



**UNIVERSITY OF SARAJEVO
FACULTY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND DIPLOMACY**

**THE IMPACT OF POPULIST AGENDAS IN THE VISEGRAD GROUP
COUNTRIES ON DEMOCRACY
- Master's thesis -**

Candidate

**Amila Ramić
1028 / II**

Mentor

Prof.dr. Damir Kapidžić

Sarajevo, September 2022.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	5
2. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK.....	6
2.1 Research Topic	6
2.2 Research Question.....	7
2.3 Research Objectives.....	8
2.4 Hypothesis Formulation	8
2.4.1 The General Hypothesis.....	8
2.4.2 The Auxiliary hypotheses:	9
2.5 Research Methods and Techniques	9
3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND EXPLANATORY THEORIES	9
3.1 Theories of Populism	9
3.1.1 Populism as an Ideology	10
3.1.2 Populism as a Discourse.....	12
3.1.3 Populism as a Political Style	12
3.1.4 Populism as a Political Strategy	13
3.2 Opportunistic Personalism.....	14
3.3 The Effect of Populism on Democracy.....	14
3.4 Research Done on Populism in Eastern Europe	16
4. THE RISE OF POPULISM IN VISEGRAD GROUP COUNTRIES.....	18
4.1 Hungary.....	20
4.2 Poland.....	22
4.3 Slovakia.....	24
4.4 Czech Republic	27
5. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS.....	29
5.1 Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)	29
5.2 Freedom House (Nations in Transit).....	30
5.2.1 Hungary	31
5.2.2 Poland.....	31

5.2.3 Slovakia	32
5.2.4 Czech Republic.....	32
5.3 Freedom House Subcategory Scores	33
5.3.1 Hungary	33
5.3.2 Poland.....	33
5.3.3 Slovakia	33
5.3.4 Czech Republic.....	34
6. SHIFTING AGENDAS AS A POPULIST TOOL IN V4 COUNTRIES	34
6.1 Migration.....	34
6.1.1 Hungary	35
6.1.2 Poland.....	36
6.1.3 Slovakia	37
6.1.4 Czech Republic.....	38
6.2 Independent Media.....	39
6.2.1 Hungary	40
6.2.2 Poland.....	40
6.2.3 Slovakia	41
6.2.4 Czech Republic.....	42
6.3 Roma Minority	43
6.3.1 Hungary	43
6.3.2 Slovakia	45
6.3.3 Czech Republic.....	46
6.4 Personal and Social Freedoms.....	47
5.4.1 Hungary	47
6.4.2 Poland.....	48
6.4.3 Slovakia	49
6.4.4 Czech Republic.....	49
7. CONCLUSION	50
BIBLIOGRAPHY	53

1. INTRODUCTION

Populism is not a new phenomenon nor is it specific to only one region, but in recent years the number of populist parties and actors had drastically increased and there are also many governments with populist political actors in power which suggest that this topic is relevant now more than ever. The populist wave has been very intense in Europe and the biggest advances have been made in Central and Eastern Europe. All four so-called Visegrad countries: Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia are governed by populist parties. This opens the question if there are certain causes for this phenomenon to appear there and become this successful. This research paper will investigate the patterns that could provide an understanding of why Central and Eastern Europe turned out to be a favourable soil for populism to take off.

Populism is as much a right-wing as it is a left-wing phenomenon, there are politicians from both ends of the political spectrum who claim to speak on behalf of ordinary people and to stand in opposition to an elite establishment that puts their interests above those of the ordinary people. The ambiguity of ‘ordinary people’ and ‘the elite’ gives these populist actors the opportunity to frame them as they see fit and makes them the ultimate interpreters in this game of us vs. them. They often claim that the government, other political parties, or activists, are the ‘others’ who are denying the rights of ‘ordinary people’ or even pose a danger to their way of life. This is where populism can become dangerous. Certain groups of the population, such as ethnic minorities, feminists, LGBTQI persons or immigrants are often painted in the negative light and presented as the source of all the problems ordinary people are facing. These problems are often very simplified and set up in a way that only the populists could solve them and not the evil elite.

The special focus of this paper will be exactly on the countless agenda’s populist actors had employed between 2010 and 2020 that helped them gain the support of the voters. It is evident that 2015 migration crisis gave them the biggest push forward and brought them into the mainstream politics, but all other misused circumstances and fabricated threats are often overlooked when talking about their steady progress over the years. The research objective of this paper is Central Eastern Europe as a whole because this phenomenon occurred there around the same time and populist actors seemingly use the same agendas and tactics in all four

countries. However, this does not mean that the country specific cases would be ignored. Every chapter and the topic discussed would go into details and analyse each country individually.

The ultimate goal is to understand the effects populism has on liberal democracy. The idea is to do this by looking into the circumstances that opened the door to the populism, following the rise of the phenomenon in the region, researching the methods Visegrad populist used to gain support of the people, and their actions once in power. This will be supported with quantitative data that measures the state of democracy throughout the above-mentioned periods. Once again, the research will make a distinction between the four countries in order to see if the possible erosion of liberal democracy was equally strong in all of them.

2. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Research Topic

The foundation of this paper is the study of populism. Although populism has become a very attractive topic in academia and the term itself has become a kind of a buzzword in the political arena and media, it is still relevant to investigate specific cases through which we will gain new insights into this phenomenon. Populism is a very vague term used to describe various politicians, parties, and movements and there are several definitions used to describe it but what they all come down to is that: “populism is essentially a set of ideas, connected to an essential struggle between ‘the good people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’,” (Cas Mudde in Kaltwasser, C. Rovira, 2017; 63). This paper will try to explain why this concept, which is in principle good, has such a bad reputation.

Precisely because this term is in itself too extensive, this paper will focus on researching a specific case in order to come to new valuable conclusions about it. Populist wave has been very intense in Europe and the biggest advances have been made in Central and Eastern Europe. All four countries of the so-called Visegrad group: Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia are governed by populist parties and their presence has already taken a toll on democracy. Media reports often state that populism has weakened liberal institutions such as a free press, independent civil society, and constitutional courts. That is why this study will

examine the state of democracy in these countries to see just how much populism has affected it.

2.2 Research Question

This paper will present the political situation in all four of Visegrad countries. It will elaborate on why leaders in this region are deemed as populists and how this affects democratic institutions. But in order to explore this topic from a new perspective that would give a deeper insight into the situation in the region and a better understanding of populist figures in general, this paper will specifically address populist agendas that are constantly changing in order to boost the popularity of these political factors.

Looking at things from this angle is important since shifting agendas seem to be one of the key characteristics of populists and possible explanation as to why they are doing so well lately. This phenomenon also corresponds to what Kurt Weyland called *opportunistic personalism*. “Populism rests on pure, opportunistic personalism—as distinct from ideocratic personalism, where the leader embodies a dogmatic ideology and acts as its monopolistic interpreter. Pure personalism, by contrast, is opportunistic and tries to maximize the leader’s chances of coming to power. Fully personalistic leaders therefore use ideas, slogans, and campaign promises instrumentally and flexibly shift with changing circumstances. Lacking firm ideological commitments, they seek to mobilize as much mass support as possible. It is this pure, opportunistic personalism that gives rise to populism” (Kurt Weyland in Kaltwasser, C. Rovira, 2017; 90). This constant change of narrative is what gives populists an advantage over their political rivals. Therefore, this paper will seek to expose this misuse of ideas, slogans, and campaign promises. The focus will specifically be on all the different agendas these parties used from 2010 up to 2020 to gain support of the people. It is evident that in 2015 when the ‘migration crisis’ happened in Europe these parties oriented themselves against immigrants, more precisely against the Muslims, but their agenda before and after that gets overlooked when the issue of populism in the Visegrad group is discussed nowadays.

Designed to include all the issues mentioned above, this paper poses the following research question: *To what extent did shifting agendas of populist governments in the Visegrad countries manage to erode institutions of liberal democracy?*

2.3 Research Objectives

The general objective of this paper is to point out to a special case that is, seemingly sudden rise of populism in Central Eastern Europe. This particular area is relevant because all four countries: Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia are governed by populists and there have been countless accusations over the years that these populist leaders have managed to undermine democracy in their respective countries. That is why to overall goal of the paper is to understand how populism affects our democracies and to assess the possible negative consequences and dangers related to this phenomenon. The scientific objective is to create research results that will be useful to the broad academic community, and which will be applied for scientific purposes. In addition, the paper will strive to achieve better theoretical understanding of populism, which by its very nature is extremely vague. Therefore, the scientific goal is the exploration of populism in general.

Despite the popularity of this topic in recent years both in media and academia, populism is still not researched enough in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is present in Bosnian political scene, but not often recognized or classified as such. This work will hopefully contribute to the greater interest in researching populism in BiH context as well. Social objective would be to draw attention to what this paper will call “sifting populist agenda”, which is a strategy of switching to whatever agenda is going to bring populist politicians more votes or help them stay relevant at the moment.

2.4 Hypothesis Formulation

By defining the research question, it is possible to formulate the general hypothesis, as well as the auxiliary hypotheses:

2.4.1 The General Hypothesis

GH0: Shifting agendas of populist governments in the Visegrad countries managed to erode institutions of liberal democracy in all four countries.

2.4.2 The Auxiliary hypotheses:

AH1: Populist actions undermine freedom and independence of media.

AH2: Populist actions undermine civil and political rights of minorities

AH3: Populist actions undermine the right to practice religious beliefs

AH4: Populist actions undermine personal and social freedoms, such as choice of marriage, size of family, control of the appearance.

2.5 Research Methods and Techniques

In order to answer the research question, this research is conducted using mixed methods, combining the elements of quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative method will be done using the data from social science data collection sources like V-dem and Freedom House. Qualitative method is based on the content analysis, where secondary gathered information is used. This will be done by using the previous literature on this topic, official reports from the international organizations and media articles. Using different methods will help produce more credible findings.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND EXPLANATORY THEORIES

This part of the paper is an overview of what has been written on this topic. It will try to answer the question of what exactly populism is, by reviewing the existing literature and by identifying most prominent approaches to contemporary populism. This will make it possible to better understand the nature of this phenomenon. It will also define and explain key concepts according to how they are used in the paper to provide easy understanding of the problem and avoid ambiguous meaning.

3.1 Theories of Populism

Research on populism has always been characterized by an open and ongoing debate about how to define it. The term is extremely hard to grasp and has long been one of the most ‘contested’ concepts in the social sciences. As Margaret Canovan noted: “Although frequently used by historians, social scientists, and political commentators, the term (*populism*) is exceptionally vague and refers in different contexts to a bewildering variety of phenomena” (Canovan, 1981; 3). This can be a consequence of the multidisciplinary nature of the research, but also a result of a lack of an agreement on the essence of the term within one discipline.

For the purpose of this paper four main conceptual approaches were identified. They define populism as an ideology, a discourse, political style, and political strategy. Despite the fact that these approaches all offer different definitions of populism, they are useful because they arrive at a systematic understanding of populism that clearly identifies the key features of the phenomenon and allows for a more principled comparison of populist politics across contexts. It is safe to say that there is a common ground in contemporary literature on populism: “many scholars nowadays agree that it should be defined as a set of ideas that concerns the antagonistic relationship between the corrupt elite and the virtuous people” (Rooduijn, 2018).

In the end, whether populism is defined as a full ideology rather than a looser set of ideas, centered around the fundamental opposition between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite,” is in most cases of secondary importance to the research question and often impossible to determine empirically. In essence, the various definitions within the ideational approach share a clear core, which both holds them together and sets them apart from other approaches to populism (Kaltwasser, 2017). Cas Mudde also argues: “At this stage scholarship of populism would profit from focusing more on the many similarities between various ideational definitions than on (over)emphasizing the few differences. This can foster the development of cumulative knowledge across historical periods and geographical areas, which will further the knowledge of populism in general, and of specific populist actors in particular” (Cas Mudde in Kaltwasser, 2017).

3.1.1 Populism as an Ideology

Conceptualisation of populism as an ideology has become the dominant position in the literature over the past decade. Much of this success, particularly within European political

science, can be attributed to the contribution of Mudde (Moffit, 2016). Cas Mudde defines populism as “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; 6). By defining it as ‘thin-centred ideology’ Mudde suggests that populism usually cannot exist by itself, rather that it is mixed with or attached to ‘thick-centered’ ideologies such as liberalism, socialism, fascism, ect. For Mudde, the strength of a minimal definition of populism as an ideology lies in its applicability to comparative empirical research—particularly its ability to transcend regional bias—as well as its ability to jettison any normative baggage with which conceptions of populism have often been burdened (Moffit, 2016). There are three core concepts of populism according to Mudde: the people, the elite and the general will. ‘The people’ is a very vague and flexible term, used in a way that best suits the populist using it. It is supposed to create some sort of a shared identity and sense of unity among different groups.

The people constitute a community, a place where, as Zygmunt Bauman says, we feel ‘warm’ and ‘safe’ and where there is mutual trust. Moreover, the community is a place where “it is crystal-clear who is ‘one of us’ and who is not, there is no muddle and no cause for confusion” (Bauman, 2001: 12) (Albezazzi and McDonell 2008; 5). It is most often used in a combination of the following three meanings: the people as sovereign, as the common people, and as the nation. In all cases the main distinction between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ is related to a secondary feature: political power, socioeconomic status, and nationality (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; 9).

Unlike ‘the people’, few authors have theorized about the meanings of ‘the elite’ in populism. According to Stanley, in populist discourse the ‘fundamental distinguishing feature’ of ‘the elite’ is that it is in an ‘adversarial relationship’ with ‘the people’ (Stanley, 2008; 103). But this does not say much about who the elite are. In the populist mind, the elite are the henchmen of ‘special interests’. Historically, these powerful, shady forces were bankers and international financiers (often alleged to be Jewish). But in contemporary populism a ‘new class’ has been identified, that of the ‘progressives’ and the ‘politically correct’ (Mudde, 2004; 561). Most populists not only detest the political establishment, but they also critique the economic elite, the cultural elite, and the media elite. All of these are portrayed as one homogeneous corrupt group that works against the ‘general will’ of the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; 11).

The notion of the ‘general will’ is closely linked to the work of the famous philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) who distinguished between the general will (*volonté générale*) and the will of all (*volonté de tous*). While the former refers to the capacity of the people to join into a community and legislate to enforce their common interest, the latter denotes the simple sum of particular interests at a specific moment in time. Seen in this light, the task of politicians is quite straightforward: they should be, in the words of Margaret Canovan, “enlightened enough to see what the general will is, and charismatic enough to form individual citizens into a cohesive community that can be counted on to will it” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; 16). Indeed, populists always act like genuine representatives of “the people” they ‘incarnate’ the people’s culture, articulate the will of the people, ‘say what people are thinking’, can see through the machinations of the elites and have the vision to provide simple, understandable solutions to the problems portrayed by the elites as complex and intractable. (Albezazzi and McDonnell 2008; 5).

3.1.2 Populism as a Discourse

An approach that has proven popular in recent times in the literature on populism in Europe and Latin America views populism as a discourse that pits ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’ (Hawkins 2009) or ‘the oligarchy’ (de la Torre 2010). Here, rather than being a feature of a set of political beliefs, populism is seen as a particular mode of political expression, usually evident in speech or text (Moffitt, 2016). In the same spirit, Kazin (1995), in his historical analysis of American populism, defines populism as a language used by those who claim to speak for most Americans. Similarly, to Mudde’s definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology, Kazin argues that the political style of American populism is built on the dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Yet for Kazin, populism is not an ideology that captures the core beliefs of particular political actors but rather a mode of political expression that is employed selectively and strategically by both right and left, liberals and conservatives (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013; 8).

3.1.3 Populism as a Political Style

This approach is close to the former one that views populism as discourse. Benjamin Moffitt thinks discourse approach is on the right track since it focuses on speech acts and rhetoric, but

what it lacks is visual, performative, and aesthetic elements. This is a problem because according to him populism is a subject notorious for its prevalence of allegedly charismatic leaders and stylistic flourishes and we are only getting half the picture by focusing on written or spoken discourse. He defines populism as a political style that features an appeal to ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite’, ‘bad manners’ and the performance of crisis, breakdown or threat (Moffit, 2016). In this understanding, populism alludes to amateurish and unprofessional political behaviour that aims to maximize media attention and popular support. By disrespecting the dress code and language manners, populist actors are able to present themselves not only as different and novel, but also as courageous leaders who stand with ‘the people’ in opposition to ‘the elite’ (Mudde and Kaltwesser, 2017; 4).

3.1.4 Populism as a Political Strategy

In contrast to ideational and discursive approaches, some scholars advocate for an understanding of populism as a mode of political strategy. This approach, which is particularly prevalent among sociologists and political scientists working on Latin America, comprises three variants that focus on different aspects of political strategy: policy choices, political organization, and forms of mobilization (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013; 10). It emphasizes that populism implies the emergence of a strong and charismatic figure, who concentrates power and maintains a direct connection with the masses. (Mudde and Kaltwesser, 2017; 4). Those who see populism as a strategy have also attempted to present a minimal definition, with Weyland’s (2001, 14) definition of populism as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers” proving popular as a starting point for empirical analyses, particularly in the literature on Latin American populism. Others working within this approach have focused on populism’s organisational features, examining populist movements’ plebiscitarian linkages or modes of election campaigning. In these strategic approaches, populism is thus not defined by the political values of the political actor, nor by the way that they communicate, but by their relationship (which is supposedly ‘direct’) with their followers (Moffit, 2016).

3.2 Opportunistic Personalism

Since this research is concerned with the shifting nature of populism it is important to define the term ‘opportunistic personalism’. Opportunistic personalism is a defining trait of populist leaders and it can give a possible explanation on why populist agendas are always changing. Kurt Weyland came up with this term and he writes about it in ‘The Oxford Handbook of Populism’. He separates this type of personalism from ideocratic personalism where the leader embodies a dogmatic ideology and acts as its monopolistic interpreter. This type of leader is concerned with ideological purity and dismisses any kind of flexibility. He is looking for a deeper commitment from his followers and he does not mind staying in opposition while waiting to win converts. On the other hand, “pure personalism is opportunistic and tries to maximize the leader’s chances of coming to power. Fully personalistic leaders therefore use ideas, slogans, and campaign promises instrumentally and flexibly shift with changing circumstances”. Such leaders are focused on gaining as many followers and support as possible. Weyland claims that “it is this pure, opportunistic personalism that gives rise to populism” (Weyland in Kaltwasser, 2017).

3.3 The Effect of Populism on Democracy

The relationship between populism and democracy is also a frequent topic of discussion in academic literature. Although consensus has never been reached, it can be argued that the most common and popular view is that populism poses a threat to democracy. Before we discuss this complex relationship between populism and democracy, we need to define democracy.

Democracy in the narrowest sense would be government by the people or rule of the majority. However, as Mudde and Kaltwasser explain most people, while using the term democracy, think of liberal democracy. The difference is that liberal democracy “refers to a political regime, which not only respects popular sovereignty and majority rule, but also establishes independent institutions specialized in the protection of fundamental rights” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). These rights include the right to self-determination, right to freedom of thought and religion, and the ability to express yourself freely without the state interference. People also have the right to assembly and participate in the political life of their country. Alberazzi and Mueller emphasize one more crucial component of liberal democracy, they say that: “All these necessary ‘ingredients’ of liberal democracy are underpinned by what is

arguably the most fundamental principle of all, perfectly embodied in the US Constitution: the notion that power can never be absolute, no matter how large a majority may be at a certain moment in time” (Albertazzi and Mueller, 2013). All these rights and freedoms are inviolable and usually protected by the constitution. Therefore, the rights of minorities should not be called into question and must be respected as well.

Now that we have defined democracy and liberal democracy, it is time to clarify how populism affects them. Most authors believe that populism poses a dangerous threat to democracy because of its illiberal and authoritarian tendencies. As we already established, populism only recognizes “the will of the (pure) people ” and is therefore directly opposed to the notions of pluralism. According to Mudde and Kaltwasser, *volonté générale* (general will) is a very exclusive notion. It does not include people who are on the margins of society, such as homosexuals, people who belong to another ethnic or cultural group, foreigners or people who belong to the elite because of their status. Minority rights are not something populist care about, and they often disregard the institutional guarantees of those rights. In practice, “populists often invoke the principle of popular sovereignty to criticize those independent institutions seeking to protect fundamental rights that are inherent to the liberal democratic model” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). The next thing that points out the antagonistic relation between populism and liberal democracy is that the fundamental liberal democratic principle: that the power of the majority is always limited and that it can never be exercised at the expense of individual liberties, no matter how numerically overwhelming the majority is, or how strongly its members feel about an issue is, as Alberazzi and Mueller note so irreconcilable with the most strongly held belief of populist ideology (Albertazzi and Mueller, 2013). Gianfranco Pasquino lists a few reasons that show in what way populism clashes with democratic framework. First thing is that populist followers put all their trust into the leader with extraordinary abilities, who is the only one that can solve their problems and help them. Second, populism is essentially based on hostility towards the ‘others’. And this leads towards the state of constant conflict which is not a very democratic outcome. Third reason is that, because of the already described close and direct leader-follower relationship, institutions are disregarded. Therefore, populism both prevents the consolidation of democratic regimes and challenges existing ones. Finally, populism cannot be sustained. It often becomes more radical with some followers resorting to violence or end up in a state of social and political alienation (Alberazzi and McDonnell, 2008).

3.4 Research Done on Populism in Eastern Europe

In order to get a better understanding of the causes, characteristics, and consequences of the rise of populism in Central Eastern Europe, this part of the paper is dedicated to previous research and theoretical explanations related to this specific area. Furthermore, this part also points to the importance of looking at populism through the prism of a region or a group of countries such as the Visegrad Group.

The authors of 'Populist politics and liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe' claim that populism in these countries shares some important common characteristics. The first characteristic is that, as in most other cases, populists in this region refer to the 'people as a whole', as opposed to the 'corrupt' and 'powerless' political elite. They therefore do not present themselves as an alternative to another political party but as an alternative to the existing system. Another thing is that populists oppose the idea that the political majority should be limited by constitutional restrictions, which is one of the key principles of liberal democracy. Populism in this region is characterized as openly majoritarian. Populists believe that the consent of the majority equals the ultimate legitimation in politics. Therefore, this type of populism is especially opposed to the idea of minority rights. Lastly, populists challenge at least some elements of what they see as the 'liberal consensus' of the transition period: market-oriented reforms, integration into Euro-Atlantic organizations, rejection of nationalist language and behaviour. Populists challenge all or at least some of these 'taboos', they reject the 'political correctness' of liberalism and give citizens the opportunity to discuss the problems that were maybe of limits to the mainstream parties (Mesežnikov, Gyárfášová, Smilov, 2008).

Ben Stanley talks about two theories about populism in this region: radical and centrist. "According to the radical theory, populism in Central and Eastern Europe would consist in a backlash against the liberal politics of post-communist transition and the elites responsible for implementing these reforms. According to the centrist theory, populists would largely exploit dissatisfaction with corrupt and incompetent leaders, rather than rejecting the politics of transition" (Stanley in Kaltwasser, 2017). His main argument is that empirical evidence supports *both* radical and centrist theories of supply-side populism. Stanley notes that populism in Central and Eastern Europe was not purely radical and that no single dominant type of populism emerged in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communism, as opposed to

Western Europe where most radical populism was right-wing. According to him, the centrist populist party emerged as a new subtype of populist party in Central and Eastern Europe. This subtype was characterized by moderate or eclectic attitudes on political issues, refusal to be defined in accordance with traditional ideological dimensions, and above all an emphasis on the corruption and incompetence of established elites. To Stanley the case of Central and Eastern Europe demonstrates that populism is not necessarily a vehicle for expressing anti-liberal sentiments. "While many parties at the extremes of the dominant dimensions of political competition are populist, not all populist parties are at the extremes" (Stanley in Kaltwasser, 2017).

Smilov begins his overview of some of the distinctive features of the Eastern European family of populists on the same note. He says that the first important feature of the Eastern European populism is that it is not "radicalism" or "extremism". According to him, populists do not demand or offer an alternative to democracy, however, he notes their version of democracy is flawed and dangerous. Second characteristic is that populism in the region comes in two forms, which Smilov describes as 'soft' and 'hard'. "Soft" populism is based on criticism of the current regime and the ruling party and uses the established populist view that the government is corrupt and too far removed from ordinary people. "Hard" populism challenges not only the current government but poses a serious threat to liberal democracy by undermining its key principles. Third feature of populism in Central and Eastern Europe is precisely that the line between 'soft' and 'hard' populism is very thin. Meaning that both versions of populism are fluid and constantly changing. The point is that populists and their attitudes lack a foothold. They lack a developed party structure and ideological coherence. Also, the radicalism of these parties is constantly decreasing and increasing, both during elections and when they are in power. Next characteristic is that populism in this region cannot be explained only as a post accession phenomenon. Smilov explains that, although many believe that populism is a consequence of high expectations regarding EU membership and fatigue from long lasting austerity measures, there is not enough evidence for this stance. He states that some trends that emerged after the accession were present even before the rise of populism in this region. According to him populism in this region is a by-product of the two last characteristics. The first is the failure to create stable liberal parties. Liberal parties are losing popularity in the region and getting fewer votes. They mostly manage to mobilize voters when they are seen as the last barrier against 'hard' populism. The second one is the shift of party competition from the field of socio-economic matters to identity- and integrity-related issues: most importantly

anti-corruption and nationalism. Precisely because of the situation where liberal parties are gaining less and less support, nationalism and identity politics are gaining more and more attractions. One of the consequences of the rise of populism in Central and Eastern Europe is that most parties have been forced to adopt one form or another of ‘responsible’ nationalism in an order to attract voters (Mesežnikov, Gyárfášová, Smilov, 2008).

4. THE RISE OF POPULISM IN VISEGRAD GROUP COUNTRIES

Ivan Krastev wrote that “populism is on the rise all over Europe”. He also considered Central Europe as “the capital of the new populism” (Krastev, 2006). Seventeen years after accession to the European Union, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic have witnessed populists come to power. As a recent empirical study shows, the appeal of these populist parties has increased quite rapidly in the last two decades. Since 2000, when populist parties took an average of 9.2 percent of the national vote, their vote share has tripled, reaching 31.6 percent in 2017 (Freedom House, 2017) (Bugarcic, 2019).

These four countries together form an alliance called the Visegrad Group, founded in February 1991 in Visegrád, Hungary, as a political alliance of three CEE leaders and friends – Lech Wałęsa, Václav Havel and József Antall – with the aim of coordinating the process of post-communist transformation often described as ‘a joint return to Europe’. After the January 1993 “velvet divorce” between Czechs and Slovaks, the V3 became V4 – now consisting of Hungary, Poland, the Czech and Slovak Republic – though the overall form and aims of the Alliance remained unchanged. The key factors motivating the Founding Fathers of the Group were:

1. The desire to eliminate the remnants of the communist bloc in Central Europe;
2. The ambition to overcome historic animosities between Central European countries;
3. The belief that through joint efforts it will be easier to achieve the set goals, i.e. to successfully accomplish social transformation and enter the European integration process;
4. The proximity of ideas of the then ruling political elites. (Visegrad Group, 2021)

It is important to mention the features of the Visegrad Group in order to understand the evolution of the group and the problems that followed. “First and foremost, it was a leadership

alliance reflecting the proximity of ideas of the then ruling political elites. With a move away from politics of the original founders, gradually replaced by critics and opponents, the Group has been experiencing growing tensions. Second, the Group was originally clearly pro-liberal, pro-EU and pro-integrationist. It reflected the liberal-democratic political and ideological commitments of the founding leaders, as well as the shared goal of ‘returning to Europe’ (Paulski, 2016). At that time this meant building the liberal-democratic institutions and joining NATO and the EU. But it turned out that the later political leaders did not share the same ideals as the ‘founding fathers’. The politics in these countries changed drastically after the membership in NATO and the EU was secured, and after the EU was hit by a series of crises.

Since around 2008, the Visegrad Group as a whole, has been facing multiple problems in maintaining the shared liberal and pro-EU path of transformation. First the global financial crisis, which originated in the Western economies, impacted Visegrad countries as well. They found themselves highly exposed because through privatization, they had sold a majority of their banks to foreign, mostly West European, conglomerates. “During the 2000s, hundreds of billions of dollars flowed into CEECs (Central Eastern European Countries), as the transformational wave of foreign investment that seemed to represent the reward for adopting painful neoliberal policies. Then, just as suddenly, it stopped” (Orenstein and Bugarcic, 2020). Shortly after the global financial crisis in 2008 alternative economic and political ideas emerged and spread through the region. “Neoliberal economic policies were gradually replaced with various statist models of development, combining economic protectionism with elements of leftist social welfare policies. At the same time, political liberalism has been challenged by open flirtation with illiberal and authoritarian forms of government” (Bugarcic, 2019).

When the 2015 immigration crisis happened, and the Visegrad countries started witnessing a sharp anti-liberal turn and growing popularity of nationalistic populists. Moreover, the turns mark not just a regime change, but also to the formation of a new type of ‘illiberal state’, as Victor Orbán once proclaimed himself (Orbán, 2014).

No one expected this illiberal turn to be as sharp as it was in Hungary and Poland. Both countries are moving further and further away from the liberal-democratic model of constitutional state based on rule of law. This shift is accompanied by phenomena such as: “centralization of power in single decisional centers, as well as partisan clientelism imposed through purges of the state administrations, the judiciary, the public media outlets, the education system, and the national culture” (Paulski, 2016). Populism reached Czech Republic

and Slovakia but neither of the countries underwent a regime change of the Hungarian and Polish proportions.

4.1 Hungary

Populism in Hungary has proven to be the most problematic case of this phenomenon in the entire region. The current government in this country has managed to turn Hungary from a successful example of transition after the fall of communism to an illiberal regime it is now. Therefore, to understand the rise of populism in Hungary and the arrival of populist actors in government, we must start from the fall of communism and the beginning of the transition.

When the collapse of communism became inevitable, the transitional government began a systematic dialogue with the opposition, which turned into a National Roundtable where the methods of peaceful transition were discussed. After that, elections were held in two rounds in March and April 1990, in which the victory went to a right-centre Hungarian Democratic Forum-led coalition that included the Smallholders and the Christian Democrats (Britannica, 2021). Hungarian transition to democracy did bring liberal reforms, but without the economic take off for which many Hungarians hoped for. Neo liberal economic policies of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) led government, left over one million people without a job. Because of this many Hungarians yearned for the system of social security under the second communist regime. In 1994 voters rejected the MDF and elected the Socialist Party (MSZP) whose forerunners, the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party (MSZMP) had been dismissed only four years before that (Benzinger, 2017). From 1997 until 2001 the economy in Hungary was growing, but it stagnated between 2002 and 2010 because the government did not implement necessary reforms. (Paulski, 2016). By 2006, Hungary recorded the worst fiscal deficits in any EU country, forcing the government to introduce austerity measures (Britannica, 2021). Then the 2008 financial crisis happened which hit Hungary at the worst possible moment. As a result of all this public confidence in politicians and political institutions declined. Such a situation opened the door to Fidesz and Victor Orban, who have by now established themselves as the center right nationalist party that will free Hungarians from the measures of the IMF and corrupt authorities. Their populist strategies against the establishment became very popular and contributed to Fidesz's success story.

Fidesz, or "Hungarian Civic Alliance", has existed since the first democratic elections in Hungary after the fall of the Soviet Union. The party ran in the 1990 elections getting 8.95%

of the vote and winning 21 seats in parliament. In the 1998 elections they managed to surpass their former results and secured 29.48% of the vote, giving them 148 seats in parliament. The 1998 election was also when Fidesz's leader Viktor Orbán became the Prime Minister of Hungary for the first time, with many more terms to come. Orbán did lose the 2002 and 2006 elections, but Fidesz continued to get more and more successful, winning 188 seats in 2002 and 164 in 2006 (National Election Office). Many authors cite a secret speech by Socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány from 2006 that got leaked to the press, as a turning point of the crisis in Hungary. In this speech, Gyurcsány was addressing party activists after winning the election, and he admitted that "we did not actually do anything for four years ... Instead, we lied morning, noon, and night" (Britannica, 2021). This ruined Socialist Party's (MSZP) reputation and led to the gradual political decline of the party (Paulski, 2016). This period of economic hardship and political scandals did not work only in Fidesz's favor. In the 2010 election the extreme right-wing party Jobbik, won only 12 fewer seats than the Socialist Party. Although it had been a notable presence on the Hungarian political scene for only a short time, Jobbik was well known for its anti-Roma and anti-Semitic stance (Britannica, 2021). They competed with the Fidesz coalition to set the national agenda helping to pull politics further to the right. Jobbik is far from politically correct and that seemed to resonate with many voters including a younger generation who have adopted these views (Benzinger, 2017).

And so, in 2010 the discredited socialists suffered a huge electoral defeat, while Fidesz (and its coalition partner, the Christian Democratic People's Party) scored an outright constitutional majority, capturing more than two-thirds of the seats to pave the way for Orbán to become Prime Minister once again (Britannica, 2021). This, in turn, allowed him to pursue radical reforms, including fundamental changes in the old institutional framework. The constitutional majority threshold was merely a power instrument for an ambitious leader (Paulski, 2016). Orbán's new constitution was adopted in 2011 and it proved to be the first step towards building an illiberal regime that he advocated. The new constitution reflected extremely conservative and religious views, which was shown in, for example: "defining marriage as the union of a man and a woman and declaring that a fetus was entitled to legal protection from the moment of conception". Protests and hard criticism of the West at the expense of the new constitution followed, especially due to concerns about the judiciary and threats to the independence of Hungarian courts (Britannica, 2021).

Orbán and Fidesz continued their success in the elections, winning about 50% of the popular votes in the 2010, 2014 and 2018 elections. Nationalism, anti-immigrant, and anti-Islamic rhetoric, as well as conspiracy theories about the Hungarian-born American financier and activist George Soros and the EU were at the heart of Fidesz's 2018 election campaign. And when the votes were counted in April, Fidesz and its coalition partner, the Christian Democrats, retained their supremacy in parliament, gaining more than 130 seats (Britannica, 2021). Jobbik, which is much more extreme than Fidesz, was a little less successful, but on a steady rise. In the 2010 elections, they won 16, 67% of the vote, earning 47 seats, and in the 2014 elections, 20, 22% of the vote, earning 23 seats. After the 2018 elections, they secured the position of the second largest political party in Hungary, earning 19.63% of the vote, which brought them 25 seats in parliament. Now 159 of the 199 seats in the Hungarian parliament are occupied by members of strong populist parties (The National Election Office 2018).

It is also important to point out that Jobbik and Fidesz are not only strong in Hungary, but also have a significant presence in the European Parliament. Of the 21 seats in the European Parliament dedicated to Hungary, Jobbik and Fidesz occupy a combined 12 of those seats. While this may not seem like a significant number of seats given that there are 750 members in the European Parliament, this shows that more than half of Hungary's vote in international politics is controlled by strong populist parties (European Union Election Results 2019). Although in March 2019, Fidesz was suspended from the European People's Party (EPP), a center-right coalition that was the largest pan-European presence in the European Parliament, in the May elections Fidesz increased its presence in the European Parliament from 12 to 13 seats by winning more than 52 percent of the vote (Britannica).

4.2 Poland

Following the victory of the Law and Justice Party in 2015, Poland followed Hungary's road to right-wing populism. Since its establishment in 2001, the Law and Justice Party has been linked to controversies and scandals. It started out as a Christian center-right party, and in 2007, the party started forming coalitions with far-right parties, bringing its politics closer to nationalism. A country that is moving toward nationalism and populism runs the risk of abusing the rights of those it considers to be 'other'. This conveys the danger of separating and alienating people.

Poland's democratic transformation, dubbed a "return to Europe" was the product of a new wave of political leaders and elites emerging from the Solidarity "peaceful revolution," the 1989 Roundtable agreements, and the election victory in June 1989. The transition was peaceful, elite-led, as well as pro-Western and liberal democratic. The goal was construction of a sovereign constitutional state and pluralist liberal democracy, as well as establishment of an open market economy, plural society free of political censorship. Poland's membership in NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004 was the icing on the cake (Paulski, 2016). The rehabilitation began and free-market capitalism took hold. The EU began to pour money into the country when it joined in 2004, building roads and schools as part of a 20-year, 229-billion-euro aid package. Poland was the only EU member state to continue growing during the 2009 economic crisis, and in 2017 had the highest economic growth in the EU (Country Report Poland 2017) (Moskwa and Jefferson, 2020). A broad ruling consensus among key members of the Polish political elite enabled such a quick and fast liberal transformation. This elite included not only the top political players but also the major business lobbies and key 'opinion makers', including the hugely influential Polish 'Pope John Paul II and top Catholic hierarchy members. Surely, there were several issues as well. The transition of the economy was inconsistent. It resulted in extremely massive youth unemployment, especially among low-skilled and lowly educated workers in the country's eastern regions (Paulski, 2016). At least 2.5 million Poles left the country in the decade after the country joined the EU, or 6 percent of a population of 39 million (Moskwa and Jefferson, 2020). Even though economic migration provided a temporary outlet for discontent, political alienation among the young Polish 'millennials' was on the rise. The most devout Catholics felt marginalized by what they perceived as a wave of Western popular culture, as well as the resulting lifestyle liberalization and weakening of cultural norms. Nationalists who favored national sovereignty over liberal democracy were disappointed by EU regulations and worried that the opening of Poland's borders would endanger them. These issues, however, did not jeopardize the liberal elite consensus. They had little effect on the transition until leaders of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) mobilized and radicalized them in 2010-15 (Paulski, 2016).

At first, PiS was characterized by a generally moderate conservatism and a strong emphasis on decommunisation. The party was founded by Jarosław Kaczyński, a former Solidarity activist and head of President Wałęsa's chancellery and his twin brother Lech Kaczyński who was the Justice Minister from 2000 to 2001 and was one of only few postSolidarity figures to get out of the 1997–2001 parliamentary term with his reputation not only intact but improved (Stanley

and Czesnik, 2019). At the start of the 2001–2005 parliamentary term PiS focused on the need to combat crime and corruption, and as incidents of high-level corruption were brought to the public's attention, these themes became more prominent in political discourse, and support for PiS grew. In 2005 the party won right-wing votes with its social conservatism and demand for moral revolution, and former left voters with promises of a large welfare cushion. PiS thrived in government from its 'demonstrative fulfilment of election promises', which allowed it to keep its core of supporters while also attracting dissatisfied voters of Self-Defence (SO) and the League of Polish Families (LPR) (Millard, 2009). In 2005 Lech Kaczyski was elected President of Poland, and Jarosaw Kaczyski was appointed Prime Minister in 2006. However, PiS lost the 2007 parliamentary elections, and that very year President Lech Kaczyski was killed together with 98 other key officials of the Polish state in an air crash. This sparked a major political rift in Poland, with many within PiS claiming that it was the result of a planned attack, potentially orchestrated by Russia in collaboration with Polish secret agencies. Jarosław Kaczynski's personal connection to this tragedy allowed him to build an emotional bond with voters and by promising to cleanse the state of a corrupt elite, thus PiS was able to win the Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2015 (Kulesza and Rae, 2017). It seems like the Law and Justice politicians were able to recognize the fears of the electorate and use it to their advantage.

In 2019, the opposition actually managed to secure a majority in the Senat which is the upper house of parliament by winning 52 out of 100 seats. But the Law and Justice led coalition the United Right won the parliamentary election, taking 235 out of Sejms' 460 seats and Sejm is the lower house of the parliament that has the key role in enacting legislation and forming the county's government. The fact that the United Right mobilized its supporters to a greater extent than any other Polish political groupings did is the real electoral success. "The right-wing coalition appealed to 2.3 million, or some 30 percent, more voters in 2019 than it did in 2015. Never before since 1989 has any party earned such a high percentage of all votes (43.5 percent)" (Grosse, 2019).

4.3 Slovakia

In recent years, political actors in Slovakia have begun to use populist techniques with strong ethnic and even nationalist overtones to appeal to voters. For a long time, Slovakia's political scene has been characterized by these voter-appeal methods. Ever since the fall of the communist regime in 1989 and the establishment of pluralistic democracy, these approaches

have proven to be effective, granting their proponents a great deal of power and political advantage

The independent Slovak Republic diverged from the liberal path of democratic consolidation following the peaceful partition of Czechoslovakia in 1992. Vladimír Mečiar, the populist prime minister, and his party, the Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), made a series of undemocratic moves between 1992 and 1998. These led to the country's growing isolation in Europe and made Slovakia fall behind its neighbors in the integration process. Slovakia was accepted into NATO only in 2004, unlike Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic which entered NATO in 1999 (Nič, Slobodník, and Šimečka, 2014) (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017). Being left out of EU and NATO enlargement in 1997 was one of the main sources of the country's identity crises, which eventually ended in political change. The turning point came in the October 1998 elections when a broad democratic coalition, unified by opposition to Mečiar and the fear of falling further behind the region's integration mainstream, defeated the HZDS party. The new coalition's main focus was on the strategic goal of getting the country back on the EU and NATO integration track and on reviving the stagnating economy (Nič, Slobodník, and Šimečka, 2014). Following the election, Prime Minister's Mikuláš Dzurinda government introduced major structural reforms. At the heart of the government's aims was a neo-liberal agenda encouraged by international financial bodies such as the World Bank. The government embarked upon radical socio-economic reforms including pension reforms, changes to the health system and cuts in welfare benefits (Haughton and Rybar, 2008). Due to these reforms and a massive inflow of foreign investment, Slovakia has experienced unprecedented economic growth. However, public dissatisfaction with the state of health care, with some aspects of social policy and the implemented labor code reform, as well as the coalition strategies of the anti-reformist Smer-SD party, led to a complete change of party composition in the government following the 2006 elections (BTI).

The Smer-SD party earned parliamentary representation in the 2002 parliamentary elections and between 2002 and 2006, it behaved as an implacable opposition force. Its connection with citizens, broad criticism of the government's performance, and suggested solutions to existing issues all screamed populism. Nationalist messages were an important aspect of the party's mobilization methods. The party confirmed its 'pro-national' orientation by cooperating with nationalistically oriented political formations before presidential and regional elections in 2004. After the 2006 parliamentary elections, Smer formed a ruling coalition with the SNS and

the HZDS (Mesežnikov & Gyárfášová, 2008). During the first half of the term the new ruling coalition maintained the previous government's economic path and complied with conditions necessary to adopt euro. Robert Fico's government refrained from accusing the EU of curbing the country's sovereignty and interfering with domestic policy-making processes. The main factor that kept the populists from adopting such a stance was a solid economic growth inherited from the previous administration (Mesežnikov, Gyárfášová and Smilov, 2008). However, after the 2009 global crisis, Fico abandoned this course, and the budget deficit has increased. Through minor modifications, the state's involvement in the economy enhanced. In the meantime, the government has failed to adequately address the major socioeconomic issue of rising unemployment. The majority of welfare initiatives were unsystematic and consisted of one-time direct payments. Moreover, during his first term, Fico showed less respect for media freedom, civil society, judicial independence, and the rule of law in general, and the government's commitment to tackle discrimination and corruption weakened. (BTI). The Fico government lasted for the full term until 2010 election. The next two years witnessed Smer in opposition as the center right government led by Iveta Radičová was formed. This government did not survive a veto of confidence in 2011 which led to early election 2012. In this election Smer obtained a majority in parliament and created a single-party government (Spáč, and Havlík, 2015). This was the first time a party has won a majority in Slovakia's post-communist history. This huge victory happened partly because of the outrage over "Gorilla", a leaked intelligence report which suggested that centre-right politicians in a previous government may have been pocketing commissions from privatisation and public-procurement deals (The Economist, 2012). Support for the PM Robert Fico's ruling party, Smer-SD, stalled in 2014-15. But since the refugee crisis erupted, support for Fico, his ruling coalition, and, paradoxically, also for his right-wing critics has been rising. Fico has been repeatedly emphasizing the dangers posed by refugees. But when no refugees came to Slovakia's and other unresolved social problems entered political agendas, namely, the low quality of both health service and education the support for Fico declined (Paulski, 2016). Smer popularity continued to decline due to a rising number of scandals and alleged corrupt practices. After the victory in the 2016 general election, Smer's position weakened in local and regional elections, and finally a clear defeat of its nominee in the 2019 presidential election to the winner Zuzana Čaputová, suggested that a major change in Slovak politics was imminent (Havlík, Nemčok, Spáč and Zagraban, 2020).

Following the murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in 2018, Slovakia witnessed the largest protests since 1989. Demonstrations organized by civic activists took place for several months and attracted tens of thousands of people throughout the country. The protestors demanded early elections and substantial reconfiguration of the establishment, and their pressure eventually led to the step down of several prominent political representatives including Prime Minister Robert Fico. This culminated with an overwhelming victory of the opposition over Smer in the parliamentary elections of 2020 (Mesežnikov, 2020) (Freedom House, 2020). The big winner in Slovakia's 2020 parliamentary election was the center-right "soft-populist" movement Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO), which earned a massive 25% of the votes and a mandate to form a new government with 53 seats in a 150-seat legislature. Though OĽaNO's party leader, Igor Matovič, can be credited for his ability to mobilise voters, the party being centre-right and operating on philosophies of Christian-democracy certainly helped in a country where the electorate is largely conservative, Catholic, and parochial. This also helps explain the electoral success of two other parties: the Eurosceptic We Are Family (SME Rodina) Party, and the far-right People's Party – Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), which came in third and fourth respectively. What this means is that Slovakia's parliament will be dominated by conservatives, populists, parochialists, and remnants of Smer-SD's entrenched elite. The largest threat to Slovakia's political scene is the evolution of ĽSNS from a peripheral neo-fascist movement to a mainstream party. Its long-time leader Marian Kotleba portrays himself as the heir to the Slovak Republic, a wartime Nazi collaborationist state, and has openly promoted anti-Roma policies similar to far-right movements in Hungary (Rossi, 2020).

The 2020 general election has shown that the formation of a government in Slovakia without populist parties became mission impossible. The prevalence of nationalist, conservative and Eurosceptic positions presented by populists in Slovakia will definitely impact both foreign and domestic policies in the upcoming years.

4.4 Czech Republic

The Czech Republic has been a prime example of successful democratic consolidation in Central Eastern Europe. A prosperous democracy with the lowest unemployment rate in Europe (2.7 percent), limited public debt, good social service provision and health care. Czech Republic was arguably one of the 'least-likely cases' for populism to succeed. But, as its V4 neighbours, the Czech political scene has been experiencing a sudden rise of populism.

On 31 December 1992, three years after the Velvet Revolution, dissolution of Czechoslovakia into the Czech Republic and Slovakia happened. Most Czechs and Slovaks think of Václav Klaus and Vladimír Mečiar, the leaders of the two victorious parties in the June 1992 elections, as primary instigators of the separation (Kopeček, 2017). Since then, the transformation of the country has included significant political and economic changes. Few major political actors shaped the further development of the country. The first was the former dissident and well-known representative of the opposition movement Charter 77, Vaclav Havel (president of the Czechoslovak Federative Republic 1990 – 1992 and the Czech Republic 1993 – 2003). The second actor was Vaclav Klaus, one of the leading figures of the Civic Forum and later the leader of the Civic Democratic Party, holding the offices of the prime minister, speaker of parliament, and president (2003 – 2013). Miloš Zeman, a third key political figure, and from March 2013 the country's president, is a former leader of the Czech Social Democratic Party. Between 1996 and 1998, he was also the chairman of the lower house of the Czech parliament and from 1998 to 2002, Prime Minister (BTI).

In Czech Republic the president is a formal head of state with limited executive powers. But despite that fact the office of the President has been seen by Czech citizens as very prestigious. Populist narratives started to be used by the last two presidents, Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman. Both of them embraced the “populism of irresponsibility,” an approach that is “based on the clever presentation of the president himself as a passionate fighter against matters over which he has not the slightest influence” (Nekvapil, 2007). This “irresponsibility” has become a characteristic feature of their campaigns. Vaclav Klaus has been playing the role of a strong man, who stands between ordinary people and the evil political elite. He has perfected the anti-elitist rhetoric. He stated that: “Elites have been more dangerous foes of the Czech recovery from the Hayekian communist slavery than the defeated communists and their friends”. Miloš Zeman was elected president in 2013, due to widespread public discontent, which he helped to create by highlighting the moral degradation and inadequacy of the Czech political establishment. Since then, “Zeman has been presenting himself as a left-leaning people's advocate, an ally of Czech citizens in their fight against corrupt politicians and rich entrepreneurs” (Pakulski, 2016).

Over time new political parties characterized by anti-establishment rhetoric and populism continued to emerge, such as– Andrej Babiš's Action of Dissatisfied Citizen's (ANO) and Tomio Okamura's radical right parties Dawn of Direct Democracy (2013 – 2017) and Freedom

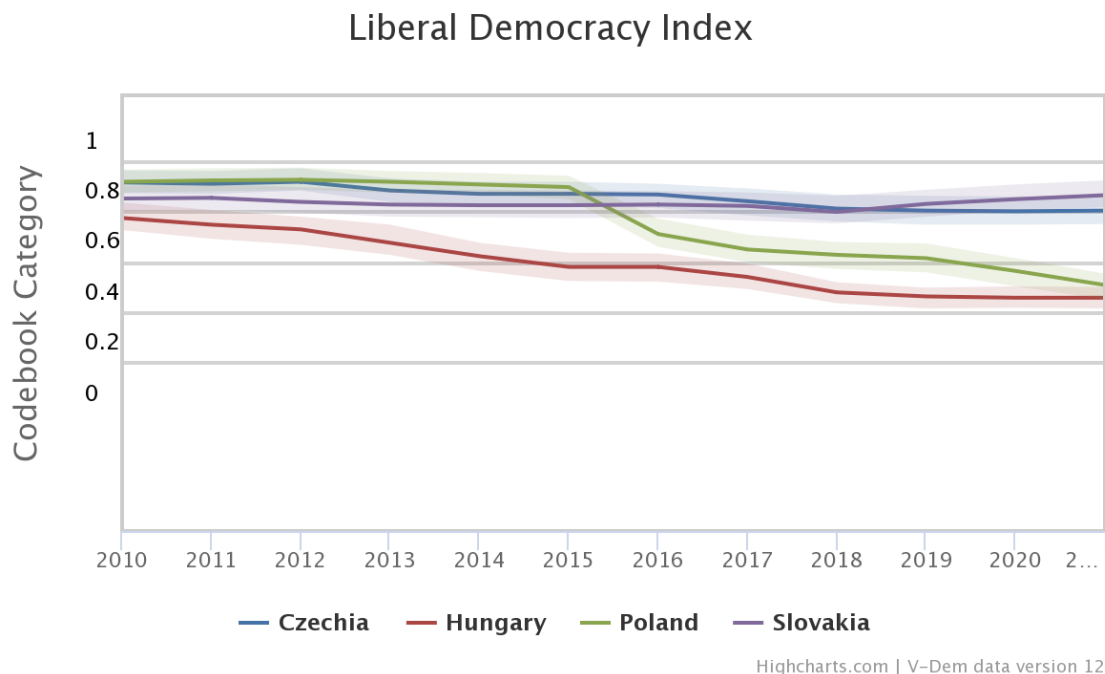
and Direct Democracy (2017–). Andrej Babiš, the populist billionaire, has successfully cast himself as the defender of “ordinary people,” despite being the second richest person in the country. In 2013, his party ANO became the second strongest political party, joined the government as junior partner with the Social Democrats, and Babiš became the minister of finance and the deputy prime minister. In 2017, he won the elections, and as of July 2018, he became the Prime Minister (Buštikova and Guasti, 2017). “Babiš presents himself as an anti-elitist, a hard-working successful businessman who has enough courage to attack the establishment and enough experience to run the state effectively. He depicts his politics as non-ideological, pragmatic, and managerial, which is to resemble running a business. His popularity remains high” (Pakulski, 2016). Unlike ANO, the UPD is not part of the governing coalition and represents what one may call “populism of an outsider party”. It targets not just the other parties, but the entire political system. The UPD is a strong proponent of direct democracy – that is, ruling through referenda. The UPD leader is Tomio Okamura, a Czech-Japanese businessman, whose populism has always been rougher and more xenophobic than the one exhibited by Babiš (Havlík 2015). His party has a strongly anti-elitist, anti-establishment stance. He blames not only the corrupt political elite, but also “ill-adjusted citizens”, that is, namely the Roma people and refugees. Okamura has recently founded a new political movement “Liberty and Direct Democracy” (SPD) with an even more xenophobic, anti-refugee and anti-European orientation. He opposes the allocation of refugees and promotes heavy handed nationalistic politics – an obvious irony considering Okamura’s own foreign origins (Pakulski, 2016).

Due to the fact that Czech Republic is a country “with few ethnic minorities, no delusions of regional grandeur, weak nationalism, very weak religiosity, very low unemployment, virtually no refugees and a strong economy” it seemed that it would have been resistant to the populist wave (Vachudova and Rovny, 2019). But with the rise of the populist ANO with its chameleon-like ability to be an anti-establishment party in government, Czech Republic joined the rest of its V4 neighbors.

5. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

5.1 Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem)

Figure 1 shows trends in the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI), which was created by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute. Based on the assessments of some 3,000 experts, the LDI captures the extent to which countries hold free and fair elections; protect the freedoms of expression, association, and the press; and implement the rule of law and checks and balances. High scores indicate a high level of democracy and vice versa.



What is evident from this graph is that Poland and Hungary stand out for their unparalleled democratic deterioration over the past decade, Czech Republic decline is much less dramatic while Slovakia even halted two years of democratic decline after voters in 2020 ousted the ruling party, Smer-SD.

5.2 Freedom House (*Nations in Transit*)

Nations in Transit published annually by Freedom House, is the study focusing on 27 former Communist states. It provides numerical ratings in seven categories that broadly represent the institutional underpinnings of liberal democracy. These include elected state institutions (local and national governments), unelected state institutions (the judiciary and anticorruption authorities), and unelected nonstate institutions (the media and civil society). The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the lowest and 7 the highest level of democracy. Accordingly, Freedom House has defined the following regime types: consolidated democracy

(1–2); semi-consolidated democracy (3); transitional government / hybrid regime (4); semi-consolidated authoritarian regime (5); and consolidated authoritarian regime (6–7).

5.2.1 Hungary

The government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Hungary has embraced its illiberal label. After centralizing power, taking over much of the media, tilting the electoral playing field, and harassing critical civil society organizations since 2010, Orbán set out in 2019 to consolidate control over new areas of public life, including education. The situation in Hungary is most alarming. The country has recorded the biggest decline ever measured in ‘nations in transit’ and plummeted to become a ‘transitional’ or ‘hybrid regime’. From a democratic frontrunner in 2005 to leaving the group of democracies entirely.

NIT (Hungary)	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Democracy Score	5.61	5.39	5.14	5.11	5.04	4.82	4.71	4.46	4.29	4.07	3.96
Democracy Percentage	77	73	69	68	67	64	62	58	55	51	49
Regime Classification	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	SC D	SC D	SC D	SC D	SC D	T/H

5.2.2 Poland

Likewise, neighbouring Poland remains a ‘semi-consolidated democracy’ recording a steep decline over the past few years. The judiciary was one of the main targets of the governing Law and Justice (PiS) that wanted to put it under its control. “After devoting its initial years in office to an illegal takeover of the country’s constitutional court and the council responsible for judicial appointments, the PiS government started persecuting individual judges in 2019. By early 2020, judges who criticized the government’s overhaul or simply applied European Union (EU) law correctly were subjected to disciplinary action”. **(FH Nations)**. Such an attack on institutions and rules that are of vital interest to any democracy - judges and judiciary independent and impartial from all external influences, was something unthinkable for an EU member before this instance.

NIT (Poland)	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Democracy Score	5.69	5.79	5.86	5.82	5.82	5.79	5.68	5.43	5.11	5.04	4.93
Democracy Percentage	78	80	81	80	80	80	78	74	68	67	65
Regime Classification	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	SCD

5.2.3 Slovakia

Szomolányi and Gál (2016) have, for example, identified a gap between the populist rhetoric of the ruling Slovak political class, and their political practices, which have been much more in line with EU policies. Prime Minister Fico's populist government, unlike other governments in the region, was not particularly Euroskeptical. Likewise, Slovak presidents, like Andrej Kiska, have been expressing unequivocal European views for some time, and the 2019 Zuzana Čaputova election confirmed Slovakia's commitment to Euro-Atlantic cooperation (Terenzani 2020). From this graph it is evident that Slovakia's democracy scores have slightly declined, from 75 in 2012 to 71 in 2020.

NIT (Slovakia)	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Democracy Score	5.32	5.46	5.5	5.43	5.39	5.36	5.39	5.39	5.39	5.36	5.29
Democracy Percentage	72	74	75	74	73	73	73	73	73	73	71
Regime Classification	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD

5.2.4 Czech Republic

Much like Slovakia, Czech Republic has a more pragmatic approach to its populist policies. Czech populists also lack a strong nationalist narrative compared to Hungary and Slovakia, that are all possible reasons why the scores are not as bad as those of its neighbours. Nevertheless, the democratic backsliding is present in the overall scores. Czech Republic has been experiencing a steady erosion throughout the years.

NIT (Czech Republic)	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Democracy Score	5.79	5.82	5.82	5.86	5.75	5.79	5.79	5.75	5.71	5.71	5.64
Democracy Percentage	80	80	80	81	79	80	80	79	79	79	77
Regime Classification	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD	CD

5.3 Freedom House Subcategory Scores

5.3.1 Hungary

Freedom House subcategories scores	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
Electoral process (12)	12	12	12	9	9	9
Political pluralism and participation (16)	15	15	15	15	12	11
Functioning of government (12)	10	9	9	8	7	7
Freedom of expression and belief (16)	16	15	15	13	11	10
Associational and organization rights (12)	12	12	12	11	10	10
Rule of law (16)	12	11	11	10	10	10
Personal autonomy and individual rights (16)	14	14	14	13	13	13

5.3.2 Poland

Freedom House subcategories scores	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
Electoral process (12)	12	12	12	12	12	11
Political pluralism and participation (16)	16	16	16	16	16	16
Functioning of government (12)	10	10	10	10	8	8
Freedom of expression and belief (16)	16	16	16	16	14	14
Associational and organization rights (12)	12	12	12	12	10	10
Rule of law (16)	13	13	13	13	11	11
Personal autonomy and individual rights (16)	14	14	14	14	14	14

5.3.3 Slovakia

Freedom House subcategories scores	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
Electoral process (12)	12	12	12	12	12	12
Political pluralism and participation (16)	15	15	15	15	15	15
Functioning of government (12)	11	10	10	11	10	9
Freedom of expression and belief (16)	16	16	16	16	15	14
Associational and organization rights (12)	12	12	12	12	12	12
Rule of law (16)	14	14	14	14	14	14
Personal autonomy and individual rights (16)	15	15	15	15	15	15

5.3.4 Czech Republic

Freedom House subcategories scores	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
Electoral process (12)	12	12	12	12	12	12
Political pluralism and participation (16)	15	15	15	15	15	15
Functioning of government (12)	10	10	10	9	9	9
Freedom of expression and belief (16)	15	16	16	15	15	14
Associational and organization rights (12)	12	12	12	12	12	12
Rule of law (16)	12	13	12	12	12	12
Personal autonomy and individual rights (16)	14	14	14	14	14	14

6. SHIFTING AGENDAS AS A POPULIST TOOL IN V4 COUNTRIES

One of the main focuses of this paper is to draw attention to constant agenda shifting among populist politicians. Visegrad populists are no strangers to this strategy of switching to whatever agenda is going to bring them most votes at that time. They are masters of framing all kinds of societal issues as threats to the ordinary citizen. They will read the public mood to identify issues that are increasing their appeal automatically and that can be framed as a threat to which they are the only solution. Next part of the paper will be dealing with several topics that proved to be most popular among for V4 politicians over the years.

6.1 Migration

In 2015, Europe and the European Union experienced a sudden wave of migration stemming from conflict or crisis zones like Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia. The EU's attempts to manage the new crisis have come under sharp criticism from the Visegrad Group. For Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia the EU's quota system for distributing refugees across Europe was unacceptable. "This was the moment when Central Europe's populists issued their declaration of independence not only from Brussels but also, more dramatically, from Western liberalism and its religion of openness to the world. Central Europe's fear-mongering populists interpreted the refugee crisis as conclusive evidence that liberalism has weakened the capacity of nations to defend themselves in a hostile world" (Krašev and Holmes, 2019).

6.1.1 Hungary

The year 2015 was also an extraordinary time for Hungary in regard to migration. The number of asylum seekers who crossed Hungarian borders irregularly during the year reached 177,135, up from 42,777 in the previous year and 18,900 in 2013 (Central Hungarian Statistics Office). Viktor Orban successfully politicized the migrant crisis and used it to gain popularity among voters. His Fidesz party was competing with Jobbik for the votes of the far-right electorate by trying to surpass their extreme stances and policy proposals. Fidesz led government introduced measures and laws that directly contradict both European Agenda on Migration and the principles and plans under Hungary's own migration strategy.

In the spring of 2015, the government issued a very hostile billboard campaign to address the immigration in Hungary. The billboards contained messages like: "If you come to Hungary, you must respect our culture", "If you come to Hungary, you must abide by our laws", "If you come to Hungary, you cannot take our jobs," but they were written in Hungarian (Juhász, 2017). This points to the fact that the billboards were intended for Hungarians and that this was another populist act of the government. In May 2015, the government also launched a national consultation on immigration and terrorism, which obviously directly linked terrorism to the migration issue. Methodology of this consultation was questionable with suggested answers and no real choices and although the response rate was low Hungarian government proceeded to use the results of the consultation to legitimate its actions (Szalai and Gobl, 2015). Hungarian parliament then made two amendments to the Asylum Act in 2015. Both amendments reduced the opportunities for obtaining asylum (Juhász, 2017). On 15 September 2015, Hungary decided to close the Balkan land route to the European Union by setting a 175-km long two-layered fence on its border with Serbia. Police and army were sent to guard the border and prevent refugees and migrants from entering the country (Amnesty International, 2015).

The Fidesz government used the migrant crisis to strengthen its Christian narrative. Conservative media have compared this situation to the Ottoman era: "when Hungary was a bastion, defending Christianity from Muslim hordes". They also instilled fear among Hungarians by presenting migrants as terrorists. Thus, in addition to political statements, military police patrols were set up on the streets of Budapest, such as in Paris, although there were no terrorist attacks in Hungary (Gessler, Tóth and Wachs, 2021). Viktor Orban's political strategy, both at the domestic and EU level, comes down to polarizing society according to the principle 'us' against 'others', which he uses to win over a certain group of voters to his side.

Following the actions of the Hungarian government in 2015, in 2016 and 2017 Orbán blamed the EU and George Soros for the situation with migrants. He accused them of collaborating in order to settle migrants in Hungary. To further push this narrative, the government organized a referendum (Zgut, Juhász and Molnár, 2017). In the autumn of 2016, Hungarians were asked a simple question: ‘Do you want the European Union to prescribe the mandatory settlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary without the consent of the National Assembly?’ Voter turnout was 39 percent and under Hungarian law 50 percent is required to make the referendum valid. But Orbán decided that the 3.3 million Hungarians who voted ‘No’ in the referendum speak for the whole country of 10 million Hungarians. (Gessler, Tóth and Wachs, 2021). The governing party claimed the invalid referendum as a victory and this whole situation has served Orbán as a great political campaign since he easily won the 2018 general elections.

6.1.2 Poland

Since the PiS came to power in October 2015, the Polish government has taken a strict anti-migrant stance (Zgut, Juhász and Molnár, 2017). This proved to be an extremely good political strategy for the ruling party, which then tried in every way to exploit this situation. This was done via the constant securitization of the migration issue or changes in the asylum and migration legislation in Poland (Łaciak and Segeš Frelak, 2018).

Islamophobic and xenophobic attitudes were represented in the Polish parliament because, in addition to PiS's representatives in parliament, this narrative was also popularized by representatives of the extreme right (entered as part of Kukiz15) (Pędziwiatr, 2017). ‘Treat of Islam’ was an effective tactic used by these representatives because the homogeneous Polish population that did not have the opportunity to coexist with Muslims (Pacek, 2020). The terrorist attacks that took place in Europe at the time were used as additional arguments by politicians to prove that Islam and Muslims are totally alien to Polish way of life (Pędziwiatr, 2017).

So it's not surprising that when Poland was asked by the EU to accept 6 500 refugees, the request was met with outrage, although the proposed quota constituted less than 0.02 percent of the Polish population of 40 million. The anti-refugee rally in November 2015 in the city of Wrocław captured the populism that has been on display in Poland. Thousands of protesters marched, denouncing the EU proposal. (Gozdziak and Márton, 2018). Jarosław Kaczyński, the president of the Law and Justice party, said that Poland refuses to take refugees because of

'security' fears, thus linking refugees with terrorism: "After recent events connected with acts of terror, [Poland] will not accept refugees because there is no mechanism that would ensure security" (Broomfield, 2016).

Besides developing a strong securitization narrative around the topic of migration the government adopted new policies that are in line with that narrative. In June 2016, the government passed the antiterrorist law, according to which "every foreigner in Poland can be put under surveillance without a court order, for essentially an indefinite period of time. It also grants the Internal Security Agency, the police, and the Border Guard the right to take fingerprints, facial images and even biological material (DNA) from foreigners in the case that there are doubts concerning their identity" (Segeš Frelak, 2016). Also in 2016, the 'Poland's migration policy' adopted by the previous government, was abolished. And since then, a new document has not been adopted. In 2019, a draft prepared by the Ministry of the Interior and Administration was leaked to the public. The Ministry has never officially published this document claiming on its Twitter account on 24th June that "this is a draft version for internal communication" and that only the "final version" will be disclosed to the public (Pędziwiatr, 2019). Leaked policy draft contains controversial and xenophobic measures. It claims that Muslims are "often incapable of integration" and it would also make naturalization contingent on foreigners adopting "Polish values, including worldview, religion and politics" (Ciobanu, 2019).

6.1.3 Slovakia

The migration crisis in Slovakia was marked by constant turmoil between populist anti-immigrant rhetoric on the domestic scene and attempts to maintain good relations with the EU. Few factors that have defined the attitude of political elites towards the migration crisis in particular were the now-finished election campaign and the lack of historical engagement in the country with migration and Islam in general. (Dubeci, 2016).

With the crisis the popularity of Robert Fico and his party Smer began to grow. His campaign for the 2016 elections was marked by the anti-immigrant rhetoric that with time became harsher and more visible, and the centre-left Smer discussed the issue in the context of security and the 'cultural incompatibility' of largely Muslim migrants (Zgut, Juhász, and Molnár, 2017). His party's champagne slogan was "We protect Slovakia" which in the context of the crisis clearly spoke of their position towards immigrants and refugees. That tough position secured Fico and

his ruling coalition of Smer-SD a strong electoral support (Pakulski, 2016). Fico often ended up on the international front pages with his Islamophobic statements such as: “Islam has no place in Slovakia,” (The Washington Post, 2016) or “we do not have mosques in Slovakia, so they cannot integrate” (Dubéci 2016). He pledged that Slovakia will only take Christian migrants and, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris, vowed to monitor “each and every Muslim” in the country. He has also sued the EU over compulsory quotas for resettling refugees and promised to “never bring a single one to Slovakia” (Politico, 2016).

However, since 2016 the situation has changed a lot and Slovak politicians have become much more measured. Over time, Slovakia has also tried to distance itself from the regional grouping and improve its own position in the EU. Some progressive steps have been taken on the migration issue, such as “including the provision of relocation spots and scholarships for refugees, the sending of personnel to Frontex and EASO, and the pledging of assistance to address the root causes of migration. These steps, nevertheless, have been taken at a minimal level of engagement” (Kudzko, 2016). Such moves are characteristic of Slovakia, they are in line with EU principles but at the same time moderate enough to keep the support of voters at home.

6.1.4 Czech Republic

The topic of migration, asylum and refugees was not an important political and social issue in Czech Republic until the 2015 migration crisis. But shortly after the outbreak it became the number one topic for Czech politicians and the media, as it was the case in all the other countries of the Visegrad Group, even though Czech Republic has not encountered a substantial spike in asylum claims by irregular migrants. In fact, “the number of applications for international protection stood low in 2015 and even dropped further by 2016. Czech Republic was an important transit country en route to Germany or Sweden for a while but the shut-down of Hungary’s borders changed that “(Jungwirth, 2016).

Politicians in this country have problematized migration in different ways: most often as a security issue and less often as an economic or social issue. Cultural incompatibility and problematic integration of Muslim refugees was one of the main arguments given for not accepting refugees. Islamophobic and xenophobic statements by politicians and the media were frequent and well received by the public that by now was made to perceive migration as a threat. This is illustrated quite well by the example of Czech President Miloš Zeman, who bet

his re-election to office in 2018 on playing the anti-migration, xenophobic card. He opposed relocation quotas saying: “The European Union is forcing us to accept so-called refugee quotas, and the Czech government is justifiably objecting to the fact that accepting several thousand, for example, Syrian refugees would create the risk that among them will be jihadists and the relatively peaceful Czech Muslim community will begin to radicalize” (Naxera and Krčál, 2018). Very often he would compare contemporary Muslims with the radicalization of Germany in the 1930s and comparing Islam to Nazi ideology in his statements: “In the 30s, the overwhelming majority of Germans were decent people, the nation of Goethe and Schiller and so on. In a few years, they became Nazis, even fanatic Nazis. And the radicalization of the – till these times – moderate Muslim population might be like the case of the German population. It might be easier than the German population, [because] you have a very radical ideology based on a religion” (The Guardian, 2016).

Several other entities used refugees as the main subject of their election campaigns such as the “Freedom and Direct Democracy” (SPD) movement, led by Tomio Okamura. His statements were also islamophobic, saying that “Muslims are uninvited intruders from an enemy culture that will destroy our democracy and our freedoms” (Culik, 2015). The current Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš’s attitude towards the migrant crisis corresponds to his style of governing in general. At the beginning of the crisis, he took the position of a businessman, as he usually does, and then, in the style of a populist, he switched to anti-immigrant rhetoric, which was more popular with voters (Jurečková, 2020).

6.2 Independent Media

The media is often the target of V4 populist. As it usually happens, if populist leaders do not benefit from what the media reports about them, they will find a way to suppress them, “the template is always the same: systematic attacks on the ‘lying press’, on the press that is the ‘enemy of the people’ or the ‘disgraceful journalists’ that spread ‘fake news’” (Gasparini, 2021). Top politicians openly insult and vilify the media, thus creating a hostile atmosphere for journalists. They seek to suppress investigative and critical reporting in many ways, usually by putting their friends and loyalists to senior positions of public and private media outlets and turning them into their own propaganda machines.

6.2.1 Hungary

In Hungary, the situation regarding media freedom is by far the worst in the region. The country is ranked 92nd in the Reporters Without Borders 2021 press freedom list; it had a 16-place drop in the Index since 2018. This is the result of the actions by the current government in Hungary and Victor Orban who, since coming to power, has managed to put the media system almost completely under his control. One of the first things the Orban government did were legislative changes aimed at reducing the freedom and independence of the media. An example of this is the creation of the regulatory body ‘The Media Council’, whose members were all appointed by Fidesz. The next step was the consolidation of state media into one news organization (MTVA) that was used to push government propaganda (Štetka, 2019). In April 2018 'The Guardian' spoke to several employees of the MTVA network who admitted that the channels pumped out government messaging, and at times false stories, with the goal of winning support for the prime minister's anti-immigration message (The Guardian, 2018). This was followed by economic pressures on the media because the government would relocate economic resources in a way that favoured pro government media.

One of the last things that consolidated Orbans' control over the media happened in November 2018, when the owners of the majority of pro-government media in Hungary formed a conglomerate, the Central European Press and Media Foundation, which runs more than 470 outlets across the country as a non-profit. This conglomerate covers newspapers, TV channels, radio stations, online portals, and local papers. It is led by Orbán loyalists formerly affiliated with the prime minister personally, connected to his political party, or supportive organizations (Kabrhelova, 2019). In 2020 Viktor Orbán's government continued to extend its hegemony over the Hungarian media landscape. The most spectacular development in 2020 was the government's takeover of the Index.hu website with the help of one of the prime minister's business allies. Until then, this website has helped to save what is left of pluralism in Hungary, along with Radio Free Europe's return (Reporters without Borders, 2021).

6.2.2 Poland

The story of the sharp decline in media freedom in Poland, now sitting at 59th place on the World Press Freedom Index—down 40 places only since 2015—is in many aspects very similar to Hungary (Reporters without Borders, 2021). Since taking over the government in 2015, the Law and Justice party has introduced measures to consolidate the media. National TV and radio

broadcasters, TVP and Polskie Radio, and Polish press agency PAP are practically controlled by the state. More than 200 journalists were forced to leave or were fired, and government spokespeople or individuals with close ties to the ruling party were put in charge (Kabrhelova, 2019). TVP has subsequently been turned into the mouthpiece of the government, synchronizing its news coverage with the PiS party agenda and constantly undermining the opposition.

Unlike Hungary, Polish private media have not been captured by the government yet, which is why they remain a prime target of the government's attacks, especially the ones with foreign owners. Putting them under substantial economic pressure by shifting the flow of state advertising—a move that has particularly harshly impacted the leading liberal paper daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*. In December the paper published a list of nineteen lawsuits. All of them, the paper explained, have been brought in recent years against it by the governing party, PiS (Law and Justice), and institutions it controls. While it is yet unclear how exactly the Polish government would go about getting rid of the media outlets that are seen as the key platforms for the opposition, it is obvious that the resurfacing of these ideas before the elections is part of the systematic attempt to increase hostility against these media and intimidate the journalists working for them.

6.2.3 Slovakia

Regarding the freedom of press, Slovakia is currently the best ranked among V4 countries according to the Reporters Without Borders, holding the 35th position on the World Press Freedom Index list. However, situation is far from great. In the last few years, the Slovak public service RTVS has been accused of falling under the influence of the government due to certain actions of General Director Jaroslav Rezník, who was criticized for his connections with top politicians during his appointment to that position. These accusations proved to be justified when the service terminated its flagship investigative program in January 2018 after some of the reports aired on the program were critical of the government coalition (Štetka, 2019).

The murder of journalist Ján Kuciak represents the worst attack on media freedom in recent Slovak history. The public responded to the murder with a series of mass protests. Prime Minister Fico desperately attempted to mitigate the public frustration, but his public communication attempts failed, and he reverted to calling on opposition leaders not to 'exploit'

the situation (Slovakia Country Report, 2020). He resigned on March 15, 2018, in order to avoid early elections. This case pushed another populist Igor Matovič to the post of prime minister for one year. Although repeatedly and on the very anniversary of the Kuciak murder, he accused journalists of ‘spite’ for reporting that he plagiarised his masters’ thesis and for criticising his coronavirus policies (Reporters without Borders, 2021).

In addition to this case quite few other things are criticized for breaching the freedom of press. Like the amendment to the Press Act passed in September 2019 granting public officials a right-of-reply to stories about them. Over 400 journalists criticized the amendment for giving politicians an undue influence over media content. Also, media ownership is reportedly concentrated in the hands of a few business groups and individuals. In addition, concerns over the independence of public broadcaster Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS) continued after dismissals of several acclaimed reporters and the departure of many others citing political pressure from their superiors (Freedom House, 2020).

6.2.4 Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic the state-run TV broadcaster faces criticism after replacing some members of the supervisory board with well-known individuals who are highly critical of investigative reporting, while the recent dissolution of its financial supervisory body raises concerns about its future independence (Reporters without Borders, 2021). Many are also concerned about the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few oligarchs first and foremost by the Prime Minister Andrej Babiš whose company Agrofert owns the largest Czech media house Mafra. Verbal and physical attacks, harassment, and intimidation of journalists were also problems in Czech Republic. Both Prime Minister Babiš and President Miloš Zeman have made inflammatory remarks about the press, contributing to a hostile environment for journalists. In April, three investigative journalists released a statement asserting that they had been summoned for questioning several times regarding their reporting on the corruption allegations against the Prime Minister (Freedom House, 2020). Czech Republic is ranked 40th in the Reporters Without Borders 2021 press freedom list which is not bad considering the trends in the neighbourhood but as Václav Štetka explains in his 2019 article *Media Freedom in Central Europe*: “tendency to entrust regulatory control over the public service media to people who not only have little respect for public service broadcasting values but who advocate ideas incompatible with liberal democracy itself, is deeply troubling, and poses a risk of replicating the Hungarian model” (Štetka, 2019).

6.3 Roma Minority

Roma people constitute one of Europe's largest minority groups with around 10-12 million people living all over the continent. Most of them – around two thirds – live in central and eastern European countries, where they make up between 5 and 10 per cent of the population (Amnesty International, 2015). Despite having a long history of living in these countries Roma are a marginalized group that is too often discriminated. Prejudice and stereotypes are widely accepted and hate crimes against them are a common occurrence. What is worrying is that antigypsyism has become the key element of political mobilization in Visegrad countries.

6.3.1 Hungary

Roma are the largest ethnic minority in Hungary and unfortunately they face widespread discrimination, violence, and poverty. 'Roma issue' is a favourite talking point for many populists and far-right politicians, even during the migration crisis Roma people were constantly tied to this issue and were used as a scapegoat as to why the country cannot accept any refugees. Roma students are segregated and wrongfully placed in schools for children with mental disabilities. Instead of trying to solve this issue, Prime Minister Orbán launched a campaign against the court that was awarding pecuniary damages to Roma pupils for school segregation in the town of Gyöngyöspata. He also pledged to change the law to prevent any future such decisions. Orban has said the school was trying to prevent Roma children bullying others. "It's unacceptable for a majority to feel ill at ease in their own towns, or country, and it won't happen while I am premier," he said (Reuters, 2020).

Both Fidesz and Jobbik exploit Roma for their political gains. Although Jobbik proved to be more extreme, Fidesz did not condemn Jobbik's actions and even contributed to creating a discriminatory and anti-Roma atmosphere. Jobbik is thought to be the originator of the 'gypsy crime' phrase, an offensive term that has become more widely used and accepted since the Hungarian mainstream has shifted to the right. This phrase that portrays Roma as criminals has led to further racism, discrimination, and violence against them. This dangerous rhetoric has been taken a step further with the formation of far-right paramilitary groups. In 2007, former Jobbik leader Gábor Vona founded the Magyar Gárda, (*Hungarian Guard*). Though Hungarian courts ordered the disbandment of the Magyar Gárda in 2008, the group utilized legal loopholes to reorganize into three separate but associated groups: the New Hungarian Guard, the Hungarian National Guard, and the Civil Guard Association for a Better Hungarian Future

(Murer, 2015). These groups were openly anti-Semitic and anti-Romani. As an example, ‘Civil Guard for a Better Future’ together with other xenophobic groups marched repeatedly in the town of Gyöngyös in 2011 intimidating and harassing its Roma residents (Minority Rights Group International, 2018).

Fidesz failed to condemn these paramilitary groups and for the 2014 elections came up with its own controversial approach to the ‘Roma question’. Local Fidesz government in the city of Miskolc demanded a destruction of the Roma encampments in Miskolc in order to renew the historic centre of the town. Their plan was to “relocate” the Roma population to the outskirts of the city, by giving Roma families payments to buy property but only if the property would be outside of the city limits. Soon the Roma people of Miskolc became a part of the political ‘game’ during the elections in 2014. It is not surprising that Jobbik used the anti-Roma rhetoric during the national election, but also other parties – even left-wing – embarked on this path during their local election campaigns. The municipality’s policy became the inspiration for election campaigns of a lot of political parties: the elimination of the run-down and neglected neighbourhoods. The campaigns were built on anti-Roma sentiments, in which even the mainstream political parties engaged. Notably the social security and housing policy quickly became the core agenda for Jobbik’s and Fidesz. Roma people were pictured in the election campaign posters of both parties as enemies and outsiders. There are two posters, one from Fidesz and one from Jobbik that illustrate this quite good:

Fidesz-Kdnp party alliance poster followed their housing and public safety policy: “Do you support the elimination of the slums in Miskolc? Miskolc and the people of Miskolc deserve a quiet and peaceful life. There must not be slums in the 21st century in a European city. The slums must be eliminated once and for all!” (Dinok, 2017).

Jobbik poster: “Unbelievable: Fidesz voted for creating ghettos in Miskolc Fidesz’s slum project would give two million Forints to those who ruined the municipal properties, who did not pay their bills, which are unable to follow the basic principles of coexistence, which are ready to leave their shabby houses and let us demolish those houses with all your money. What will be the consequences? They are not obliged to leave the city and they can buy cheap apartments in, for instance, the Avas quarter (another slum), they will keep preying upon the social welfare system of Miskolc, keep their anti-community lifestyle and they will vote for FIDESZ and MSZP. We have had enough! We do not negotiate with troublemakers. We demand that the municipality must immediately terminate their contract without paying

anything, must invalidate their certificate of domicile, must make them pay for the damage caused, and those people who destroyed the buildings should demolish those houses. Jobbik! The choice of the law-abiding majority!” (Dinok, 2017).

Given the background, it is evident that the slum/housing question refers to the Roma population. Even though Roma are not explicitly mentioned in the text, the context makes it clear that they are the ones being targeted with these campaign posters. What is interesting is that the posters do not stop at the slum issue, but they mention the importance of non-Roma citizens having ‘quiet and peaceful life’ or in Jobbik case putting an end to abusing the social welfare system. In this way Roma became the scapegoat for the social and economic misery of Miskolc and its non-Roma population. This is an example of populist simplifying the problems and presenting themselves as the ultimate solution. Miskolc is only one case, but it represents the situation of Roma all over Hungary how they are used as ‘political pawns’.

6.3.2 Slovakia

In Slovakia, Roma are being discriminated in many ways. Romany children in primary schools are regularly segregated into Roma-only classes, and many are educated in schools meant to serve children with mental disabilities. In 2019, the European Commission called for the Slovak authorities to make necessary changes to prevent the de facto segregation of Romany children (Freedom House, 2020). Anti-Roma rhetoric is very present and often used by Slovak politicians, especially during election campaigns. The popularity of this tactic was briefly interrupted by the migrant crisis when refugees became the new target of Slovak populists. However, when it became clear that Slovakia would not become overflowed with migrants as propagated by these politicians, Roma were once again the focus of their discriminatory agenda.

The People's Party Our Slovakia- LSNS, led by Marian Kotleba, has become the loudest anti-Roma voice in Slovak politics. They casually dehumanize Roma people, calling them “parasites” or “monkeys” and promising to “bring order” to poor Roma settlements. In 2001, Former Prime Minister Robert Fico claimed that Roma people “make babies because they want money” and said he wanted to stop their demographic growth. In 2013, His party SMER-SD strongly defended an aggressive police raid in a Roma settlement in the town of Moldava nad Bodvou, where officers had beaten up a group of innocent people. Although the case was under

review at the European Court for Human Rights, Fico and other SMER-SD representatives continue to defend the raid (Sirotnikova and Miroslava, 2020).

Anti-Roma comments were the reason for Milan Mazurek, a far-right politician from LSNS, to become the only Slovak lawmaker to lose his seat for a criminal conviction. The Supreme Court ruled in September that Mazurek committed a crime by expressing comments aimed at the Roma minority and imposed a fine on him (France 24, 2019). Former Prime Minister Fico attempted to defend Mazurek, saying in a video published on Facebook on September 6, that: “Milan Mazurek only said what nearly the whole nation thinks”, “If you punish someone for telling the truth, you make him a national hero” (The Slovak Spectator, 2019).

6.3.3 Czech Republic

One-third of around 250,000 Roma people in Czech Republic live in ghettos, with very bad living conditions and high crime rate. The education system is discriminatory towards Roma children who usually have minimal chances of breaking out of these segregated communities and every third child attends schools for mentally disabled. There has been a lot of criticism and appeals against this kind of treatment of Roma in Czech Republic, but nothing has changed. The non-governmental organization Romea, in one of its reports Romea described, among other things, how Roma in various municipalities have been selectively displaced to outlying areas in overcrowded, overpriced accommodation with untenable sanitary conditions. And that this further proves that by allowing these things to happen politicians are encouraging a further division of society rather than striving for social cohesion (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2013).

In 2020 The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) of the Council of Europe has published evaluation reports on the Czech Republic. The Commission did welcomed progress in several areas, but it also stressed out several problems that still prevail. Racist comments and hate speech are an issue of concern according to the report, notably public expressions and/or insufficient condemnation of hate speech both against Roma at high political levels. Negative stereotyping of Roma also occurs at the highest political level, as was shown in October 2018 when the President publicly stated, in the context of a comment on work-duty during the communist era, that slapping Roma who were not working was a ‘very humane method’. In response to his comments many Roma posted photographs of themselves working on social media, asking the President to apologize. He declined, arguing that those images were only reflecting the 10% of Roma who actually work. (ECRI, 2020). Antigypsyism

has been a key theme during the elections In Czech Republic and important political figures, wishing to establish their nationalist credentials and to demonstrate their lack of political correctness have made very racist statements about Roma. President Zeman has a head start on playing the antigypsyist card. In late 2017, as a response to UN human rights report that called for better integration of Roma, Zeman stated that 90% of his country's 'unadaptable' citizens are Roma. He then repeated this claim in his Christmas speech (Donert, 2018). Zeman is not the first Czech official to attack the Roma's work record. Prime Minister Andrej Babis was forced to apologise for remarks he made as finance minister in 2016 that Czech Roma were sent to a concentration camp during World War Two because they refused to work (Reuters, 2016).

6.4 Personal and Social Freedoms

One of the main characteristics of populists is their ability to polarize society on various issues and spheres of life. When it comes to their position on issues related to gender and sexual orientation populists in Visegrad countries have taken one that is against reproductive rights, abortion, and LGBT rights. Julie Mostov explains how this notion fits into their discourse of polarization 'us' and 'them'. She says that the typical gendered roles ensure the reproduction of the 'us' and continued rule of the majority (race/ethno-nation). "The reproduction of the 'us' is too crucial to leave unregulated, and gendered bodies are too vulnerable to violation and occupation to go without vigilance, that is, without surveillance and demographic policing" (Mostov, 2021). Populists also claim that behind their statements and policies related to gender and LGBT issues is the attempt to reassert conservative and traditional values in opposition to the progressivism of the EU's liberalism. Traditional values in Hungary, Poland and are also mostly tied to religion.

5.4.1 Hungary

In Hungary populist government uses religion to push their agenda and to limit personal freedoms. In 2011, following its electoral victory, Fidesz adopted a new constitution which was the first constitution adopted within a democratic framework and it turned out to be very controversial. It defines Christianity as a force that preserves "nationhood" and includes a passage on the protection of life from conception. It also defines the family as the marriage of a man and a woman (heterosexual) and/or as the relationship between parents and children (reproductive), with families being the basic unit of the nation (Sata, 2021). On 15 June 2021

the Hungarian parliament passed a law banning the promotion of positive representations of homosexuality and gender reassignment to children. Passing this law makes political sense for Victor Orban. An anti-LGBT law helps him to grow support among conservative voters. He also plays on the notion that LGBT rights are Western ideology been pushed onto Hungarians, and that is why the need him to protect their tradition and values.

What is also characteristic for populist government is their focus and support for traditional family. Pro-family policies are on brand with their conservative and religious agendas, and they are popular with the voters. Since 2010, the Viktor Orban government in Hungary has introduced multiple financial and tax incentives to encourage couples to have kids. The Hungarian government spends a generous 4 per cent of GDP on family assistance but targeting mostly working families rather than those in marginalized communities like the Roma. These policies also only apply to the traditional family. Last year Hungary passed a new law that had negative impact on those who do not fit the idea of ‘traditional family’. In December, using the coronavirus state of emergency, it passed a bill that made adoption for same-sex couples practically impossible. Although, same-sex marriage is not legal in Hungary, couples had been able to adopt if one of them applied as a single partner. With this law single people will now need special approval from the minister of family affairs to do so (Ciobanu, Gosling, Inotai & Szekers, 2021).

6.4.2 Poland

Polish populist government led by Law and Justice party (PiS) had made a number of controversial moves against women’s and LGBT rights. PiS has been the leader of conservative force in the region even pushing the countries in Central and Southeast Europe to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention on combating violence against women. Poland has been criticized for practically banning abortions, which is now allowed only in cases of rape or incest or when the pregnancy threatens the life of the mother. The October 2020 ruling by the Constitutional Court found that a 1993 law allowing abortion in cases of severe and irreversible foetal abnormalities was unconstitutional and in 2019, 98% of abortions were carried out on those grounds (BBC, 2021).

The government also supported municipal resolutions against ‘LGBT ideology’. Municipalities across Poland have adopted these resolutions, creating so called “LGBT free zones” what rights groups describe as “hostile spaces for anyone who is not heterosexual or committed to the so-

called natural family”. These resolutions reflect the stance of the governing party Law and Justice that says that the LGBT ideology is something that the West tries to impose on the rest of the world at the expense of the traditional and Christian values of these countries. PiS leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski has famously warned, “Hands off our children!” wanting to imply that, Polish children are in danger from ‘LGBT ideology’. The protection of tradition and Christian principles is one of the main election strategies of PiS. Activists noted peaks in the number of anti-LGBT resolutions in May-June 2019 and again in September-October — when politicians were campaigning for European elections (in the spring) and parliamentary elections (in the autumn) (Ciobanu, 2020).

6.4.3 Slovakia

Pro-family policies are also extremely popular in Slovakia and politicians are often trying to outdo each other in formulating them. Looking more precisely at the issue of gender and LGBT rights an important factor is the nomination of Sme Rodina’s (We Are Family) populist conservative vice-president Milan Krajinak as Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Family. As a minister, he has been busy erasing the term “gender equality” from legislation and strategic documents. During his ministry Christian organizations were favored in government subsidies for NGOs promoting gender equality, despite their lower rankings compared to other organizations that have been advocating gender equality and women’s rights in the long run (Slovak Spectator, 2021). On one occasion he also stated that it should be the region’s “moral commitment” to “remind Western Europe that boundless liberalism, individualism, and the destruction of social cohesion and bonds, such as the family, will lead to catastrophe” (Ciobanu, Gosling, Inotai & Szekers, 2021). As in other countries in the region populists in Slovakia see opposition to LGBT rights as a way to gain political points. Parties such as the SNS or the far-right People’s Party Our Slovakia put anti-LGBT slogans on billboards and in ads, while former Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, who is still leader of the ruling SMER-SD party, often pits LGBT rights against “traditional” family values, especially before elections (German Sirotnikova, 2019).

6.4.4 Czech Republic

Czech Republic seems to be the only Visegrad country that does not have a negative attitude regarding women’s and LGBT rights. There is still a long way to go, but Czech government sets a positive example by expressing its support for gender and sexual minority rights. “The

Czech Republic clearly opposes any discrimination on the basis of different sexual orientation or gender identity,” Foreign Minister Jakub Kulhanek wrote on Twitter on May 17, the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (Ciobanu, Gosling, Inotai & Szekers, 2021). The reason for Czech populists not to follow their colleagues in the region is probably because Czech population does not have a prominent anti-LGBT stance. This can also be due to religion not playing a big part in Czech politics. It is important to emphasize that all these progressive changes do not pass without a strong push back, especially from President Zeman. In 2021 he has been criticised after saying he thinks transgender people are ‘disgusting’ in a TV interview. He also said that protest marches such as the forthcoming Prague Pride were minorities trying to put themselves on a superior footing to others. He said if he were younger, he would organise a counterdemonstration of heterosexuals (The Independent, 2021).

7. CONCLUSION

In 2014 Victor Orban gave, now, an infamous speech announcing that his government is building an ‘illiberal state’:

“..Hungarian nation is not a simple sum of individuals, but a community that needs to be organized, strengthened and developed, and in this sense, the new state that we are building is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not deny foundational values of liberalism, as freedom, etc.. But it does not make this ideology a central element of state organization, but applies a specific, national, particular approach in its stead” (Victor Orban 2014 speech).

Knowing his usual outrageous statements and policies implemented by Orban government, this speech was not something new, although it was surprising hearing a Prime Minister of an EU member country wholeheartedly embracing the illiberal label. The question is, to what extent was he successful in his plans? How damaging was his politics to democracy? And was this trend of ‘illiberal democracy’ equally strong in other Visegrad countries? This brings us back to the beginning of this paper and the overall research question. As established earlier, according to Mudde and Kaltwasser liberal democracy is a “political regime, which not only respects popular sovereignty and majority rule, but also establishes independent institutions specialized in the protection of fundamental rights” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). These rights include the right to self-determination, right to freedom of thought and religion, and the

ability to express yourself freely without the state interference. Adding to that is a crucial point made by Alberazzi and Mueller who emphasize that the fundamental point of liberal democracy is “the notion that power can never be absolute, no matter how large a majority may be at a certain moment in time” (Alberazzi and Mueller, 2013).

It is clear from the previous chapters that the situation in Visegrad countries is troubling. The democratic institutions exist, but in reality, they become more distant from these basic principles of liberal democracy by the year. Legislative and judicial institutions are heavily influenced by the ruling parties, while media outlets are either becoming government mouthpiece or they are villainized as the ‘others’ that are here to deceive the good people. Minorities are used as political pawns or blamed for all the bad happening in the society. By looking at the rankings of the Democracy Index we get a clearer picture of the democracy decay in this region. This direction is disturbing: over 25 years of democratisation have not produced a single full democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (Democracy Index, 2021). This indicates how the rise of populist parties and their ever-changing agendas negatively affected so many fundamental institutions of liberal democracy. This would also prove that the general hypothesis stating that “shifting agendas of populist governments in the Visegrad countries managed to erode institutions of liberal democracy in all four countries” was correct. Using the auxiliary hypothesis, we can also analyse how some of the important pillars of liberal democracy were affected.

The auxiliary hypothesis stating that populist actions undermine freedom and independence of media can be confirmed as correct. Populist politicians in power in many instances would insult journalists and vilify independent media. They created a hostile atmosphere and managed in various degrees to suppress reporting that would be critical towards them. As it has been shown by the data from Reporters Without Borders Hungary is by far the worst case in the region, followed by Poland. While situation Czech Republic and Slovakia was marked satisfactory. However, situation is far from great, and the paper presents instances of violations of media freedom in the case of both countries. Second auxiliary hypothesis claiming that populist actions undermine civil and political rights of minorities in this paper is reflected in the treatment of the Roma community. This auxiliary hypothesis can also be considered correct. As the research found, Roma face widespread discrimination, violence, and poverty in Hungary, Slovakia, and Czech Republic. ‘Roma issue’ is often the main topic of political discourse and antigypsyism has often been the key element of political mobilization. Only

Poland was exempt from this part of research since, as an extremely homogeneous country it does not have prominent cases of violations of the rights of Roma and other minorities, as it is case in other three countries. Populist actions undermine the right to practice religious beliefs was the third auxiliary hypothesis, and it also can be considered as correct. This mainly relates to Islamophobia that reached its peak during the migration crisis. Anti-immigrant, and anti-Islamic attitudes were at the centre of populist political campaigns. The outrageous hateful statements, like “Islam has no place in Slovakia,” or “Muslims are uninvited intruders from an enemy culture that will destroy our democracy and our freedoms” fuelled hate towards mostly Muslim immigrants. Populist actions undermine personal and social freedoms, such as choice of marriage, size of family, control of the appearance is an auxiliary hypothesis that could be considered as partially correct. While Hungary and Poland are again the most extreme cases, Slovakia had few bad examples while Czech Republic did not showcase negative attitudes regarding women’s and LGBT rights.

The goal of this paper was to understand how populism affects our democracies and to assess the possible negative consequences and dangers related to this phenomenon. Larry Diamond from Stanford University says that “Populism becomes a danger to democracy when it seeks to restrict the rights of political, racial, ethnic and other minorities, or simply seeks in general to erode freedom of thought, information, and expression, or the ability of people in society and the media to criticize the elected populist leader” (Diamond, 2017). This research that focused on the period from 2010 and 2020 found that this was exactly the case in Visegrad countries. It is shown that populism poses a serious threat to liberal democracies, and by using both qualitative and quantitative data it was possible to illustrate the backsliding of liberal democracy throughout the years of populist uprising.

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