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Crisis? What crisis? Social policy when crises are and are not crises in Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia

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Abstract

In this article, we analyse how different governments have dealt with situations, labelled as 'crises' in the international and national discourses. More specifically, we analyse how the Czech, Hungarian and Slovak governments framed and dealt with their social policies during the 2008 'financial crisis', the 2015 'refugee crisis', and the 2020 'Covid crisis'. We argue that sometimes governments and the mass media frame the situation as a crisis, when objectively it would be hard to argue empirically that there really was a crisis. At other times, according to objective criteria, there is ample evidence that there is indeed a crisis, but the government tries to deny it for political reasons. Despite differences in objective conditions and differences in political constellations, none of the policymakers in the three countries took advantage of the windows of opportunity that the alleged crises presented to carry out path-changing social policy? changes. Instead, the changes we rather small and usually only temporary; thus, showing the importance of path dependency even during crisis situations.

KEYWORDS
Central Europe, crisis, path dependency, window of opportunity

1 | INTRODUCTION

So far, this new century has been filled with crises—or at least the popular discourses have framed these issues as crises. This includes the 2008 'financial crisis', the 2015 'refugee crisis', and the 2020 'Covid crisis'. This large number of perceived crises is the impetus for this special issue on crisis and social policies. We have chosen three post-communist, Central European countries (Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia), because they represent especially interesting cases. First, in contrast to the West European countries, these countries all faced major crises in the two decades before the new century, as economic and political crises in the 1980s helped bring about the collapse of the communist regimes (e.g., Saxonberg 2001). This forced the newly democratised countries to quickly implement a large amount of reforms, including reforms in their social policies, such as setting up mechanisms to deal with a free labour market (e.g., Inglot, 2008; Vanhuysse, 2006). Second, compared to many West European countries, some of these 'crises', would hardly meet any objective criteria of crisis, but rather became 'crises', because the popular discourse portrayed it as such. For example, although the collapse of the financial markets in the USA in 2008 nearly led to a collapse of the American economy, its impact on Czechia was rather mild, but the right-wing politicians in power used the claim of 'crisis' to defend their decision to introduce unpopular austerity measures (e.g., Saxonberg & Sirovátka 2014). In addition, while the war in Syria did lead to a large influx of refugees to some countries, such as Germany and Sweden, very few refugees applied for asylum in the post-communist countries (UNHR, 2023a). Yet, this did not prevent politicians in these countries from speaking about a 'refugee crisis' and running anti-immigrant election campaigns. Consequently, by studying these three countries, we can better understand the interplay between objective conditions and the subjective manner in which politicians frame these conditions and introduce social policies to deal with these conditions.

In this article, we will focus on the three main crises of this new millennium: the financial crisis, the refugee crisis, and the COVID pandemic, but we will also take into account the policy legacies that developed in the 1990s when the governments of these countries had to deal with the immediate crisis of transforming their economies to market economies. We pose the question: 'how have these crises influenced the social policy trajectories of the three countries?'

This article proceeds by first briefly describing our definition of crisis, and then explains our theoretical framework, followed by a section on our choice of countries and methodology, after which we analyse each of the three crises. For reasons of space, we restrict ourselves to discussions of the labour market, healthcare and family policies, but our conclusions would not change if we added other types of social policies. We choose these three areas because labour market and family policies play a central role in protecting jobs and families with children during any type of crisis, while healthcare policies are essential during pandemics and healthcare is also a key issue for immigrants.

2 | WHAT CONSTITUTES A CRISIS?

Some social scientists have emphasised the objective side of crises. For example, they see crises as unexpected, major events which have the potential to lead to a negative outcome (Coman et al., 2021; Fearn-Banks, 2010). Traditionally, a crisis was seen as a situation in which radical changes in objective conditions 'had the power to pose unavoidable, harsh and non-negotiable alternatives' (Koselleck & Richter, 2006: 399). According to the 'crisis-as-event model', 'crises are real, and their meaning is objective and self-evident' (Spector, 2019: 64). Another approach defines crises as 'collective stress' created by a situation in which traditional tools of policymaking no longer work (e.g., Capano et al., 2022).

Others argue that crises are based on subjective perceptions more than objective conditions. Laffan (2014: 266) argues that a crisis is a socially constructed phenomenon. Boin and Rhinard (2023: 657) claim that crises emerge when 'when political elites perceive a significant threat to core values or critical infrastructures, which require an urgent response under conditions of deep uncertainty'. Some social scientists combine subjective with objective criteria. Thus, t'Hart and Tindall (2009: 4, based on Boin et al. 2005) claim that crises take place when 'the problems confronting society are widely perceived as threatening and urgent, yet also involve high levels of uncertainty'.

We support the claim that it is highly subjective to decide whether something represents a crisis or not. If leading politicians claim that something is a crisis and frame it as such, then the political dynamics evolve around the alleged crises, regardless of whether one could 'objectively' claim there is a crisis. We do not agree with t' Hart and Tindall (2009) that for a situation to be a crisis there must be high levels of uncertainty. If we take the example of the wave of immigration that came to Europe as a result of the wars in Syria and Iraq, there were very low levels of uncertainty in the three countries of our study, because the actual number of immigrants coming to these countries was quite small. Nonetheless, since politicians framed the situation as being a crisis, the mass media to a large extent accepted it and politicians were able to win elections when emphasising this issue, we consider this to represent a crisis. Besides, it is difficult to objectively determine levels of uncertainty, but it is quite easy to ascertain whether leading politicians used the term 'crisis' or not to frame a situation.

Thus, in this article, we define a crisis as a situation in which key political and social actors define it as such. As Hay notes, (1996: 255)

> Crisis, then, is not some objective condition or property of a system defining the contours for subsequent ideological contestation. Rather, it is subjectively perceived and hence brought into existence through narrative and discourse.

According to our definition, a crisis emerges when the government or main opposition parties define it as such. Of course, crises have an objective element, because if there is a radical change in objective conditions, it can become increasingly difficult for governments to ignore this, and in democratic countries, opposition leaders and the mass media are also likely to frame this change as a crisis that requires action. An example is that when Trump tried to deny that COVID presented a threat, the increasing death rates encouraged the mass media and opposition leaders to frame the situation as a crisis that demanded action.

3 | THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

Crises make a good starting point for analysing the various interpretations of historical institutionalism. On the one hand, some studies have concluded that institutional paths are so resilient that social policies change very little even during crises (e.g., Béland, Cantillon, et al., 2021; Béland, Dinan, et al., 2021). According to Moreira and Hick (2021: 262), policies remain path dependent during times of uncertainty, because policymakers stick to what they know best, so governments avoid unknown policy alternatives. Previous studies of COVID policies in Europe conclude that path dependency was strong and governments in social democratic countries mostly introduced incremental, short-term changes (e.g., Greve et al., 2021), as did the Central-European post-communist countries (Aidukante, et al., 2021; Sirovátka, Saxonberg & Csudai, 2023). However, liberal countries introduced additional measures besides increasing the generosity of the existing ones (Béland, Cantillon, et al., 2021; Béland, Dinan, et al., 2021; Hick & Murphy, 2021). Meanwhile, continental and South European welfare states adopted some new protective mechanisms for non-standard workers (Cantillon et al., 2021; Moreira et al., 2021). Thus, the absorptive capacity of the welfare state goes along with path dependency: welfare states with lower absorptive capacity are more likely to introduce additional measures.

On the other hand, others see crises as the type of 'external shocks' that create critical junctures that make it much easier for policymakers to implement radical change (e.g., Burchardt, 2020; Schmidt, 2020) or windows of opportunity (Kuhlmann et al., 2021), which allow policymakers to introduce social policies that can change the path of development. Greve (2020) notes a government can use a crisis as a 'game changer', while Capano et al. (2022: 4) argue that Covid could 'be thought of as potentially a significant path disrupter....' The garbage can theory fits in well with the notion of windows of opportunity: when a crisis comes along, it creates an opportunity for policymakers to pull out ideas from the garbage can, which they rather secretly supported, but did not dare introduce because under normal times such measures would not be popular (Aberbach & Christensen, 2001; Kingdon, 1984). Yet, the garbage can only work when there is garbage to pull out of the can. If policymakers do not have hidden agendas and are lacking in innovative ideas, they are likely to miss their window of opportunity, so that exogenous shocks, which theoretically can create critical junctures do not actually become critical junctures unless policymakers have path-changing ideas. Our study shows that policymakers were lacking in such ideas, such they mostly introduced short-term incremental change or—in the case of immigration—they did not introduce any meaningful changes at all in their social policies. In other words, theorists of the garbage can theory and the window-of-opportunity approach tend to assume that a group of policymakers have a secret agenda and they were waiting for the right opportunity to propose their far-reaching, path-changing reforms that they normally would not find politically feasible to propose, but our study shows that the Central European policymakers did not have any hidden agenda, but rather stuck to their country's policy legacies.

In reality, the choice is not only between radical policies that cause a change of path or no change. Some amount of incremental change is also possible (e.g., Capano et al., 2022). Thus, one study of social policy measures taken during the first wave of the COVID pandemic in Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia shows that these countries did implement some new measures, but these changes were basically within their previous path of development (Aidukante, et. al., 2021).

The question is also how permanent these changes are. It is also possible that rather than change their policy paradigms, the governments introduce short-term measures that elapse after a few years after which they introduce austerity measures to deal with the budget deficits that grew during the crisis period (Starke et al., 2013; Vis et al., 2011). Capano et al. (2022), by contrast, point out that feedback processes could makes it difficult to take away measures when the crisis ends, thus leading to permanent change.

It would be overly deterministic to claim that a failure to implement path-changing reforms would merely be due to the strength of path dependency, as we would expect the ideology and goals of policymakers to matter as well. Sociological institutionalists point out that institutions create norms and a certain 'logic of appropriateness' (March & Olsen, 1995); however, political actors have more room to manoeuvre during a 'crisis' which opens a larger window of opportunity (Kingdon, 1984) for them to carry out more radical reforms. Thus, whether or not they take advantage of this possibility also depends on their desire to make changes.

Vašíčková (2019) notes that during crises, decisionmakers can take on more reactive or proactive approaches. We argue that during the financial crisis and pandemic, policymakers were more reactive as they basically only implemented short-term incremental changes. During the immigration wave, the politicians were proactive in claiming it was a 'crisis' situation, but then did not go on to enact policy reforms to deal with the alleged problems.

Often in the post-communist context, traditional political ideologies have not mattered much for policymaking, making it unclear how much desire policymakers might have to make such changes. For example, in Hungary the allegedly 'socialist' party carried out radical market-liberal reforms in the 1990s, making some of the generous universal policies means-tested, while the allegedly 'conservative' party reinstated these reforms once it came to power (e.g., Saxonberg 2014).

Nevertheless, Saxonberg & Sirovátka (2014) show that sometimes party ideology has mattered. In discussing Czech social policy in response to the 2008 financial crisis they point out that the ruling centre-right parties really did have a neo-liberal ideology and they used the crisis as an excuse to introduce very unpopular austerity measures, which they would have wanted to introduce anyway. Moreover, objectively speaking—at least in comparison to most European countries—the country was not facing a crisis and did not have a large increase in deficits which would merit cutbacks. Rather, the government took advantage of the fact the international discourse and national mass media discussed a financial crisis, so claiming there was a crisis they implemented these measures, which were so lacking in popular support that they lost the next elections. Even though they took advantage of this window of opportunity, the austerity measures still amounted to adjustments that lowered benefit levels (i.e., incremental change) rather than path-changing policies.

Our basic theoretical starting point then is the historical-institutional approach, where these three crises could become critical junctures that could lead to far-reaching change, but in practice these cases have only led to rather small incremental changes (the financial crisis), no changes in social policy (the immigration crisis) or temporary changes (the COVID pandemic). Since we emphasise the subjective nature of determining what becomes a crisis, we agree with t' Hart and Tindall (2009) who claim that politics is partially about 'framing contests'. As the discourse on frame analysis within social movement theory shows (e.g., Benford & David, 2000; Snow & Benford, 1988), framing is not a one-way street. If social movement leaders do not frame their issues in a manner that resonates among the population, they will fail to mobilise people for their actions. Similarly, if politicians do not frame their policies in a manner that resonates with the electorate, they will lose votes. There are two aspects: whether they can convince the population that there really is a crisis and whether they can convince the population that their policies are the correct one for meeting the crisis. For example, the population might agree with their government that there is a financial crisis, but the voters might prefer expansionist, Keynesian policies to deal with the situation, while the government might introduce austerity measures to limit the budget deficit. Unfortunately, it is difficult to get reliable information as to what extent a government's framing achieves resonance, so we shall only briefly refer to this issue to the extent that we can find available survey data as well as considering election results. For example, if a political leader emphasises immigration as a problem during the electoral campaign and then wins the election and surveys show that the population thinks that immigration is a problem, then we can assume that the anti-immigration argument resonated with the audience.

The crisis management literature usually deals more with how decisions are made than what kinds of decisions are made. For example, it is common to discuss such organisational issues as whether politicians and governmental agencies put aside partisan differences and try to reach unanimity in their decisions (Rosenthal et al., 1991). Boin et al. (2016) observe that during crises, collegial bodies often gather to make decisions and coordinate policies. Some authors write that policymaking tends to become more centralised during a crisis situation (Savi & Randma-Liiv, 2015). Such insights can be important for understanding how the exact decision-making process works, but that is outside the scope of this article, which rather looks at what types of policies governments implement when they claim there is a crisis.

In our article, now we argue that during the financial 'crisis' and pandemic, the Central European governments implemented austerity measures that amounted to incremental changes, but not path changes, while during the immigration 'crisis', they did not introduce any social policy reforms to deal with the alleged problems. We also argue that most of the policies that they have implemented have been temporary in nature. The main exception is that these countries have basically followed their Bismarckian policy legacies in borrowing the idea of *Kurzarbeit* from conservative Germany, in which workers decrease their working time for a period so that nobody gets laid off and the state compensates part of the loss of income. In order to take advantage of a window of opportunity, policymakers must have path-diverging proposals to take out of the garbage can, but such proposals were lacking during these crises.

This article precedes by analysing the changes in labour market policy, healthcare and family policy during each of the three alleged crises.

4 | SOURCES AND METHODS

In this section we discuss our choice of cases and comparative methodology as well as our choice of sources.

4.1 | Our three cases

Our three countries have in common the fact that they are all central East European (CEE), post-communist countries, which had to overcome similar obstacles in transforming their economies from being based on planning to being based on markets. They were all three previously part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and two of them (Czechia and Slovakia) comprised the same country (Czechoslovakia) when the communist regime collapsed and then split in 1993. This means that during the communist era Czechia and Slovakia had the same social policies. To be sure there were already some important differences in social policies between Hungary and Czechoslovakia under communist rule and more differences emerged after the collapse of the communist-led regimes, but compared to West European countries their similarities outweigh their differences. Scholars have classified all three countries as having a hybrid welfare state with elements of social democratic, conservative and liberal welfare policies (Aidukaite, 2011; Bohle & Greskovits, 2007; Fenger, 2007). Yet, the conservative-Bismarckian elements have dominated (Cerami, 2010; Inglot, 2008; Saxonberg & Sirovátka, 2019).

Nonetheless, the three countries have had many different political constellations which enable us to examine more clearly the role of politics given their rather similar economic and institutional backdrops, see Table 1 below. To the extent that policies might differ, it would represent the method of difference in that the countries are very similar in geography, recent political history and degrees of economic development, yet have different outcomes. However, as we show, the outcomes are rather similar, which shows that there was a more general trend in the region. We will show that differences in political constellations have only mattered to a minor degree.

In this sense our methodology is more like the critical case type of method, in which one tests a theory (path dependency) for the case in which it is least likely to be true. If it holds up even in this case, then the theory is strengthened. However, rather than one case, we have nine: three countries dealing with three events which the leaders deemed to be 'crises'. Since the leaders claimed there was a crisis, they could have used these moments to create a window of opportunity to introduce path-diverging reforms; yet they did not.

Moreover, the types of crises also differed: we would expect the financial crisis to have greater impact on labour market policies than other social policies, as governments could expect the crisis to cause many businesses to close down (Vis et al., 2011). Meanwhile, we would have the refugee crisis to have greatest impact on healthcare and labour market policies, because newly arrived refugees might be in need of healthcare and welfare chauvinists might want to exclude immigrants from healthcare benefits. Labour market policies are also important for immigrants, as

TABLE 1 Political constellations.

Year	Countries: Czechia	Slovakia	Hungary
2008	Centre-right coalition	Populist left-led coalition with populist right parties	Socialist (post-communist) led coalition with liberals
2009	Technocratic		
2010	Centre-right coalition	Centre-right coalition	Right-wing populist government supporting 'illiberal democracy'
2011			
2012		Populist-left majority government	
2013	Technocratic		
2014	Social democratic led coalition with centre-populist party		
2015			
2016		Populist-left led coalition with right-wing populist and Hungarian party	
2017			
2018	Centre-populist party led coalition with social democrats		
2019			
2020		Centre-right coalition with most parties being populist	
2021	Centre-right coalition		
2022			

they can help integrate immigrants into the labour force (Sainsbury, 2006; Schmitt & Teney, 2019), but welfare chauvinists could also use such policies to try to exclude immigrants from the labour force and exclude them from benefits when they are unemployed. Finally, we would expect the pandemic to have the greatest impact on healthcare policies, since large numbers of people become ill. At the same time, we would also expect it to have great impact on family policies, as parents must take care of children who are ill or staying at home doing lockdowns, while labour market policies are also important to prevent the lockdowns and other restrictions from leading to mass unemployment (Moreira et al., 2021; Sirovátka, Saxonberg & Csudai, 2023). Since we argue that despite differences in types of crises the general outcome was the same—continued path dependency with minor, incremental changes—the choice of different types of crises strengthens our findings even more.

Since our emphasis is on types of policies that were enacted, we concentrate on national and international policy documents and statistics, and on other available studies to see what actual policy changes the governments undertook. However, since we also argue that the notion of crisis is something subjective and socially constructed and exists if the policymakers claim there is a crisis, we also use quotes from newspapers and public statements of political leaders, to show that they framed the situations as being crises, as well as international survey data to help ascertain whether some issues got resonance.

5 | THE FINANCIAL CRISIS OF 2008

5.1 | Czechia

Even though the USA economy was close to collapsing because of the financial crisis, Czechia was not so hard hit by it. As Figure 1 shows, Czech growth rates were well above the EU average when the financial crisis began and during the years directly after it. Moreover, as Figures 2 and 3 show, both the yearly budget deficit and accumulated deficit during this period was also lower than the EU average. Even though the government claimed there was a crisis because of the international economic situation and consequently claimed it needed to introduce austerity measures to get the budget deficit under control (Saxonberg & Sirovátka, 2014), in 2011 when it announced a new austerity plan, the budget deficit was close to meeting the Maastricht criteria of 3%, going slightly over that amount at 3.3% (see Figure 3). Unemployment levels were also well below EU levels (see Figure 4) and inflation was only slightly

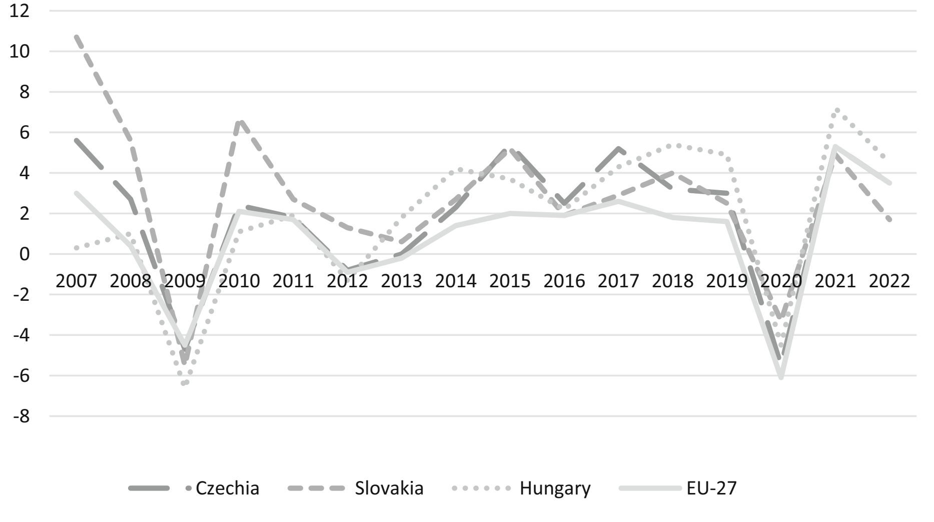

FIGURE 1 Yearly GDP growth (%). *Source*: OECD statistics, adapted.

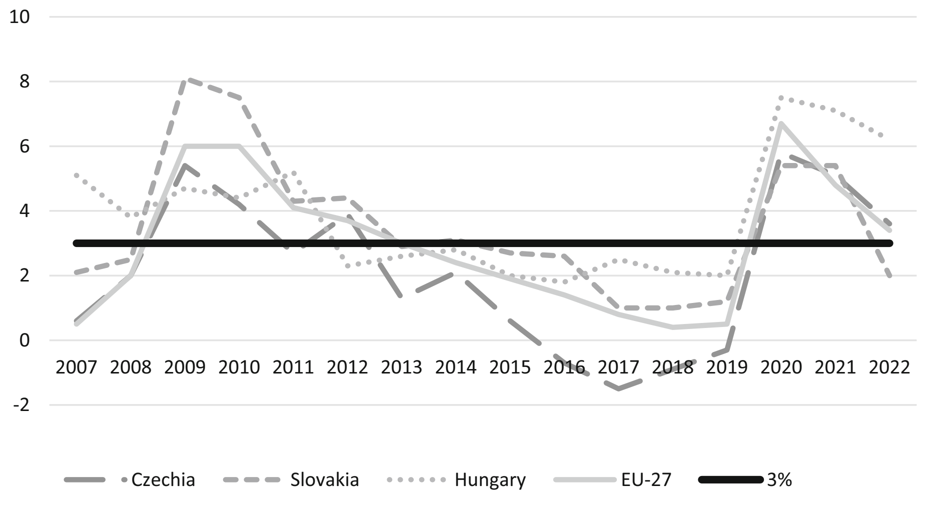

FIGURE 2 Yearly general government gross debt (% of GDP). *Source*: Eurostat, adapted.

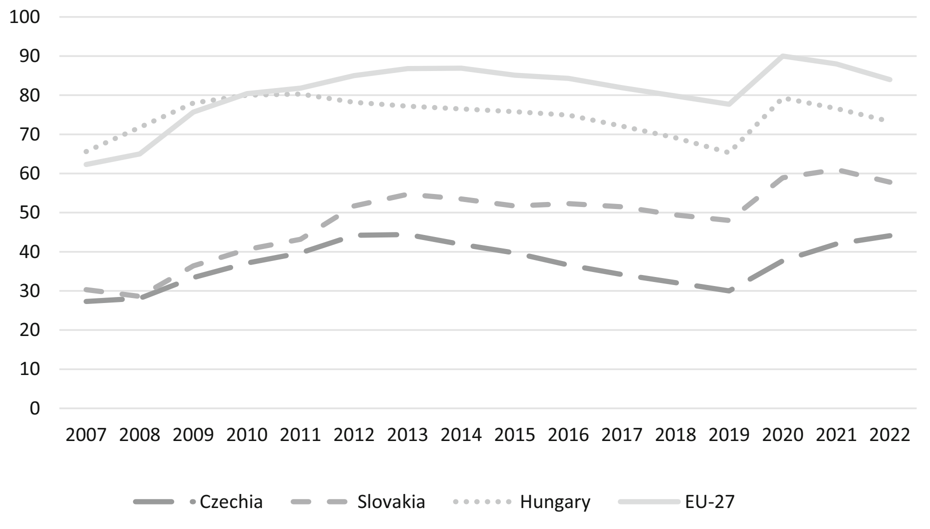

FIGURE 3 Cumulative government gross debt (% of GDP). *Source*: Eurostat, adapted.

above the Maaschstricht goal of 3% (Figure 5). This example shows that there does not need to objectively be a crisis for a government to claim there is a crisis and then use this window of opportunity to introduce anti-crisis measures. Yet, despite the relatively good objective economic situation, the Czech prime minister, MirekTopolánek warned that even though the country's financial system had so far been relatively isolated from the global financial crisis, the country was still being affected by it, which required the government to take action.[1]

Even though the centre-right government used the international financial crisis to announce cutbacks in welfare provisions, these austerity policies began already in 2007—1 year before the financial meltdown in the USA. In the area of healthcare, it introduced fees for doctor visits as well as a three-day waiting period for receiving sickness insurance benefits (Vláda, 2007). In 2010, it continued its retrenchment policies by decreasing the rate of sickness benefits from 66% to 60% of the daily base came in 2010 (Sirovátka & Ripka, 2020).

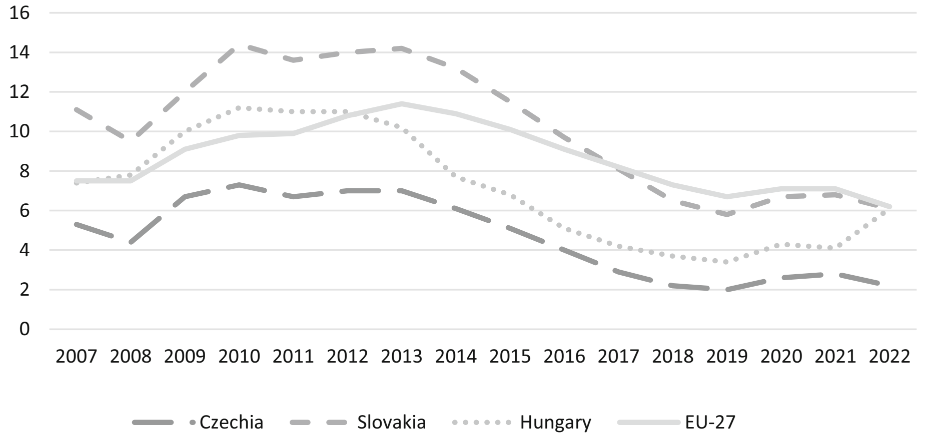

FIGURE 4 Unemployment rate 15–74 (%). *Source*: Eurostat, adapted.

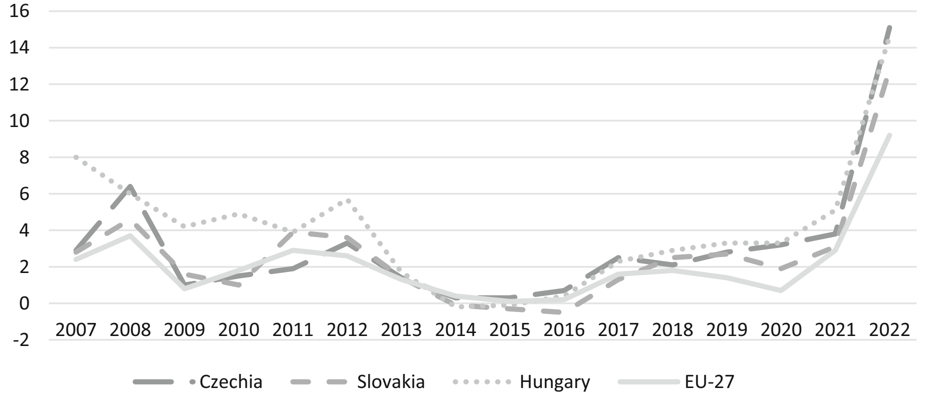

FIGURE 5 Yearly inflation rate (%). *Source*: OECD statistics, adapted.

When it comes to family policy, the government made it more difficult to receive child allowances by lowering the maximum allowed income for receiving it from 4 times the subsistence minimum to 2.4 times, although it increased the tax bonuses for inactive spouses. The government also cancelled its supplementary benefit for children in low-income families in 2011 (Sirovátka & Ripka, 2020).

In the area of labour market policies, the government shortened the unemployment benefit from 6 to 5 months, while lowering it from 9 to 8 months for those aged 50-54 years and from 12 to 11 months for those aged 55 and more. Nonetheless, the government countered this by increasing the replacement rate from 50% to 65% during the first 2 months. Another step worsening conditions for recipients was a law in 2010 making it obligatory for all unemployed persons to participate in public service activation schemes 20 h per week if they have been unemployed for over 2 months (Sirovátka, 2016).To save jobs the government also borrowed the German model of *Kurzarbeit* and introduced several projects financed from the EU's Operational Programme Employment which enabled employers to pay for retraining their employees during periods when their normal work activities were reduced (OECD, 2010). These projects were in operation since 2009 without a time limit but their scope and usage declined with the economic recovery.

Most of these measures were short-lived, however. In 2009 the Social Democrats won most of the regional elections and their regional governments decided to compensate patients for the out-of-pocket payments which the national law forced them to pay for visiting doctors. In addition, in 2012, the Constitutional Court ruled that it was unconstitutional to require recipients of unemployment benefits to work in public service schemes. Then in 2014 a new centre-left government came to power and cancelled the fees for using healthcare services and it slightly expanded entitlements for child benefits. Nevertheless, some of the cutbacks remained, such as the one-month reduction in the duration of unemployment benefits.

We do not have access to survey data that can show whether the framing of the situation as a crisis worked or not, but survey data does indicate that support for the ensuing retrenchment policies was lukewarm as a small majority of the population opposed retrenchment policies (Eurobarometer, 2011). In addition, voters punished the government by electing a centre-left government to replace it in the next elections (see Table 1).

In conclusion, the outcome of minor retrenchment and later the reinstatement of some of these policies appears to be due more to the ideological differences between the social democrats and the centre-right parties than pressure coming from an exogenous crisis. The financial crisis brought about temporary incremental change rather than path-changing reforms, which indicates that despite some differences between governments and party ideology, policy still remained rather path dependent.

5.2 | Slovakia

In the case of Slovakia, Prime Minister Robert Fico claimed that there was a crisis, but also argued that his government had been able to solve it.[2] Despite his claims the country did introduce greater changes in its social policies than Czechia, but it is not clear how much of this was due to the financial crisis and how much was due to demands from the EU for joining the Euro in 2009. The country's social policies were already turning in a more neo-liberal direction before the crisis as the centre-right government during the years 2002–2006 had implemented a series of reforms to meet conditions for adopting the Euro, and the centre-left government that came to power form 2006 to 2010 did not overturn these reforms. Among the priorities was the creation of stronger employment incentives, tightening eligibility rules for receiving social benefits and lowering their benefit levels. In particular, the centre-right government reformed the minimum income scheme which decreased the basic need-related benefit levels decreased significantly. The government further decreased the activation allowance, housing allowance, and other similar allowances. Support for working families increased while eligibility conditions and benefit levels in unemployment insurance and social assistance became tighter. Together with the new flat tax rate this marked a shift towards a residual welfare state (Gerbery, 2011). When a centre-right government came back to power in 2010 it continued some of its previous policies of incremental change in a more market-liberal direction. This included making unemployment benefits less accessible and less generous: in October 2010 eligibility criterion was loosened to 24 months of insurance in the past 3 years (instead of 12 months in the past 2 years). Moreover, in 2013, the centre-left *Smer*-led government decreased the maximum benefit from 1.5 times the average wage to equalling the average wage (Domonkolos, 2018).

As the figures show, Slovakia in some ways was objectively in a worse situation than Czechia, as its yearly public debt was well above EU levels (Figure 2); however, its accumulative debt was still well below EU levels (Figure 1) and its growth rate well above it (Figure 3). Where Slovakia really stood out in this period was its unemployment rate, which was much higher than the EU average and the other CEE countries of this study (Figure 4). Therefore, objectively one could say that there were some moderate problems but the country was far from being in dire straits. Moreover, if the government had considered unemployment to have reached crisis levels, then it would logically undertake expansionist policies rather than the austerity policies that it actually implemented. An argument against expansionist policies and in favour of austerity policies could have been inflation levels, but at around 4% at its height in 2011 (Figure 5), the inflation rate was only slightly above Maastricht requirements and the EU average.

Nevertheless, both the centre-right and centre-left governments also added some benefits. For example, in 2009 the centre-left government introduced a childcaring allowance covering parents' childcare costs up to the limit of 164 Euro (256 Euro until to the second year of age of a child in the case that a parent paid social security contribution at least 270 days). This benefit was for parents who work or are studying if the parents had receipts to show their actual costs (based on tables in MISSOC). Parents can receive the benefit until the child reaches the age of three (6 years for a disabled child). In 2011, the centre-right government increased it to a maximum of 230 Euro maximum per month or 41 Euro in the case that a child is in the care of relatives. Starting in 2011, kindergartens could receive subsidies for meals and aiding school children, who are at risk of social exclusion (Gerbery, 2015). In this period, the centre-left government put more emphasis on redistribution and benefits towards disadvantaged groups, social investment and employment-friendly principles while the centre-right government, which was in power between summer of 2010 and April 2012, pushed through neoliberal restrictive policies (Botek, 2020; Gerbery, 2015).

All in all, the crisis as such did not influence social policies very much and to the extent that some minor incremental changes took place, they were also influenced by demands for fulfilling the criteria to join the Euro as well as the neo-liberal ideology of the centre-right government that was in power from 2010 to 2012. Ideology mattered somewhat, but not party politics, as the leftwing populist *Smer* party continued with incremental changes as it made similar types of cutbacks as the previous centre-right government, which shows that both the left-leaning and right leaning parties shared some ideological views as to how to deal with the country's economic division, but this also shows that party politics did not matter much. Since the changes were only incremental, it shows that neither group had some kind of path-diverging ideas to pull out of the garbage can. Thus, the country's policies continued to basically be path depending as no political parties wanted to take advantage of the possible window of opportunity.

Their crisis framing seems to have basically been successful as an EU survey showed that during this period the majority of the population supported austerity measures (Eurobarometer, 2011).

5.3 | Hungary

In 2008, the Hungarian prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány, announced that there was a world financial crisis which could have caused the Hungarian state to become bankrupt if the state did not react appropriately.[3] Objectively, the economic situation in Hungary was indeed worse than the other two countries of this study. From 2008 to 2012 Hungary had the lowest growth rate of the three countries and it was also slightly lower than the EU average. Its accumulated budget debt was also around twice as high as Czech and Slovakia's (Figure 3). Nonetheless, its yearly debt was much lower than Slovakia's and rather similar to Czechia's until 2011, in which it became much higher than these two countries and the EU average, placing it well above the Maastricht requirement of having a maximum 3% deficit (Figure 2). Unemployment reached a troublesome 11%, which was above the EU level and much higher than Czechia, but lower than Slovakia (Figure 4). At 5% inflation was also troublesome and higher than both the EU and the other CEE countries of this study (Figure 5). This problem was not merely due to the financial crisis, however, as the country had an even higher inflation rate of around 11% in 2007—1 year before the crisis began. In summary, although it is difficult to say whether a country 'objectively' faced a crisis or not, the economic conditions were worse in Hungary than Czechia, Slovakia and the EU average; yet, the economic conditions were worse than in these countries also before the financial crisis and while the debt did not get any worse during the crisis, inflation actually decreased.

The actual situation was even worse than these statistics indicate. As foreign owners of government debt began to sell Hungarian bonds, the government bond market began to dry up, and financial institutions faced liquidity shortages. The central bank tried to support the Forint by raising its benchmark interest rate. Credit rating agencies downgraded Hungary, further worsening the situation. Consequently, the government turned to the IMF and the EU for help (Horváth, 2009). To ease financial market stress, the IMF approved a $15.7 billion loan for Hungary, and the EU and World Bank committed $8.4 billion and $1.3 billion respectively. The Stand-By Agreement, approved under the fast-track Emergency Financing Mechanism, aimed to secure government finances and stabilise the banking sector. Its economic programme focused on implementing a fiscal adjustment package, reducing government wages and pensions, and reduced pension bonuses (Horváth, 2009). Consequently, in the Hungarian case, social policy reforms were directly linked to the financial crisis and its consequences, but it is because Hungary was in a worse economic situation even before the crisis began.

Even though these international organisations pressured the government to make cutbacks to get the budget more in balance, the socialist government still tried to protect low-income earners by providing targeted housing assistance, and creating a social fund to help those most affected by the crisis (Carare, 2009). The announcement made by the new government in 2010 stated that it would increase expenditure on healthcare. However, despite this, the budget for the State Health Insurance (SHI) did not undergo any significant nominal changes from 2008 to 2012, resulting in a decline in real terms. Between 2008 and 2011, the SHI contributions paid by employers were reduced from 5% to 2%. To compensate for this reduction, government transfers on behalf of non-contributing individuals increased from HUF 4500 to HUF 9300 per person, before falling to HUF 5850 in 2012. In 2012, the employer's social security contribution, which included the SHI contribution, was renamed as the ‘social contribution tax’. To compensate for the reduced revenues, the employee contribution rate was increased by 1% (Dózsa & Szigeti, 2015).

The benefits package underwent several changes, including:

- In 2009, there was a reduction in temporary sick leave benefits from 45 to 30 days for individuals without insurance. Reimbursement rates were also adjusted, decreasing from 70% (60% for those covered for less than 2 years) to 60% and 50%, respectively.
- In 2011, the maximum daily benefit was reduced from €38 to €19. Additionally, the payment of benefits to insurers for 30 days after losing a job was abolished.
- Starting from 2012, disability pensions for individuals below the retirement age were replaced by health insurance benefits. These benefits could take the form of either rehabilitation benefits or disability benefits (Dózsa & Szigeti, 2015).

Thus, similar to Czechia and Slovakia, the changes were incremental rather than path divergent, which once again shows the power of path dependency. Party ideology does not seem to have mattered much since it was a socialist government that carried out the cutbacks. Their framing of the situation does not seem to have gained resonance as a plurality of the population favoured increased investment over retrenchment (Eurobarometer, 2011). Moreover, the socialists lost the next elections, although political scandals also played a major role in their electoral loss.

In conclusion, none of the three countries implemented radical, path-changing changes during the financial crisis, but they did take minor steps in a more neo-liberal direction and this seems to be the case regardless of the ideological orientation of the parties, although the Czech Social Democrats did act in accordance with their ideology in reversing some healthcare reforms that required patients to pay for their doctor visits. Thus, the policies basically remained path dependent as none of the governments in the three countries tried to exploit the possible window-of-opportunity that arose during the period in which the governments claimed there was a crisis.

6 | THE 2015 REFUGEE CRISIS

The civil war in Syria together with the rise of ISIS in Iraq led to a large increase in people coming to Europe to seek asylum as political refugees. Even though very few wanted to stay in a post-communist country, immigration from Muslim countries became a hot political topic in CEE as well as Western Europe. The debates were enhanced by the EU demands that the CEE countries take in a small number of refugees under a quota system, which the governments of these countries rejected. Once again, the question arises as to whether a situation that the public discourse frames as a ‘crisis’ really was a crisis for the CEE countries.

6.1 | Czechia

According to the UN commission on refugees the number of refugees coming to Czechia in 2015 was only 1515 and then it decreased slightly the following 2 years before increasing a little bit more to 1702 in 2018 and 1922 in 2019 (UNHR, 2023a). This low number of refugees did not prevent politicians from framing the situation in terms of a crisis. For example, in December 2015, the then president, Miloš Zeman, called the increase of refugees an 'an organised invasion' (Guardian, 2015). Later in 2018 he got re-elected president on an anti-immigrant campaign with billboard signs stating 'Stop immigrants and Drahoš [his opponent] supporters. This country is ours!' (ČTK, 2018). Meanwhile, in 2017, the far-right populist Tomio Okamura received 10.7% of the votes for his party in the parliamentary elections by campaigning to stop the 'Islamisation of the Czech Republic' (Muller & Lopatka, 2017). These claims of their being a crisis seems to have resonated with portions of the population as surveys showed an overwhelming majority of the population had negative attitudes towards immigrants and refugees (Eurobarometer, 2016). Furthermore, Zeman got re-elected president on an anti-immigrant campaign in 2018. Nonetheless, despite their rhetoric Czech governments did not carry out any social policy reforms in response to this alleged crisis.

6.2 | Slovakia

Slovakia has had even less asylum seekers than Czechia. According to the UN, the number varied from a high of 330 in 2015 to a low of 146 the following year (UNHR, 2023b). This did not stop the prime minister, Robert Fico, and his minister of interior, Robert Kaliňák, from claiming there was a 'migration crisis' and stating that 90% of refugees are economic migrants. Similar to Czechia, a vast majority of the population held negative views towards immigrants and refugees (Eurobarometer, 2016). Even if anti-immigrant claims could have resonated well with the populace, it is difficult to say whether this had any impact on the elections as many parties from both the right and left in the country campaigned against immigrants. We can note, however, that the ruling *Smer* party got re-elected in 2018, so at the very least, its anti-immigrant framing does not seem to have hurt the party. Although they refused to accept EU quotas and took measures to increase security at border crossings (Government of the Slovak Republic, 2015), they did not implement any social policy reforms to deal with the situation.

6.3 | Hungary

In contrast to Czechia and Slovakia, Hungary really did have to deal with a large number of refugees although few wanted to remain in the country. Despite the decline in the number of asylum seekers and refugees in Hungary, which dropped from 177,135 and 146, respectively, in 2015 to only 671 asylum seekers and 68 refugees in 2018, the Hungarian civil society has still made efforts to offer reception services for newcomers. For Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party, the arrival of these asylum seekers was not a humanitarian issue but a Muslim invasion threatening the national security, social cohesion, and Christian identity of the Hungarian nation. In response, the government introduced a string of anti-immigrant policies, such as constructing barbed wire fences on the border to deter asylum seekers from entering Hungarian territory (Goździak, 2019). Similar to Czechia and Slovakia, a vast majority of the population held negative views towards immigration and refugees (Eurobarometer, 2016), which indicates that the policies resonated and it might have helped the right-wing populist government get re-elected. None of these measures, however, fall under the category of social policy.

The Czech and Slovak examples show that even when objective conditions seem to be far from what one would reasonably call a 'crisis' politicians might still run campaigns based on an alleged crisis, but since objectively speaking the situation is not very serious, they do not go on to implement social policy measures to deal with this issue. Even in the Hungarian case, when the number of refugees was, in fact, quite high for a period, the government did not enact any social policy reforms to deal with the situation, which also shows that a perceived crisis during a situation that is also objectively extraordinary still might not lead to social policy reforms. Thus, once again we have a situation of path dependency: although rulers in all three countries claimed there was an immigration crisis and although the populations of these countries seemed to have accepted this framing and shared this view, none of the governments took advantage of this window of opportunity to introduce path-diverging social policy reforms. It did not matter whether the actual number of refugees in the country was very low (Czechia and Slovakia) or much higher (Hungary), the outcome was basically the same in the area of social policy.

7 | THE COVID PANDEMIC

The recent pandemic offered the greatest challenges to the CEE governments, and they responded with much more radical measures than for the previous two crises. For example, they carried out strict lockdowns, required people to wear masks in public places, etc. All three governments often referred to the situation as being a crisis. The question is whether these governments also carried out social policy reforms. Although they all enacted emergency measures, they were mostly short-term stop-gate policies that did not lead to long-term change. Thus, their policies still basically remained path dependent. In this case, since the pandemic threatened the lives of the population and led to many thousands of deaths in these countries, it would be easy to argue that the objective conditions really presented the governments with a true 'crisis'. Thus, it is not surprising that all the governments also claimed there was a crisis (for Slovakia, see Bariak, 2020). Interestingly, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš in Czechia referred to the pandemic sometimes more in terms of an 'economic crisis' than a health crisis (Křížová, 2020). Hungary presents the most extreme case, where Prime Minister Orbán introduced emergency rule, which gave him extraordinary powers (Biró & Presinszky, 2020). By the end of the pandemic, Hungary also became the country that suffered the most during the pandemic with 48,868 deaths, making it a total of 5087 per million inhabitants, which is the third worst in the world after Peru and Bulgaria. Czech suffered 42,800 deaths (3986 per million inhabitants) and Slovakia 21,167 (3877 per million inhabitants) placing them in 9th and 10th place for the most deaths per million inhabitants in the world.[4]

Given the fact that thousands of people died in all three countries, it was not difficult for the crisis framing to get resonance among the populations. In all three countries at least 90% of the population thought that the pandemic had serious economic consequences for their country, but only a majority of Hungarians were satisfied with their government's policies towards covid, while a large majority were dissatisfied in the other two countries (Eurobarometer, 2021).

7.1 | Czechia

The most significant labour market policy in Czechia was the re-introduction of short-time work (STW) and job subsidy schemes (JSS) inspired by the German *Kurzarbeit* model. This time the *Kurzarbeit* was made permanent, making it the only important social policy reform that remained after the pandemic died down. Even in this case, historical institutionalism provides a good explanation for this change, as all three countries have Bismarckian policy legacies (Weir & Skocpol, 1985) dating back to their period as part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Cerami, 2010; Saxonberg & Sirovátka, 2019), which made it natural to look to the country of Bismarck for reforms.

Czechia applied the most generous and most encompassing employment protection scheme among the three countries. It covered employees in firms closed by government order (Antivirus A), as well as employees in firms which reduced their production or services (Antivirus B). The Antivirus A scheme provided full compensation for one's previous wage with a relatively high ceiling for those employees being quarantined or isolated from COVID-19 and those whose companies had closed. The measure remained in force until the end of February 2022. In May 2021, parliament approved a proposal to set the wage subsidy paid by employers to employees at 80% of salaries for the reduced working time, with a ceiling of 1.5 times the average wage. Employers received 80% of the wage costs reimbursed by the state (Sirovátka et al., 2021; MLSA, 2021). In June 2021, it became permanent as the senate approved an amendment to the Employment Act, which allows the government to decide by itself to implement the *Kurzarbeit*-scheme during a crisis (MLSA, 2021).

Another measure, which was only temporary was to waive social insurance payments for up to 3 months for employers with less than 50 employees starting in June 2020. It also allowed employers to defer their social insurance payments from May until October 2020 for all employers in the private sector (Sirovátka et al. 2021).

Since the pandemic presented a health problem, sick pay became one of the most pressing social policy issues. In Czechia, employers were able to get reimbursed through the STW scheme for part of the sick pay that they had to pay employees (see above). In addition, because the government feared that people would avoid taking COVID-19 tests so that they would not have to go into quarantine if the results are positive, in March 2021, the government announced a new extraordinary benefit for employees in mandatory quarantine. This benefit supplemented the standard sickness benefit by providing an additional CKZ 370 (€14) per day for 14 days. The total sickness benefits were so high that they often exceeded the net wage for those in quarantine who earned less than the average wage (Sirovátka et al., 2021).

One of the biggest problems was supporting parents when their children had to stay at home because their schools or pre-schools closed down. Czechia built on the existing caregiver's allowance, increasing it from 60% to 80% of the 'daily calculation base'. In practice, it meant for most families that the level increased from 70% to about 90% of net wage since benefits are not taxed. In October 2020, this caregiver's allowance amounted to 70% of the daily calculation base with a minimum CZK 400 (€15.40) per day for taking care of children up to 10 years old. The benefit was available for the entire period of the (pre-)school closure until June 2021. In November 2021, the government restored the measure, because although there were no longer country-wide school closures, many parents had to stay at home with their children because of local school closures or because they were in quarantine due to contact with an infected person (Eurofound, 2022). Another measure was a new, caregiver's allowance for self-employed persons who were not previously eligible (since participation in the sickness insurance scheme is optional for them). The benefit level was CZK 424 (€16.30) per day. In October 2020, it decreased to CZK 400 (€15.40) (Sirovátka et al., 2021). As both of these measures were only temporary, they did not lead to any long-term change.

In conclusion, none of the Czech reforms except for the *Kurzarbeit* measures became permanent, which shows that even when a major crisis took place in the form of an international pandemic, policies still remained very path dependent.

7.2 | Slovakia

In April 2020, similar to Czechia Slovakia followed its Bismarckian policy legacy and re-introduced a *Kurzarbeit* scheme. It supported 80% of wages when companies had to shut down because of the pandemic (option 1) and between 20 to 80% when the companies reduced their activities because of the pandemic (option 2). From October 2020, the subsidy covered up to 100% of the total labour cost of employees, including compulsory payments to insurance funds, but with a €1100 ceiling. Under option 2 (a fixed subsidy), the government replaced the fall in revenues. Previously, it paid the subsidy when the decline of revenues was at least 20%, but later changed it to 10%. In April 2022, the Slovak government prolonged the availability of the measure and in May 2022 the *Kurzarbeit* scheme became made permanent (Gerbery & Bednárik, 2021). As in Czechia, this is the only social policy reform to survive the pandemic.

In March 2021, the government also passed laws to make work more flexible. The law defines more clearly conditions for working from home and online. Its aim is to prevent, for example, work performed on the premises of customers, who could become infected. Furthermore, the employer must reimburse the employees for their increased expenses associated with withholding home office and teleworking (SITA, 2021).

To deal with the healthcare problems caused by the pandemic, the Slovak government gave support for the social insurance payments of employers and the self-employed. From March 2020 to December 2020, these groups could defer their social insurance payments if the public health protection authority forced them to shut down for over 15 days or if they faced a fall in revenue of over 40%. This provision was later extended until June 2021 (Gerbery & Bednárik, 2021). During the fall of 2021, the pandemic worsened, so the government prolonged the measure until the end of 2021. In January 2022, the government decided to further postpone the compulsory payments that employers and self-employed must pay to the Social Insurance Agency until 31 March 2025 (Eurofound, 2022). Once again, these reforms were only temporary.

To help parents take care of sick children, the government introduced a benefit amounting to 55% of their gross daily earnings. One could receive this support for children under 12 years old who stayed at home because of school closures, or for children under 16 who were staying at home because of illness. They could also receive this benefit to take care of relatives because of the closure of their social service facility. The measure was adopted in March 2020 and in force during 2020 and 2021 (Gerbery & Bednárik, 2021). Thus, this reform was only temporary. Similar to Czechia, only the *Kurzarbeit* reform remained permanent as well as rules about working at home.

7.3 | Hungary

Even though Hungary also reintroduced a *Kurzarbeit* scheme, it was more selective than in Czechia or Slovakia, as it was confined to firms that did not close but had reduced their production by less than 75%. In these cases, the state compensated 70% of the employees lost salary with a low ceiling of 214,300 HUF (€584). Hungary also implemented a targeted measure of income support for employees engaged in R&D activities in April 2020: a three-month's wage subsidy of 40% of gross income with a ceiling of HUF 318,920 (€874). This measure ended in February 2021 (Albert, 2021; Eurofund, 2022). Nevertheless, job retention policies were less important than measures to support industry and infrastructures (Bohle et al., 2022). In contrast to Czechia and Slovakia, though, this reform did not become permanent.

To keep up employment levels the government also continued its public works scheme that forces unemployed persons to do public work in order to receive benefits. It became compulsory to participate in the programme if one could not find a job in the labour market within 3 months, but it restricted the compulsory participation of skilled workers during the state of emergency (Albert, 2021).

Another employment measure was to make working time regulations more flexible as deviations from the labour code were allowed. This included changing the working hours and allowing employers to order employees to work remotely (home office), as well as increasing the period in which employers can ask employees to work irregular hours. These rules were extended until June 2022 (Albert, 2021; Eurofound, 2022).

Hungary provided tax relief on labour for certain target sectors hit hard by COVID-19 in the months of March–June 2020 and extended it until 2021 in the periods when there was a state of emergency. The tax relief was for both employers and employees, who only had to pay health insurance. For those in the hard-hit sectors, the government also provided relief from social insurance payments and the flat rate tax for self-employed and micro-companies. In May 2020, Hungary also added a wage subsidy (covering 100% of labour costs with a ceiling of HUF 100,000/€225 monthly for 6 months) to create jobs for registered jobseekers. In October 2020, the ceiling was increased to HUF 200,000/€550 for 6 months, which corresponds to 150% of the minimum wage but the rate of subsidy dropped to 50% of labour costs. Since June 2020, the target group has been those who have been registered over 6 months as jobseekers, as well as youth between 15 and 25. In October 2020, the government also included low-skilled labourers (Albert, 2021; Eurofound, 2022).

Next, between October 2021 and January 2022, the Hungarian government provided a subsidy to businesses to cover the costs of training their employees and the cost of wages for downtime because of this training. The subsidy ranged from 50% to 70% of wages according to company size. The subsidy had a ceiling of HUF 200,000 (about €555), or HUF 300,000 per month for targeted vulnerable groups, with the condition that their employment must continue at least 12 months after the training ends (Eurofound, 2022). In January 2021, parliament passed a permanent measure to support the employment of disabled people, abolishing the income limit for people with disabilities. Thus, the disabled are entitled to rehabilitation and disability benefits at any level of earnings. This is the only measure introduced during the COVID crisis that became permanent.

In the area of healthcare, Hungary had a comparatively generous policy in that it was the only of the three countries which recognised COVID-19 infections gained while performing employment-related duties as an occupational injury. This entitled employees to a benefit equal to 100% of their salary (Albert, 2021).

Hungary did not implement special measures for parents to stay at home to take care of their children because of illness or school closings, because parents could receive compensation for their loss of income through the *Kurzarbeit* reform. Under this programme, the state paid parents a reimbursement amounting to 70% of their wage if they could not work because they were taking care of children due to (pre-)school closure, or their children being quarantined because of COVID (Albert, 2021).

Thus, even though the pandemic offered a greater window of opportunity than the previous two crises as everyone in the countries were directly influenced and most people's lifestyles changed during the crisis period, the three governments still neglected to take advantage of the opportunity to introduce path-changing reforms. Ideology and political parties did not matter, nor did the degree of hardships endured by the inhabitants of the three countries. Except for the small reform in Hungary that enabled the disabled to receive benefits and entitles employees infected with COVID to receive 100% of their salaries, the *Kurzarbeit* reforms were the only changes that became permanent, and this was only the case for Czechia and Slovakia.

8 | CONCLUSION

At least in terms of popular discourses, all three countries underwent three different kinds of crises in this new millennium: the financial crisis, the refugee crisis and the pandemic crisis. There were variations in the objective conditions, as the pandemic caused the greatest impact on the lives of the people, with the immigration issue causing by far the least impact of the three cases which political leaders claimed were crises. There were variations between the countries as well for the first two crises, with Czechia performing best during the financial crisis and Hungary the worst. Similarly, Hungary was by far the hardest hit by the increase in refugees that came about because of the wars in Syria and Iraq. In the cases of Czechia and Slovakia the actual number of refugees coming was so minuscule that it would hardly meet any kind of 'objective' criteria for being a crisis, but it was nevertheless framed as a 'crisis' by leading politicians. All three countries were much harder hit by the COVID pandemic than the other two 'crises', having suffered tens of thousands of deaths.

Nonetheless, despite the great differences in the types of crises, the objective suffering taking place during the crises, the differences in the degree each country was hit by the crises and the differences in the political constellations of the three countries, no major social policy innovations took place that would lead to path divergence. Some amount of rather minor incremental change took place during the financial and COVID crises, but these changes were nothing like the major path-changing changes that we might expect according to the theories of critical junctures and windows of opportunities. Any of these crises could have theoretically served as a window of opportunity for policymakers to introduce far-reaching reforms that would set their country down a new social policy trajectory. However, even though we discussed three different types of crises in three countries, which together meant nine possible critical junctures arose, our study shows that the garbage can theory only works if policymakers really have hidden agendas to pull out of their garbage cans. Of course, the fact that theories of critical junctures, windows of opportunity and garbage can exist at all, indicates that under some conditions crises can lead to path divergence, but again, this requires the policymakers to have some ideas or hidden agenda, which they can implement when the opening arises. Perhaps, the title of our article for describing the post-communist, Central European countries could also be old French phrase: 'the more things change, the more they stay the same'.

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ENDNOTES

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