



BULLETIN

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Migration Crisis Unites Visegrad Group

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The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary are adamant in rejecting an imposed quota mechanism to relocate refugees from war-torn countries and they are demanding that the EU's external borders be sealed. Although these demands in the face of an uncontrolled wave of migrants are beginning to find understanding among many of the EU's partners, a negative consequence of the crisis for the three countries is the cooling of relations with Germany and the rise of radical sentiments. So far, only Hungary has been the main transit route, but if others open then migratory pressures may also affect the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Therefore, these countries will likely seek to maintain a common position in the future, especially as the current policies are supported by the main opposition parties and societies.

The opposition to imposed quotas coming from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary reflects a host of internal determinants, including lower levels of affluence compared to Western Europe, administrative weaknesses, infrastructure backlogs, a lack of historical contact with Islamic culture and rather discouraging experiences with ethnic minorities. Moreover, none of them is considered an end-destination and must reckon with the fact that migrants would quickly go farther to the West. Those countries, in turn, are one in emphasising the need for a more accurate distinction between refugees and economic migrants and in calling for tighter external borders. They also criticise Germany, accusing it of making unrealistic assessments of how many migrants are interested in obtaining asylum in the EU, a position that has led to a major cooling of their relations with Berlin for the first time in many years. Another consequence is a rise in extremist sentiments and the fairly high intensity of public emotions that has sparked both pro- and anti-immigrant demonstrations in all of the states' capitals and filtered through to pronouncements made by politicians. The language used by leaders of extreme rightist groups and of parties in power that seek to reverse their falling popularity, including prime ministers Robert Fico in Slovakia and Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Czech President Miloš Zeman, has been radicalised to a similar degree.

Czech Republic. Given the country's location along the route linking Hungary and Austria to Germany and the imposition of temporary controls on the Germany-Austria and Austria-Hungary borders, the Czech Republic is the most exposed to the likelihood of the large incoming migrant wave. To prevent this, Prague has increased police presence at railway stations and on trains in the South Bohemia and South Moravia regions, including at the Břeclav hub. To streamline the registration process, the Czech security services initially marked immigrants' wrists with numbers, but this method was later abandoned in response to a barrage of criticism in media. Regular monitoring of the 362 km-long Austrian border remains a tall order, though, even with the defence minister's announcement of the country's readiness to dispatch more than 2,000 troops to help deal with the situation. In these circumstances, ideas emerging in the Czech debate include, for example, completely closing the borders (recommended by the opposition ODS party) and deploying NATO troops to guard them (Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Andrej Babiš).

Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka meanwhile calls for a joint stance to be taken inside the EU; he also declares the country is ready to accept 1,100 refugees over two years and questions the rationale of imposed quotas. Resistance to the quotas actually unites the whole political scene in the Czech Republic. The government announced it would increase migration-related spending and channel it to such efforts as new temporary camps or renovating already existing. According to defence ministry estimates, Prague should expect to receive more than 7,000 asylum

applications in 2016, or seven times as many as usual (by early September 2015, some 1,000 applications were received, but only 7% from Syrians). As the crisis intensifies, increased activity can be seen among extremist politicians (including Tomio Okamura, who has Japanese roots) and also among leaders seeking to bolster their waning support, such as President Zeman, who likened the number of immigrants to a tsunami and announced the use of the military to stem the inflow. On the other hand, the business community has shown openness to employing Middle Eastern arrivals: in a questionnaire issued by the Czech Confederation of Industry, the country's largest industrial companies signalled a demand for some 5,000 migrant workers, mostly in manual jobs.

Slovakia. This country's goal, too, is to prevent the migrant wave from abruptly sweeping over its territory after Germany and Austria imposed temporary border controls and possible opening of a new transit route via Romania: for this purpose, the Bratislava government has sent additional officers to strengthen the police force in areas bordering Hungary and Austria. PM Fico expressed the country's readiness to accept 200 Christian Syrians and he threatened to call a national referendum if the EU pressed for the quotas. A local referendum has already been held in the border village of Gabčíkovo, and 96.7% of the inhabitants voted against a proposed temporary camp for 500 refugees who had already reached Austria. Bratislava's assertiveness in contesting the EU proposals reflects not only public resistance with roots in tense relations with the Roma and Hungarian minorities but also the country's migration policy record to date, which is not particularly encouraging: in 2014, the government processed 331 asylum applications, giving only 14 positive replies. Slovakia has the sixth-lowest ratio of foreign nationals as a proportion of the population (1.42%), two-thirds of whom are EU citizens, mostly Czechs, Hungarians and Poles.

The opposition rejects enforced quotas, too, but in view of the parliamentary election slated for early spring 2016, they have tried to avoid openly supporting the government. Faced with the approaching end of the current parliamentary term and falling support for his party, SMER-SD, Fico has chosen harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric: he suggested that there is a direct link between immigration and terrorism, and said that responsibility for the crisis should be assumed by the countries bombing Syria and Libya. The stance taken by President Andrej Kiska is milder than the government's, although he is equally sceptical of the quotas. Speaking against the public mood, Kiska said that Slovakia has the "moral duty" to help immigrants. The president's pronouncements aim to build his image as a politician-intellectual guided by values; he also seeks to highlight the difference between him and Fico, his opponent in the 2014 presidential ballot.

Hungary. As a country directly on the main migration route, Hungary is undoubtedly in the worst position. The number of asylum applications processed by the administration so far in 2015 is 3.5 times higher than last year, since the beginning of the year a record number of 191,000 people crossed the country's 175 km-long border with Serbia. Despite its earlier reluctance to follow the Dublin convention, Budapest has for some time now sought to ruthlessly stick to the Schengen arrangements, by registering those who cross the border illegally and sending them to a refugee camp pending an application for asylum. The first portion of a fence on the Serbian border was built, border guard operations were resumed, and the most popular border crossing in Röszke was closed. The Fidesz-dominated parliament amended the asylum law to penalise illegal crossings and anyone damaging the border fence. The goal of these moves, coupled with the country's exemption from the EU's refugee relocation programme and €5.2 million in support provided by the European Commission (the government asked for €12.2 million), is to prop up the border, discourage immigrants from taking the route through Hungary, and reduce the number of those who have already come into the country. According to Hungarian figures, it has already spent €200 million on immigration-related projects.

For Orbán, too, the crisis offers a chance to regain popularity. His firm rhetoric fits in well with public sentiment—more than 80% backed the asylum changes—and also has the effect of weakening Jobbik, the nationalist main opposition party. Orbán portrays himself as the leader of the resistance to the European schemes and even against the migrants themselves—saying, for example, his stance is defending Europe's Christian heritage against Muslims. Even the leftist opposition has tried to capitalise on the crisis, including the party Together, which regularly organises anti-Orbán marches in Budapest, and the Democratic Coalition, the leader of which, former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, invited a refugee family to live in his house. But support for the two parties has so far remained low (at 2% and 8%, respectively). The Hungarian Socialist Party is, in turn, the relatively least visible.

Conclusions. The loyalty to Hungary from the Czech Republic and Slovakia reflects their fears that an uncontrolled wave of illegal immigrants may reach them, too. Hungary is a frontline state, and the effectiveness of its migration policy also influences the activities of other countries from the region. Thus, the tightening of border checks by Prague and Bratislava can be attributed not only to similar steps taken by Germany and Austria but also to Hungary's clampdown on asylum seekers, which will trigger new transit routes and increased migration pressures on the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The former has already begun preparations for an influx of refugees. The dominant tone in these three countries is to discourage the immigrants, with anti-German voices on the rise. Finding a solution to the problem is not helped by the aggressive statements made by leaders who resort to wartime rhetoric and dehumanise those who come from the Middle East and they legitimise aversion to others. In the long run this may adversely affect these countries' position within the EU and influence their inhabitants' relations with refugees, especially with the influx continuing but routes changing (now to Croatia and Romania) and with Berlin seemingly determined to press for the quotas. Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary will seek to maintain their unity, however, not least because politicians have support from both main opposition parties and societies.