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The Visegrád 4 - a unitary actor in times of EU crises?

Bachelor Thesis



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Introduction

In 1991, the Hungarian castle town of Visegrád witnessed the creation of a regional alliance between the Central Eastern European countries of Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia. This trio was later expanded to a Visegrád Four (V4) arrangement, following the peaceful split of Czechoslovakia in 1993. United in their effort to overcome the legacies of socialism and stimulate economic growth and competitiveness, the V4 fulfilled its main objective of attaining membership in the European Union (EU) a decade later in 2004 as a part of the Eastern Enlargement (Törő et al., 2014, pp. 364-365). While initially serving as a model of successful liberalisation and integration for other aspiring members, the image of a ‘poster child’ turned into that of disobedience, undermining of European solidarity, and in the case of Hungary and Poland, also a violator of EU’s core values articulated in Article 2 TEU (Boros, 2018). While this deviation has been present across policy areas, it has been particularly acute in the context of the refugee and rule of law crises, which constitute both an exogenous and endogenous challenge to the process of European integration.

The refugee crisis revealed the deficiencies of the existing asylum policy outlined in the Dublin Regulation as well as the presence of conflict within the EU itself, as the V4 countries were criticised for their non-conformal behaviour when rejecting the mandatory redistribution of asylum seekers (Schmölz, 2019, pp. 23-24). Furthermore, the systematic violation of rule of law in Hungary and Poland heightened into a crisis which became increasingly pressing as democratic backsliding has been further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Arguably, the two crises reveal that the EU, which was built on law, is now facing a threat to its very own identity and the values which are embedded in its treaties (Blauberger & Kelemen, 2017, p. 321; Rech, 2018, p. 343). Internal consequences stemming from the breach of core values and principles, by disrespecting the rule of law in conjunction with the legacies of the refugee crisis, carry considerable implications for the EU as an actor also in the international arena (Raube & Costa Reis, 2021, pp. 628-629) as its image of a protector and promoter of fundamental rights and values could be compromised.

While divergence of interests in the event of crisis is natural and hence should be anticipated also in the case of EU27, it is particularly interesting to examine the actorness of the V4 in the context of crises with regards to their narrative and response. The question of V4’s unitarity in the aforementioned crises does not only act as a mirror of regional attitudes and beliefs, but can additionally indicate the direction of future cooperation and coordination

within the EU, as the block may possess the ability to significantly shape the policy direction of the EU as a whole. This invites for the formulation of the following research question:

To what extent did the Visegrád 4 act as a unitary actor during the refugee and the rule of law crises?

This thesis will begin by providing a summary of the existing findings and the current state of debate concerning the degree of unitary actorness of the V4 countries. It will then proceed with the introduction of strands of new institutionalism which will be utilised for the creation of differing expectations encompassing the rationale which guides actors' action. Next, the research design will outline the specifics of process tracing and the proxies which will be examined to subsequently enable the generation of plausible conclusions regarding the motives preceding actorness of the V4 in the EU's institutions. A two-level analysis will follow for both the refugee and the rule of law crises to map out the rhetoric and actions of the V4 countries in their responses. The discussion section will test the explanatory power of the hypotheses to account for the limits of the extent of V4's unitary actorness. The findings indicate that unitary actorness is subject to and a product of rational cost-benefit calculation of individual countries and thereby any alignment between the V4 countries in EU decision-making is coincidental. Finally, all main findings and further implications stemming from the research will be outlined in the conclusion.

Background: The V4 and the EU

The V4 countries share similarities such as their geographical location within Europe, historical background, accession period into the EU and to a greater part also linguistics. These factors are said to create a shared sense of belonging and construct a regional identity which shapes the external political action of the V4 countries within the EU's institutions (Balazs & Griessler, 2020, p. 289). Schmidt (2016) states that while the V4 does not demonstrate such unity as can be witnessed by the Benelux union, nonetheless, the V4 presents itself as a coherent actor in the EU (p. 126). Such premise is reiterated by Schmölz (2019), who points to the revival of collective discourse of the V4 countries which creates a sense of togetherness and guides the V4 to act as a singular entity in the EU based on the 'us vs. them' narrative (p. 29). However, in the existing literature, scholarly opinions on whether the V4 acts as a unitary actor in the EU or whether the states act as individual players remain disputed.

Végh (2018) argues that over time, the V4 developed from a policy-taker into a regional policy-maker striving to promote the preferences of the regional partnership via a structured mode of cooperation and the simultaneous establishment of a regional profile (pp. 431-435). This shift is embodied in the V4's 'disobedient' response to the refugee crisis in their appeal against the EU quota on distribution of asylum seekers, which was additionally perceived as the manifestation of collective illiberalism within the V4 (Kazharski, 2020, p. 271), since potential reforms of the status quo were jointly blocked (Ripoll Servent, 2019, p. 305). Other scholars such as Káposzta & Henrietta (2015) also point to the increase of cohesion among V4 countries (p. 98) and the analysis of Koß & Séville (2020) supports this statement as the study concluded that the governments of the V4 committed themselves to common policy goals and acted as a cohesive block employing the concept of identity in order to harness domestic support (pp. 99-101).

On the contrary, other scholars view the V4 purely as an 'ad hoc' cooperation which is utilised strictly when regarded as a means of multiplying the chance of fulfilling domestic preferences of individual states (Kazharski, 2020, p. 264; Pachocka, 2016, p. 130; Schmidt, 2016, p. 138). Walsch (2014) argues that national approaches remain dominant as the V4 operates intergovernmentally and cooperation takes place only if it is in the states' self-interest (pp. 31-35). The debate on the degree to which the V4 is institutionalised is also subject to disagreement as some claim that the lack of established institutions does not translate to the cooperation itself not being institutionalised (Braun, 2020, p. 927). Aside from the aspect of institutionalisation, also the structural similarity of the V4 countries is challenged by Cichocki & Jabkowski (2019) who argue that the four countries demonstrate vast cultural, social and economic differences (pp. 28-29), which result in diverse preferences among the members and thus invite for nationally-determined action within the EU's institutions.

Returning to the refugee crisis, the fact that states are not strictly tied to the V4 can be seen by Slovakia and Czechia eventually accepting asylum seekers despite their anti-refugee rhetoric, while Poland and Hungary refused to do so (Schmölz, 2019, p. 28; Walsch, 2018, p. 188). Walsch (2018) highlights that the Polish and Hungarian authorities responded to the positions of Slovakia and Czechia by 'toning down' their initial hard-line positions. Nevertheless, he rejects the significance of this rhetoric and argues that actions of V4 countries remain mostly individual (pp. 187-188). Pachocka (2016) argues more generally that regardless of cooperation during the refugee crisis, the V4 countries are not committed to

a long-term common strategy and thus rejects the notion of the V4 as an institutionalised body (pp. 128-129). In the same manner and over the course of time, Cichocki & Jabkowski (2019) view the V4's unity in this crisis as an exception rather than a rule (p. 28).

In the domain of the rule of law crisis, the scholarly debate on the extent of unitarity of the V4 countries appears increasingly complicated and is under constant revision as the crisis is ongoing. The V4's reluctance to interfere in and limit each other's sovereignty comes under criticism by scholars who highlight the inaction of Slovakia and Czechia to the rule of law breaches of their other partners – Poland and Hungary, this being seen by the lack of action in the Council (Blauberger & Kelemen, 2017; Ciosa 2020; Kochenov & Pech, 2016). Sovaltin-Colella (2020) asserts that opposing the activation of Article 7(1) TEU by the V4 is a sign of support of Orbán's illiberal policies (p. 10), which illustrates the coordinated efforts of the V4. This finding challenges the previous notion of Góralczyk (2019) who argues that the domestic polarisation in the individual countries of the V4 coupled with the unwillingness of Slovakia and Czechia to follow the illiberal pathways of Hungary and Poland conveys that rather than acting in line with a collective V4 identity, the preferences of individual states prevail (pp. 69-70). Ultimately, it becomes evident that there is a lack of consensus between scholars when striving to identify the rationale behind the actions of the V4 countries in their response to the crises. The next section turns to the conceptualisation of the main features of V4's actorness.

Theorising the V4 as a Unitary Actor

To analyse the extent to which the V4 acted as a unitary actor during the refugee and the rule of law crises, the approach of new institutionalism will be applied, in particular rational institutionalism and sociological institutionalism, with an emphasis on March & Olsen's (1984) logic of consequences and logic of appropriateness. These approaches allow for the explanation of the actors' rationale and emphasis on differing preferences and can thus function as a lens to investigate the calculation according to which the countries of V4 acted during the crises.

New institutionalism posits that preferences and meaning develop through an endogenous process and institutions can be treated as autonomous actors and decision-makers (March & Olsen, 1984, pp. 738-740). The endogenous nature of change allows for the explanation of processes, focusing on continuity rather than change (Schmidt, 2010, pp. 1-2). New institutionalism asserts that institutions shape outcomes via their embodiment of bias

developed over time and thus both constrain and enable certain behaviour of actors (Aspinwall & Schneider, 2000, p. 3). This thesis will focus on rational institutionalism and sociological institutionalism as two divergent epistemological approaches to studying the rationale behind action.

Rational institutionalism stipulates that action is the result of a cost-benefit calculation which seeks to fulfil the actor's preferences and maximise utility (Schmidt, 2010, p. 2). The agent is seen as independent from its context and thus preferences are exogenous in origin and aim to satisfy short-term individual rather than long-term collective goals (Aspinwall & Schneider, 2000, pp. 3, 5). In this manner, institutions are viewed as a strategic arena of power contestation (Aspinwall & Schneider, p. 7) and serve as mechanisms which reduce uncertainty and transaction costs (Schmidt, 2010, pp. 4-6). Accordingly, cooperation is instrumental rather than normative and institutions are not perceived as independent variables - structuring action, but as intervening variables - a factor of consideration in the calculation.

The underlying assumption of rationality as behaviour which favours action yielding the highest expected return from a set of choices is highlighted by the logic of consequences respectively (March & Olsen, 1984, p. 744). The logic of consequences describes rational choice as behaviour guided by anticipated consequences that reflect a priori interests of the agents (Sigelman, 2006, p. 675). The decision-making process expects that actors consult their preferences in relation to predicted expectations stemming from a set of possible actions, and correspondingly select conduct which appears to be the best choice for achieving their desired ends (March & Olsen, 1984, p. 741).

Following rational institutionalism and the logic of consequences in the context of the EU, the actors (states) would be expected to utilise uncertainty and their relative bargaining positions to strategically use institutions as a means of achieving their preferred outcome (Aspinwall & Schneider, 2000, pp. 11-13). As both rational institutionalism and the logic of consequences neglect the role of identities in shaping action (Goldmann, 2005, p. 39), political events are therefore the result of individual calculated decisions. It can be expected that the more Visegrád countries perceive their national interests as aligned at the EU level, the more they will act as a unitary regional actor in their response to crises. This leads to the formulation of the first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1 (H₁): If the national interests of V4 countries are aligned at the EU level, then their behaviour as a unitary regional actor is coincidental

On the contrary, sociological institutionalism asserts that institutions create identities and the agent is not independent from the context, but rather forms and is formed by the norms, ideas and cultural patterns present in the institutions (Schmidt, 2010, p. 3). Ideas thus stem from cultural framing and action is guided by a shared sense of identity and collective meaning-making (Goldmann, 2005, p. 13). Such endogenously produced preferences establish mutual understanding and result in common action with the focus on long-term effects (Aspinwall & Schneider, 2000, p. 5). The emphasis is laid on the history of repeated practices and symbolic gestures which bind the members together. The role of institutions is therefore arguably more dominant than in rational institutionalism, as in sociological institutionalism the institutions are regarded as independent variables in the decision-making process - their structure influences the agency (Aspinwall & Schneider, 2000, pp. 6, 26).

As institutions provide an environment in which preferences are constructed and played out, the logic of appropriateness can be employed to explain how action attains legitimacy when being driven by rules and aligned with identity (March & Olsen, 2008, p. 689). Actors pursue action which is regarded as socially appropriate according to their role in the political community (Sigelman, 2006, p. 675). This does not exclude rational calculation altogether, however, primacy is attributed to acts which are in line with what is viewed as expected and anticipated in relation to a socially accepted conduct (Goldmann, 2005, p. 39), and thereby the most normatively appropriate (March & Olsen, 1984, p. 741).

When applying sociological institutionalism and the logic of appropriateness to conduct in the EU, it would be expected that states would shape their action according to the values the EU is based on, or alternatively on the regional sub-groups. In this regard, the regional culture and shared historical practices would produce a sense of common understanding and collective identity which would invite states to pursue likeminded action in the face of integrative challenges or crises (Aspinwall & Schneider, 2000, pp. 19-20). Therefore, the more Visegrád countries emphasise their shared identity in EU politics, the more they will act as a unitary regional actor in their response to crises. This allows for the construction of another hypothesis regarding the behaviour of the V4:

Hypothesis 2 (H₂): If the V4 countries emphasize their shared identity at the EU level, then their behaviour as a unitary regional actor is purposeful

Research Design

Case Selection

This thesis will employ a small-N most similar system comparative research design (Halperin & Heath, 2017, pp. 217-218). This design is the most suitable since the number of member states is low N=4 (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Czechia) and the two cases of crises, refugee and the rule of law crises, will be examined in a comparative manner to analyse the responses of the V4 countries to the crises. The comparative research of the rhetorical as well as legal responses – policy initiation and voting of the aforementioned countries, is particularly interesting given the different origins of the crises. The fact that the refugee crisis constitutes a crisis which was external not only to the V4 but also to the EU itself, is a sharp contrast to the rule of law crisis which emerged and gradually intensified within the two countries of the V4. Irrespective of the crises' origin, a most similar system design will be used due to shared structural similarities of the countries, which generate equal conditions for the response of the actors. This will allow for the isolation and subsequent explanation of the factors which are responsible for the observable differences in the outcome, these disparities being manifested via examining the rhetoric and the conduct of the V4 countries.

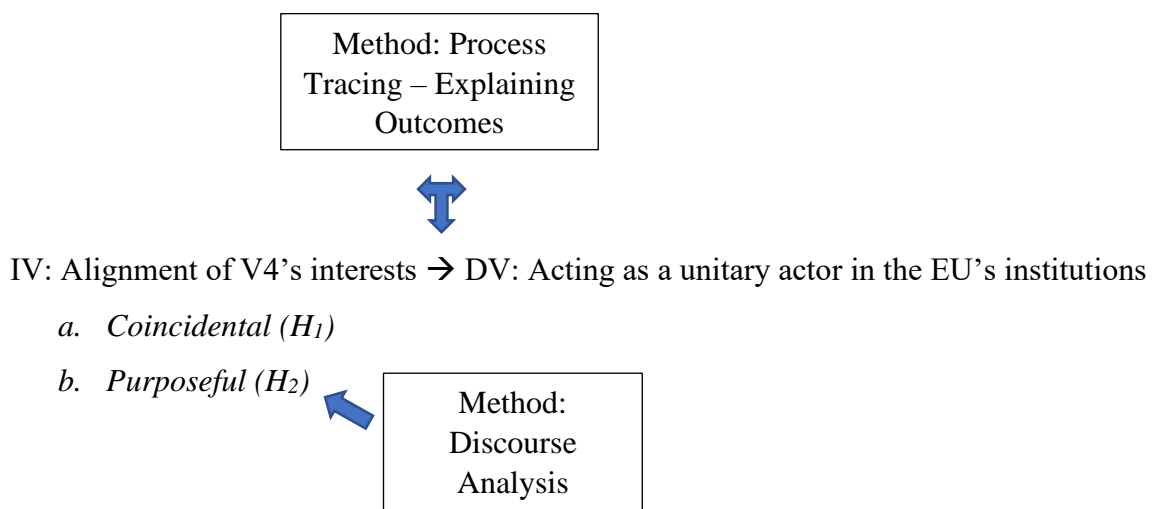
Methodological Approach

In order to answer the research question concerning the extent of unitary actorness of the V4 in crises, the qualitative method of explaining-outcomes process tracing will be applied. The approach of deductive reasoning will aid the explication of the causal mechanisms and the specific variables which accounted for the observed outcomes (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 19). Moreover, such method will allow for a holistic comparison of the cases selected, with the emphasis on context as well as the behaviour and values of actors (Halperin & Heath, 2017, p. 95). Lastly, the state-level of analysis will enable the examination of the variation between the singular members of the V4.

This thesis acknowledges that process tracing suffers from the lack of generalisability of findings due to case-specificity, as well as the fact that the study of actors' intentions or motives is highly problematic and demands a careful construction of conclusions. It may appear that the two case studies are insufficient for the formulation of general patterns in the behaviour of the V4 countries. However, these potential limitations can be overcome by a two-level analysis of the interplay between the actors' rhetoric and subsequent actions. If the narratives of decision-makers of the individual V4 countries align with their actions, it is

possible to generate plausible conclusions about the actorness of the member states. Additionally, the comparative qualitative in-depth analysis of the two case studies overcomes a binary classification of ‘independent rational actors’ vs. ‘collective regional identity’. Rather, this method allows for the analysis of the extent to which actors act individually or collectively and under which conditions this is the case. Process tracing is thus effective in demonstrating how preferences can change over time and the causal mechanisms developed can serve as guidance for future research. The following operationalisation of variables is based on the theory-based expectations which can be found in Table 1 in the Appendix.

Figure 1: Diagram of the 2-level Analysis:



Dependent Variable

The dependent variable or the outcome variable is the extent of ‘unitary actorness’ of the V4 countries during the refugee and the rule of law crises. The notion of ‘actorness’ can be understood in terms of active and deliberate behaviour of an entity in relation to other states or players in the international arena (Sjöstedt (1977) in Groen & Niemann, 2013). In this instance, actorness of the V4 would be the conduct of these countries in the EU’s institutions ranging from discourse, positions and alliances, policy initiatives as well as voting and blocking. Adding the component of ‘unitarity’ anticipates the coherent action of the V4 countries in accordance with the established values and beliefs (Kahler, 1998, p. 930). Therefore, the two definitions will be combined to produce the concept of ‘unitary actorness’ of the V4, which will in practice translate to the countries acting jointly in the EU’s institutions as a regional block rather than as individual states.

In the analysis, the greatest extent of unitary actorness in the response to the crises would be demonstrated by convergence on the three proxies – the use of common discourse, joint efforts in proposing policy and voting as a regional block. On the contrary, the smallest extent of unitary actorness would be visible by a divergence on all three proxies.

Independent Variables

This thesis will make use of two independent variables, each in accordance with the theory-based hypotheses which were formulated in the theoretical framework. The hypothesis devised under the theory of rational institutionalism supposes that when national interests of the V4 countries are aligned at the EU level, then their behaviour as a unitary regional actor is coincidental. Therefore, the first independent variable is the ‘coincidental alignment’ of V4’s national interests, based on their preferences and utility-maximising behaviour in a given case. Coincidental alignment occurs when the nationally-determined preferences of the countries happen to align and thereby it appears that the V4 acts jointly. Alternatively, the countries could choose to present action as a joint response with the aim of increasing their relative power vis-à-vis the other members of the EU.

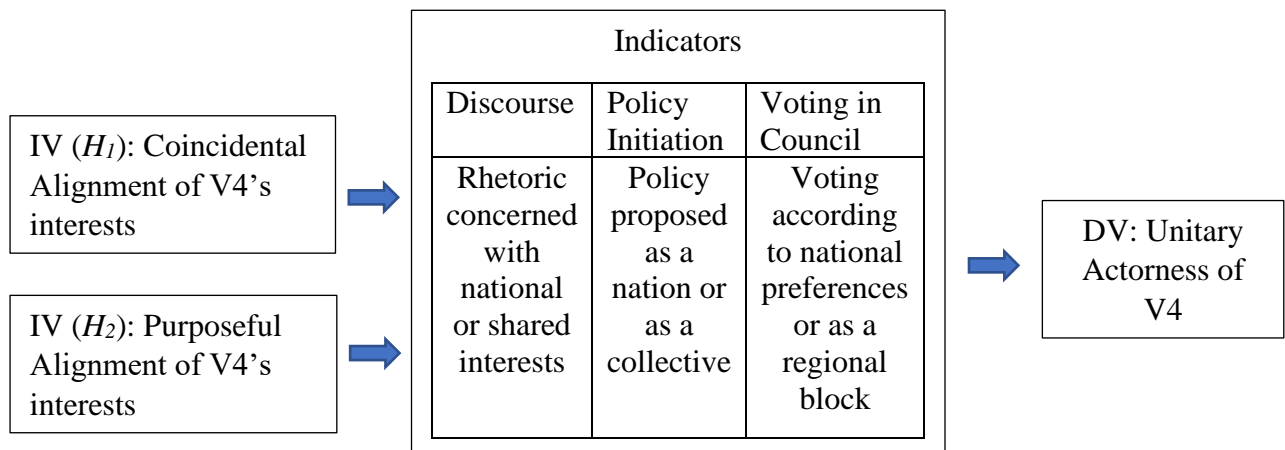
The second independent variable, which stems from the theory of sociological institutionalism and is articulated in the second hypothesis, is the ‘purposeful alignment’ of V4’s interests, which is generated by the sense of shared identity of the countries. The greater this sense of identity is, the larger the extent of unitary action will be seen. In this instance, the preferences of the collective prevail and arguably also shape or alter national preferences. Purposeful alignment is the product of the regional alliance which emphasizes and follows distinct values which are created and reinforced by the members of the V4. In practice, this would result in the collective action in the EU’s institutions as a pre-arranged block. The nature of alignment will be established by the method of discourse analysis based on if in their rhetoric, the V4 countries emphasized individual national or shared collective interests. Therefore, coincidental alignment being the product of the former and purposeful alignment of the latter nature of interests.

Indicators

The three indicators or proxies which will be used as measures of observable manifestations and investigated under the causal mechanism of the process tracing are the following: discourse, policy initiation and voting in the Council of the EU (Council). The presence of these indicators is crucial in allowing for a distinction of the rationale behind the behaviour of

the V4 countries. By looking at the development of the rhetoric and the legal activity over time, it is possible to capture the progress and the potential change of attitudes and official positions of the V4 countries. Thereby, the interplay between the four countries and the prominence of certain factors which accounted for the resultant action can be mapped out.

Figure 2: Mapping the Causal Mechanism



Data Selection

Diverse data sources will be utilised to serve the analysis of the three indicators of interest: discourse, policy initiation and voting in the Council. Discourse analysis of speeches of key decision-makers from V4 countries during the crises will be investigated to reveal how the construction of narratives in the crises impacts the formation of a collective identity which can consequently affect the choice of conduct. In order to increase the validity of the findings, media reports will serve as additional empirical evidence to help unveil the narratives and motives of actors and thus enable the construction of a plausible explanation of responses. For each case of crisis, 20-25 speeches and news articles will be examined to allow for a representative sample of sources. Supplementarily, academic literature and official platforms of the V4 and the EU's institutions will be studied to uncover the patterns of voting in the Council and the policy initiation of the V4 countries. The time-period per case will range from 2015 until present (March 2021), however, in the case of the rule of law crisis, attention will be attributed to the theme from 2010 when the first violation was reported (Human Right Watch, 2013).

1. Analysis of Refugee Crisis

1a. Discourse

The analysis of political discourse during the refugee crisis revealed an overall negative attitude towards accepting refugees in all Visegrád countries during the entire duration of the crisis as well as its aftermath. The rhetoric of V4 decision makers was generally marked by similar rhetorical styles, common positions and emphasis on preserving shared values. Each decision maker pleaded foremostly for the protection of nationals, and only secondarily for the V4 countries. This can be seen by phrases such as “Hungarian culture and European civilisation” (Orbán, 2019), refugees being a “threat to the Poles” (Cienski, 2015), “destroying the traditions on which Slovakia was built” (Coscolluela, 2019) and lastly that migrants will “not respect Czech laws” (iDnes, 2015). Collectively, the initial stance of rejecting mandatory quotas for redistribution, labelling the movement of migrants as illegal and endorsing the doctrine of securitising migration persisted since 2015 up until present, irrespective of domestic party affiliation. Internationally, the V4 countries regarded mass-scale migration as a threat to the European identity and the European way of life which was said to be based on Christian values, distinct culture and traditions (About Hungary, 2016; Fico, 2016; Visegrád Post, 2018). Migrants were perceived as a threat to this standard of life and as unable to integrate due to their different religious and cultural background. V4 leaders made use of terrorist attacks in Western Europe as evidence for this claim and Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán described migration as the “trojan horse of terrorism” (Baran, 2017; Kuisz, 2017; Orbán, 2017; Truben Studio, 2016).

In this regard, Hungary and Poland appealed mostly to concerns of erosion of Christianity, while Slovakia deployed this argument less and Czechia not at all - arguing rather via security concerns posed by terrorist attacks. Rhetoric against migrants alongside religious lines came across as harsh and direct, Slovak Prime Minister Fico stating that “Islam has no place in Slovakia” but “we are willing to accept Syrian Christians” (Coscolluela, 2019; Fico, 2016). Likewise, Polish Prime Minister Kaczynski warned that migrants will use Christian churches as “toilets” (Cienski, 2015), portraying refugees as disrespectful towards Christian faith, this being reiterated by Orbán who stated that migrants “want to replace what is ours with what is theirs”. Such narratives, in combination with frequent equating of refugees to terrorists, aimed to construct anti-refugee sentiments by connoting refugees with enemies of Christian religion and as those aiming to strip away European culture. Additional

fear of migration was invoked by phrases such as “invasion of migrants” who will cause “irreversible cultural occupation”, striving to provide a justification for the top-down securitisation of the crisis (Visegrád Post, 2018).

Such ‘us vs. them’ rhetoric was created on two fronts: the V4 against Brussels, and the EU against migrants. While all V4 countries rejected mandatory redistribution quotas which Fico called a “ritual suicide” (French Press Agency-AFP, 2016), only Hungary directly referred to Brussels as the enabler and enforcer of this process. The humanitarian component of refugees seeking asylum was downplayed by the perception of migration as guided mainly by economic interests (Orbán, 2015b), Fico labelling them as “economic speculators” (Fico, 2016) and Czech President Zeman stating that “ninety percent are young healthy men who certainly do not look poor” (Panenka, 2016; Zeman, 2015). Rather, refugees were portrayed as “terrorists”, “rapists” and “criminals” which are striving to “occupy” the EU in an “orchestrated fashion” (Orbán, 2015). The notion of clash of civilisations was most prominent in the case of Hungary, which rejected multiculturalism as a value and stated that migration will “blend cultures” and make Europe “bloodless and docile”. In his speeches, Orbán called for domestic as well as Visegrád mobilisation against what he views as “slavery” to Brussels and the immigrants, claiming that the task to safeguard Europe in its current form needs to be taken by the “nations of Central Europe...which have not yet lost all common sense” and that “Hungary together with Visegrád countries is determined and committed... in protecting Europe” (Orbán, 2016). Consequently, Hungary appears as the most outspoken against accepting refugees, and also as the most proactive in inciting joint V4 action in the form of an opposing coalition to the EU’s policies.

Aside from securitising migration, both Hungarian and Polish authorities made references to migrants as a health concern, Orbán claiming that migrants carry the “risk of infectious diseases”, Kaczynski stating that migrants brought “all sorts of parasites and protozoa” and Polish President Duda echoing this by warning against “epidemiological risks” for Poles (Al Jazeera, 2015). Such statements created the impression that migrants are not only culturally, but also biologically different to Europeans, this further widening the divide between Europeans and refugees. The use of symbolism played a key role in constructing vivid imagery as the refugee crisis was depicted in “waves” (Dunai & Komuves, 2020) or “tides of illegal immigrants” (Babiš, 2018), and even by the metaphor of a “bursting dam”- the dam representing EU’s borders and water as the influx of refugees (Visegrád Post, 2018). Such antagonistic imagery of migration was accompanied by the urge to “motivate refugees

to return home” as Czech Prime Minister Babiš declared, which encapsulates the V4s’ strive to return refugees rather than to integrate them (Babiš, 2019). While Slovak President Kiska spoke about the refugee crisis from a more humane aspect and called for “‘help to those whose lives are in danger” (Tóđová & Čokyna, 2015), he remained politically isolated both nationally and also in terms of the V4 group.

1b. Policy Initiation

Analysis of documents published from the V4’s annual summits and the reports of V4 Presidencies demonstrate that from the beginning of the crisis hitherto, the theme of migration was repeatedly regarded as a matter of priority on the V4’s agenda (Czech Presidency –Executive Report, 2015/2016; Hungarian Presidency, 2017/2018; Polish Presidency, 2016/2017; Slovak Presidency, 2014/2015). While domestic policies varied in the V4 countries, two central assumptions appear to be shared. Firstly, the movement of refugees within the EU is regarded as illegal, since the V4 countries view the secondary movement from the first EU country of entry as a violation of the Dublin Regulation. Secondly, the common view is that such secondary movement presents a security concern. The prominence of these assumptions can be seen by the V4s’ recurring emphasis on the necessity to protect the external borders of the EU in order to preserve the internal freedom of movement in the Schengen area, as well as the need to address the root causes of migration (Joint Statement by the Prime Ministers of V4 Countries on Migration, 2017; Joint Statement on Migration, 2016; Visegrad Group, 2015; Visegrad Group, 2016; Visegrad Group, 2020).

As the V4 was criticised for failing to comply with the mandatory relocation mechanism, during the 2016 EU Council Summit in Bratislava, the V4 proposed the notion of ‘flexible solidarity’ which was later re-named to ‘effective solidarity’ (Zachová et al., 2018). This proposition was first articulated in the ‘Joint Statement of Heads of Governments of the V4 Countries’ and is based on the voluntary nature of member states’ decision on the specific form and extent of contribution, acting as an alternative to the former asylum policy based on a mandatory distribution key (Polish Presidency of the Visegrád Group, 2016/2017). While failing to attain support initially, the European Council later agreed to the voluntary nature of contributions, and thus this could have been regarded as a win for the V4 block. The ‘New Pact on Migration and Asylum’ introduced in September 2020 was met with joint resistance from the V4, Estonia and Slovenia, who demanded abidance to flexibility (European Commission, 2020; Government of Poland, 2020). Further negotiations are to reveal the

concrete form of the asylum policy in the future. However, ‘effective solidarity’ acts as evidence of unitary actorness of the V4 in the form of a cohesive regional block which managed to increase the group’s bargaining power, and consequently shape the migration policy of the EU.

1c. Voting in the Council

Even though the actual exposure to refugees was minimal in Poland, Czechia and Slovakia, Hungary was one of the most affected EU’s countries, however, only temporarily and mostly as a transit country (Cichocki & Jabkowski, 2019). Regardless of the limited actual exposure, evidence from academic literature supports the idea of unitary actorness of V4 against any mandatory mechanisms in their voting in the Council to a significant extent. When voting on the packages of measures relating to migration, the second Decision EU (2015/1601) concerning provisional measures to aid the frontline countries - especially Greece and Italy, Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia and Romania voted against and Finland abstained (Pachocka, 2016). It could be said that with its vote in favour of adoption, Poland undermined the V4. Nevertheless, shortly after the elections in Poland which generated a new government, Poland allegedly apologised to the V4 for deflecting from the group during the vote, and henceforth embraced unity with the V4 (Cichocki & Jabkowski, 2019, p. 28; Panenka, 2016). This was seen in the 2016 vote against the migrant relocation scheme and then again in 2019 when the blockage by V4 resulted in removing the topic of mandatory mechanism from the agenda of the EU Council meeting altogether (Koß & Séville, 2020, pp. 95-96). Accordingly, it can be concluded that when voting, the V4 countries exhibited a high degree of alignment despite the minimal actual contact with refugees in the majority of the V4 countries.

2. Analysis of Rule of Law Crisis

2a. Discourse

The rhetoric of the decision makers and governmental representatives during the rule of law crisis has witnessed vast divergence within the Visegrád countries, ultimately rejecting the notion of the block’s unitary actorness in their response. While first signs of violation of the legal framework in Hungary date back to 2010 (Human Right Watch, 2013), increasing attention was attributed to this topic as Article 7(1) TEU was evoked against Poland in December 2017 and against Hungary in September 2018 (Kaiser, 2021; Netherlands Helsinki Committee, 2020). The subject became especially prominent during the discussions surrounding the adoption of the 2021-2027 budget, which is tied to the conditionality of

respecting the rule of law (Emerging Europe, 2020). With regards to the rule of law debate, empirical evidence indicated a sharp contrast in the stance of the V4 countries, with a general increase in polarisation within the block in the period of 2020-2021. The rhetorical stances of V4 countries resemble the alignment of V2+2, with Poland and Hungary on one side, and Czechia and Slovakia on the other. However, up until the Autumn of 2020, there appeared to be limited public condemnation and a sign of hesitance to address the rule of law violations by Czechia and Slovakia towards their V4 partners.

Czechia demonstrated the greatest disinclination to address or confront the violations of Poland and Hungary by striving to maintain mainly a neutral stance, preferably avoiding the topic overall. While claiming to support the rule of law mechanism in July 2020 (Deník CZ, 2020), in September, Babiš marked the rule of law violation allegations by international media as “fake news” and proceeded to swiftly change the topic to illegal migration (Cody, 2020). An interesting case is the conflict between Orbán and the Czech Commissioner Jourová, a nominee of Babiš (Euractiv, 2020). After Jourová repeatedly pronounced her concern that Orbán is building an “ill democracy” (Birnbaum & Ariès, 2020), Orbán asserted that Jourová “knows nothing and is lying because Soros is paying for it” (Palata, 2020) and demanded her resignation. Babiš remained silent (Euractiv, 2020).

Contrastingly, Slovakia exhibited a far more critical approach towards Hungary and Poland on both higher and lower levels of representation. Slovak President Čaputová publicly announced the support for the rule of law mechanism by stating that “benefits should come with responsibility” (Boubínová, 2020) and also personally questioned Polish President Duda about the state of Disciplinary Chamber of the Supreme Court (Wójcik, 2019). Likewise, during the event of the 30th anniversary of the Visegrád 4, Čaputová stated that “for Slovakia it is strategically important to remain in the heart of European integration” and expressed her hopes for a “pro-European direction” and a “jointly constructive voice”, remarks which were aimed primarily at the remaining V4 members (TASR, 2021; Wójcik, 2019). Slovak Foreign Minister Korčok has been very vocal about separating Slovakia from the ‘illiberal’ V4 and criticised Hungary’s ambitions to portray the subject as a matter of V4 against the EU (SME Domov, 2020). According to Korčok, rule of law is “fundamental” (Stolár, 2021), “the foundation of the EU” (Bariak, 2020), and he proclaimed that “V4 must not be a protective wall against the EU” (Čaplovič, 2021).

The rhetoric of Hungary and Poland shared visible similarities as well as controversies in the form of contradictions. Both Hungary and Poland rejected the rule of law violations (Cienski, 2016) while simultaneously claiming that “there is indeed a rule of law problem in Poland” (Tilles, 2020) or that the debate is “undermining Europe’s unity” (Euronews, 2020).

Hungary once again attempted to mobilise V4 and other countries by labelling the rule of law requirements as a “political instrument” (ČTK, 2020) and a “political weapon” (Kovács, 2019), which is currently directed against Hungary or “maybe against some other country in Central Europe”, continuing with warnings that “in a few years...it could be directed against someone else” (Euronews, 2020). Both countries marked the rule of law mechanism as “broad and vague” (ČTK, 2020), and shifted the blame onto Brussels, which was portrayed as a bully for interfering with national sovereignty. Evidence of this is seen by Kaczynski exclaiming that “we cannot be terrorised by money” (Palata, 2020) and Orbán rejecting the mechanism due to the “patriotic duty” (ČTK, 2020) against the “unfair perception of Hungary” (Al Jazeera English, 2017).

Apart from blaming Brussels and alluding to national historical sentiments, which seek to recurrently foster the us vs. them narrative, both Hungary and Poland made use of diversionary techniques to appeal to their domestic audiences. Faulty claims of Orbán such as “only those countries that accept migrants are considered as law-abiding countries” and that the EU “blackmails” Hungary and Poland because they reject LGBTQ ideology (Boubínová, 2020; Szalay, 2020), attempted to deemphasize the reality of violations by equating the subject of adhering to rule of law as a means to impose mandatory migrant relocation quotas or ideology, rather than its actual aim - to prevent the erosion of law. Such victimisation continued also in the case of Poland which referred to the mechanism as an “institutional enslavement” (Boubínová, 2020) and that while Poland “says ‘yes’ to European Union”, they “say ‘no’ to being treated as children” (Euronews, 2020). This created the picture of an EU in the role of a parent which dictates terms to Poland and Hungary – the children. Such imagery seeks to justify the unwillingness of Hungary and Poland to cooperate with the EU, and to even risk the temporary blockage of funds in the name of “our honour” (Kovács, 2019) and “respect” (FRANCE 24 English, 2017) in the long run. As the appeal to the V4 members was unsuccessful, such rhetoric targeted primarily the national audiences in Poland and Hungary, who supported each other against the so termed “ideological weapon” of the EU (Euronews, 2020).

2b. Policy Initiation

The study of official V4 documents in the form of annual reports as well as special meetings displayed the absence of debate on the theme of rule of law (Czech Presidency –Executive Report, 2015/2016; Hungarian Presidency, 2017/2018; Polish Presidency, 2016/2017; Slovak Presidency, 2014/2015). It appears that the objectives of the V4 are oriented towards joint efforts in regional and external partnership rather than in shaping each other’s domestic matters. However, there has been an attempt at externalising the rule of law discord, which was proposed by Hungary and followed by Poland under the name of ‘Professional Network and Junior Programme’ (SME Domov, 2020). News articles revealed that via this programme, Hungary strived to initiate an alternative definition and understanding of the rule of law concept between the V4 countries (The Slovak Spectator, 2020). Such action can be interpreted to serve as a deterring mechanism aiming to push back the EU’s concerns about rule of law violations, and harness some additional time for the national authorities to maintain their grip on power, as elections will take place in 2022 in Hungary and in 2023 in Poland (Euronews, 2021).

The establishment of a new definition did not materialise under the name of the V4 due to Slovakia rejecting the proposal, arguing that such initiative is senseless an unnecessary, and criticised Hungary for attempting to abuse the V4 ‘brand’ for their personal ambitions (SME Domov, 2020). In the sources studied, there was no direct response found to this initiative from the side of Czechia. Irrespective of the information deficiency concerning Czechia’s stance to the aforementioned initiative, in relation to the vetoes of Poland and Hungary on the EU’s 2021-2027 budget, Czechia stated that agreement within the V4 is not always necessary (Mint, 2020). This serves as evidence that the degree of unitary actorness of V4 is limited to a strategic partnership and that in certain cases the V4 countries purposefully distance themselves from the group.

2c. Voting in the Council

Voting on the 2021-2027 budget which contains a coronavirus recovery fund of €750bn (Euronews, 2020) was blocked by Hungary and Poland who casted their vetoes on 25th November 2020 due to the rule of law conditionality criteria (Emerging Europe, 2020). This blockage was neither supported by Czechia nor Slovakia (Emerging Europe, 2020), but was backed by Slovenia, which likewise rhetorically rejected the rationale behind the mechanism (Euronews, 2020; iRozhlas, 2020). Even though Hungarian and Polish vetoes were formally

lifted on 10th December 2020 after it was agreed that the mechanism would be applied only after the verdict of European Court of Justice (Euronews, 2021), the unanimity requirement enabled the two V4 countries to cast the EU into uncertainty in a time of great pressure due to negative externalities inflicted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Since conditionality does not yet apply, but both countries can benefit from the recovery funds, this can be regarded as a partial success for the V4 sub-block. Altogether, when determining the extent of unitary actorness of the V4, this case demonstrated that countries vote according to their national interests but are able to promptly partner up when striving to achieve a common goal, while no significant repercussions occur in the event of deflection.

Discussion

The analysis of the three indicators concerning the rhetoric and action of the V4 countries during the refugee and the rule of law crises revealed differing responses to the crises in terms of the degree of unitary actorness.

Firstly, the case of the refugee crisis witnessed convergence on all three indicators of interest and thus it can be concluded that there was a high extent of unitary actorness of the V4, this finding being in line with the proposed hypotheses. Interestingly, when it comes to determining the rationale behind action, or the most dominant independent variable, it appears that initially the alignment was coincidental but later endeavoured to present itself as purposeful. Evidence of this is the adjustment of rhetoric which originally focused on the preservation of national identity, but was later transformed to the conservation of shared values and the common way of life within the V4, with acclaimed higher goals of safeguarding Europe overall. As a result, policy and voting were predetermined and coordinated. Nevertheless, common action was initiated mainly by Hungary, the only country from the V4 which was considerably exposed to refugees as a transit country. While the objective of halting illegal migration was congruent for all members, the line of argumentation was diverse, Czechia not arguing on religious grounds and countries articulating their concern primarily with regard to domestic populations, an example being the narrative of epidemiological concern for the Polish population. Therefore, while the V4 demonstrated high internal solidarity via common rhetoric and action, the rationale behind collective mobilisation was guided by the logic of consequences and stemmed from the strive to increase bargaining power in the EU's institutions to multiply the chances of fulfilling national objectives. For this reason, H_1 which predicts alignment as a coincidental product of

national preferences is regarded as the leading explanation of the observed outcomes, even though the formal justification of the V4's actions was based on argumentation present in H_2 .

Secondly, the case of the rule of law crisis manifested a V2+2 format of convergence on the three indicators, with Hungary and Poland acting unitedly and Slovakia and Czechia, while both supporting the mechanism, exhibiting limited coordination. Overall, the analysis revealed minimal unitary action of the V4 in their response to the crisis, since only two members assumed a joint approach. Therefore, it becomes apparent that H_2 which predicts unitary actorship based on the logic of appropriateness can be entirely rejected. Alternatively, the Hungarian-Polish alignment can be described as coincidental as it was initiated by Hungary and guided by individual gains – the prospect of avoiding budgetary sanctions being the factor that motivated Poland to join. Thereupon, H_1 is able to explain such divisive format of the V4 in their response, with Hungary and Poland united to increase their leverage as violators, and Slovakia and Czechia refusing to grant their support due to adherence to the EU's standards rather than to the regional grouping. The evidence stemming from the study of the three indicators points to the fact that countries adopt conduct which benefits their domestic interests, and are willing to deflect from the V4 with the knowledge that no repercussions will follow. When comparing this case to the V4's conduct during the refugee crisis, further support for H_1 is present as cooperation and coordination take place only if it is seen as beneficial by all members and as a means of increasing their relative bargaining position vis-à-vis the EU's institutions. Ultimately, this leads to the following verdict with regards to answering the research question: the extent of V4's unitary actorship in times of crises is limited and subject to the strategic calculation which perceives joint actorship as a means of increasing the chances of fulfilling national preferences.

Concluding Remarks

This thesis examined the extent of unitary actorship of the V4 countries in the cases of the refugee and the rule of law crises. The analysis of the three proxies of discourse, policy initiation and voting in the Council enabled the detection of dominant themes to reveal the motives which guided action. The two strands of new institutionalism, rational and sociological institutionalism, were utilised for the formulation of two varying hypotheses regarding the rationale which accounted for specific action of the actors. The comparative assessment carried out in the discussion section indicates that contrary to some beliefs, V4 countries act as independent rational actors in the EU's institutions and unitary action is seen

as a means rather than an end. Moreover, it was demonstrated that the V4 countries exhibit a varying degree of commitment to inciting collective V4 action, with Hungary appearing as the most proactive while Czechia as the least.

The research conducted in this thesis is subject to the limitation of size and scope as well as a distinct time frame. Moreover, different conclusions can be drawn at a later point in time as the asylum policy is constantly under debate and the rule of law crisis is ongoing, with a verdict from the European Court regarding the appeal of Hungary and Poland expected in May 2021. As process tracing of outcomes is a research method which is broad and can be executed in various ways, future research can utilise and further enhance this analysis by the use of different indicators as proxies, by alternatively choosing more or different crises to study, or by simply analysing a larger quantity of sources.

The findings generated by this thesis contribute to the scholarly debate on the V4 and its actorness in the EU from a causal-like perspective. Despite the presence of possible structural drawbacks, the two-level analysis of discourse and action supported the presence of a causal mechanism which stipulates that alignment leads to unitary action and that this alignment is a coincidental product of individual countries' strategic assessment of utility-maximisation according to national preferences. Further research on the actorness of the V4 can help predict the trajectory and the extent of the V4's conduct within the EU's institutions in the occurrence of new crises and integrative challenges.

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Appendix

Table 1: Actorness of V4 in the Refugee and Rule of Law Crises – Empirical Manifestation

Category	Rational Institutionalism <i>(if H₁ holds)</i>	Sociological Institutionalism <i>(if H₂ holds)</i>
Function of V4 in the EU's institutions	V4 countries view the EU's institutions as an arena to advance group interests.	V4 countries function collectively within the EU's institutions to increase their regional power.
Logic of Action & Generation of Policies	Logic of consequences: V4 countries are guided by a rational cost-benefit calculation focusing on maximising the state's utility. Policies are proposed according to national preferences.	Logic of appropriateness: V4 countries are guided by a shared sense of identity and according to established norms and practices. Policies are proposed according to joint preferences – coordination.
Preference formation & Framing	Exogenous preference formation: V4 countries form their preferences independent of the V4, interests are nationally determined.	Endogenous preference formation: The V4 structures the preference formation of the V4 countries, emphasis on collective values.
Discourse	Rhetoric in line with state's national objectives.	Common motives in rhetoric stemming from a shared identity.
Voting	Voting as a block in the Council of the EU when interests are aligned.	Voting as a block in the Council of the EU.