CHAPTER 2

Illiberal Advantages of Migration

Hungarian and Polish Narratives in Comparison

Katalin Miklóssy
University of Helsinki

Abstract

The chapter asks when migration carries a crossroad moment that opens a new horizon of possibilities to strengthen illiberal regimes. The study investigates what types of migration are framed discursively as 'crisis', which is closely connected to the means developed as crisis management. The core argument is that while these regimes feed on crises that justify extraordinary measures, not every crisis represents a temporal juncture point that can expand geopolitical leverage. New elbow room for integrity is aimed at through innovative modus operandi that are rooted in illiberal regimes' capabilities to adapt to new circumstances. The main questions this chapter seeks to answer are (1) how this special window of opportunities occurs and (2) what the process is that leads to the revision of traditional political means and the

invention of new strategy, designed to reaffirm the resilience of the regime.

Keywords: illiberalism, migration crisis, Hungary, Poland, Visegrad, crisis management

Introduction: Illiberal Instrumentalization of a Phenomenon

Ever since the summer of 2015, there has been an ongoing and rather fruitless European debate about finding stable solutions for immigration from Asia and Africa. The EU plans to build a more just system sharing the growing pressure on the Southern European countries bordering the Mediterranean reached a deadlock. In particular, the Visegrad states (Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary) once again found unity in refusing stubbornly and consistently to accept any compulsory quota policy. This created a cleavage between Western and Eastern members of the European Union. During 2015 and 2016, Hungary and Poland became the loudest opponents of migration in the Visegrad region, hijacking the decision-making mechanism of the EU. Back in 2015, these countries were addressed as examples of lack of compassion, of being free riders on EU support, their communist past brought up to explain their attitudes. After less than a decade, in the European Parliament elections of 2024, opposition to migration became a mainstream narrative building up campaign agendas in most of the member states. It is an interesting question whether the Hungarian and Polish stance was contagious. In any case, they introduced a new discourse that openly challenged the liberal value system.

This chapter examines state-led responses to three migration processes, all framed as crises: the European migration crisis in 2015, the Polish–Lithuanian border crisis in 2021, and the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022.[1] Naming is placing. Naming an event as *crisis* elevates it out of the ordinary, disconnecting it from its original context and furnishing it with a special meaning. The reidentification with a new label is a trigger that draws further *extraordinary action* (Birey et al. 2019). As McConnel et al. (2017)

have pointed out, migration studies in the European context can be thematized around borders, crises, and power. These themes are interwoven, although the entry point of exploration differ. An ever-growing scholarly literature has discussed especially the 2015 migration crisis in the context of the European transformation (Börzel 2016; Dzenovska 2016) and in connection to the rise of populism and right-wing politics (Thorleifsson 2018; Bangstad, Bertelsen, and Henkel 2019), zooming in on the special cases of the xenophobic anti-refugee politics of Hungary and Poland (Kallius, Monterescu, and Rajaram 2016; Gozdziak and Márton 2018, 125–151; Klaus et al. 2018, 1–34; Karolewski and Benedikter 2018; Krasznai Kovács, Ramakhrishnan, and Thieme 2022).

This chapter explores why migration has offered *flawed democracies* the means to strengthen their own path of illiberal development (Cabada 2017, 75–87; *The Economist* 2016). The focus here is on the dramatic changes in politics and rhetoric between 2015 and 2022, due to the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine. The core argument is that while illiberal regimes feed on crises that justify extraordinary measures, not every crisis allows political elites to seize the moment and gain geopolitical elbow room. The main question to be answered is why and how migration became a *metanarrative* serving the ultimate purpose of the illiberal agenda. Metanarratives are overarching explanations that bind together previously unrelated and various stories, which are now reframed to be perceptible within a new core message within and directed to a particular society (Lyotard 1984).

By analysing legal sources, official state documents, public and parliamentary debates, and media references, the political and narrative consequences of two waves of mass migration, in 2015 and 2022, will be discussed. Methodologically, both spatial and temporal comparison will be carried out. Besides the previously mentioned two timeframes of migration, the study compares the Hungarian and Polish reactions to and perceptions of these different periods of migration. Hungary and Poland have often been discussed together based on similarities, as defined by Liubarskii (2000; cited in Krom 2021, 92), regarding their distinctive

quality (governance model), their regional location (East Central Europe), and simultaneous historical events.

From the comparative angle, the question is: what is more important regarding the political responses to such an international phenomenon as migration—the similarities in governance models or the divergences in the countries' positioning in the international arena?

This chapter first elaborates the link between illiberalism and migration, then it will discuss why migration in 2015 can be seen as a watershed in the emergence of a new narrative frame and how it is negotiated, regionally and in relation to the EU authorities. Turning then to events in 2021 and 2022, the changes in metanarrative will be presented.

Invention of Metanarrative for Illiberal Purposes

The profound narrative change of the Hungarian government can be dated to the summer of 2014, when Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared that his country's ideal of development was illiberal democracy (Orbán 2014). The term 'illiberal democracy' had been introduced already by Fareed Zakaria (1997) and has been criticized ever since as an oxymoron, in contradiction with the Western understanding of democracy as inevitably including freedom of speech and assembly, media pluralism, and protection of minorities (Bozóki 2017, 459–490; Halmai 2019, 296–313). Hungary at the time of this revelation was already on a democratic downward curve, with erosion of the rule of law, centralization of power, and increasing control over the media and civil society. What the administration needed was a powerful and consistent message that would ensure the mobilization of the people, especially in times of elections. *Illiberalism*, however, was as abstract a concept as *democracy*—not conceivable for most ordinary folk, who would be unlikely to respond to fuzzy theoretical notions. Consequently, a simpler trigger was required that would stir up emotions with minimum effort but that would work as a charm

every time whenever its use was necessary. A metanarrative had to be invented.

Metanarratives have important added value. Besides becoming shared discourses through the help of invested political power, they also anchor values, beliefs, and behaviour patterns. As such, they offer a platform for the construction of identity for a community (Kaplan, Sheafer, and Shenhav 2022, 1552). In the Hungarian case, the core message around which the metanarrative was built was the idea of national integrity. Between 2011 and 2015, the Orbán regime increasingly started to use the buzzword of integrity against criticism it was attracting for the rule-of-law situation, but it was still an ineffective rhetorical means of dealing with the EU (Miklóssy 2023). What made a difference in the popular turn of narrative strategy was the realization of how the language describing mass migration changed in 2015 in Europe. A new political interpretation emerged that framed the flow of African and Middle Eastern asylum seekers and migrants as a 'crisis', requiring urgent management (Clayton 2015). Crisis speech became a more frequent part of the rhetoric over the years, and gradually it prevailed also in later waves of migration in 2021 and 2022 onwards.

This chapter claims that while anti-migration discourse helped to concretize the illiberal message, crisis talk was a central factor in launching this process because it opened a new horizon of narrative possibilities. It was a crossroad moment, i.e., a liminal point where previous choices were revisited, enabling a new direction. Crossroad moments often appear in crises when finding a feasible solution requires the evaluation of options, particularly when multiple crises overlap on multiple levels. Migration in the cases of Hungary and Poland simultaneously affected the countries' international relations, domestic power play, and regional alliances, parallel to increasing clashes with the EU over the rule of law. A crossroad creates a suitable 'state of exception' (Schmidt 2004 [1922], 1988 [1926]; Agamben 2005, 32–40, 74–88, 2021, 26–30, 82–85) overturning traditional hierarchical relations between

causes and effects: illegitimate legislative practices become legitimate, making it possible to overstep institutional boundaries.

Political elites framed public discourse embedded in the triangle of agency and spatial and temporal contexts. *Agency* refers to friends and foes, heroes and villains, connected to the phenomenon of migration. This included a blame game addressing the various agents that accelerated the migration 'crisis', like the EU, international refugee aid institutions, political parties, individual politicians, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This was juxtaposed against the 'real heroes' of the situation, who offered working solutions, such as the border guards, local authorities, the nationally minded political elites. References to *spatial context* mark the uniqueness of challenges or solutions in the regional space of the Visegrad countries. Addressing the *temporal context* emphasized the momentum to act in response to a mounting crisis. The triangle of these interpretations of migration reveals the underlying political change, and the profound contradiction between the advocated values of the EU and the emerging illiberal trend among its Visegrad member states.

Illiberalism, as Kauth and King (2020) point out, conceptually refers to ideology and practices. Whereas ideology is based on the logic of excluding certain groups from the ultimate community, political or rhetorical practices undermine democratic procedures. Since illiberal elites oppose cosmopolitan and globalist perspectives and defend the nationalist and localist angle (Scheppele 2018), for them the transnational movement of people offends the national space and challenges the idea of nationhood. Furthermore, migrants and refugees require an individual approach to evaluate their right to stay. Individualism runs counter to declared community principles of the illiberal agenda (Laruelle 2022). The religious background of migrants can offer a powerful discursive means through which to emphasize the importance of defending Christian roots as an element of the unity of a nation. In other words, illiberal regimes react to migration because it symbolizes, in a condensed form, those values that they particularly reject;

hence, a migration 'crisis' represents a crossroad moment that emphasizes agency in a temporal and spatial context.

Inventing a metanarrative that was capable of strengthening the illiberal grip was a strategy of resilience. It was an ability to adapt to exogenous stress that occurred, in our cases, in the form of migration and complex international pressure. Resilience is dependent on the transformative capacity to safeguard the main structures and values of the system (Olsson et al. 2015). The metanarrative therefore had to contain a warehouse of narrative elements that could be applied flexibly in any and every situation.

The migration topic became a central piece of the Hungarian and Polish metanarrative due to a crossroad moment. The next section will elaborate on why migration in 2015 offered such a moment for the purposes of consolidating the illiberal regime in Hungary and establishing one in Poland.

The Crossroad Moment in 2015

The East Central European countries had previous experiences of 'mass' migration in the 1990s, when they welcomed tens of thousands of refugees following the disintegration of Yugoslavia, but the phenomenon was not framed as a 'migration crisis'. These people were seen as 'neighbours', running from wars that were ravaging close to citizens' home in Hungary and felt in other Visegrad countries as well. Images of the brutalities were mediatized widely and frequently over nine years. Taking into consideration of this fairly recent past, the puzzling question arises: what was so different in 2015?

The year 2015 was a perfect one in which to construct a new rhetorical strategy, centred around the metanarrative of integrity and concretized by anti-migration discourse. On the one hand, East Central Europe, due to its communist past, consisted mostly of ethnically homogeneous societies, with little previous experience of African or Middle Eastern migrants. A large-scale inflow of such migrants within a few months came as a surprise for those countries that were situated on the Balkan route. Second,

after 9/11, the Islamist terrorist attacks in France, Germany, Great Britain, and Sweden in early 2010s were widely discussed in the traditional and social media, building a solid ground for public attitudes.

The political landscape was also different in August 2015 when the massive rush of people through the Balkan route begun. The migration wave raised critical voices against German chancellor Angela Merkel's *Willkommenskultur*. This concept referred to a mutual understanding between the German government and people about accepting refugees enthusiastically (see, e.g., Joffe 2015; Hamann and Karakayali 2016). As early as April 2015, the EU discussed in special meetings what could be done against human trafficking and the foreseeable rise in migration figures. A proposal for reforming the asylum system was presented, and internal solidarity and responsibility was called for (European Council 2015b; Schulz 2015).

Chancellor Merkel's Germany had acquired a leading role in the EU, so criticism of Merkel's proposals for reforming the asylum system turned eventually against the EU, not Germany. This slowly surfacing East Central European oppositional stance started to emerge after the 2008 financial crisis. Doubts about the rationality of EU solutions had begun to deepen, helping EU-critical parties to gain more seats in the European parliamentary elections in 2014 (European Parliament 2014). However, the mass migration in 2015 crystallized the growing urge to find different responses to those being formulated in EU policy. This opened up the crossroad moment, resulting in the introduction of a new narrative frame. It spatially emerged first in Hungary and circulated via the Visegrad Alliance to Poland, a growing European power, which became the chief advocate of an anti-migration stance alongside Hungary. From this East Central European area, the anti-migration narrative later started to spread, between 2016 and 2018, more widely in Europe because the new rhetorical strategy was successful in resisting EU migration policies and wrecking the compulsory quota system. Hungary and Poland set an example of how to do it. In addition, and as the ultimate but veiled

aim, the anti-migration narrative had a tremendous impact on the illiberal development in Hungary and Poland.

Hungary: Launching the Anti-Migration Narrative

The migration crisis intersected with the accelerating rule-of-law debate vis-à-vis Hungary. The Hungarian government had been repeatedly warned since 2011 about its increasing problems with the rule of law, but before 2015 it was still just a small, unimportant country creating minor headaches for the EU (Miklóssy 2023). The pan-European crisis in 2015 offered the Hungarian administration an opportunity to distract EU attention away from the country's democracy failures. While the emerging Hungarian anti-migration attitudes added human rights violations to the long list of democratic deficiency, the new proactive stand nevertheless generated growing international attention to Hungarian narratives.

The anti-immigration narrative was first tested in January 2015. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared in a primetime public TV broadcast that his government wanted to avoid creating minorities of significant size, with cultural characteristics different from those of the Hungarian community (Hungarian Public Television 2015). This interview referred to the march of the heads of state in Paris in solidarity over the *Charlie Hebdo* attack as a strong statement against terrorism. The narrative invention of Prime Minister Orbán's speech was the linking of Muslim immigration to terrorism, and the consistent use of 'migrants' instead of 'refugees'. By consciously blurring terminology, a transformed message was articulated that the arriving people did not deserve the right to protection. The new narrative aimed at an emotional transition: diminishing empathy with people running for their lives while focusing on an image of calculating and cunning people seeking better living standards.

The EU started to reflect on migration as early as April 2015 at a special summit of heads of state in Brussels, where common

responsibility and solidarity were underlined and an 'emergency relocation mechanism' was sketched out (European Commission 2015c). The escalating situation in war zones like Syria and Iraq, and the continuing violence in Afghanistan and Eritrea, increased migration considerably by summer 2015 (UNHCR 2015). By June, when it became obvious that the number of arrivals had started skyrocketing—having almost doubled within six months—the emphasis shifted to reinforcing external borders and helping border states to manage the quickly growing difficulties (European Council 2015a, 2015b).

In June, the Hungarian government announced a lockdown on the southern border and started to build a fence four metres high and over 175 km long (Kormányhatározat 1401/2015). This was the first such fence since the Berlin Wall was torn down in 1989. Information spread fast among the migrants and increased their eagerness to get through the border before the fence was ready. This grew into a massive rush, putting pressure on decision-makers. According to Frontext data, between July and September almost 143,000 people entered Hungary, whereas in the previous quarter the number was less than 40,000—an increase from the previous year of 1,364 per cent (Frontext Report 2015). Tens of thousands of people were wandering from one place to another, trying to get through Hungary; many headed towards Budapest, aiming to find transportation to the West.

Authorities, however, let the situation escalate in downtown Budapest, where thousands of people were taken care of only by humanitarian volunteer groups (Kallius, Monterescu, and Rajaram 2016). The media headlines of the dreadful circumstances in one of the main railway stations of the capital arguably served two narrative aims. First, they visualized the Hungarian government's anti-migrant arguments by zooming in on the young male refugees and their religious background. They were framed as an *aggressive army of Muslim men* threatening Christian Europe, especially women—and this image became an important narrative asset in both domestic and international arenas (Godziak and Márton 2018). The other aim was to utilize the extensive media

attention about the thousands of people who were left consciously unattended, piling up around the railway station waiting to be transported to the West (*New York Times* 2015). The image of human misery would affect the Western public emotionally and put pressure on German and Austrian politicians to open their borders.

Repositioning Hungary in the International Arena by Blame Game

The Hungarian government turned to the EU for assistance and money but found the EU process slow and inefficient—and so, the blame game started. The blame game is always an important polarizing narrative. On the one hand, it underlines the juxtaposition between friends and foes, but its ultimate message in this case, on the other hand, was that the situation was not by any means the Hungarian leadership's fault. Being a victim of circumstances and of international pressure became a constant and central element of the metanarrative.

From the Hungarian point of view, the main problem was caused by the Dublin Regulation, according to which refugees were supposed to be registered in the first EU country they entered (EUR-Lex, Dublin II Regulation). The Hungarian prime minister consulted other heads of state at the July EU meeting regarding whether the Hungarian authorities should still respect the Schengen and Dublin agreements or just establish a corridor through Hungary towards the West, which would nullify all previous agreements (*Spiegel International* 2016). The Hungarian government also saw Greece as responsible for the Balkan route and wanted Athens to do more to handle the problem. Later in September at an EU summit, Orbán bluntly suggested that 'if the Greeks are not able to defend their own borders, we should ask kindly, because Greece is a sovereign country, let the other countries of the EU defend the Greek border' (Euronews 2015).

Greece was not the only country drawn into collision with Hungary. After Hungary blocked entrance with the fence,

migrants changed their major route towards Croatia and started to enter Hungary from there. The Croatian PM Zoran Milanović indirectly criticized Hungary for closing borders and declared in September that his country was unable to handle mass migration and would not let migrants stay in Croatia—but would assist with their transfer to Hungary and Slovenia by trains and buses (The Government of the Republic of Croatia 2015). The Hungarian authorities were furious, seeing the Croatian action as outsourcing the problem to neighbouring countries. Antal Rogán, head of the Hungarian Prime Minister's Office, stated on national radio that Hungary could block Croatia's accession to the EU's Schengen zone (Index 2015).

Disappointment and frustration with the situation were expressed in the EU and the debate became heated (Juncker 2015). In early September, Angela Merkel suggested that a quota system be implemented across the EU to share the burden more evenly. She called for solidarity and accepted refugees who wanted to continue to Germany from Hungary. Orbán did not hesitate to lead a full-frontal narrative attack on Merkel, taking advantage of the differences within her governing CDU–CSU coalition. He accused Merkel of 'moral imperialism' and underlined that the Hungarian administration did 'not see the world through German eyes' (Werkhäuser 2015). The Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU) and its leader, Bavarian PM Horst Seehofer, sympathized with Orbán's firm stand against the massive influx of refugees to Germany, advocated by Merkel of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU). Seehofer supported Orbán's proposal on stricter control of the EU's external borders and distinguishing between refugees and economic migrants.

Orbán presented himself as a champion of European law, especially of the Dublin Treaty, and suggested that the whole world should be involved in handling the migration crisis. In a meeting in Bavaria in September, addressing the German public, Orbán underlined that the Hungarian fence protected Bavaria (DW News 2015b). The apparent breach between the German governing parties was widely covered in the media, creating pressure on

Merkel. Thus, Merkel changed strategy a couple of months later, making a deal with Türkiye to dam migration from the Middle East (Amann et al. 2015). Blaming Merkel bluntly for the refugee crisis was a highly unexpected act given that Orbán's Fidesz party was in the same European People's Party group in the European Parliament and Germany was Hungary's biggest trade partner and main investor. As Orbán acknowledged in February 2015 during a meeting with Merkel, 6,000 German companies worked in Hungary, providing 300,000 jobs, and 25 per cent of foreign investments were from Germany, amounting to €6 billion since 2010 (Orbán 2015).

Yet not only did Orbán oppose the united EU policies; he also launched an offensive to change the course of Europe: his plan was to list all of the secure transit countries to Europe, to persuade Greece to hand over its border control to EU forces, and to create a global contingent system to share the burden of migration (Hungarian Public Media Company 2015; Joób 2015). He proposed this plan at the EU summit in September and immediately received Europe-wide publicity that increased the significance of a small country like Hungary (France24 2015; Euronews 2015). Aligned with the growing international interest, Orbán added a new narrative element, emphasizing his own image and role: the freedom fighter PM, who saves his country not only from migrants but also from EU dictates and safeguards Europe from Islamization. This was not only an effective narrative: it also strengthened his personal myth of the ever-so-productive and stubbornly independent leader. This narrative played a part in cementing Viktor Orbán's power position as the sole figurehead of illiberal Hungary.

Regional Alliance: Towards a Common Master Narrative

The master narrative, Orbán standing firmly alone against major EU countries, earned visibility but also negative attention for his country. For support, the Hungarian leadership turned to old allies in the neighbourhood. The Visegrad governments unanimously

refused Merkel's proposal on the compulsory quota mechanism, which stirred up emotions in the West, underlying the East–West divide. Tensions grew especially in the leaderships of the Mediterranean border countries, Italy, Spain, and Greece, where huge numbers of arriving people created enormous domestic pressure, requiring concrete acts of EU solidarity (DW News 2015a). In contrast and as a testimony to the lack of empathy and fairness, a more consistent Eastern opposition was underway. The Visegrad countries, also known as the V4, began to organize frequent meetings during the summer of 2015. This strategy had been developed already in the late 1990s when group power proved efficient in negotiations over the conditions of EU integration. It became customary that before important EU summits, the Visegrad countries met to reach a common understanding on how to drive shared interests (Miklóssy 2020).

In 2015, such meetings had three main purposes. First, the threat of mandatory quotas forced the V4 group to ensure that it would withstand increasing EU pressure by representing the same view at every EU level. Second, the countries were aware that bluntly opposing the quota proposal would harm the V4 brand, so a constructive approach was required to solve the migration crisis. Third, reaching out to other dissatisfied countries, regions, or parties would ease the pressure on the V4 and strengthen their point of view.

Since its establishment in 1991, the Visegrad alliance maintained a circulating presidency, lasting 12 months (Visegrad Group 2023). The migration crisis happened during the Czech presidency. While each presidency had its own agenda regarding regional cooperation, the Czech government admitted that migration came to dominate the presidency period from July 2015 until June 2016. In the most heated phase (between September and December 2015), the V4 had one extraordinary summit of prime ministers, six meetings of ministers of foreign affairs, two of ministers of interior, and two of ministers of defence—all of them linked to the threat of migration. All of these meetings testified to

a broad consensus on migration policy and the rhetorical stages required to represent it at the EU level (Visegrad Group 2016a).

The narrative strategy was simple but effective. The alliance began to take advantage of the same tropes that the EU used in addressing the migration issues but turned them against criticism. So, to respond accusations that the V4 was lacking in solidarity with other countries, the group began to repeat the notion of 'voluntary solidarity'. They blamed the EU for the worsening East–West divide because of its unwillingness to engage in constructive dialogue. To move the focus of the European debates, they emphasized, instead of quotas, the protection of external borders of the EU. To prove their constructiveness, they offered experts and technical equipment for the fight against human trafficking and to assist with asylum procedures in certain distant hotspots. According to the V4, the goal was 'to eventually cease the pull factors' of migration and give financial assistance to countries of transit and origin. In this respect, Hungary was unanimously supported by its fellow Visegrad states because it was considered a frontline country protecting Europe's Eastern borders. This was a reference to a shared historical-mythical narrative about standing on the walls of Europe saving the continent from barbaric attacks from the East and South (Humphreys 2016). The V4 demanded the fulfilment of legal obligations by all member states, referring particularly to an effective return policy (Visegrad Group 2015b). The irony of the situation was that the Eastern flank of the EU countries followed the Schengen agreement and the Dublin Treaty to the letter while the West overlooked the common rules. The V4 even called for a 'roadmap back to Schengen' (Visegrad Group 2016b).

It was obvious that the V4 needed strategic partners to succeed in opposing greater powers with a decisive influence on European policy, such as Germany and France. So the Visegrad alliance began to lobby. During the most heated EU debates in September 2015, the ministers of foreign affairs presented the V4 agenda to the Luxembourg EU presidency and Germany (Visegrad Group 2015a). They reached out to strategic EU partners in the region,

such as Croatia (8 October), Latvia (21 October), Slovenia and Estonia (October 23), and Austria (23–24 November). In addition, they met with the Western Balkan countries (12–13 November), through which they raised the significance of the Balkan migration route to the same level of concern as the Mediterranean or southern passage. The ministers of foreign affairs even produced an article entitled as 'We Offer You Our Helping Hand on the EU Path'. The deal was bluntly stated: Western Balkan countries were geographically important in tackling the migration crisis, in exchange for which the V4 promised support in furthering their integration to the EU. The document mentioned that the 'article was published in the main dailies in the Western Balkans' simultaneously with the Annual Country Reports of the European Commission, which did not give a flattering picture of the state of democracy in the Western Balkans and would therefore delay EU negotiations (Visegrad Group 2015d; European Commission 2015b). In other words, for the common cause of hindering EU solutions on migration, the V4 did not hesitate to challenge the EU stand on enlargement.

Another terror attack on 13 November 2015 in Paris, by Islamists who had come to France with refugee status (France24 2022), unleashed the anti-migration rhetoric, presented by the Hungarian PM particularly but firmly supported by other leading Visegrad politicians. Before the European Council meeting, the V4 countries released a joint statement declaring their sympathy with 'the French nation' and took the opportunity to urge the implementation of external border protection, detention hot spots, and the preservation of Schengen (Visegrad Group 2015c). To prevent any further discussion over compulsory distribution of refugees, in December 2015 the Slovak PM Robert Fico even issued a lawsuit at the European Court of Justice against mandatory quotas as a violation of the legitimacy of national parliaments. Two days later Hungary joined in filing a similar lawsuit (Court of Justice of the EU 2015).

The 2015 migration crisis and its aftermath taught the V4 that group effort made a difference in standing up to the EU, and this

lesson undoubtedly strengthened their inner cohesion. This was palpable at the summit organized by the Czech presidency celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Visegrad alliance (15 February 2016), where differences in migration policy were framed as 'emerging new dividing lines in Europe' (Visegrad Group 2016c). In addition, as another symbol of successful opposition to the EU, the Hungarian fence became a model followed elsewhere. In 2015 and 2016, fences were erected between Slovenia and Croatia, between Greece and North Macedonia, between Austria and Slovenia, around the harbour of Calais, and in Ceuta and Melilla.

Poland: Flexible Solidarity and the Hungarian Path

The lesson learned from 2015 was that European attention is directed at 'putting out immediate fires', which offers considerable leverage during acute crises. In the Polish parliamentary elections in October 2015, Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice party (PiS) gained the majority—and the migration crisis that year bore relevance in the campaign. As early as 2011, Kaczyński had made it public that he admired Viktor Orbán's illiberal model of governance and intended to implement it eventually in Poland. Kaczyński claimed: 'Viktor Orbán gave us an example of how we can win. The day will come when we succeed, and we will have Budapest in Warsaw' (*Financial Times* 2016). The illiberal political change in Poland was dramatic because the new national conservative, right-wing powerholders were openly critical of the EU and allied closely with Hungary on every significant question, ranging from the rule of law and nationalism to African and Middle Eastern refugees.

Poland took over the Visegrad presidency in July 2016 and by September 2016 the crossroad moment was reappearing, now in Warsaw. Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Witold Waszczykowski introduced a new common narrative frame for the V4 'flexible solidarity'. Each EU member country was to participate in sharing the burdens of refugees according to their economic capabilities.

Those countries that had modest economic potential could contribute to the refugee effort by participating in humanitarian programmes and assisting in refugee camps, especially near to the war zones. The aim of presenting the idea of 'flexible solidarity' was to show constructiveness while hindering the new EU plan to fine those countries resisting responsibility for their share under the quota mechanism. This was translated as an institutionalization of compulsory solidarity between EU states and as such was unacceptable for the V4. So, the Polish leadership launched the 'Bratislava process', representing an ever-toughening line (Visegrad Group 2016b). By November 2016 the tone of the rhetoric had become agitated. The V4 ministers of the interior accused the EU of an inability to deal with migration and deepening divisions among the member states (Visegrad Group 2016d).

Poland was not situated on the Balkan route of migration, so the country was not 'targeted' by the mobility. What the leadership resisted was being dragged into the 'crisis' by the suggested mandatory quota system. The Polish initiative of 'flexible solidarity', played out the central and cherished memory piece of Polish history, the resistance movement of Solidarity (Pol. Solidarność) against the communist leadership and Soviet overlords. The new narrative of solidarity was a reminder for the West of Poland's traditions, indicating that Western accusations that the country lacked solidarity were unfounded. The new narrative also challenged the 'refugees welcome' type of transnational solidarity by representing a competing interpretation (Agustín and Jørgensen 2019; Oikonomakis 2018; Wrzosek 2016). The official anti-migration line was supported by mushrooming illiberal civic movements and nationalist organizations that counterbalanced the pro-refugee NGOs (Ekiert, Kubik, and Wenzel 2017). This encouraged the government to elaborate further on the narrative content of solidarity; as Polish Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz put it: 'Our solidarity rests upon strongly supporting Frontex' (cited in Gozdziak and Main 2020).

Poland and Hungary: Culmination of Crossroad Moments

The Polish influence grew considerably in the international arena during 2016. This gradually strengthening role was due to the consistent exploitation of anti-migration narratives. The Polish leadership started to coordinate the Migration Crisis Response Mechanism. This initiative was framed as a 'constructive' V4 alternative, offering a 'result-oriented solution' and 'comprehensive approach' to migration policy, in contrast to the 'ad hoc' EU actions (Visegrad Group 2016d). The goal of the proposal was to move the balance of narrative strategy from responding to EU suggestions to become more proactive and more impactful. This was in line with Polish priorities, which the administration drove at the European level through the Visegrad alliance, particularly during the Polish presidency period of the V4. 'A strong voice in the EU' was aimed at strengthening the Polish positions in the EU, in order to shape its agenda (Visegrad Group 2016e). This was Poland's crossroad moment.

While the EU's attention was directed at finding solutions to the migration crisis during 2015 and 2016, the new power-holders in Poland introduced a new policy line, resembling the Hungarian one. PiS won the parliamentary elections in October 2015 and sped up legislation on the media, gender, and the Constitutional Court, launched holistic judicial reform—all within a year. In addition, Poland acquired a leading role within the V4 with remarkable levels of activity and initiatives on the migration agenda, all part of an underlying effort to take a central role in European politics that would better befit the size of the country and the significance it sought.

With the group support of the Visegrad countries and the PiS victory, Viktor Orbán's illiberal regime was not alone any more. These factors had a transformative influence on Hungarian behaviour. Because the V4 shared the Hungarian anti-migration ideas, and the Polish leadership showed political sympathy, Orbán

became bolder and was able to multiply daring political moves. Hungarian crossroad agency was intensified by the Polish lead.

In accordance with the Polish flexible solidarity initiative and to protest openly against EU plans to fine resisting countries, the Hungarian government organized a referendum (2 October 2016) to send a message that the Hungarian people stood behind the anti-migration policies. The question to be answered in the referendum was framed around the idea of sovereignty: 'Do you want to allow the European Union to mandate the resettlement of non-Hungarian citizens to Hungary without the approval of the National Assembly?' (*Népszavazás* 2016). From the legal point of view, the referendum was unnecessary because the state was bound by international agreements, such as EU membership, that would override national legislation. Furthermore, in 2016 any law, even the Constitution, could have been altered without any referendum or discussion in parliament because the ruling Fidesz party had a supermajority. In addition, the Hungarian people experienced a year-long overenthusiastic anti-migrant campaign. It started with billboards in September 2015, continued by weekly speeches by leading politicians repeated in electronic and printed media, and accelerated during the summer of 2016 (Glied and Pap 2016). The propaganda around the referendum emphasized national security and that the government wanted to protect the citizens from 'foreign invasion', since the migrants were mostly young and aggressive men, potential terrorists. Yet, seemingly, people became weary of the massive campaign, and only 41 per cent of eligible voters cared to vote, although over 98 per cent of these favoured the government. The referendum was declared invalid (Nemzeti Választási Bizottság 150/2016).

There were three major consequences of the crossroad moment, when the Hungarian administration took a new turn in the summer of 2015, launching its anti-migration narrative, followed in a few months later by the Polish government. On the one hand, this move paid off by reinforcing illiberal power in both countries. The ruling parties, the Hungarian Fidesz and the Polish PiS, were re-elected, Fidesz again acquiring a supermajority.[2]

Second, from a wider perspective, it can be argued that the V4 had undermined the compulsory quota policy of the EU by September 2017. After two years of the 2015 refugee crisis, only 28,000 people were redistributed, out of whom 16 went to Slovakia, 12 to the Czech Republic, and none to Hungary or Poland (Martin 2017). Third, and perhaps the most long-term consequence of all, was a paradigm shift. The national cause embedded in the sovereignty-seeking discourse of the V4 group brought attention to nationalist-conservative agendas emphasizing ethnicity, culture, and religion in the Eastern flank of the EU, but this was eventually echoed in rising state-centred nationalism and migration-critical trends in Western countries by 2020. This Western development can be seen in the growing support for the V4 initiatives that move the focus of migration policy to firmer border control and establishing refugee camps outside the EU. This paradigm shift played a vital role when the Polish–Belarusian border crisis began in the autumn of 2021.

Polish–Belarusian Border Crisis in 2021

By September 2020, the EU authorities were losing patience with the stubborn opposition of the V4 on migration policy. While the prime ministers changed in Poland (now Mateusz Morawiecki), Slovakia (Igor Matovič), and the Czech Republic (Andrej Babiš), their staunch objection to quotas remained the same. The EU Commission, however, insisted on a 'mandatory solidarity mechanism', according to which participation in sharing the burden would be a condition for EU funding, and refusal would result in an infringement procedure. Furthermore, the Commission would monitor member states' economic prosperity and population size annually and then decide the number of refugees each country must take in (Baczynska 2020). Hungary and Poland were under additional pressure due to the new rule-of-law mechanism, introduced in January 2021. It also relied on conditionality, regarding not only post-pandemic recovery funds but also the EU budget for the period of 2022–2027 (EUR-Lex Regulation 2020/2092).

Seemingly, the East–West debate was heating up, but suddenly a new migration crisis broke out and changed the underlying juxtaposition.

The Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenka staged a migration flow as a response to the EU sanctions. These sanctions were issued in response to fraudulent presidential elections and drastic measures against the political opposition and civil society (Council of the EU 2020). Transporting migrants from Iraq across Belarusian territory to the borders of Lithuania and Poland was an attempt to inflict pressure on the EU and create internal conflict over migration. Already in June 2021, when hundreds of migrants began to arrive daily in the country, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielis Landsbergis called the situation 'hybrid warfare', where refugees were instrumentalized and called for EU assistance (Landsbergis 2021). But no aid was provided, and the situation accelerated rapidly until October, when the Polish–Belarusian border became a violent hotspot (Hebel and Reuter 2021; Bolliger, Popp, and Puhl 2021).

While Poland and Lithuania were still waiting for the EU to react in the mounting crisis, the Visegrad countries promptly offered their help to Poland. In June 2021, they agreed on military cooperation and commitment to a special Visegrad battle group, which could be utilized also in response to EU actions and would not be solely under NATO command (Visegrad Group 2021a). In July, the V4 repeated the old tactics involving other countries, to get more support for regional matters. The new V4+ also entailed Austria and Slovenia, both in sympathy with the illiberal administrations of Hungary and Poland. Taking advantage of the ongoing hybrid operation, the V4 stressed the urgency of fighting illegal migration and cross-border crime (Visegrad Group 2021b). This was an attempt to cement the regional anti-migration stand and keep EU attention on security discourse. The V4 also drove an initiative to reform the Schengen agreement to reintroduce inner border control, as a response to the new Schengen Strategy (EUR-Lex COM 2021, 277). Through this new strategy, the EU was trying to mediate between the divergent Eastern and Western positions.

On the one hand, the Commission agreed to invest in stricter external border control. On the other hand, it still required compulsory solidarity, but only in *migration management*. This was a considerable concession for the V4 and a flexible solution that could cover various activities, ranging through capacity building, operational support, and other engagement (European Commission 2020).

In the meantime, the Polish–Belarusian border situation became heated. The Polish authorities deployed around 15,000 military personnel, supported by additional forces from the border guards and police, using water cannon and pepper spray to hold back the migrants who were driven over the border by Belarusian troops. Poland declared a state of emergency in September and restricted access to the border area for journalists and refugee aid activists. Later, in October, Poland legalized the procedure of pushing back to Belarus those refugees who had succeeded in crossing the border (EUobserver 2021; BBC News 2021). While international criticism of human rights violations was increasing, Poland refused the Frontex forces—due to profound distrust in the EU organization and its possible hindering of the practice of pushing back. In contrast, the V4 supported the tough Polish actions and offered immediate combat assistance to help to protect the border (Szíjjártó 2021).

The conflict brought much international publicity to the PiS government, but seemingly in a completely new manner. While just a year earlier the EU had threatened Eastern members with conditionality if they did not change their attitude to quotas, in November 2021 the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, declared that this was not a 'migration crisis' but a destabilizing manoeuvre by an authoritarian regime, and that it was vital to strengthen the external borders of the European Union (von der Leyen 2021a). She promised support for border management, for which the Commission tripled funds for Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia (von der Leyen 2021b). For the V4, the change of emphasis meant that finally the EU had got their message: safeguarding the external borders from intruding migrants

was the most important guarantee of security. The response of the Commission to the border crisis was a confirmation of the post-2015 paradigm shift, launched by the consistent narrative of the Hungarian and Polish leaderships.

In the end, the crisis was neutralized by EU negotiations, and while the EU opposed building fences around Europe, the Polish administration ordered the construction of a steel wall 186 km long and 5.5 m high along the Belarus border, which was finished in July 2022. The firm Polish stand in the border conflict, and particularly its refusal of EU Frontex assistance, stirred up criticism in the EU, and more attention was directed to the rule-of-law violations in Poland. Yet Poland, relying on Hungarian support, maintained its illiberal line against all odds.

Ukraine 2022: Refugee Crisis

The war in Ukraine was another crossroad moment for Hungary and Poland. The choices they made created a rift between these countries and within the Visegrad alliance. The war brought the fragility of security to the fore, but the threats to national existence were interpreted differently in Budapest and Warsaw. Nevertheless, the war turned Hungarian and Polish refugee politics upside down, as both countries displayed a similar welcoming reaction to the people fleeing the atrocities. In this respect, the situation recalled the 1990s Yugoslav wars and the benign atmosphere towards *neighbouring refugees*.

Poland and Hungary, however, had different relations with Ukraine and Russia, and divergent national narratives fed on official memory discourses, where historical traumas played a special part. The widely advertised Polish solidarity with Ukraine was reminiscent of the selected memory pieces of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the Middle Ages, embracing Ukraine, and especially Western Ukraine as Polish territory. All of this unity was destroyed by the USSR after the Second World War. The current war resembles the Polish experiences of existential fear of expansionist Russia, which has relevance for the formulation

of Polish identity. Hungarian remembrance considered the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine a part of the ideal homeland that Hungary lost to Stalin (Miklóssy and Pierzynska 2019). The vital difference between these memory traditions is that Poland had begun to repatriate ethnic Poles from the lost territories after 2004 (Sendhardt 2017), while Hungary did not do the same with the Hungarian minority. When the war in Ukraine broke out in February 2022, the Hungarian minority there consisted of around 150,000 people. The Orbán government's neighbourhood policy has always depended on how a country dealt with the Hungarian minorities. Hence, when the Ukrainian government issued language laws, restricting the use of minority languages in education and local administration, it became a problem. In response Hungary opposed Ukraine´s membership of NATO, and bilateral relations quickly deteriorated as early as 2019.

Refugees were a different issue, on which both countries showed extraordinary solidarity. In both countries, there was massive work-related out-migration to the West, creating a lack of labour force on home markets (Klaus 2020). Hence, these countries started to rely on migrant workers coming from Ukraine. According to various evaluations, between 2018 and 2021 Ukrainians represented 88 per cent of all registered migrant workers on the Polish labour market (Duszczyk and Kaczmarczyk 2022). In Hungary, the number of Ukrainian workers was much lower (in 2020 it was 13,410, 2 per cent), due to the language barrier, which is why many of those who did come had a Hungarian minority background (Pálos 2022; Nemzeti Foglalkoztatási Szolgálat 2020). This situation changed suddenly with the outbreak of the war. According to the UNHCR (2023), by April 2023, over 2.4 million Ukrainian refugees had entered Hungary and 10.6 million had come to Poland—although for temporary protection some 34,300 people registered in Hungary and 1.58 million in Poland. Comparing these numbers with the firm opposition to the EU mandatory quota back in 2015, the difference is astonishing. While these countries had a convergent migration policy, the war in Ukraine

altered their bilateral relations profoundly because of their diverging policy on Russia.

Poland had been a staunch proponent of EU sanctions on Russia since 2014, with anti-Russian attitudes uniting Polish political parties. Hungary, on the other hand, did not consider Russia a residual threat. For Hungary, 'security' historically referred to economic development that guaranteed the standard of living and thus the legitimacy of power. Russia was seen as a stronghold against uncontrolled immigration, and the Kremlin's concern about Russian minorities abroad echoed the national conservative Orbán administration's long-term strategic goal of minority protection (Országgyülési Határozat, 94/1998). Personal cordial relations with President Putin played a role in securing gas transfers, but even more importantly, Orbán was able to exploit the anti-Russian atmosphere prevailing in Western rhetoric (Orbán 2017; Szíjjártó 2017). The different Russia policy resulted in dissimilar recalibrations in the countries' EU strategies.

Since Poland was aligned with the official EU line on Russia, the PiS government earned new respect in the EU. The enormous voluntary share of Ukrainian refugees taken by Poland was positively noted (Krzysztoszek 2022b). Poland supported all EU sanction packages, and even called for a firmer line against Russia and more substantial military support to Ukraine (Krzysztoszek 2022a). In contrast, Hungary begun to block consensual decision-making and succeeded in watering down sanctions against Russia after June 2022 (Strupczewski 2022). Since the war fundamentally threatened the European security architecture, the differences in these countries' policy on Russia and Ukraine gradually started to influence general EU attitudes. Parallel with the fluctuating war in Ukraine, EU appreciation and annoyance translated into discussion over the rule of law in Hungary and Poland. As it turned out, Poland was rewarded by the approval of a €35 billion recovery fund early in June 2022, but this was withheld temporarily according to the rule-of-law mechanism (Liboreiro 2022). In contrast, EU discontent with the overall performance of Hungary could be seen in a delay in approving its recovery fund until the last minute

in December 2022, denying access to the funds based on the conditionality of the rule-of-law mechanism. The breach within the Visegrad alliance continued, due to the different Russia policies. As a result, by January 2023 Hungary stood alone.

This crossroad moment showed the significance of in-between spatiality. The different choices of Hungary and Poland originated from the different options embedded in the area between the Eastern and Western systems. Hungary, while taking advantage of the EU as a member state, openly showed affinity with the Russian model at a moment when tensions between the EU and Russia were heightened. Poland, in contrast, capitalized on the fact that the EU's short-term interests converged with Polish Russia policy. This does not mean that Poland changed its course and approach to the Western democratic model. The Polish elite just used the convergence of interest with the EU to boost the resilience of their illiberal regime.

Illiberalism and the Anti-Migration Narrative: Time, Space, and Agency

This chapter has investigated how three temporal migration events offered crossroad moments for regional actors, such as Hungary and Poland. A juncture in a particular time and space enabled the reinvention of agency. An illiberal regime opposes liberalism in general, but this has limited if any impact on liberal democracies. The crisis talk, addressing migration, that emerged in the European political discourse in 2015, however, made a big difference. It created the opportunity and the rhetorical means to invent a metanarrative that contributed to legitimizing the *illiberal argument*. Taking advantage of 'crises' helped countries to redefine the illiberal narrative and their international leverage and increased their impact. The international circulation of its ideas further reinforced the illiberal power; in other words, it strengthened regime resilience. This we can call the 'liberal paradox'.

The Hungarian leadership recognized the chance to expand the boundaries of agency and the narrative space by exploiting the

moment when the unity of the European community was weakened by migration challenges. In 2015, Hungary was still the sole declarable illiberal regime. It pushed a new process into motion by introducing the novel narrative of sovereignty for the Visegrad countries, through which the Hungarian leadership reached out for regional support. The difference between the other countries of the V4 and Hungary was that all except Hungary had only indirect experience of migration in 2015. To mobilize the Visegrad alliance against the 'compulsory solidarity' rhetoric of the EU was instrumental. The group support made the Hungarian agency bolder, and the growing international attention widened the audience receiving the anti-migration narrative. The increasing power of its argument lent an impression of Hungary being a 'bigger' country with a stronger illiberal cause that contributed to the changing of power in Poland. The new Polish administration sought a greater international role for itself, gaining new agency and more space by taking over the lead on anti-migration advocacy in 2016. In comparison, Hungary initiated a narrative that Poland, with a time gap, helped to nurture to a fuller size. The consequence of this collaboration was a profoundly weakening European narrative that, in the end, made concessions to the strengthening illiberal agency. By 2017, relying on the Visegrad Group's support, Poland and Hungary were able to water down the compulsory quota system.

By maintaining firm opposition with alternative proposals, their ideas spread across the EU, enhancing a paradigm shift in migration discourse. This could be seen particularly in the Belarusian border conflict in autumn 2021, when the Western human rights rhetoric gave way to border security discourse, redefining the mainstream narration. The EU authorities fully supported Polish actions to force the migrants back over the border. Temporarily, 2021 was a reaffirmation of the process that started in 2015. In that sense, it underlined the rising impact of an enhancing illiberal agency. Poland, however, was acquiring the undoubted leading regional role.

The war in Ukraine was a new crossroad moment that turned around the staunch anti-migration policy of the Hungarian and Polish governments. Suddenly, they welcomed millions of refugees from Ukraine without hesitation. In this case, migration was profoundly connected to European security, i.e., relations with Russia and Ukraine. On the other hand, this pointed to the immanent racist nature of previous 2015 and 2021 anti-migration narratives. For Poland and Hungary, African and Middle Eastern Muslim refugees and white Christian Ukrainian refugees were two entirely different stories.

The diverging Hungarian and Polish responses to Russia had decisive impact on how successful their chosen agency was in achieving more leverage at this juncture. As became evident, the Polish strategy coincided with the primary goals articulated by the EU and hence considerably strengthened Poland's European appreciation and international position, regardless of the fact that it was still an illiberal state. In contrast, due to its controversial choices, Hungary became increasingly isolated in the European arena, which decreased its political weight and influence. Ironically, due to the metanarrative of the legitimacy of the illiberal regime, invented in 2015, EU criticism of Hungary's path made illiberal power even stronger. The anti-migration stance launched by Hungary spread eventually across Europe, with the powerful side message of illiberalism, nationalism, and neoconservatism.

The advantages of a crossroad moment might seem unpredictable but basically the question is similar to that in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, when Alice asks the Cheshire Cat what road to take, and the Cat's answer is 'That depends on where you want to go' (Castiglione 2007, 26). From the illiberal regimes' perspective, it is a chance to strengthen their grip on power to make their system sustainable. The only open question is how the selected strategy takes them to this primary goal. Furthermore, consecutive crossroad moments can blur the big picture; choosing between short-term and long-term strategies becomes more complex and increasingly difficult. This indicates that at any crossroad moment, a decision can diminish or even nullify previous suc-

cesses, because agency always depends on the cross-reading of the temporal and spatial context.

Notes

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2   Parliamentary elections were held in Hungary on 8 April 2018 and in Poland on 13 October 2019.

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