Refugees and Fish Fingers

How Visegrad Policymakers Used Emancipatory Narratives to Establish a ‘Right to Reject’

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ABSTRACT

Emancipatory narratives and acts often emerge in struggle against injustice and marginalisation. This article shows the ease with which they can be employed to justify the denial of rights. The space-time is ‘post-socialist’ Eastern Europe, more specifically, the Visegrad platform set up in the 1990s to facilitate entry of three such states into the European Union (EU). The ethnography begins in 2015, when Arab and/or Muslim refugees appeared in Europe in what most EU politicians deemed as unsettling numbers. I read moments from conversations with policymakers and activists, as well as archive material, through lenses of solidarity and sovereignty. This approach allows us to see that delegitimisation of others’ rights can well be a product of relational insecurity, in this case, frustration in the Visegrad’s ‘policy world’ with the region’s recent Westernisation.

KEYWORDS

foreclosed future, refugees, right to reject, sovereignty, Visegrad, EU

A policy workshop on refugees has just ended. This one was in a format in which academics and journalists presented their observations from recent months and diplomats and other academics sat in the audience. Participants now continued the conversation in smaller spontaneously formed groups, circulating between coffee tables. A small queue was beginning to form around the desk with a warm buffet. I walked out of the building to get some fresh air. A few minutes later, a woman in a business suit was leaving the premises. She came to introduce herself and it turned out that she was a high-level diplomat representing one of the Visegrad states. As we shook hands, she added: ‘What you said was interesting’. I wondered how to read ‘interesting’, as my main message in the panel had been that it was unacceptable for Visegrad to reject refugees when much poorer countries opened their doors, despite their strained capacities. So, I asked: ‘Would you agree with some of that?’ Her response was one of key

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moments that helped me understand what was at stake: 'I would not say that. You have to understand that we will never have asylum policy like Sweden or Germany. We cannot do it. *That* is a fantasy'.

A (post)2015 Europe was generous in terms of Goffmanian frame reversals. Patients were suddenly becoming doctors and a reordering was in the making. In a year in which over a million people applied for asylum in the EU, a twofold increase from the past year (Eurostat 2016), some states have outright rejected them, or pledged to admit miniature numbers, such as 'one hundred Syrians'.¹ Instead, individuals and spontaneous collectives stepped in, offering food and campaigning for right to enter. In another plot twist, as we will see later, the 'newly democratic' EU members were lecturing their former teachers. While to most parts of Europe refugees arrived only electronically, even such virtual presence catalysed a new page in conversation on how their potential host societies want to live. In Prague, a cab driver would start some small talk with: 'Have you seen the hordes barging in on us?' A post office clerk, who noticed, on an envelope, that the sender worked at a university, inquired whether what he saw, about the migrants, on TV, was really true.

Yet these were not just times of panic and confusion, but also of revisiting expectations and possibilities for acting. Migration was discussed in pubs and on bus stops, and became a key agenda item of 'policy workshops' – panels convened by think-tanks, ministries, or activist groups – usually bringing together representatives of all the aforementioned spheres. Unlike in typical academic settings, participants in policy workshops are directly invited by organisers; there is no need to submit an abstract. Hats are often mixed – diplomats sometimes start their remarks by flaunting their academic credentials, adding 'I am here not just as an ambassador'. Researchers are asked to speak without professional jargon, which often results in their taking over the language of practitioners. There is rarely an open conflict and during the coffee breaks interlocutors engage in friendly banter. Business cards are swapped, the need to continue dialogue is affirmed. The purpose of such workshops is not just to exchange information. They also serve to put on the record that a dialogue is happening. As we will see later, dialogues in these or other settings do not necessarily resolve things. But an insight into Visegrad's 'policy worlds', an expression used by Shore, Wright and Peró (2011) for practices and sites of policymaking, offers clues for understanding how rejection of solidarity (or, rejection of rights of others), became framed as a right.

In this journey, we will be guided by a few pages from ethnographic notebooks discussing sovereignty. In the Europe of today, *sovereignty* is a suggestion both dangerous and emancipatory. It also happens to be one of key words in debates about European integration and a useful lens for studying what is, in many settings, already labelled a ‘so called refugee crisis’.² To be sure, the earlier suggestions that we have witnessed a clash of depoliticised state policy and political mobilisations of individuals (Kallius, Monterescu and Rajaram 2016) are not wrong. But the endlessly elastic list of reasons for denial of entry can also be interpreted as a symptom of a wider demand for the reordering of power relations in Europe. While some of the Visegrad discourses, such as fear of terrorism or of endangering of their ‘cultural security’ (Huysmans 2000), have been similar to concerns raised in European countries to their geographic north and west, there has been something more at work. The region’s recent history offered nutrition for a frustrated narrative of underdevelopment and its unequal positioning in Europe. The analytical lens of sovereignty then helps uncover how Visegrad’s rejection of refugees was nested in relationship with the imaginary West. Sovereignty is best understood in the context in which it emerges (Bonilla 2017); it is almost always a search for a new relationship (Dennison 2017). If perceived as absent, it can be simulated (Bryant and Hatay 2011), so important it is. Engagement with current lives of ‘post-socialism’ in studying wider European phenomena is long overdue (Kojanić 2020; Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert and Koobak 2019). This is mainly because of the specific temporality this field offers – a rich assemblage of pasts and futures – to the point of ‘disorientation’ (Jelača and Lugarić 2018).

The Visegrad network is a very productive site for studying the relationship between sovereignty and solidarity. Established shortly after the end of the Cold War, it was supposed to serve as a platform for consultations of four ‘post-socialist’ states and gradually evolved into overlapping networks of academics, artists, and writers. Acts and speeches made in the name of Visegrad often lay claims on representation of Central Europe, a placename used to emphasise a region’s uniqueness, often in hierarchical terms, as somehow more advanced than the ‘backward’ south-east (Kuus 2014; Todorova 2009).³ Terms such as East and West are fuzzy, analytically disobedient, but commonly mobilised in struggles over recognition of rights. Debates about migration provided yet another reshuffling of these categories. Visegrad’s political life, from the very inception of this platform, has revolved around finding a relationship with ‘the West’. And it is the

disappointment with the recent past of Westernisation, and related uncertainties about future, that provide clues for understanding why what I call ‘the right to reject’ emerged as a solid rock in post-2015 debates about the refugees. The argument is based on ethnography and interviews with Visegrad policymakers and activists, conducted primarily in Prague, with Brussels as a secondary site, and moments from interactions at other Visegrad locations and spent with its document archive serving as additional material. My interlocutors came primarily from Visegrad (Czech, Slovak, Hungarian and Polish) ministries of interior, foreign and social affairs and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). Conversations informing this article took place mostly in the period 2015–2017. Throughout the text I identify interlocutors not by their national affiliation but by the more generic ‘Visegrad diplomat/policymaker’. This is on the one hand to protect their privacy, but mostly not to distract from the main line of the argument, which focuses on mobilisations around the imaginary East–West divide. National differentiation of course cannot be dismissed – protesters attending recent anti-government demonstrations in Prague made pleas ‘not to become like Hungary’. Visegrad is not the only site in which tension along East–West marker emerged – one could follow these debates in other ‘Eastern’ locations, such as the Baltic states, but also within Germany (Dzenovska 2018; Römhild et al. 2018).

Thinking ‘Sovereignty’ in Visegrad

While dominant texts on European integration emphasise that independence and interdependence are not at odds, it seems that many Europeans do not believe this. Brexit, a show that entered conference rooms at approximately the same time as the refugees,⁴ amplified debates about sticking together, saving the European project. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, the EU has come under critique from diverse ideological positions, yet barely anyone has challenged the value of cooperation. In fact, a number of cooperative efforts emerged to dismantle EU institutions, such as when Steve Bannon, the former high-level advisor to President Trump, toured Europe to unite the forces that seek its dissolution.⁵ It is then clear, that movements which emphasise sovereignty also use this as a discursive strategy to achieve a rearrangement.

If independence or isolation is not the desired endgame of sovereignty narratives, what then is? Jean Dennison, writing about the

experience of Osage, a North American First Nation, proposes to think of it as a way of entering into new relations with others: sovereignty does not, because it cannot, mean independence as in isolation (Dennison 2017). This approach is very helpful to understanding the times when Europeans noticed refugees coming to the continent. According to Dennison, sovereignty:

operates as an ongoing process of engagement with other authorities. It is an insistence on one's authority without the illusion of full control, a mess of negotiations and interruptions, which almost always leads to further entanglements (Dennison 2017: 685).

To understand what was being renegotiated in Visegrad in 2015, we need to take a few pages from events around 1989, a yet earlier reordering in European politics, a moment when the Cold War was declared to be over. In 1991, three high-level delegations met in *Visegrád*, a small Hungarian town overlooking the Danube river. Presidents of Czechoslovakia and Poland and the Prime Minister of Hungary articulated their shared objectives in a document which, among more, asked for 'full restitution of state independence, democracy and freedom' and 'full involvement in the European political and economic system' (Visegrad Declaration 1991). They thus formed a peer-group, known under the acronym V3, a forum designed to help its members to enter the world of opportunities that had just opened. In the early 1990s, Europe was reordering in paradoxical ways. As the Berlin Wall came down, East Germany almost immediately merged with West Germany, and in 1993, the same year that institutions created by West Europeans after 1945 adopted the name the European *Union*, Czechoslovakia became two states. The V3 changed its logo to V4, expanding its list of members without changing external borders or gaining population.

Recent history of the Visegrad societies is built of narratives of fight against oppression and search for an independent, yet somehow anchored, place in the world. The year 1989 served as a symbolic milestone of spatial and temporal reorientation. To zoom in on Czechoslovakia at that time: crowds gathered on squares, chanting slogans such as 'We have had enough' (*Máme toho dost*) and demanded self-rule. There was a promise in the revolution; it meant something when the dissident Václav Havel walked from prison to the presidential palace, and his portraits replaced, in schools and public offices, those of communist party dignitaries. But not to everyone – my late grandfather, who never attended any of the 1989 rallies, would later often exclaim,

in disappointment over developments in politics or economy: 'Is this what we wanted back then? ... Is this why we jingled our keys?' It was a fairly common phrase in that period. Nineteen eighty-nine is a point of reference regardless how one participated, and notions of 'failure' are a staple in memories of post-socialism (Kurtović and Sargsyan 2019).

The regime change presented opportunities but also shocks – open borders showed Easterners the abundance of goods behind the former Iron Curtain, but also the fact that they could not afford them. Western NGOs arrived, new scholarships were announced, training programmes encouraged a culture of individual choice, what one author called 'Me Inc.' (Makovicky 2014). This was a process of remaking not just constitutions, but also people with the declared goal to erase what was believed to be a 'passivity of socialist-era person' (Kalb 2014).⁶ New liberated air manifested itself also via renegotiation of nation and foreignness. Czechs and Slovaks cheered when the Warsaw Pact (often referred to as just Soviet or Russian) tanks stationed in the country since 1968 were leaving. But there were some locals whose presence also seemed oppressive, namely minorities threatening the ethno-nation (Verdery 1998). To be sure, exclusion of ethno-religious others and calls for their annihilation did not begin in 1989. Troubled and often violent patterns of coexistence reach back way before that magic year (Judt 2005). What was new and unsettling in the post-'89 period was the vibrancy with which such narratives and acts operated without authoritarianism as the obvious culprit. Racism, an exclusionary process, now flourished hand in hand with (entitled) calls to be accepted *in* the unified Europe, and by the West.

The confusions about a new relationship with 'the West' – as an idea and an institution – in these early years are well-documented. Already in the early 1990s it was obvious to careful observers (Šiklová 1993; Wedel 1995) that while democracy and freedom might have been keywords in the narratives of transition, they were far from being its only substance: new forms of economic relations were just as significant as elections. Many felt disenfranchised by the economic reordering and the process of becoming EU members was not felt as materialisation of the desired self-rule (Kalb 2009). In now a classic text, Verdery (1996) cautioned against hopes that a copy of the West would emerge in the East.⁷ The process had many paradoxes and while the West was expected to help, there were doubts whether it could or wanted to. Yet some claims can be made with certainty: the end of censorship and relaxing of restrictions on assembly and

association opened a wider arena for discussing what ‘the West’ could mean.

In the narrative underpinning the policy that prevailed, joining the West via membership in the EU was to guarantee the renewed sovereignty. Fulfilling the so-called accession criteria basically meant adjusting to norms previously developed in Western Europe. Yet just as first celebrations were held around the region and transition was declared accomplished, the V4 supported the US-led operation ‘Iraqi Freedom’, to the dismay of France and Germany. The then French president, Chirac, told Eastern European diplomacies that ‘they lost a good opportunity to be quiet’ (Traynor and Black 2003). Soon-to-be full members were still considered students.

We can think of Visegrad’s EU membership as a type of ‘simulated sovereignty’, an expression I borrow from Rebecca Bryant and Mete Hatay (2011). In their ethnography of Turkish Cypriot life, the authors show how a community unable to exercise political rights in a state of their formal citizenship (the Greek-Cypriot-governed Republic of Cyprus) created channels for living and demanding ‘political being – to be recognised as having rights in the island’ (ibid.: 640). Unlike Turkish Cypriots, Visegrad citizens live in states, which are internationally recognised. These states are even full EU members – but a perception of lagging behind the Western counterparts is a common part of political debate. In one workshop intended to mend fences between ‘East’ and ‘West’, held in Prague after 2015, a Visegrad participant, a scholar by profession, a diplomat by situation, tried to explain to Western counterparts, that:

More diplomatic rhetoric would be welcome, a less divisive language towards Eastern Europe . . . There should be self-restraint when EU politicians are talking to each other . . . You know, . . . we are also learning to fly here; we do not know how to do it yet, so, we are trying to imitate you.

The EU entry certainly gave Visegrad countries more say in Europe than they had before – after all, its representatives now sat behind one table with Western Europeans and voted on laws that would have impact on the whole union. But formal voting rights did not erase the perception of hierarchies of knowledge – a sense that this ‘new Europe’ means a younger Europe, a one which still has to obey its elders. Commenting in 2016 on statements of the region’s politicians, who dismissed the rights of refugees and ‘western patronizing’, a Visegrad diplomat told me: ‘This has been a rhetoric invented for

a different occasion – it's the anger from how they felt treated during the accession process'.

Participants of discussions in and about Visegrad often note the problem of unfinished catching up. The sense of the 'unfinished' can, however, easily translate into 'unfinishable'. That the refugee arrival catalysed debates about perceived impossibility to 'develop' is perhaps not surprising in light of scholarship on neoliberal globalisation. Inability of a state to guarantee basic fair redistributive policies (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000) is probably already a truism. With free flows of capital, regulations of human mobility remain some of the last prerogatives of the state (Sassen 2008) and anti-migration mobilisation offers a protection shield (Lawrence 2007), a measure of the last (or only) resort.

The Law, in Europe, on Our Terms. What is Illegal and Who Gets to Decide?

Months into the panic that started in 2015, I was on a study trip in Brussels, the seat of EU federal institutions and secretariats of NGO networks. Research appointments in this busy city are often unpredictable, schedules are adjusted on the go, a 10am meeting can quickly move to 4pm. If one is lucky, a planned one-hour talk can turn into a much longer conversation over dinner or drinks. If the interlocutor has to deal with an emergency, meetings get cancelled, or cut to a much shorter time. The logistics of a meeting at one of the Visegrad embassies to the EU was new even to a researcher used to Brussels' flexibility.

My scheduled appointments were, due to unpredicted assignments of the embassy, shrunk into a twenty-minute session with four diplomats behind a roundtable. One of them instructed me to ask the most important questions. This was months after Visegrad rejected a proposal to relocate some asylum-seekers from Greece and Italy, whose capacities had been overstretched at the time. To provide context: in spring 2015 the European Commission announced a set of measures aimed to help the member states with the fact, that the 'Dublin system' had basically fallen apart within one summer. According to the 'Dublin system', asylum-seekers were to be registered mainly in the first EU state they entered. Thus, if asylum-seekers arrived from Africa or Asia, this would be mainly Greece and Italy. But in the summer 2015 many

more people arrived than the system had counted on upon its design, and the 'frontline states' had allowed movement further north.

The Commission, in its European Agenda on Migration, proposed a set of measures, including strengthening border controls, aid to 'countries of origin' and a small mechanism of relocation from Southern EU states to those that were, for obvious reasons, not the first point of entry. The word 'quotas' was frequently used to describe this proposal and became a symbol of disagreement between the EU's 'East' and 'West'. I thus wanted to use the little time we had to address precisely this point. One of the diplomats suggested that the 'migration debate cannot be reduced to quotas'. To show how complex the 'migration dossier' was, she briefly recounted several of the 'huge package of measures', including border patrols and fingerprinting, discussed between member states and federal institutions. The tone of our conversation was amicable. When another diplomat asked me to note down that, in Brussels negotiations, things are much less heated than they seem in the media – 'no one really points out others' dirty laundry', I assured them, to the surprise of some in the room, that I certainly believed that.

By 2015, Visegrad had entered into its third decade and become a cluster of overlapping professional and friendship networks, something relevant enough to be mobilised. The state representatives have been consulting regularly on a diversity of issues, including those on the EU federal agenda. Their discussions now focused also on new development projects for partners further east and south of the EU, with whom Visegrad wanted to share its 'transition experience'. In fact, solidarity with countries on EU's waiting list was a way of getting leverage in the EU. To that end, and also to strengthen relations within the group, the four states have established a joint endowment, the International Visegrad Fund, supporting cooperative projects of local associations and initiatives engaging partners from abroad.

This endowment, and the insistence of the grant-making team that most projects had to involve organisations or individuals from all four countries *made* the unofficial Visegrad. NGOs and universities took advantage of this opportunity and organised concerts, research projects and sports club meetings. Yet disputes between member states were common, and so were the attempts to disentangle one's society from the group. Visegrad has grown into a set of relations, mobilised for contradictory goals.

When *the law* became a prominent site of competing claims about the future of the EU, many politicians in Visegrad tried to add leverage

to their position by working through the common platform. We can well say that the vote on ‘the quotas’ became a symbolic battleground for establishing which laws (should) matter. On the one hand, the EU member states are legally obliged to provide shelter to people seeking asylum. Moreover, according to the EU constitution, if one member state is faced by ‘an emergency situation characterised by a sudden inflow of nationals of third countries’ the other members should help share ‘the burden’.⁸ Yet, for Visegrad governments, that particular clause has been just one of many laws, and, in their view, one invoked opportunistically. Phrases such as ‘German dictate’ or ‘Brussels dictate’ were uttered in many meetings and relocation was often portrayed as an imposition. To many observers this seemed absurd. One representative of a European NGO network asked me, during our interview, how V4 diplomacies are reading the situation. When I briefed him on their position, he wondered: ‘How is this a Brussels dictate? Isn’t this what democracy means – that there is a vote, a decision is passed, and then everyone has to follow it?’

While it seemed that in the first months of European crisis everything had been in chaos, for Visegrad, a clear political project crystallised over time: shaping EU politics on their own terms trumped commitment to asylum-seekers. The right to reject was not something *we are sorry to do* but something *we have a right to do*. Refugee defenders were then expected to demonstrate a specific relationship to the law. Some felt that they had been asked to provide a convincing case that refugees would spontaneously have zero crime rates. That is, of course, one of many paradoxes – if fitting in means acting like the locals, then having ‘zero crime rates’ would, if attainable, be just another marker of differentiation from the locals. Thus, in addition to proving that refugees are not ‘economic migrants’ (Holmes and Castaneda 2016), their advocates had to demonstrate their essential ‘goodness’.

A young activist, I will call him Marek, confronted in a TV debate by the securitised discourse of other participants, insisted: ‘Of course they are not terrorists – they are running away from terrorism’. Before Marek went to the TV, he told me he did not feel like a migration spokesperson. But then, migration was permeating every policy realm and it made sense for people to speak, as citizens. We talked again shortly after he returned from the studio and our conversation illustrates how the dominant discursive paradigm coaxed some activists to question whether they should have spoken out at all. He entered my office with a worried expression, and we skipped the small talk.

‘How can I be sure that all of them are good?’ he asked me, and I was not sure what to say. I tried to dispel the worry: ‘Well, I do not know, you cannot, maybe you should not be, maybe that is not the point. It’s still good that you were there’. That was not much of a consolation, as Marek felt that his TV appearance had closed some doors: ‘Now everyone in the family saw it . . . I wanted to explain these things to my aunt, but maybe now it will not be possible’.

What perhaps deserves more attention is the irony – a volunteer with tiny resources was faced with more expectations than a state. Policymakers sometimes tried to convince the public that even those who could qualify for refuge are best helped in their own countries, otherwise they are likely to become victims of smugglers. Many lawyers, however, pointed out that in the absence of what they call ‘safe routes’, soliciting the services of a trafficker is indeed often the only way of getting out of immediate danger. It was an EU-wide phenomenon well before 2015 that ‘humanitarian assistance has represented a less demanding alternative to providing asylum’ (Biondi 2016: 210).

In *Life of the Law*, Laura Nader wrote: ‘law is often not a neutral regulator of power but instead the vehicle by which different parties attempt to gain and maintain control and legitimisation of a given social unit’ (2002: 117). If the law is eventually a product of politics, also Nader’s observation that in certain contexts rights of states gradually overtook rights of individuals, is pertinent. Law and order have become tools of new governance; they have been enlisted to create an appearance of control (Brin Hyatt 2011). In Visegrad’s official view, the group did not escape from responsibility – it contributed to it.

Insistence on orders and borders was framed as an important part of such contribution to European security. In an interview with Czech newspaper *Mladá Fronta* published on 27 August 2015, the Czech ambassador to Hungary said: ‘Building of the fence is a logical step, and it is not protecting only Hungary. It is protecting the whole Schengen area’. When the journalist asked: ‘Only this year, 150 000 thousand people crossed Hungary. In Czechia we caught hundreds. Where and through where [*kam a kudy*] has the rest disappeared?’, the ambassador responded:

No one knows. Some part of them went through Slovakia and Czechia, a part through Austria, we caught a few hundreds, something [*něco*] was caught by Austrians, but where is the rest? One only manages to catch [a few] percent. Simply, those people are not in Hungary. Where are they now, and how they got there, that is an enormous problem.

Dozens of commentaries were written about the so-called East–West split in the EU, and several authors suggested that Eastern members have not really understood EU values. Policymakers in Visegrad often dismissed such punditry as unfair, pointed to reports of imperfect (or outright ‘terrible’) results of migrant integration in western EU states, and protested they were asked to do something even the West failed to do. They chose not to see that the hated ‘quotas’ followed a common principle of cooperation in the EU: the number of representatives each member state can elect to European Parliament or Commission, the size of contributions to EU budget, and many other measures are calculated with attention to indicators such as population and wealth. Moreover, many Visegrad policymakers wondered ‘why now’ – as the problem of responsibility-sharing in asylum matters has long been on the table, and even Germany, the symbol of anti-Visegrad, has been reluctant to address it.

At a workshop held in the heat of the crisis, a small assembly of diplomats, academics and think-tankers, one Visegrad ambassador stated that this Western critique is hypocritical, especially since the German Chancellor Merkel years ago expressed doubts about Turkey’s EU membership on cultural grounds. I responded that this can hardly be considered a ‘Western critique’ – many locals have asked for policy change. He did not follow up, in the workshop, but approached me after it was over, and tried to make me understand that ‘Merkel is choosing the best ones, the educated ones, and we would have to do with the rest’. The right to reject was not introduced by decree – those who disagreed were to be convinced that Visegrad has good reasons for its position. But dissent could be heard also within the state administration, where a number of employees felt embarrassed by this policy, such as a man in his forties based at his country’s representation in Brussels:

I feel that the currency we offer is expiring. We cannot endlessly say no to quotas, and not offer an alternative. We say we send personnel to borders or development aid – but everyone else is doing that as well, plus they take some refugees.

Once it became apparent that also capacities of other states were not unlimited, statement such as ‘We were right, everyone is now focusing on security’ could be heard from many Visegrad policymakers and pundits. There was often a sense of Schadenfreude and an ostensible demonstration of accomplishment as many in Visegrad watched emergence of restrictions on migration in western states. The *Politico*

online portal, one of the most followed webs on EU politics, ran an article on 15 September 2017 with a headline ‘Orban Wins the Migration Argument’. That was a correct observation and this (sense of) victory soon became a widely accepted building bloc of new policy.

Yet, it would be difficult to argue that Visegrad is, in principle, against solidarity as a system of rights and obligations. The many joint declarations issued by the group in the wake of the crisis include multiple references to solidarity as a foundational value of European integration.⁹ A number of these statements emphasise the need to help the weaker in order to achieve prosperity for all, such as this one:

The infrastructural network in Central-Eastern Europe cannot be compared with that of the Western part of the Union . . . Investment should be focused on the development of infrastructure in our region that would strengthen the energy security of the European Union as a whole. (Visegrad Group 2015a)

Visegrad governments have endorsed not just European but global cooperation on issues that cannot be resolved by any state individually, such as when they ‘expressed full support to a legally binding and universal agreement on climate supported by all the nations of the world’ (Visegrad Group 2015b). And while in many policy areas Visegrad’s actions lag behind declarations, solidarity with refugees seems hard to commit to even on paper. Visegrad refused to *see* that the arriving people could be qualified as refugees.¹⁰ The signatory governments refer to ‘migratory pressures’, or ‘irregular migration’, but the word ‘refugees’ is rare even in declarations entirely focused on what the group calls ‘migration crisis’ (e.g. Visegrad Group 2015c). Moreover, when an idea started circulating in policy circles that if Visegrad does not oblige with the quotas, Western Europe might decide to limit freedom of movement for East Europeans, V4 quickly cautioned against such ‘opportunistic proposals’ (Visegrad Group 2015d).

In light of Visegrad’s demands for wealthier Europe’s help with the region’s development, its silences about intra-group inequalities seemed startling. In the summer of 2015, images from Budapest’s Keleti train station circulated on social media, together with reports that, while the Hungarian government prioritised repressive measures, refugees received assistance mainly from volunteers. Hungary, with its southern border, was in a specific situation: the number of asylum applications more than tripled compared to the previous year. In EU-wide comparison, the number of applications filed in Hungary ranked right behind Germany. The other three Visegrad states

registered less than one per cent of all applications filed in the EU in that year. One online portal asked the Czech, Polish and Slovak foreign ministries whether Hungary requested help and whether they offered it. The question was perhaps a bit subversive, as it was already obvious from governments' rhetoric that supporting refugees had not been their priority, but the editorial team was still startled to read a part of response from Poland: 'There was no indication that any assistance is required' (Visegradrevue 2015). That sentence catalysed many editorial emotions: 'Don't they have a TV? Did they just cut their diplomatic relations with Hungary? How on earth can you say such a thing?' the editors wondered. In light of testimonies and their easy availability that response sounded brutal.

As the debate on quotas continued and Visegrad was regularly reminded – by the European Commission, parliamentarians and also citizens around Europe – that it was failing its obligation to refugees and southern EU states, a new theme captured East–West dialogue: food. In July 2017, the V4 prime ministers declared that 'it is unacceptable that our consumers are treated differently and in a discriminatory way' (Visegrad Group 2017). It had been known for years that although the EU should be one market with the same standards, product quality varied geographically. Olga Sehnalová, a Czech Member of the European Parliament (EP) has been raising this issue in various fora for years. Already in 2013, the EP asked the Commission to intervene, without much follow up. Only after the 2015 mobilisations did the question receive more attention in Visegrad and 'Western' policy circles. The push for ending the practice of selling products of inferior quality to the Eastern market has been a part of strategy to 'turn over the page', to move on from the quota debate. In his 2017 State of the Union speech, the head of the European Commission said: 'Slovaks deserve as much fish in their fish sticks as anyone else' (Tamma 2017). But, like the debate about refugees, the product quality dispute cannot be explained away as an East–West gap. As Sehnalová repeatedly pointed out, Visegrad's own regulation authorities have done preciously little to help their citizens enjoy products identical in quality with those available in Western markets. In the 2019 EP election campaign in Czechia, food standards dominated marketing strategies for those policymakers who had failed to take concrete measures to correct the problem. It is perhaps an irony that Sehnalová, one of the most committed campaigners for food equality, did not get re-elected.

To some, including the present author, Visegrad's sudden emphasis on higher content of meat in hams at the same time when the group

had been doing so little for refugees, sounded cynical and embarrassing, and so did the suggestions of policymakers in the region that the initiative might improve Visegrad's image in the EU. But no less worrying had been the occasional remarks of Western diplomats, who wondered whether food quality really was a thing the EU should be dealing with, especially if uttered by interlocutors supportive of anti-refugee policies. The story of the food and the story of refugees in fact have common roots. Rejection of quotas did little to defend the rights of Visegrad EU citizens and the sudden campaign for food equality brought to attention not just the problematic practices of Western companies, but also those of local governments. If Visegrad's purpose, since its establishment, has been to catch up with Western standards, discussion about goods quality should not have waited until it proved a convenient card to hold in the refugee debate.

This is How Things Cannot and Will Not Be: Foreclosed Future

Let us now turn to future-making, or, more precisely, future foreclosing, as this is the direction in which the ethnographic material leads us. In most of the Visegrad, debates about refugees happened without their actual presence. After border closures along the Balkan route and adoption of the EU–Turkey deal in 2016, it became even more complicated for people fleeing from the south to enter via Slovakia, Czechia or Poland. There would have to be an explicit invitation for more people to come, but governments were not issuing any. Considering the small numbers, we know, that prevention of entry was not driven by actual experience of collapsing infrastructure. The Visegrad debates have been engulfed in various types of insecurity; these included an imaginary menace represented by ethno-religious others (often classified as ‘Arabs’ or ‘Muslims’)¹¹ but also a more intimate one, a fear that region's further development is foreclosed.

Two events from Czechia can well illustrate the ethno-religious panic. Both happened against the backdrop of high-level state representatives' fearmongering by the threat of terror attacks. Both were very close to such attacks, except that they were not committed by Muslims. The first one was literally dramatic – a group called ‘We don't want Islam in the Czech Republic’ staged ‘an educational theatre’, entering one of Prague's central squares with dummy guns and a camel prop. Media brought reports of panicked tourists, many of

whom probably did not know that the group's leader has entered public consciousness for wishing acts of violence to Muslims. The second event is a personal tragedy of a Czech man in his seventies. Mr B, also driven by the need to 'raise awareness' of the supposed dangers coming with people from the Middle East, placed tree trunks on train rails and distributed threatening flyers written in broken Czech-Arabic. Fortunately, no train has been derailed yet Mr B found himself to be the first person in the country's history to be sentenced for the crime of terrorism. The irony of manufacturing the threat people were then supposed to be afraid of has not been lost on columnists. The first event created by a far-right movement with an elite intellectual core was clearly an act of political profiteering on panic already sown by high-level representatives of state. The second could well be noted as an act of someone with 'diminished responsibility' (Loizos 2001) – as the senior seemed to be defending principles he did not invent but that were becoming mainstream ethics – and one explicitly encouraged by some in national leadership.

But rejection of refugees has not been driven only by fears of ethno-religious others. A related discourse, a one I call *impossible development* or *frozen future*, a sceptical reflection of one's actorness, underpinned the making of Visegrad's right to reject. Let us recall the statement of a Visegrad diplomat that opened this article: 'We will never have asylum policy like Sweden or Germany. We cannot do it. *That is a fantasy*'. It indicates both a resolve and a resignation on possibilities of the local policy apparatus and hence has to be discussed separately from differentiation based on ethnicity or religion. Statements like these in fact constitute active rejection of one possible future.¹² A high-level ministry official working in the field of social affairs, a person whom I found, in many repeated conversations, to have a genuine empathy with people who happened to depend on the help of others told me:

This state has nothing. This state is incompetent – it can't take care of its poor, old, single mothers. Every day I see how we're failing. So, refugees, ... please, excuse me.

In debates about refugees, it has been frequently suggested that *our* people should be a priority. But it is one thing to create hierarchies of deservingness, and quite another to suggest that refugees' turn will simply never come. In the former case, an option of catching up, one day, is still open, whereas in the latter, the possibility of development has reached its limit. Several of my interlocutors from the public

policy sphere expressed their frustration at being criticised, by NGOs or Western colleagues, for ‘not doing enough’. They felt they were asked to deliver the undeliverable and thus were permanently caught as being behind. Perhaps this explains why patriotic appeals cajoling the policymakers towards showing ‘good European citizenship’ could have little effect. Responding to demands ‘to do better’ became tiring, the rejection was then framed as a right.

If we understand sovereignty as ‘control over time’ (Ramsay 2017), the right to reject translates as the right not to be expected to feel delayed. In this narrative, Visegrad is a region that should *be protected* and *understood*, rather than one that should *protect and understand*. In such reading, saying ‘no’ to refugees is a way of overcoming a vulnerability – albeit with a violent result. This explains why governments have not even tried to expand the state capacity to provide refuge, why is it they did not ask for more time to adapt to the new situation but declared a closed doors policy. The right to reject is underpinned by a fixation on one’s underdevelopment and impossibility to change it; ethno-political notions of who can be allowed in mix with foreclosing of some futures.

It is, from the perspective of 2019, stunning to reread the words of sociologist Jiřina Šiklová, written shortly after 1989:

We are experiencing cultural shock like migrants, refugees and emigrants experience. The shock originates in the fact that one has been uprooted and is suddenly living in a totally new environment in which he must quickly adapt. (Šiklová 1993: 737)

It would be reasonable to think that one’s own refugee(like) experience might create a sense of connection to others facing similar fate. Indeed, such strategies were reported by researchers working in other regions (McNevin and Missbach 2018). Similar perspectives, including memories of exile and a sense of pragmatism regarding their own future, informed some of the arguments presented by refugee defenders in Visegrad. ‘We also used to escape’, this *we* meaning nineteenth- and early twentieth-century labour migration and flights from the Nazi regime or state socialism. Authors writing about migrant experience often note that uncertainty is one of defining themes of human journeys. With approach to refugees, Visegrad seems to be both embracing and denying its state of flux.

Claims made in 2015 resemble the disorientation from early 1990s, but by now rejection of refugees became one of few certainties, and a right that can be claimed. After all, while several diplomats and

commentators kept suggesting that ‘the East’ failed its responsibilities, the diplomatic efforts, by Easterners and Westerners alike, to put this issue ‘behind us’, have become more dominant. The latter has been driven by two processes. First, growing discursive consensus, in Western EU states, that their capacities are also not endless, and that immigration is a politically divisive issue. Second, there was a mounting pile of everyday agenda in EU policymaking, which needed to be addressed. The list of policy items (including energy security, Brexit, relations with Russia, relations with the US under Trump), however, seemed to be endlessly elastic. In other words, there could always be one more item added before one could seriously start talking about opening doors to people who, for various reasons, had to leave their homes.

Conclusions

Debates *in* and *about* Visegrad in the wake of arrival of refugees revealed fragility of claims made about role of solidarity in European integration. If 2015 is just entering into records as the symbolic milestone of EU’s failure to live by its own declared commitments and address refugee needs, the year 1989, commemorated in the Visegrad societies as the beginning of movement from the Eastern past to Western future, already became one of the codes for speaking about failed expectations. Those who advocated on behalf of refugees, whether by resolute demands or gentle requests, have been unable to change the overall policy. They have often been called ‘foreign’ (or ‘Western’ or ‘Soros’) agents, and their interventions were skilfully used as further material to solidify the *right to reject*. Importantly, the pressure from the Western EU member states has not been too strong – after all, externalisation of asylum-seekers was a trend in EU well before Visegrad’s entry. The insights presented in this article do not tell much about how deeply the right to reject is entrenched in societies – the analysis focused on policymaker exchanges. There is little evidence that the political representatives of Visegrad acted in response to what their voters asked them to do. It is more plausible to see the right to reject, the right not to feel delayed, as a response to wider dynamics in European integration.

A mere three decades earlier, search for belonging to or with ‘the West’ had been a strategy of gaining independence and a safeguard against potential return of authoritarian rule and occupation. The

search for solidarity between the EU's East and West had been a strategy of regaining sovereignty. Interdependence between the EU's Eastern and Western members is undeniable. Yet, five years after 2015, Visegrad has achieved that it is no longer seriously expected to do its fair share under the existing laws and has successfully redirected attention to the East–West gap in the EU. The less addressed part of this discussion is that the ‘impossible development’ is partly of its own making.

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Notes

1. Pledge made by Robert Fico, Prime Minister of Slovakia, quoted by *Hospodarske noviny* daily, 21 July 2015, Available in Slovak at: <https://dennik.hnonline.sk/slovensko/515533-slovensko-prijme-100-utecencov-zo-syrie-vyhlasil-fico> (accessed 15 February 2021).
2. Activists and migration lawyers I spoke to often used the expression ‘so called refugee crisis’ or literally said ‘refugee crisis in quotation marks’, to indicate that there is a problem with the name, for several reasons including the fact that numbers of those coming to Europe are negligible compared to responsibility expected from other regions (see Gilbert 2015). For a discussion of contested ‘nature’ of the crisis see Dzenovska (2017).
3. Todorova’s work (2009), especially the chapter six provides a concise intellectual itinerary of thinking ‘Central Europe’. Kuus (2014) has written a very

- insightful work on interplays of east/west/central Europeanness in present-day diplomatic discussions in Brussels, the seat of EU federal institutions.
4. The UK voted to leave the EU in June 2016. The promise to ‘renegotiate’ terms of membership was made by PM Cameron already in 2013. When he was elected, in 2015, the theme became an important part of EU agenda.
 5. The Bannon story was reported by several news outlets including *Politico* and the *Guardian*.
 6. As Grill’s (2018) fieldwork with unemployed Roma in Slovakia shows, ‘activation’ remains an important pillar of state policy, with very little benefits to participants of these programmes.
 7. Several authors, e.g., in a volume edited by Böröcz, J. and M. Kovács (2001), suggested that Eastern enlargement of the EU was a continuation of colonial and market-courting practices of West European states.
 8. Article 78(3), Consolidated version of the treaty, 2012.
 9. I reviewed the 28 common Visegrad Group declarations published on its website in 2015-16 (available at www.visegradgroup.eu, accessed 31 January 2017). Most of them included references to migration.
 10. I am aware of the problems of migrant/refugee differentiation, nevertheless, the invisibilisation of refugees in Visegrad common declarations is startling.
 11. In Visegrad debates, ethnic and religious categories often get conflated. In everyday speech, the markers of ethnicity ‘Arabs’ and religion ‘Muslims’ are often used interchangeably and as synonyms for people who do not belong and represent potentially threatening others. It is one of the ironies of the situation that Visegrad citizens frequent tourist resorts in the lands of these others.
 12. I am grateful to Dr Martin Fotta for highlighting this point.

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