political leadership in these two countries has challenged the norms, institutions, and principles of the EU, not because these leaders strive toward a schism from the rest of Europe but because they claim to stand for the real values of European civilization (Bluhm and Varga 2020). Recent scholarship has provided a variety of explanations for this "illiberal backlash:" a superficial understanding of liberal democratic values at the time of the transition from communism (Dawson and Hanley 2016; Bohle and Greskovits 2012; Krastev 2007); a decade-long history of authoritarianism that has impeded the development of a true liberal political culture (Wilkin 2018); the consequences of neoliberal capitalism (privatization, deregulation, and the dismantling of the welfare system) that have exacerbated social inequality (Bíró-Nagy 2017; Minkenberg 2013; Mudde 2007); and the increased political polarization and mainstreaming of populist parties (Stanley 2017; Enyedi 2016; Palonen 2009). While these factors may all have contributed to an erosion of democracy in the V4 countries, socio-political attitudes and values among citizens there have been overlooked as relevant factors.

Using Survey Datasets to Contextualize EU-Skepticism

In its treatment of survey data, this study relies on quantitative descriptive and interpretative quantitative methods. First, the descriptive method is used for bivariate analysis to characterize the views held by the population in the V4 countries and to assess patterns in those views using contingency tables and scatter plots. Then, interpretative analysis is used to explain attitudes that are not immediately apparent about complex, interdependent, and diverse socio-political factors associated with contemporary Euroskepticism. By integrating the two methods, this research extends knowledge in the study of Euroskepticism, as it both presents the central tendency and variability of public opinions and provides a detailed understanding of the socio-political environment through observation. Numerical data provide precise measurements from which conclusions are drawn about both particular cases and the region overall. However, while this positivist approach can address the circumstances influencing public opinions in the V4 countries about EU integration, it cannot explain the reasons behind those circumstances. The interpretative quantitative method enables statistics to be "used to shed light on the unobservable data generating processes that underlie observed data" (Babones 2016, 453). This research method has been validated because it focuses on the meaning of behavior in context (Gaskins 1994). Hence, it is particularly suitable to highlight the factors that have strongly influenced attitudes toward the EU in the V4 countries, beyond the influence of populist parties.

Data were collected from the following survey datasets:

- 2020 Standard Eurobarometer 93: Public Opinion in the European Union (henceforth "Eurobarometer 93");

- 2020 Special Eurobarometer 500: Future of Europe (henceforth "Eurobarometer 500");

- 2020 Politico Europe Poll of Polls (henceforth "Politico");

- 2019 Pew Research Center poll: European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism (henceforth "Pew Research Center");

- 2017 International Republican Institute Survey: Public opinion in Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia (henceforth "International Republican Institute," or IRI);

- 2017-2021 Joint Dataset of the European Values Study and World Values Survey (henceforth "European Values Study").

The use of primary data collected from multiple sources over four years adds value to this study in multiple ways. First, it helps reduce the impact of potential biases in individual surveys. Second, it makes it possible to explain trends in ways that looking at a single dataset would not permit. Third, comparing datasets produced over four years helps to establish consistency over time and reinforce the validity of the conclusions.

The Standard Eurobarometer is a biannual survey coordinated by the European Commission that analyzes attitudes of EU citizens about various policy areas. For the purpose of this research, the summer 2020 Standard Eurobarometer 93 and the special edition of the Eurobarometer on the "Future of Europe" were considered. The survey questions in those datasets are pertinent to understand the most recent views of V4 citizens on the state of the European Union and future European integration. Politico, as a leading news organization, has tracked and aggregated polling data for political parties in every country in Europe. A 2017 study by the International Republican Institute (IRI), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization conducting polls in transition democracies in Europe, is particularly relevant as it is the only recent, large-sample public opinion survey focused on the Visegrad Group on questions of identity, politics, and relations with the EU. Similarly, the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan fact tank that conducts opinion polls and social science research, has produced a dataset allowing for a multi-country comparative analysis. Finally, the European Values Study is a unique, large-scale, cross-national, and longitudinal survey sampling the opinions and values of adults across European countries.

Understanding Public Opinion about the EU and Societies in V4 Countries

Utilitarian Relationship with the EU (Hypotheses 1 and 2)

Respondents in the IRI poll indicated the loss of independence and sovereignty as one of the greatest costs of EU membership. Majorities in Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary believe that the EU is an association of sovereign states and that it has little connection to individual citizens, so that citizens' loyalty rests with their respective states rather than the EU. Poland is the only country where a plurality says that there should be loyalty to the EU because the EU grants rights and benefits to EU citizens. Poles express a high degree of attachment to the EU (Eurobarometer 93), as do large segments of the Hungarian and Slovak populations. Yet 63 percent of Czechs do not feel any attachment to the Union, accounting for the large standard deviation from the V4 mean (Table 1). Additionally, most Czechs and Slovaks are neutral about the EU, with over a third of them thinking the EU is a waste of funds.

Table 1: Attachment to and Trust in the EU in the V4 Countries

	Visegrad Group					
	Hungary	**Czechia**	**Slovakia**	**Poland**	**Mean**	**Standard Deviation**
Think citizens owe loyalty to the EU (%)	35	41	45	49	42.50	5.17
Think citizens owe loyalty to their respective states, not the EU (%)	51	56	54	42	50.75	5.36
Feel attachment to the EU (%)	70	35	59	73	59.25	14.94
Do not feel attachment to the EU (%)	28	63	40	25	39.00	14.95
Trust the EU (%) - *EB93*	53	35	45	56	47.25	8.14
Do not trust the EU (%) - *EB93*	40	56	46	32	43.50	8.76
Trust the EU (%) – *EVS*	41.4	25	53	45.5	41.23	10.25
Do not trust the EU (%) – *EVS*	53.4	69	44	47.6	53.50	9.56

Sources: International Republican Institute, Eurobarometer 93 and European Values Study

When it comes to trusting the EU, the Eurobarometer 93 reveals that opinions are split across the V4. The European Values Study paints a bleaker picture, as shown in Table 1: in three out of four V4 countries, distrust in the EU is more than thirteen percentile points higher than what is recorded in the Eurobarometer 93. Moreover, people in V4 countries express an even lower level of trust in their national institutions, indicating general skepticism about governing elites.

Therefore, it comes as a relative surprise that data from both the Eurobarometer 500 and the Pew Research Center show that a majority in all V4 countries sees EU membership as generally a positive thing. This favorable view has to do with citizens associating the EU with freedom of movement for people, goods, and services (Eurobarometer 93 2020). For 70 percent or more of citizens in all V4 countries, the two greatest benefits they get from the EU are the financial aid they receive and access to the common market and border-free travel (IRI 2017). Hence, economic considerations drive people's approval of the EU in part, with majorities across the V4 saying their national economies have been strengthened because of EU membership (Pew Research Center 2019). Exhibiting a utilitarian approach toward the EU, most respondents agree that the interests of their respective countries are best served by

maintaining strong relations with the EU (IRI 2017) and disagree that a better future outside the EU is possible (Eurobarometer 93 2020).

Table 2: Views on National Interests and the EU in V4

	Visegrad Group					
	Hungary	Czechia	Slovakia	Poland	Mean	Standard Deviation
Do not want more decisions taken at the EU level	63	75	73	69	70.00	4.58
Agree their country's interests are best served by maintaining strong relations with the EU (%)	61	46	63	69	59.75	8.47
Say EU membership has strengthened the national economy (%)	65	51	58	71	61.25	7.50
Do not think their country would have a better future outside the EU (%)	61	48	57	52	54.50	4.92
Think their country would have a better future outside the EU (%)	31	42	33	39	36.25	4.44

Sources: International Republican Institute, Pew Research Center and Eurobarometer 93

Overwhelmingly, citizens in all V4 countries reject that additional realms of decisions be placed under EU authority. A good number of respondents in Czechia and Slovakia would like to see fewer decisions made at the EU level within the next ten years. Those people say that they are in favor of the EU but do not support the way the EU has functioned until now. In contrast, most Hungarians and Poles prefer to preserve the existing arrangement rather than increase the powers of the EU (Eurobarometer 500 2020). Majorities in each country, however, agree that future global challenges will be best addressed if shared by national and EU-level governance (Eurobarometer 500 2020). Hypothesis 1, which states that "Most V4 citizens oppose the transfer of additional policy-making powers to the EU and believe their respective countries would have a better future outside the EU," is thus not supported by evidence. While it is true that people in the V4 do not favor increased EU powers, they also do not feel that the EU undermines national interests in V4 countries; instead, they believe that future collaboration between their respective states and the EU will be beneficial.

The question remains as to whether the opposition to the jurisdiction of the EU being expanded is related to the influence of populist parties. Table 3 presents the cumulative percentage of voters who have indicated a preference for one of these parties in Hungary (Fidesz and Jobbik), Czechia (ANO and SPD), Slovakia (OLANO, Sme Rodina, and
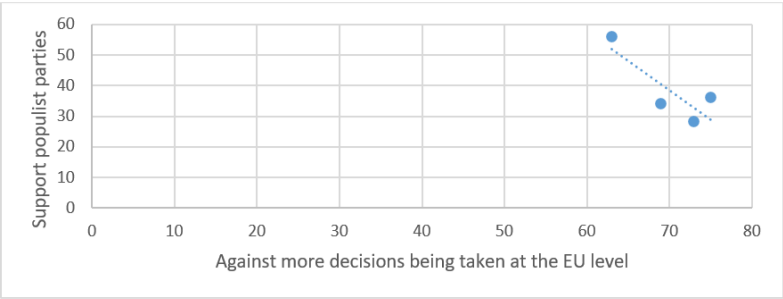
L'SNS), and Poland (PiS). The first observation is that, except in Hungary, majorities in V4 countries do not vote for populist parties. Hypothesis 2 states that "Greater support for populist parties in V4 countries is consistent with greater opposition to the transfer of additional policy-making powers to the EU." A scatter plot provides a visualization of the relation between the two variables and highlights that there is no positive relationship (Graph 1). In V4 countries where there is greater popular support for populist parties, people are less opposed to an increase in the decision power of the EU. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is also unsupported by the data.

Table 3: Percentage of Support for Populist Parties in V4 Countries

	Visegrad Group			
	Hungary	**Czechia**	**Slovakia**	**Poland**
Support populist parties (%)	56	36	28	34
Do not support populist parties (%)	44	64	72	66

Source: Politico

Graph 1: Relationship between support for populist parties and opposition to further transfer of decision-making powers to the EU

Source: The author

The Threat of Multiculturalism (Hypothesis 3)

Immigration is an acute concern in V4 countries, especially in the aftermath of the contentious 2015-2016 migrant crisis in Europe. In the V4 countries, views on immigration have been generally impacted by the fact that incoming migrants and

refugees are culturally and religiously different from the majority of the population there. The Pew Research Center survey reveals that, among all surveyed countries, the V4 countries have the largest percentage of respondents with an unfavorable view of Muslims (see Table 4). This finding starkly contrasts with results from several Western European countries, such as Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, and France, where between 68 and 72 percent of respondents had a positive view of Muslims.
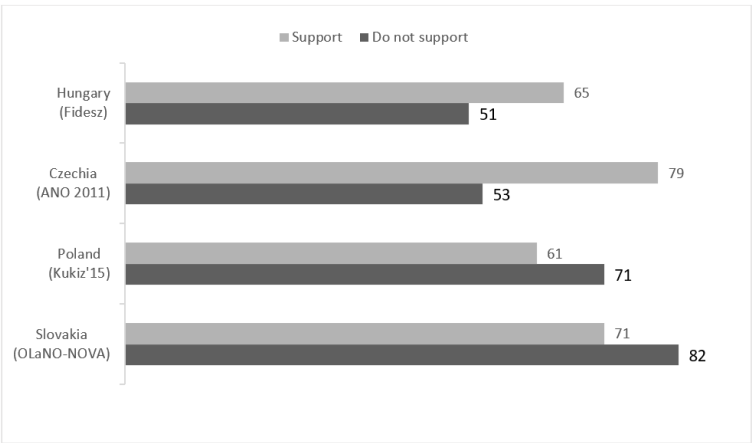
Table 4: Views on Globalization and Muslims in V4 Countries

	Visegrad Group			
	Hungary	**Czechia**	**Slovakia**	**Poland**
Have unfavorable view of Muslims (%)	58	64	77	66
See terrorism as the main threat to their way of life (%)	28	33	35	31
Think globalization has benefitted their family (%)	46	54	54	42
Think globalization has hurt their family (%)	54	46	46	31
Think globalization is an opportunity for economic growth (%)	70	58	47	63
Think globalization threatens their country's identity (%)	56	63	58	45

Source: Pew Research Center, International Republican Institute and Eurobarometer 93

Data from the same survey also show that, while support for (right-wing or centrists) populist parties corresponds to greater anti-Muslim sentiments in Western European countries, populist parties are not a determinant variable for this trend in V4 countries. As Graph 2 demonstrates, both supporters and non-supporters of populist parties in V4 countries have a highly unfavorable view of Muslims. For example, in Hungary and Czechia, majorities among both those who vote and do not vote for the governing parties Fidesz and ANO 2011 have this negative perception. Furthermore, in Slovakia and Poland, anti-Muslim sentiments are even more widespread among those who do not support populist parties.
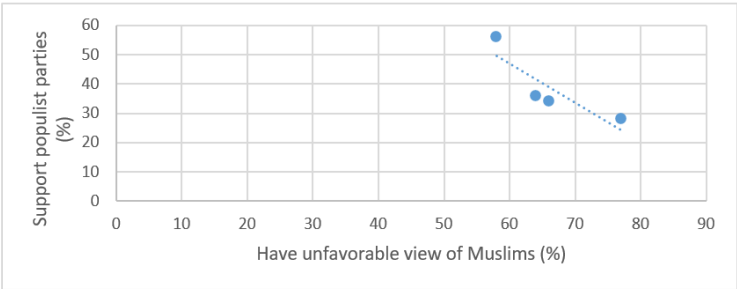
Graph 2: Percentage of people who have an unfavorable opinion of Muslims in their country

Source: Pew Research Center

Graph 3 is a visual rendition of the relationship established in Table 3 between anti-Muslim sentiment and support for right-wing populist parties. Contrary to expectations, this graph shows a downward trend and negative correlation, which means that as people increasingly support populist parties, their views about Muslims are less negative. Such results can be explained by the data that show that majorities in all V4 countries have expressed unfavorable opinions of Muslims, whereas, with the exception of Hungary, populist parties have been supported by minorities. If the support, or lack thereof, for populist parties does not account for anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim opinions in V4 countries, the question then becomes, what other societal factors do?
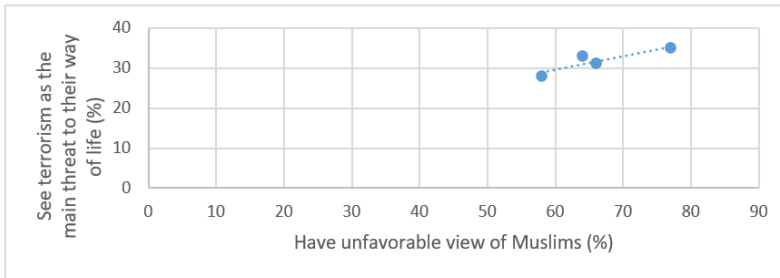
Graph 3: Relationship between anti-Muslim sentiments and support for right-wing populist parties

Source: The author

The Eurobarometer 93 shows that, in 2020, leaders in all V4 countries identified immigration as the most important EU-related issue, while the economic situation was considered as most concerning by EU members as a whole. IRI survey data from 2017 also show immigration and terrorism in the EU as either the first or second greatest concern for people in V4 countries, implying a perceived link between increasing numbers of immigrants and an increase in terrorism. When the same survey asked what was most likely to threaten their way of life and their children's future, most respondents in Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia chose terrorism, extremism, and political violence. In Hungary, this response received the second largest share of support. The 2020 Eurobarometer on the Future of Europe supports these findings: while 20 EU member states listed either climate change or health risks as the main global challenges for the future of the EU, people in three out of four of the V4 countries pointed to terrorism as the greatest threat. Poland was an outlier with 50 percent of respondents choosing risks related to health as the main issue, likely influenced by the context of the coronavirus pandemic.
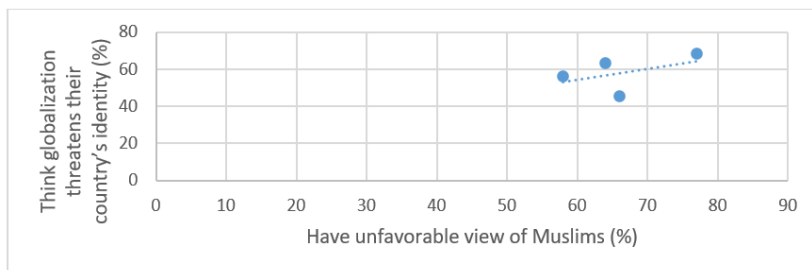
Graph 4: Relationship between anti-Muslim sentiments and perception of terrorism as the key threat to existing way of life

Source: The author

The upward trend line in Graph 4 illustrates that there is a positive correlation between people seeing terrorism as a main threat and their unfavorable opinions of Muslims. When asked about globalization, V4 citizens were divided (IRI 2017), as can be seen in Table 4. Globalization was seen as an opportunity for economic growth by most respondents in all V4 countries, but the largest percentage of V4 citizens also felt it threatened their identity (Eurobarometer 500). Graph 5 demonstrates that when more people in the V4 countries perceive that globalization threatens their country's identity, it corresponds with an increase in their negative perceptions of Muslims.

Graph 5: Relationship between anti-Muslim sentiments and perception that globalization threatens a country's identity

Source: The author

In conclusion, people in V4 countries do hold negative views of migrants and religious minorities. However, there is no link between these views and support for right-wing populist parties, since these views have been expressed by a majority of both supporters and non-supporters of populist parties. Thus, hypothesis 3—that an increase in support for right-wing populist parties corresponds with an increase in negative opinions about migrants and religious minorities—is not corroborated. Instead, people's unfavorable opinions about migration, and in particular about Muslims migrating to Europe, is related to the perceived threat of terrorism and the loss of national identity.

Disparate Attitudes and Values (Hypothesis 4)

The report by the Pew Research Center includes an exploration of political party favorability in EU member states. It unveils that preferences diverge across regions. In Western European countries, left or center-left political parties enjoy greater public support, whereas the more conservative or right of center a party is, the less favorably it is ranked. The exact opposite appears to be true in Eastern and Central European countries. Throughout that region, center-right or populist right-wing parties receive the most positive reviews. Data from the European Values Study are slightly less conclusive. On a scale of self-reported political leanings, the largest share of respondents in each country position themselves at the center (see Table 5). Yet, the means in Poland and Hungary are 6.2 and 6.1 respectively, the highest in the EU.

Table 5: Socio-political Values Expressed in Select EU Countries

	Visegrad Group				Western Europe			
	Hungary	Czechia	Slovakia	Poland	Germany	Nether-lands	France	Sweden
Self-reported political leaning (on a scale from 1=left to 10=right)	6.1	5.6	5.6	6.2	4.9	5.6	5.1	5.5
Do not want homosexuals as neighbors (%)	37	20	37	28	8	3.6	8	2.4
Agree that homosexual parents are as good parents as others (%)	23	40	16	12	60	66	53	74.5
Believe they have a duty to society to have children (%)	41	55	45	43	24	3.6	23	8
Agree that abortion is justifiable (on a scale from 1=never to 10=always)	4.9	6.1	5.3	3.8	6	7	6.8	8.2
Self-report as religious (%)	53	32.4	69	83	52	42	40.5	27

Source: European Values Study

Table 6: Socio-political Values Expressed in Select EU Countries (Mean and Standard Deviation)

	Visegrad Group		Western Europe	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Self-reported political leaning (on a scale from 1=left to 10=right)	5.88	0.28	5.28	0.29
Do not want homosexuals as neighbors (%)	30.50	7.09	5.50	2.54
Agree that homosexual parents are as good parents as others (%)	22.75	10.71	63.38	7.90
Believe they have a duty to society to have children (%)	46.00	5.39	14.65	8.99
Agree that abortion is justifiable (on a scale from 1=never to 10=always)	5.03	0.83	7.00	0.79
Self-report as religious (%)	59.35	18.84	40.38	8.90

Source: The author

Simply accounting for political leanings is not sufficient to assess societal and ideological differences across EU countries. Public attitudes about certain issues that concern family and society, such as LGBT rights, abortion, and religion, among others, also shed light on how conservative or liberal a society is. Tables 5 and 6 illustrate that the populations of V4 countries and Western Europe differ in certain social views and values they hold. When asked whether they would want homosexuals as neighbors, between 20 percent and 37 percent of respondents in V4 countries answered in the negative, for under 10 percent in most Western European countries. Similar differences in opinions can be observed for the question of whether homosexual parents are as good parents as others, whether citizens have a duty to society to have children, and whether abortion is justifiable. Notably, the Czechs standout from the group, as their views on the issues of homosexual parents and abortion are closer to the European average.

Two trends emerge from the data. First, people in V4 countries hold more conservative social and political values than people in Western Europe. This finding supports Hypothesis 4. Second, conservatism is not uniformly expressed among the populations of V4 countries. Instead, conservatism exists on a spectrum, as demonstrated by the high standard deviation in the V4 group's mean for variables such as people's level of religiousness and opinions about same-sex parenthood. This standard deviation primarily results from the gap between public attitudes in Czechia and Poland, which indicates that Czechia is the most socially liberal of all the V4 countries, while Poland is positioned as the most socially conservative in the group.

Sources of Worldviews in the Visegrad Group

Euroskeptic but not Anti-EU

Much of the literature on Euroskepticism has explained sovereignism and nationalism in the V4 countries as a product of the influence of populist parties, which promote Euroskepticism. This chapter shows that reservations toward the EU among the populations of the V4 exist independently from that pressure. Survey indicators unveil that Czechia is the most Euroskeptic of the V4 countries, while Poland is the most pro-EU. Contrary to expectations, citizens of Hungary and Poland, whose governments have been criticized for leading the opposition to the "ever closer Union," are the most favorable to the EU out of the V4 countries. In contrast, the public in Slovakia and Czechia appears to be more reticent in its optimism about the Union.

A general lack of trust in the government and institutions drives wariness about the actions of the EU. Yet, the case of the V4 demonstrates that EU-skepticism is not equivalent to anti-EU sentiment. A clear majority in each V4 state is in favor of the EU, but about half of the citizens there feel that the European project needs to be rethought and changes need to occur in implementation (IRI 2017; Eurobarometer 500 2020). In all of the V4 countries, only a minority wishes to see an increase in the scope of decisions

made at the EU level in the future. The issue of relative power between member states also plays a role in how willing people are to accept a greater range of competences granted to the EU. On the one hand, large Western countries, especially Germany and France, have a disproportionate influence in setting the EU's agenda. On the other hand, smaller member states, mostly in Central and Eastern Europe, have benefitted from economic integration, as the single market, the free movement of people, and multifaceted cooperation on a regional level have strengthened their development. However, the fact that they have comparatively less influence on EU matters has prompted people there to resist additional power transfers from national to EU institutions. Gaining independence from the controlling influence of the Soviet Union in the 1990s was a historic feat for Central and Eastern European nations. Thus, they have remained wary of propositions that would lead to a renouncement of this hard-earned independence. As one recent study has demonstrated, even in Germany, which is a substantial driver of EU policies, concerns over loss of sovereignty has resulted in increased Euroskepticism (Yordanova et al. 2020). It follows that Euroskepticism in V4 countries is connected to the perceived need to protect national interests within the EU rather than to an appetite for the break-up of the EU. Therefore, the analysis here supports the thesis that Euroskepticism in V4 countries is only a "soft" Euroskepticism (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2002).

Immigration and Nation

The difference in worldviews between East and West among EU member states has become visible on matters related to immigration and multiculturalism. During the migrant crisis, the V4, as well as other Central and Eastern European countries, have been among the most vocal in opposing the proposed mandatory quota system for accepting migrants. Compared to other European countries, the V4 states are more homogenous ethnically and linguistically, which has certainly played a role in shaping people's socio-political views there. In the tradition of the nineteenth-century German romanticists, who spearheaded the unification of all German states under the concept of *Volk*—a homogenous cultural entity based on nationhood that rests on linguistic and ethnic elements (Pflanze 1966)—nationality in most of Central and Eastern Europe has been defined in terms of a shared ancestry rooted in the feeling of belonging to a common ethnicity and language group. This understanding constitutes a primordialist conception of the nation, where the nation predates the state and is solely a cultural entity, rather than a political construct (Dawisha 2002).

According to this understanding of the nation, nation-states differ from other forms of political entities such as multinational states, city-states, or empires, in which identity is shaped through the prism of citizenship (Haas 1997). For example, in the United Kingdom and France, nationhood has emerged out of people's loyalty to a state or a monarchical authority, in line with Rousseauist philosophy and a constructivist conception of the state, which both hold that nations are communal affiliations based on subjective psychology rather than on objective biology (Dawisha 2002). Hence, "a nation

exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to be a nation" (Seton-Watson 1977, 5). According to civic nationalism, as represented by the United Kingdom and France, the existence of the state is a prerequisite for the process of nation-building; and heterogeneous ethnic and linguistic groups can unite because they accept a single civic identity.

In contrast to civic nationalism, ethnic nationalism has developed out of a reverence for the cultural separateness of peoples. Consequently, for the ethnically, religiously, and linguistically homogeneous V4 countries, suggesting that populations of different origins should settle in and integrate into one society and nation contradicts the very understanding of national belonging as a culturally exclusive process. Likewise, the V4's perspective is at odds with the open borders' context inside the EU, the EU's motto— "United in diversity"—and the concept of a supranational European citizenship and identity. It is not within the scope of this research to explore the divergence between the two conceptualizations of the nation in greater detail, but it is important to note that the debate has remained as relevant in modern European politics as it was in the nineteenth century (Hutchinson and Smith 1994; Smith 1992; Brubaker 1992; Renan 1990). This research ascertains, however, that globalization-driven multiculturalism has been perceived as a threat to national identities and security in V4 countries in the contemporary era, suggesting that the pushback against harmonizing certain EU-wide migration and asylum policies will continue in the years ahead.

Conservatism in V4 Countries

The findings of this study suggest that people in the V4 countries lean to the right politically but that these countries do not constitute a uniform bloc when it comes to attitudes and values; indeed, some countries within the group are shown to be more liberal than others. Nevertheless, a clear East-West "value gap" emerges when comparing the views held by people in the V4 to those held by people in Western member states, notably on the issue of religion and social issues such as abortion and LGBT rights. Yet, about half of V4 citizens have stated that they perceive their values as being similar to those held by people in Western Europe (IRI 2017), which demonstrates that there is dissonance in the way EU citizens approach "European values." In the EU, these values generally encompass liberal ideals. Indeed, the "common values" described in the preamble to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union include freedom, solidarity, democracy, and the rule of law. The Charter also promotes respect for cultural and religious diversity, prevents discrimination based on religion and sexual orientation, and defends other principles that have all shaped the legal system of the EU. However, the eastward enlargement of the EU since 2004 has resulted in a pluralism of worldviews and values across member states. Thus, while some politicians refer to Europe's Christian heritage when speaking about European values, others mean secularism and multiculturalism.

Hungary's and Poland's respective historical contexts have led to a conservative wave in those two countries in recent years (Bluhm and Varga 2020). Leftist parties in Central and Eastern Europe have often derived from the former ruling communist parties. Therefore, people in these regions make different mental associations about leftist parties than in other parts of Europe. For example, in Western countries with a history of *laissez-faire* capitalism and rigid social class hierarchy, the political left has challenged the conservative status quo during the last few decades. In contrast, in Central and Eastern Europe, it was the political right that brought a wave of societal changes to challenge the leftist establishment in the post-1989 transition period. Furthermore, the seed of conservatism has always been present in these societies; it was simply suppressed during the communist era. After the fall of communism, that seed was cultivated to slowly lead to electoral success and mainstreaming. Hence, what we are witnessing today is a "conservative renaissance" (Bluhm and Varga 2020).

Waning Trust in Times of Crises

Support for the EU among people of the Visegrad Group has been multidimensional. The citizens of V4 countries have had reservations about certain EU policies based on their perceptions of national interest in their respective countries. As a consequence, people in the V4 group support political leaders who have contested many aspects of the European project; but at the same time these citizens hold positive views of the EU overall. Studies on Euroskepticism have tended to attribute rising sovereignism in V4 countries to the success of populist parties, without considering that these countries have prioritized different policies in European integration and that societal conservatism is a source of this rising trend. Thus, this chapter counters scholars who have claimed that the public pushback against the incremental ceding of powers to EU-level decision-making can be attributed to the influence of populist parties.

Among the V4 countries, Euroskepticism appears to be most prominent in Czechia, while people in Poland are the most EU-enthusiastic. Data also show that general skepticism about and distrust in governing institutions, both at national and EU levels, exist in all V4 countries. However, citizens there are more open than their governments in the tackling of challenges pertaining to foreign policy and migration at both the EU and national level. In each V4 country, most people agree that although some sovereignty might be lost, the interests of their respective countries are best served in the context of EU membership because of the economic gains membership brings. Hence, while not fully content with the direction in which the Union is headed, people in V4 countries are not anti-EU. This finding reaffirms the distinction Hobolt and De Vries (2016) have posited between regime and policy support.

Together, the V4 countries do not constitute a unanimous voice among EU member states, as they are divided on many issues. Each of the four countries included in the V4 has its own political environment and policy positions. However, when comparing the

V4 to Western EU member states, regional commonalities become apparent. This study concludes that the social and political values held by the citizens of the Visegrad Group are more conservative than those of Western Europeans and that this discrepancy indicates that an East-West gap in the understanding of "shared European values" is anchored not only among political elites but also among citizens. A majority of people in the overwhelmingly ethnically homogeneous Visegrad Group countries have a negative view of immigration and multiculturalism, which they believe bring the threat of terrorism and erode national identity. Such positions cannot be attributed to the influence of right-wing populist parties. In fact, these views are held equally by supporters and non-supporters of populist parties. This finding, thus, posits that it is based on grassroot reactions that during the 2015-2016 crisis the V4 countries rejected the EU migrant quota policy.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine are likely to have a further impact on Euroskepticism trends in V4 countries. On the one hand, V4 citizens could divert their concerns away from migration and toward security issues in the health sector, which has already been the case in Poland, according to the Eurobarometer 500. EU-wide efforts to overcome the pandemic and respond to Russia's military actions could become points of convergence for member states. On the other hand, the legacies of the COVID-19 crisis, potential disagreements over foreign policy among member states, and emerging crises linked to the economy or the energy sector may further weaken the public's trust in the governing bodies of the EU and boost nationalism in Europe. These trends echo those Europe already faced during the Eurozone and migrant crises, which enhanced people's support for the national state. Research is needed to investigate how those novel circumstances will impact people's support for EU institutions in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

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