Changes in the Political Discourse of Eastern European Countries in the Context of the Migration Crisis and Combating Human Rights Violations

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Abstract

The aim of the study is the analysis of changes in political discourse in the Eastern European countries during the migration crisis and its impact on political decisions. A mixed approach, combining graphic methods, comparative methods, sociological method and content analysis of studies and political texts, was used. The results of the study indicate significant changes in the political discourse during the migration crisis, which are characterized by the formulation of migration as a security threat, the prioritization of national identity, and the rise of populism. The political leaders' favour of anti-immigration sentiments reflects the influence of public opinion on policy decisions, while the media have played a key role in strengthening the securitized discourse. The study determines the impact of these changes in discourse on policy decisions, including the adoption of restrictive immigration measures and their consequences for European integration, democratic values, socio-cultural dynamics, and security.

Keywords: Eastern Europe, migration crisis, political discourse, national identity, populism, European integration, political decisions, protection, human rights violations.

Introduction

The political landscape of Eastern Europe has undergone significant transformations in recent years, especially after the migration crisis. Eastern Europe has historically been a region with complex political dynamics, with transitions from communist regimes to democratic governance. However, the migration crisis of the last decade has created unprecedented challenges for the region's political landscape (Spiegel & Mhlanga, 2022; Esses et al., 2017). The

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increasing flow of migrants, combined with different national responses, has created a unique context that requires in-depth study.

The migration crisis in Europe during the last decade has had profound consequences for politics in the region (Kajánek, 2022). It began with a significant influx of refugees and migrants caused by conflict, instability and economic inequality in the Middle East and North Africa. The crisis has intensified as hundreds of thousands of people have sought asylum in the European Union, leading to a range of challenges including border security, humanitarian problems, and political discrepancies. The unprecedented refugee crisis of recent years was caused by Russian military aggression in Ukraine (Lee et al., 2023). The migration crisis and the transformation of the political discourse in Eastern Europe bring the issue of human rights protection to the fore. Strengthening national security and identity measures are appropriate, but it is extremely important to find a balance between solving security problems and countering human rights violations, especially in the context of the issue of migration processes.

The relevance of the study is identifying the consequences of the migration crisis both for Eastern Europe and for the European Union as a whole. Existing disagreements and differences in ideology between Eastern European countries are exacerbated by concerns about human rights, security, and solidarity within the European Union. Understanding the evolution of political discourse in the region is crucial to understanding the existing multifaceted issues.

The aim of the study is the analysis of the transformation of the political discourse in the Eastern European countries during the migration crisis and its impact on political decisions and general approaches to solving migration problems.

The aim involved the fulfilment of the following research objectives:
1. Analyse the changes in the political discourse of Eastern European countries regarding the migration crisis and migration policy in general over recent years.
2. Study the influence of changes in the political discourse on relevant political decisions and legislation in the field of migration in the countries of the region.
3. Determine the impact of the results of the transformation of the political discourse on the general vector of the development of Eastern European countries in the issues of European integration, national identity, securitization, changes in electoral attitudes, and attitudes towards migrants.

The migration crisis has led to significant changes in the political discourse of Eastern European countries. It can be assumed that these changes are

characterized by increased attention to issues related to border security, national identity and sovereignty, which affects the political decisions of these countries.

Literature review

International migration is a complex phenomenon influenced by various factors and causes. Conflicts, instability, economic imbalances, globalization, new means of communication, and the increasing impact of climate change lead to increasing levels of mobility. However, recent developments indicate that new challenges are being added to existing ones, resulting in unpredictable situations that evolve rapidly, involve a complex interplay of driving forces, or are based on deliberate and hostile actions by other states. This new migration environment is shaped by a number of factors: the continued impact of long-term trends and drivers, the impact of growing geopolitical competition, the direct and indirect impact of war and conflict (ICMPD, 2023a).

Migration is a response to shocks and global imbalances, such as huge gaps in income and well-being across countries. About 40% of the world's population (3.5 billion people) live in places that are highly affected by climate change. Economic opportunities in affected regions decrease, thereby increasing migration pressure (World Bank, 2023).

Understanding the dynamics of the migration crisis is important for predicting its impact on Eastern Europe. Different Eastern European countries have responded differently to the crisis: some of them adopt more restrictive immigration policies and others advocate a more compassionate approach.

Studies in this area establish that political leaders and parties in Eastern Europe have taken advantage of the migration crisis to advance their political agendas. They presented the crisis as a threat to national identity and security, often using rhetoric that resonated with their electoral base. This shift in policy discourse has influenced policy decisions as governments have introduced measures to address the challenges posed by the migration crisis (Hutter & Kriesi, 2022; Hadj Abdou et al., 2022).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) adopted by the United Nations established a universally recognized list of fundamental rights and freedoms that should be protected уйгфддн for all people, regardless of their nationality, ethnic origin or migration status. The UDHR defined the right to freedom of movement (Article 13), the right to seek asylum from persecution (Article 14) and the right to citizenship (Article 15) (United Nations, 1948). These provisions are particularly relevant in the context of the migration crisis, as a significant number of migrants and refugees are fleeing conflicts, violence, and human rights violations in their countries of origin.

In the current conditions, it is of particular concern that some Eastern European countries have implemented strict immigration policies and securitized discourse, which may worsen the protection of human rights for migrants and refugees. In turn, the above implies resistance to human rights violations. The European migration policy is increasingly diverging from the EU's commitments to uphold human rights. Signs of discrimination, limitations on freedoms, and failure to uphold certain social rights are observed (Bast et al., 2022). The migrant crisis is fostering an exclusive policy within the European Union, leading to increased human rights violations (Christofi & Georgiadou, 2023), which escalate into criminal actions by migrants attempting to defend their rights by any means necessary (Muñoz, 2022).

Some Eastern European countries, such as Hungary, responded to the migration crisis by introducing new restrictive rules to prevent the influx of migrants (Kallius, 2017; Goździak, 2023). These actions indicate that narratives about the threat to national identity and security from the influx of migrants have intensified in the political discourse of these countries. Individual countries are accused of unwillingness to adhere to the European values of solidarity and humanism in the treatment of migrants in some other eastern EU members. Gellwitzki and Houde write about the strengthening of populist, anti-migrant and Eurosceptic narratives in the political discourse of some Eastern European countries in the context of the migration crisis (Gellwitzki & Houde, 2023). One of the problems is the institutional changes in the EU, which caused a certain differentiation in the process of adopting new legislative acts (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2023).

Researchers conducted extensive studies on the migration crisis and its impact on political discourse in Eastern Europe. A number of studies are often based on different theoretical approaches. Many studies have applied framing theory to examine how political actors in Eastern Europe formulated the migration crisis (Czymara & Klingeren, 2022). It examines how different frames such as security (Tkaczyk, 2017; Lloyd & Sirkeci, 2022), cultural identity and humanitarianism, mass media (Czymara & Klingeren, 2022) influence public opinion and political decisions.

In general, the research provides a ground for understanding the role of political discourse in Eastern European countries during the migration crisis, showing the complex relationship between rhetoric and policy decisions and providing a basis for further analysis in this study.

Methods

The transformation of political discourse in the Eastern European countries in response to the migration crisis was studied through a mixed research method. This approach combined qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current complex dynamics. The research design determined the relevant stages:

1)   identification of the reasons for immigration to Europe and the quantitative distribution of migrants according to recipient countries (European Commission, 2023; Eurostat, 2023a);

2)   analysis of the category of entry into selected European countries in 2005-2020 (OECD, 2021; OECD &European Commission, 2023);

3)   assessment of the perception of immigration as a problem or opportunity for EU countries (European Commission, 2022);

4)   assessment of state activities to promote the integration of immigrants into the EU (European Commission, 2022);

5)   identifying the approaches of selected Eastern European countries to the migration crisis (Balsam, 2023; Beger, 2023; Bureš & Stojanov, 2022; Stefancik et al., 2022; Thérová, 2023).

The EU statistics on various migration-related aspects (Eurostat, 2023a; Eurostat, 2023b; OECD, 2021; European Commission, 2023; OECD &European Commission, 2023) and the results of a public opinion survey conducted by the European Commission (2022) were used as research materials. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods made it possible to obtain a more holistic view of the subject of research.

Data from sociological surveys are used to assess public attitudes towards migration and related policies (European Commission, 2022). The specified quantitative data complemented the analysis of political texts, were used to assess changes in political discourse and public attitudes, as well as identify trends and relationships.

Results

Contemporary cross-border movements are characterized by their diversity: there are no typical migrants or typical countries of origin or destination. Migrants differ in motivations for moving, skills and demographic characteristics, legal status, circumstances and prospects. There are about 184 million migrants around the world (approximately 2.3% of the world's population), 37 million of them are refugees. Approximately 43% (52 million economic migrants and 27 million refugees) live in low- and middle-income countries. They moved mainly for work or family reunification or in search of protection. Global migration has grown more than three times faster than population growth in high-income

countries and twice as fast as population growth in low-income countries (World Bank. 2023).

Before the migration crisis, political discourse in Eastern European countries was characterized by a wide range of issues that were discussed with varying degrees of expressiveness. The discourse was influenced by the historical experience of the region in the field of migration, in particular, the accession to the European Union. In many Eastern European countries, the narrative emphasized the benefits of EU membership and the promotion of democratic values. The discourse has, however, also been influenced by populist elements, while some politicians occasionally use anti-immigration rhetoric to gain support.

As of January 1, 2022, 23.8 million citizens of non-EU countries (5.3% of the total EU population) found shelter in European society (European Commission, 2023). Almost 3.7 million first residence permits were issued in the EU in 2022, compared to 2.9 million in 2021, which is higher than before the COVID-19 pandemic (3.0 million in 2019) (Eurostat, 2023a). Permits were granted for various reasons (Figure 1).
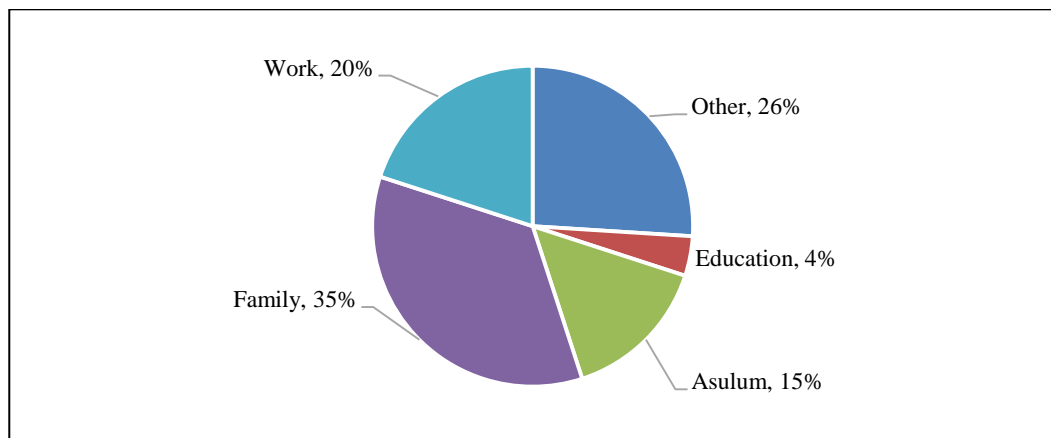

Figure 1. Reasons to stay in Europe, 2021 (Eurostat, 2023a)

If we consider the 2021-2022 situation, the residents of Ukraine received the largest number of residence permits in EU member states (Figure 2). The residents of Ukraine obtain residence permits in EU member states through various mechanisms, such as work visas, family reunification programmes, or student programmes. This may be determined by various factors, such as a wide range of job opportunities, educational opportunities, or a more stable economic and political environment compared to some other regions. Current migration trends indicate the attractiveness of EU countries for Ukrainian citizens and may

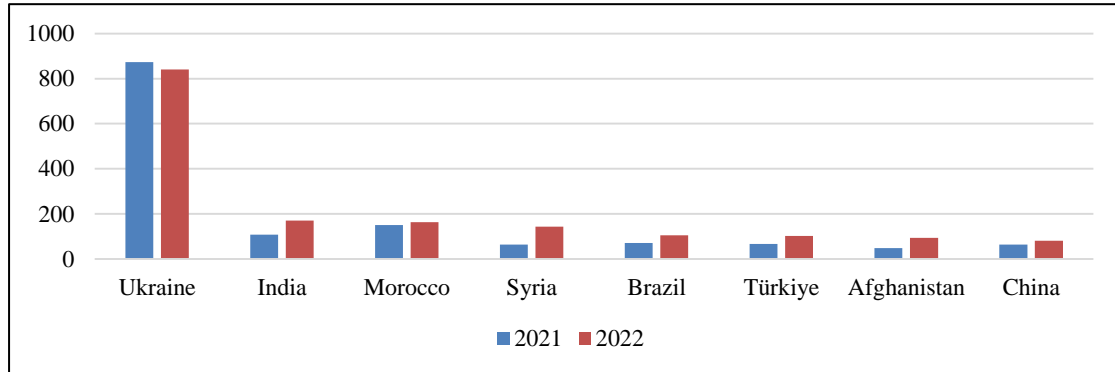be caused not only by economic factors, but also by cultural, educational or family motives.

Figure 2. Residence permits issued in EU member states, thousand (Eurostat, 2023b)

Various aspects of the immigrant issue intensified after the Russian military aggression in Ukraine in early 2022, and the number of those seeking asylum or better opportunities for life and development increased significantly (Ruiz, 2022). Almost a third of Ukraine's pre-war population was displaced by the end of February 2023, including more than 8 million refugees registered in Europe. In 2023, Poland accepted 1.6 million Ukrainian refugees, Germany — 1 million. Refugee-hosting countries quickly introduced temporary protection regimes, which now cover more than 4.8 million Ukrainian citizens. At least 80% of refugees plan to stay in their countries until the end of hostilities and improving of the situation in Ukraine (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023).

The analysis of the motives of immigration shows the main needs: labour migration, family migration, free movement, accompanying the family of workers, humanitarian migration (Figure 3). The study of these motives emphasizes the diversity of the immigrant community in the European Union and the importance of adaptive migration policies that take into account the different needs and motivations of people coming to the region. Considering these aspects, the EU countries can interact more effectively with the immigrant population, promoting their integration and joint development.
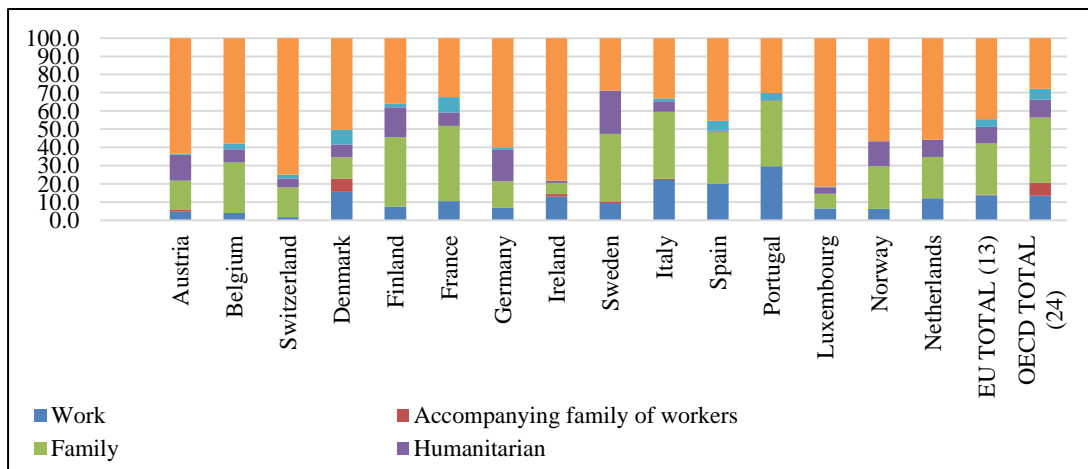
Figure 3. Categories of entry, 2005-2020 (OECD, 2021; OECD &European Commission, 2023)

The thesis that the electorate, based on its own ideological views or preferences, forms the political structure of national authorities and the European Parliament (Galiñanes, 2023), emphasizes the necessity to reveal the voters' vision of the current situation with the consequences of immigration. An important indicator is the perception of immigration by the EU citizens in relation to the consequences it generates. The local population can understand immigration as a problem or, on the contrary, as future opportunities for the development of the country or region (Figure 4).
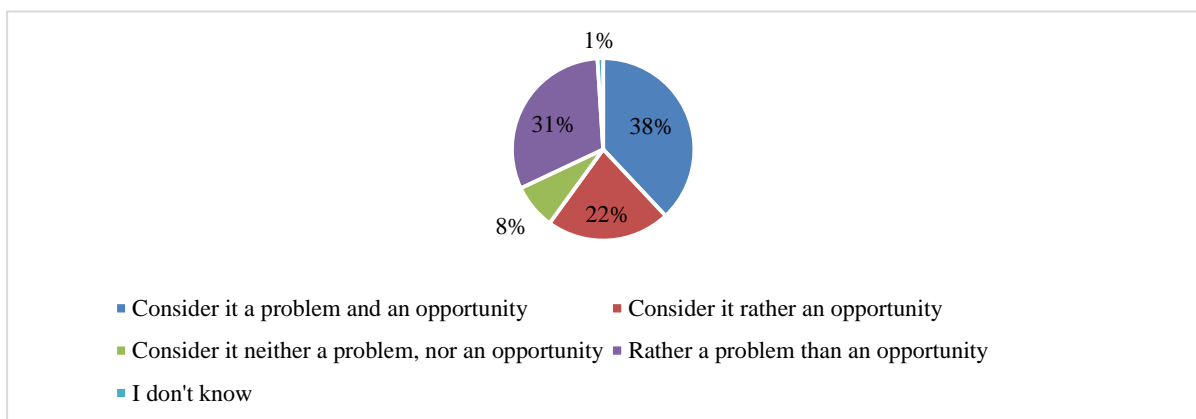

Figure 4. Assessment of the perception of immigration as a problem or an opportunity (European Commission, 2022)

The transformation of political discourse during the migration crisis had a tangible impact on political decisions and actions in the Eastern European countries. In response to the migration crisis, many Eastern European countries

have implemented and enforced stricter immigration policies. Political actions, guided by the preservation of national security, include strengthening border control, increasing the number of detentions of migrants and legal restrictions for asylum seekers.

Populist leaders with anti-immigration positions have gained significant support. This influenced political decisions and contributed to the success of certain political parties in the elections. The issues related to migration began to dominate the political debate, as the crisis escalated and the number of migrants seeking asylum in the EU increased. It can be stated that the vision of the integration of immigrants in the EU is a priority issue for governments (Figure 5).
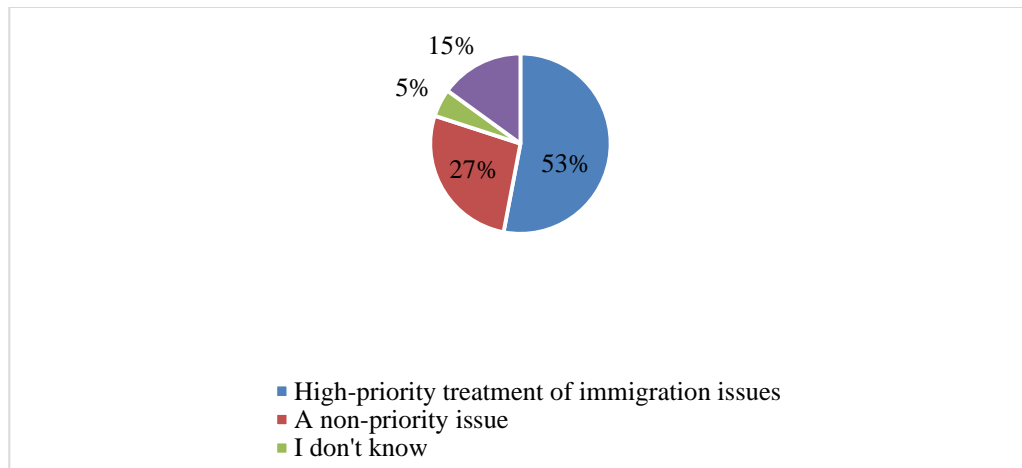

Figure 5. Assessment of the activities undertaken by the state to promote the integration of immigrants (European Commission, 2022)

At the same time, Eastern European countries have often positioned themselves as defenders of their borders, emphasizing the need to improve security measures to protect their national interests. In the existing discourse, migration is related to the risks associated with terrorism and crime, and discussions about the preservation of national identity and sovereignty occupy a prominent place

A comparative analysis of Eastern European countries revealed differences in their responses to the migration crisis. Although a general shift towards securitized discourse and restrictive policies was evident, there were other differences (Table 1).

Table 1. Approaches of individual Eastern European countries to the migration crisis

Country	Political intentions and actions
Hungary	Under the V. Orban's leadership, the country demonstrated one of the strongest reactions to the migration crisis. Strict immigration laws have been introduced and migration is seen as a direct threat to national identity (Beger, 2023). However, this position has faced criticism from human rights organizations for violating human rights. At the same time, there are opposition forces in the country advocating for a more balanced approach.
Poland	The country has taken a restrictive stance on migration, but the discourse has been less overtly anti-immigrant. The Polish government justified its policy by emphasizing security considerations and the need to protect national culture (Thérová, 2023). However, Polish society remains divided on this issue, which has led to a more moderate approach in some aspects.
Czech Republic, Slovakia	There was a shift in discourse towards securitization and restrictive policies, but the tone was less confrontational compared to Hungary. Public opinion was divided, leading to more moderate approaches (Stefancik et al., 2022; Bureš & Tojanov, 2022). At the same time, right-wing populist parties used anti-immigration rhetoric to mobilize the electorate.
Romania	Facing challenges related to border management, but varying degrees of political polarization. Support for relatively moderate discourse and politics in times of crisis (Balsam, 2023). The government maintained a relatively moderate discourse and policy during the crisis period, although there were differences within the authorities regarding migration issues.

Overall, in Eastern Europe, there were significant differences in the intensity of changes in political discourse and responses to the migration crisis, reflecting the diversity of approaches in this region. In all analyzed countries, migration was depicted as a threat to national security, and the political discourse increasingly emphasized the need to protect borders. Most governments adopted stricter migration laws and measures to limit the influx of migrants. In some countries, such as Poland and the Czech Republic, society was deeply divided regarding attitudes toward migration, prompting governments to adopt more balanced approaches. In others, like Hungary, anti-migration discourse dominated.

Thus, despite the general trend towards the securitization of migration and the strengthening of anti-migration discourse, the response of Eastern European countries to the migration crisis was heterogeneous.

Consequently, the migration crisis had a profound impact on political discourse, politics and actions in the Eastern European countries. The discourse shifted towards securitization, national identity, and populism, which led to the adoption of restrictive immigration measures. Understanding the existing changes in discourse and their consequences is crucial to understanding the evolution of the political landscape of Eastern Europe.

Discussion

The results of the study are consistent with previous studies on the securitization of migration in political discourse. Studies Czymara & Klingeren (2022) and Von Rosen (2019) emphasized the role of security framing in the securitization of issues, which was evident in the migration discourse of Eastern European countries. Security-related rhetoric and images of migration as a threat are consistent with securitization theory (Balzacq, 2019).

The study of the influence of political discourse on political decisions and actions is also consistent with the existing literature. A study Decarli (2015) demonstrate how political discourse can influence policy outcomes. The results of the study confirm the connection between securitized discourse and the adoption of restrictive immigration policies, as observed in Hungary, Poland and other Eastern European countries (Bockel, 2021).

In addition, the influence of populist elements in the discourse and its alignment with public opinion is a constant theme in the literature. Detailed studies demonstrate a link between populism, anti-immigration sentiment, and political success. Their findings suggest that the migration crisis provided an opportunity for populist leaders in Eastern Europe to mobilize support by presenting migration as a threat to national identity and security (Ismayilzada, 2023).

The International centre for Migration Policy Development report (ICMPD, 2023b) forecasts migration issues to focus on in 2023, including: high migration pressure in times of global polycrisis; concentration on migration routes of the Western Balkans and the Central Mediterranean; probable second wave of refugees from Ukraine; growth of migration partnerships between EU member states and non-European partners.

Migration pressure will not reduce because of the escalation of violent conflict, political instability and worsening economic conditions in many regions of origin, as well as the effects of the global supply and cost of living crisis.

Newly concluded partnerships in the area of migration and mobility, which are based on the interests of the Member States and their partners outside the EU, will facilitate not only legal migration, but also cooperation in preventing illegal migration (ICMPD, 2023b).

The analysis of interpretations and possible explanations enables a deeper understanding of the changes observed in the political discourse and their consequences. Several key factors contribute to changes in discourse and political decisions during the migration crisis (Table 2).

Table 2. Changes in political discourse

Reasons	Consequences of changes
Historical context	The historical experiences of Eastern European countries, such as the legacy of communism and the transition to democracy, played a role in shaping their response to the migration crisis. A legacy of authoritarianism and a strong emphasis on national sovereignty influenced the discourse, emphasizing the need to protect borders and preserve national identity.
Influence of mass media	The mass media often reinforced the securitized discourse, contributing to the public perception of the crisis. This influence of mass media in combination with the development of social networks contributed to the spread of populist narratives.
Public opinion	The orientation of political leaders to public mood was an important factor in the formation of discourse and political decisions. As the public expressed concern about immigration, politicians who took anti-immigration positions gained political support.
Regional differences	Differences in the intensity of changes in discourse and political reaction between Eastern European countries can be explained by regional differences. Countries such as Hungary and Poland, with strong nationalist governments, have displayed more confrontational rhetoric and restrictive policies. In contrast, such countries as Romania and Bulgaria followed a more moderate approach.

Giving priority to human rights protection in responding to the migration crisis, Eastern European countries are obligated to promote a humane approach to managing migration processes, prioritizing human rights protection in addressing

the migration crisis. The legislation of Eastern European countries should provide fair asylum procedures, including ensuring adequate legal representation and ensuring non-discriminatory decision-making. It becomes important to observe the principle of preventing the forced return of refugees to the territory where their life or freedom may be in danger, based on the implementation of reliable mechanisms for identifying persons in need of international protection.

Politicians should counter the spread of populist narratives and foster a balanced political discourse based on facts and respect for diversity. EU countries need to better coordinate efforts to address the root causes of migration, combat human trafficking, and establish legal channels for migration. It is essential to strengthen cooperation among Eastern European countries on migration policy issues, information sharing, and best practices for ensuring the rights of migrants. Regional coordination of actions will enable a more effective response to the impacts of the migration crisis.

Conclusions

The study demonstrated the processes of transformation of political discourse in the Eastern European countries during the migration crisis. The migration crisis has led to significant changes in political discourse, with a notable emphasis on securitization, national identity, and populism. Political leaders and the media have played a key role in framing migration as a security threat, reinforcing the need to protect borders and cultural heritage.

Although the migration crisis poses significant challenges for the countries of Eastern Europe, it is extremely important that the issue is resolved on the basis of ensuring the human rights protection in relation to migrants. A significant number of human rights violations identified in Eastern European countries affected by the migration crisis compel the search for appropriate changes in the state policies of those countries and criminal punishment for human rights violations.

Further research in these areas is important for understanding the complexities of political discourse, political response, and societal implications in Eastern Europe.

Recommendations

Separate recommendations should be given regarding the formation of emigration policy.

1. Eastern European countries must find a balance between security policy and the protection of fundamental human rights in migration matters.

2. Governments should counter the spread of populist narratives and shape a balanced political discourse based on facts and respect for diversity.

3. EU countries should coordinate their efforts to address issues related to the causes of migration, combat human trafficking, and establish legal migration channels.

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