

The Refugee Crisis and the Reaction of the Visegrad Countries

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Responses of the Visegrad 4 Countries to the Current European Migrant Crisis

First lessons of an expert survey

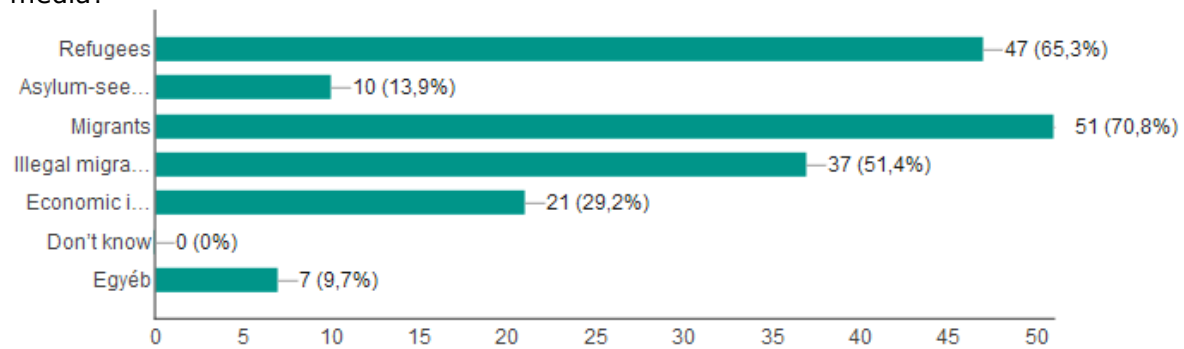
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To supplement the thematic analytical work of our current research project the expert group of the HES in consultation with our partners compiled a comprehensive basic questionnaire in order to map out and identify basic similarities and differences among Visegrad 4 countries in terms of their responses given to the current European migration crisis. The main fields we intended to cover included among others the decisive aspects of the relevant domestic political landscapes and the related historical background, the Visegrad Cooperation, the emerging civic engagement and of course the basic characteristics of the migrants arriving and passing through the V4 countries.

As to the resources of the sought information, our main idea was to invite experts familiar with the issue suggested by our partners from the V4 countries to reply our questionnaire. Besides professionals of academic circles we wanted to rely also on the opinion of the well informed practitioners dealing with this issue from the administration, the media, civil society, etc. For this reason our questionnaire consists of two parts, the first part with general questions on the current political context framing the migration issue while the second part covers the more technical, legal and historical aspects. We have invited some 200 selected people to fill out our questionnaire, of whom 72 complied with 41 % of them completing both parts of the questionnaire. The composition of the respondents' nationality looks quite balanced; 29 % of them being Polish, also 29 % Hungarian, 25 % Czech while 16 % of the respondents were Slovaks. Despite of the relatively high proportion of the answers we naturally do not consider our findings representative in any of the possible aspects due to the qualitative nature of our approach. At the same time however we are convinced that our method can provide a useful orientation point for the further elaboration of our common research project.

In the presentation of the first lessons of our expert survey we restrict ourselves to fleshing the most typical findings, common features, basic similarities in the reactions of the Visegrad 4 countries to the current migration wave.

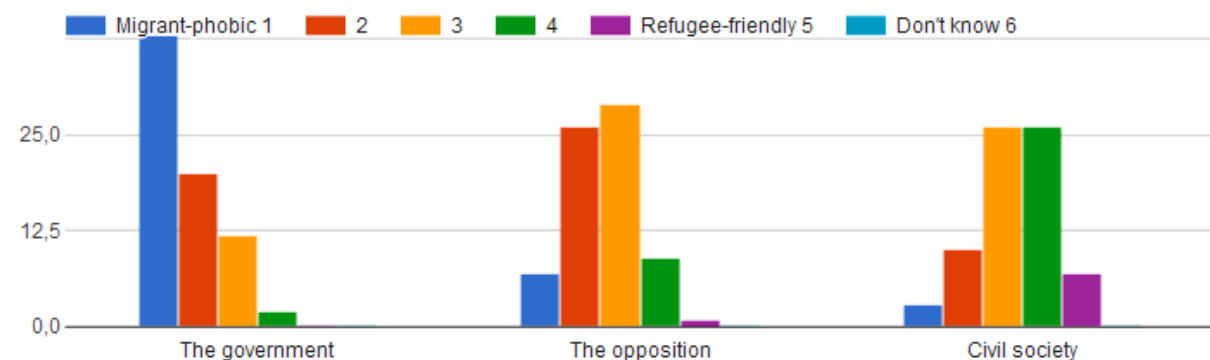
Figure 1: How are people leaving Syria and other conflict zones usually referred to in the media?



According to the answers received migrants arriving from the conflict zones were **most usually referred to by the media as migrants (71%) and as refugees (65%)** while the label of **illegal migrants** was also rather frequently used (51%). Less used terms were economic immigrant (29%) and asylum-seekers (14%) – corresponding somewhat to reality, we could add.

The answers to our question about **the dominant position of the main political actors in the V4 countries towards the current migrant wave** reflect the - presumed, well known - divide between the stance of the government and that of the opposition, as well as the civil society. On a scale of 1-5, i.e. from „migrant-phobic” (1) to „refugee-friendly” (5) the most characteristic negative view belonged to the government, considered to be migrant-phobic by a bit more than half (53 %) of the respondents and close to it (scale degree 2) by a further 28 %.

Figure 2: The dominant position of the main actors towards refugees in V4 countries (Scale 1 is „migrant-phobic” 5 is „refugee-friendly”, 6 is used for „don't know”).

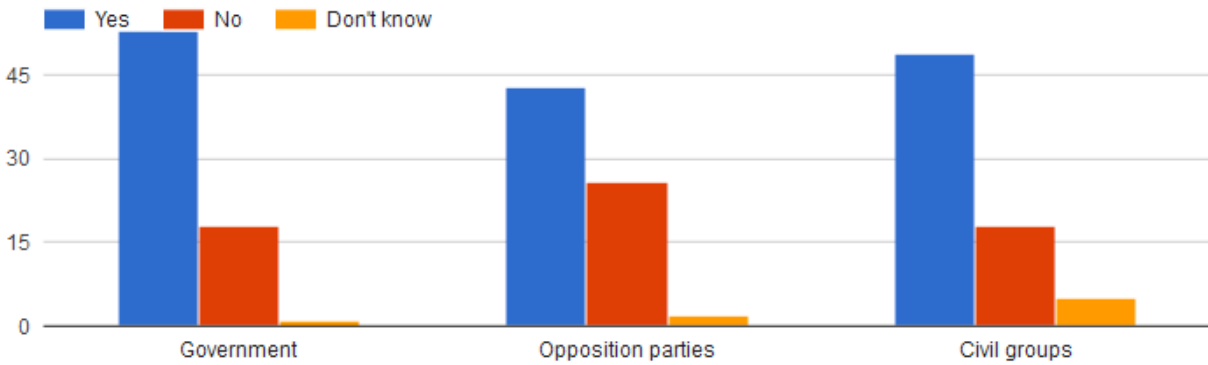


In case of the opposition parties – being dominantly left- wing but in most V4 countries a combination of both left and right wings – the same grades were rather different; 10 % was seen to be migrant phobic and further 28 % is close to it. The civil society showed the most positive picture in terms of scores; only 4% was considered to be migrant-phobic while 10 % was seen to be refugee-friendly and a further 36% close to it (scale degree 4). The calculated average scores of the main political actors are rather temperate in total; they range between 1,7 in case of the government and 3,3 of the civil society whereas the opposition received an average score of 2,6.

Compared to the somewhat commensurable picture of the main political actors' attitude towards the migrants, their **counter refugee actions** must have left a stronger imprint in the memory of our responding experts. According to their answers since the beginning of 2015 not only have 74 % of them encountered any anti-refugee campaigns run by the government, but 60% of them must have seen this type of action run by the opposition parties and 68 % have also encountered such activities initiated by civil groups.

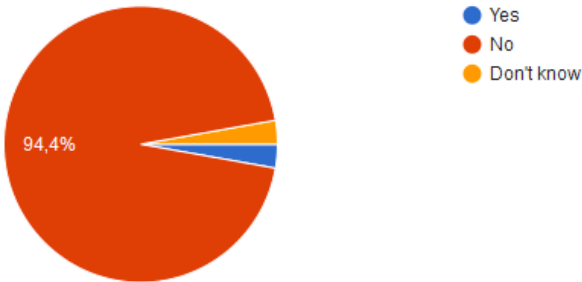
The majority (58%) of the V4 respondents also felt that their government's **position had hardened** during the migration flow in the summer of 2015 and roughly one fourth of them shared the same view about the opposition parties too. The hardened stance of the government was mainly felt after the opening of the borders in Germany (and a bit less as a reaction to the building of the border-fence in Hungary).

Figure 3: Encounters to any anti-refugee campaigns run by the government, opposition parties, or civil groups since 2015.



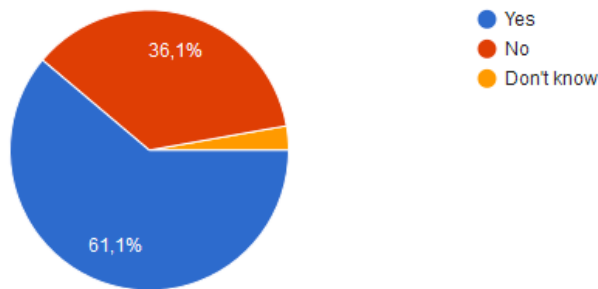
Not surprisingly, close to all respondents (94 %) claimed that the policy of **Angela Merkel was not supported** by their government.

Figure 4: Has your government supported Angela Merkel's policy?



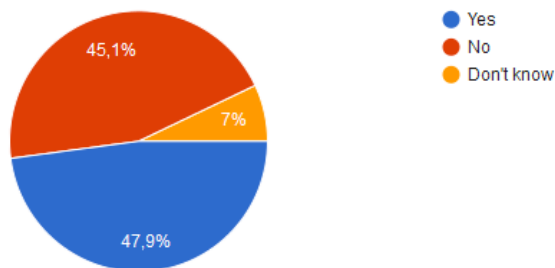
The further accommodation of Angela Merkel's policy by the V4 government was not crystal clear to our experts – either, we could add. Although more than half of them stated that their respective government attempted to develop **alternative propositions to the German position at the European level**, 36 % of them were not aware of such an initiative at all

Figure 5: Has your government attempted to develop alternative propositions to the German position at the European level?



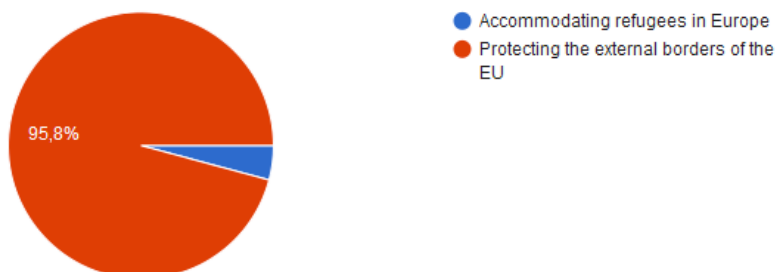
The perception of the burning **dilemma of „how to save the European Union“ without giving up shared European values** proved to be rather ambivalent in the V4 countries according to our experts. Close to half of them (48%) shared the view, that this issue being present in the public discourse, but again close to half of them (45 %) were of the opinion that this issue was not much discussed in the time of the migration wave.

Figure 6: Has the question of „how to save the European Union“ without giving up shared European values been an issue in public discourse?



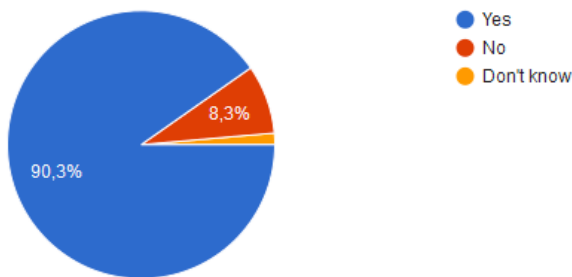
The next question shows much more clearly how the dilemma described above was handled by the V4 governments. According to close to all (96 %) respondents the **government's rhetoric of saving the European Union was limited** to the issue of **protecting the external borders** of the EU, whereas shared European values, such as accommodating refugees in Europe were practically completely neglected.

Figure 7: What has the government emphasised more during the refugee crisis?



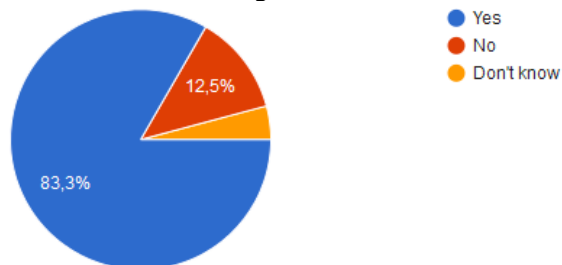
What is more, not only neglected European values but clear **anti-EU rhetoric of the politicians was experienced by 90%** of the responding experts in the V4 countries.

Figure 8: Have politicians in your country used anti-EU rhetoric in order to „save” the nation from migrants?



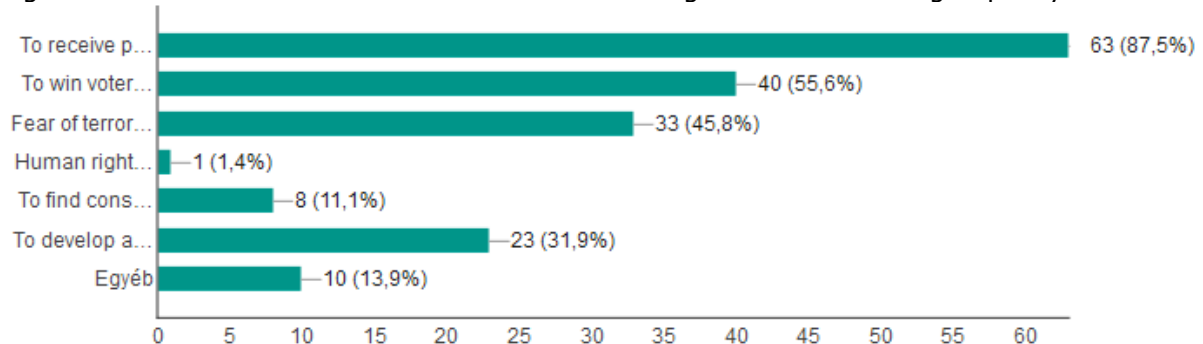
Not at all independently from the experienced practice of using anti-EU rhetoric in handling the migration crisis, **anti –European sentiments** were felt to be raised by the vast majority (83 %) of our respondent.

Figure 9: Has the refugee crisis raised anti-EU sentiments in the public in your country?



The previously discussed aspects of the governments’ manoeuvres are also reflected in the answers to the question concerning the **main motivations of the governments’ refugee policy** in 2015.

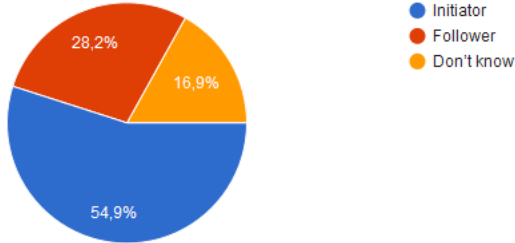
Figure 10: What were the main motivations of the government’s refugee policy?



Professional deliberations, such as human rights approach (1,4 %) or finding consensus inside the European crisis management (11%) were among the least often identified motivation. Even the otherwise widely used government argument referring to the threat of terrorism and to security concerns were mentioned by less than half (46 %) of our experts. At the same time the far most characteristics motivations were seen to be those related to simple – and well known - domestic political considerations, namely to receive popular/electoral support (88 %) and to win voters over from the extremist parties (56 %). We can add that the same distribution of the motives was attributed to the opposition parties as well but to only much lesser extent.

As to the Visegrad cooperation, more than half of the questioned claimed that their government was rather an initiator than a follower of the **V4 positions** regarding the refugee crisis.

Figure 11: Has your government been an initiator or rather a follower to the common V4 positions in relation to the refugee crisis at the European stage in 2015/2016?

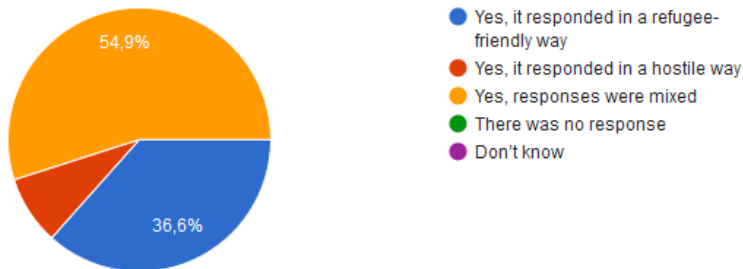


It is probable, that there was essentially no need to be an initiator, because the ideas of the V4 governments pointed to the same direction from default. This is proven by the fact that the „initiators” – according to the replies – mostly put forward identical elements to the common policy, both in practical and in ideological terms, namely: protection of external borders, objection against mandatory refugee quotas and hotspots, supporting border-fences, legal challenges of the EU-decisions, the defence of Christian Europe and supporting intervention in the Syrian war.

Most of the answerers related that the **general perception in the EU of their respective countries** has turned to the worse during the refugee crisis. V4 respondents replied that their countries were viewed in the EU as egotistic, selfish, narrow-minded, islamophobic, marginalized, isolated , xenophobic, troublemakers, lacking solidarity, non-cooperative, nationalistic, naysayers, happy to accept benefits, but unwilling to share burdens. However there seemed to be some small differences among the 4 countries in the sense, that while Hungarians seemed to see their own country as the leader of the pack regarding the negative attitude towards refugees and having changed EU perceptions to the worst, the Czechs answers reflected the CR as the most reluctant follower of the 4 – due to the more liberal stance of the PM -, and a Member State which is encouraged by Germany to „tame” the other 3.

The **response of civil society** to the refugee crisis was ambivalent in the V4 during the period. Although 37 percent of the responses reported „refugee-friendly” attitudes, 54 percent said they were „mixed”, although only 6 percent claimed that they have been outright hostile.

Figure 12: Has the civil society in your country responded to the refugee crisis?



An insight is given to this phenomenon by **how the refugees were portrayed in the public discourse, including the social media**. The Polish answers reflected the general attitude of society as not open for Muslims, regarding refugees as potential terrorists, thieves, economic migrants, parasites, Muslim hordes, foreign invaders, incompatible Islamists mostly, with a weakening minority pointing out that there are doctors, engineers, brain-surgeons and other well educated people among the Syrians, who have dignity and had suffered police brutality in their homeland. In Poland the civil society connected with the Catholic Church and left-liberal political movements influenced the public discourse in a refugee-friendly way, but the public media instructed and managed by the government has been rather hostile to refugees.

In Hungary the overall picture has been quite similar. While a big and successful refugee-helper group had been founded on Facebook during the summer of 2015 as a civic initiative, the deep political division of the country strongly influenced the public discourse on refugees as well, the refugee-unfriendly part of society labelled as „Nazis” by the other, and the previous labelling the latter as „refugee-lovers”. In all the 4 countries public media mostly portrayed refugees in negative terms and stereotypes, often with racist and islamophobic attitudes, highlighting the “uncrossable” divide between Christianity and Islam, using xenophobic language to frame the crisis (economic migrants in designer clothes and smartphones, healthy young men who should fight for their own countries, young men coming to take benefits and teach Islam, not suitable to accept local values, fundamentalists, exporting jihadist ideology, stoking war of civilizations against white people and their values, rapers, culturally different, barbaric, dirty intruders, underminers of social cohesion). It is remarkable, that the public media almost exclusively portrayed men rather than families, refugees shown as a homogeneous group, lacking individual stories. This negative image was also spread by the tabloid media, while broadsheets were somewhat more nuanced. In Poland there have been a number of civil initiatives to welcome refugees with the help of a part of the Catholic Church following the sentence of Pope Francis, but a significant part of the clergy have been speaking of refugees as the incarnation of evil.

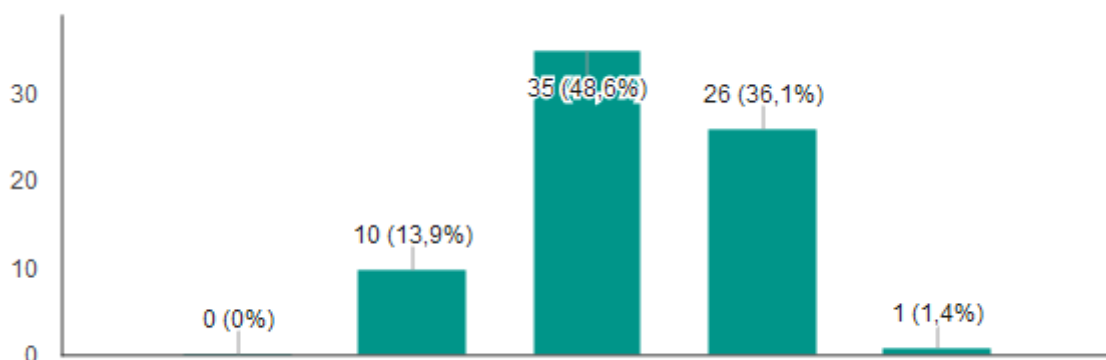
Table 1: How important are the following social fears in rejecting refugees/immigrants from the Middle East and from Africa in your country? (Scale 1-5, where 1 is not important at all and 5 is very important.)

Social fears	Average score
Refugees/immigrants pose a cultural risk to the nation because the majority of them are Muslims.	4,52
Many refugees/immigrant might stay and take jobs that otherwise locals could have.	2,62
The arrival of refugees/immigrants would increase crimes against property.	3,62
The arrival of refugees/immigrants would increase crimes against women.	4,17
The arrival of refugees/immigrants would increase the risk of terrorism.	4,32
Refugees/immigrants would form a parallel society with own norms, institutions, legal systems.	3,91
Refugees/immigrants might slowly become the majority in some regions of the country and later claim territorial autonomy or want to secede	2,51

An important reflection of the general portrayal of refugees by the governments and the public media is, that in the V4 countries refugees are overwhelmingly rejected on a cultural basis, and not so much for economic reasons (see Table 1). Most of our experts considered the refugee's Muslim religion as a very important reason why people in these countries have generally denied welcoming them, moreover - not independently from this perception -, most of our respondents also had the impression, that the general public has a very strong fear of refugees committing crimes. In this latter respect the fear of terrorism is the most important factor, but it is worth mentioning that the public's fear of possible crimes against women plays a bigger role in the rejection of refugees according our experts, than fear of refugees committing crimes against property. At the same time the data clearly show that people in the V4 countries are not really afraid that refugees could pose a threat to their jobs.

The attitudes detailed above have been reinforced by the fact that all of our respondent experts seem to be convinced: refugees would be more welcome in the V4 countries if they were Christians. On the other hand very few of them believed that even in this case the public would be very enthusiastic.

Figure 13: If a similar number of Christian refugees would have to be absorbed from the same regions, would they be more accepted in your society? (Scale of 1-5, where 1 is „they would be totally refused“ and 5 is „they would be very warmly welcome“.)



A paradoxical consequence of the refugee crisis, revealed by our survey has been that it **„relatively“ improved the perception of the native/autochthon minorities in the V4 countries.** While people are generally rejecting Syrians and other Muslims, in Slovakia the situation of the Hungarian ethnic minority improved, since they have the same cultural background and shared values as the majority and they are very well integrated. In Slovakia, the prejudices regarding the Roma minority have basically remained constant, but the public discussion shifted from problems with Roma to problems with migrants. Regarding the Roma, in Hungary the situation is quite the same, in fact, the Roma minority is now sometimes mentioned as less problematic than migrant refugees. Ironically the Roma suddenly have become „our Roma“ to whom we owe attention. However the Hungarian government occasionally made references to the Roma population drawing a parallel between them and the refugees, and some of the anti-Roma prejudices are now used against migrants. In Poland it is the Ukrainian economic migrants now who receive a warmer welcome as they are perceived as „ours“ – Christian, white, hardworking, etc. In the CR it is not only the Ukrainians, but even the Vietnamese that are now rather than before seen as the „good foreigners“, who are able to integrate into society.

Respondents of the survey mentioned only a few, rather spontaneous **civic actions** having provided material and mental assistance to refugees. In Slovakia, it was the Call for Humanity organization. In Hungary there were two of them (Migration Aid and Migszol). There were refugee-friendly demonstrations in Warsaw, welcoming refugees at the airport and the city centre, and „Football against Racism Cup” organized. Several NGOs in all countries gave free legal assistance for refugees. It is important to note that it was only the CR where a high level government politician – namely PM Bohuslav Sobotka – later awarded refugee-helping volunteers, although there were accounts from Slovakia too of refugee-friendly NGOs having been granted financial help by the government to support their activities. On the other end of the spectrum there were significant anti-refugee demonstrations and other hostile civic actions as well in the region (citizens „helping” the police officers to „protect” citizens from refugees in Poland, ultra nationalist groups sending paramilitary to the southern border in Hungary, protests against refugee camps by Slovakian and Hungarian extremists in Slovakia, the creations of the „Bloc against Islam” in Poland, an organization aiming to run on the elections as well).

Respondents remarked that **refugee-friendly civic actors** found it more difficult to find each other and get organised to work in a systematic way, than refugee-hostile ones. Since NGOs have often been frightened of losing government subsidies, they tended to support grass-root refugee assistant organizations in a hidden way, whereas refugee hostile groups sometimes gained support from various political parties and politicians. Refugee-friendly organizations in Poland mostly operated among the same group of people who organise themselves also around other topics (women’s rights, LGBTQ rights, animal rights, workers’ rights), while refugee-hostile groups are close to right wing politicians, use church rhetoric, and are often associated with football clubs. In Hungary the most important refugee-hostile „NGO” is in fact a GONGO (Government Organized Non-Governmental Organization), namely CÖF, which has been founded years ago to support everything the government does. The answers also shed some light on the external connections of the different civic groups of the V4 involved in the refugee issue. It is quite clear, that many of the refugee-hostile organizations have links to the Hungarian Jobbik party, the German Pegida movement and the AfD party, as well as to the Europe of Nations and Freedom group in the European Parliament. Pro-refugee organizations are less connected trans-border: there are some links via e.g. anarchist networks, or simple individual initiatives, plus attempts to collaborate in the framework of the Refugees Welcome network, which was also somewhat assisted on the level of the European Parliament.

Respondents of the survey **could not detect much lasting impact of the civic activities** on the institutional and legal processes of their countries. A positive effect in the CR has been the clear commitment of the government to combat the extreme right and hate crimes, but probably this has to be evaluated in the light of the political battle between a right wing, anti refugee president and a leftwing, moderately refugee-friendly government. In the CR asylum law had been quite tight even before the refugee crisis, and they have not been changed. In Hungary pro refugee civic movements were unable to prevent the erection of the border fence by the government, nor the introduction of extremely strict asylum legislation, e.g. the criminalization of illegal entry. Polish immigration law is not

hostile to refugees, and the public administration treats foreigners well, but the Law and Justice government's rhetoric is strongly against multiculturalism and anti-Islam, appraising Viktor Orban's politics, while society is ill informed by the mainstream media about the crisis, about Islam, and about why the people are actually fleeing from the Middle East. All in all the achievements of most V4 refugee-friendly civic organizations have been described by our respondents as more or less successful damage-control actions. The result of which was that the tense situation created by the refugee-inflows of 2015 did not escalate to open aggression, and the tide of public opinion fuelled by governments stopped short of turning outright against immigrants.