

Editorial introduction

The Visegrad Group (V4), i.e., Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, have been regarded as typically emigrant countries for practically the entire 20th and early 21st centuries. The fact is that a far greater number of their inhabitants went abroad than immigrants arrived there. The situation began to change a few years after the enlargement of the European Union in 2004. Initially, however, these countries experienced significant outflows of inhabitants to other Member States. In the case of Poland, the level of emigration between 2004 and 2008 was so high that it could even be compared to the migration exodus of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the case of the other three countries, the level of emigration, although significant, involved smaller proportions of their citizens.

The benefits of participation in the EU single market, the inflow of structural and cohesion policy funds and, above all, direct investment resulted in accelerated economic growth, which translated into an improved labour market situation. Added to this were the effects of demographic processes initiated after the Second World War (highs and lows in birth rates) and in the 1960s and 1970s (steady decline in fertility rate levels). This resulted in declining numbers entering the labour market in the first and second decades of the 20th century. As a result of these processes, there were shortages in the labour markets of the V4 countries that could be filled by foreigners. Therefore, the V4 governments, albeit to different extents and scales, decided to liberalise access to their labour markets, especially for citizens of Eastern Europe and selected Asian countries. Particularly wide doors to labour markets were opened first by the Czech Republic and later by Poland. In the case of Poland, a very liberal policy of admitting foreigners to the labour market has resulted in a situation where Poland ranked first in the European Union in 2019–2021 in terms of issuing various types of residence rights related to access to the labour market. The migration situation of the V4 countries has also been changed to a very significant extent by Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the related influx of war refugees from that country.

The leading political actors, recognising the possibility of quick political profit, effectively positioned the migrant crisis (2015–2016), and created so many additional levels of interpretation to existing ones, in order to place the issue of immigration and terrorism at the centre of the political agenda. Instead of the preparation for

effective management, there was a communication battle, which hystericised public debate both in domestic politics and at the European level too that basically crushed rational initiatives and correct dialogue. The migration policies of the V4 countries present many similarities that seem to be the effect of congruent historical and economic determinants. During the migration crisis of 2015–2016, the Visegrad states partially coordinated their political communication using the same communication panels, which strongly impacted domestic political relations. Later, the collaboration got disrupted due to the different reactions of the V4 governments after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.

This special issue contains papers analysing the phenomenon of V4 countries transforming from typically emigrational to immigrational ones. Two of them also show the different approaches that have been taken to the influx of immigrants. The first compares Hungary's response to the influx of immigrants during the so-called migration crisis of 2015–2016 with Poland's response during the influx of immigrants across the Polish-Belarusian border in 2021, which has been triggered by Alexander Lukashenko's regime. The second paper analyses and compares the extent and rules on which war refugees from Ukraine have been and continue to be accepted in all four V4 countries. The other three texts included in this special issue on migration analyse the process of Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic becoming migration-oriented states, moreover, examine migration-related policies of the abovementioned states. Thus, the individual texts complement each other and form a whole showing the specificity of the V4 countries on the current migration map of the world.

The 20th century has been called the century of migration. During it, the V4 countries were categorised as emigrational. In the 21st century, migration is becoming even more spectacular, although the time of the COVID-19 pandemic brought global migration to a halt for two years. In the current century, the V4 countries are migrant-receiving countries, which influences how they are perceived around the world. We, therefore, encourage you to read the paper that answers the question of how this whole phenomenon has happened and whether it is already a permanent trend or just a periodic change in the history of migration.