THE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

POLICYSOLUTIONS

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES

THE POLITICAL COMMUNICATION OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Author

Gábor Győri

POLICYSOLUTIONS

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES

Policy Solutions
Révay utca 10, 1065 Budapest, Hungary
Square Ambiorix 10, 1000 Brussels, Belgium
www.policysolutions.eu

Foundation for European Progressive Studies
Rue Montoyer 40, 1000 Brussels, Belgium
www.feps-europe.eu

Publisher: Policy Solutions, Budapest
Responsible publisher: Tamás Boros, Co-director

Author: Gábor Győri
Editor: Tamás Boros

Designing: FERLING
Printing: TEXT Nyomdaipari Kft.

Table of Contents

1 | Introduction

Crises tend to bring out in the open conflicts that are either dormant or quietly simmering beneath the surface, waiting for an opportunity to publicly reveal themselves. Tensions between the EU's wealthy western half and the poorer, former communist, new member states have been apparent for a while now. Until now, these tensions had mostly tended to manifest themselves in conflicts with individual countries. Already a year after the massive 2004 accession wave, when eight former communist eastern European countries joined the EU, Polish voters gave a very narrow election victory to the staunchly nationalist and populist Justice and Law Party (PiS). This was especially critical because of Poland's status as the regional "superpower" that is home to over half the population of the eight new EU member states at the time. PiS's uncompromising interpretation of national interests led to several conflicts with its EU partners, most notably over the threat of the then-president, the late Lech Kaczynski, to veto the European Constitution due to concerns about Poland's rights under the qualified majority voting system proposed in the new treaty.[1] There was a shock in the EU at the time both because of the Polish government's vehement style and because the EU's traditional main powers had failed to anticipate that one of the new EU members could prove so resolute in rejecting the will of the old member states.

1 http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/diplomatic-offensive-against-a-warsaw-veto-poland-blocking-new-eu-treaty-a-488056.html. All websites cited in this analysis were accessed on 6 March 2016.

There are two complementary interpretations of this watershed event. One, the major old member states had mistakenly assumed that the eastern Europeans they had allowed to join would be largely docile in the early years of their membership, that they would naturally follow the lead of the established western members. Second, they were stunned by such a staunchly nationalist interpretation of a country's interest, and the Polish government's apparent obliviousness to the notion that the European project as such may be deserving of substantial compromise in terms of a traditional understanding of national self-interest.

It was not necessarily unusual for domestic electoral considerations to trump the real or perceived interests of European integration when the two were seen to be in conflict. In fact, when leaders fail to convince the public, or do not even try to do so, that a given step of integration (or other goals, for that matter) serves their long-term interest, then a rejection of the given policy is the most democratic response. The United Kingdom and Denmark, for example, have several times opted out of common European projects. However, European leaders had usually pursued integration as a project of inherent value, one that was worthy of compromises in terms of national sovereignty, traditionally understood, in exchange for the long-term benefits that would accrue to the national community through membership in a stronger European community. In this process, distinctions between national interests and community interests became less sharp over time. Sometimes such compromises were not popular with the domestic public, and occasionally leaders would fight hard to convince a sceptical public that a given step of integration was worth taking - and sometimes they failed. Consequently, governments were occasionally compelled to strike a balance between their electoral interests and the interests of what they saw as the inseparably linked futures of their nations and the European Union. As a result, grand bargains were struck that could

lead to short-term political costs. What the old member states appeared unprepared for was the total and uncompromising primacy of short-term electoral considerations, the unwillingness to "take one for the team", as it were; this proved an ill fit for a vision of European integration that rests on the promise of long-term benefits (which are, of course, sometimes used as an argument for generously overlooking the immediate flaws of EU policies).

The Polish 'incident' was soon followed by several others, notably the election of the Slovakian left-nationalist politician Robert Fico, who, during his first term, had relied on right-wing extremist coalition partners rather than cooperating with the parties of the moderate centre-right. The next episode was the election in Hungary of Viktor Orbán, who controversially used his constitutional supermajority to substantially weaken his country's democratic structure to build something he refers to as an "illiberal democracy." Manageable though they were, these conflicts occasionally took up substantial space on the EU's public agenda; this has clearly contributed to the deceleration of the pace of further integration.

1.1. The Divide between EU's East and West

It seems plausible to argue that many western leaders underestimated the role that nationalism played and continues to play in central and eastern European (CEE) politics, in structuring the party systems of these countries. Traditional cleavages, in particular on economic policy, did not necessarily play a major role in shaping party systems. Not because these were not important issues in the CEE region but because parties did not appear bound by ideological pronouncements once they found that in government their fiscal leeway could not match

their earlier rhetoric. In other words, the omnipresent gap between ideology and the reality of governance was particularly stark in the CEE countries. Intense nationalism, sometimes coupled with authoritarian values, on the one hand, and a broadly liberal western-style outlook on the other, proved to be a much more consistent and transparent distinction for voters, and hence a more predictable guide as to what might be expected from a party or politician once elected (outside the realm of economic policy).

The result was a new dividing line within the European Union and recurrent conflicts with governments that either represented a harder nationalist/authoritarian line or felt electoral pressure to make concessions to such politics. The emergence of new fault lines was to some extent expected; clearly, various divisions have always existed in the EC/EU, for example between the largely euro-sceptic north, the western European core of EU integration (Germany, France, Italy and the Benelux) and the newer Mediterranean states. As showed by the conflicts between Greece and the euro partners, or the recurrent disputes over Britain's rights and obligations, the new member states were certainly not singular in driving a tough bargain or even being plainly intractable. Moreover, the democratic back and forth between pro-western centrists and nationalist/populists implied that the EU did not have to face a united front, even as nationalism and populism were clearly gaining ground in the region and increasingly forced even western-oriented CEE parties to adapt their communication and agendas. For the most part, it was possible to isolate particularly troublesome players. And even though there were increasing parallels in their behaviour, there was often not much love lost between the hardline players in central and eastern Europe.

1.2. The Refugee Crisis as a Turning Point

The refugee crisis marked a turning point, however. Not only were large segments of the central and eastern European region united in their total rejection of letting in refugees, but in this context, the relevance of the nationalist versus centrist-moderate divide disappeared almost completely; the left-right distinction, weak to begin with, proved almost irrelevant as well. Hardly any mainstream party in the region dared challenge the prevailing attitude of rejecting refugees.

Supported by a band of smaller western allies, Germany took the lead in pushing for a European response that best reflected the dominant liberal self-understanding in Germany's political elite at the time. The German reaction was also a response to the lessons the country took from its role in World War II. The resulting position was that the European response to the unfolding humanitarian crisis at the doorstep of Europe should be decisive, generous and, above all, commonly shared by the EU member states. It was clear very early on that the policies of the German and Swedish governments, for example, which essentially opened the door to vast numbers of persons from far-flung segments of the globe, would be sustainable only if they were complemented by a community effort to help the most generous member states.

The number of migrants coming to Europe was staggering, topping more than 10,000 persons on peak days, but nevertheless, a concerted effort by a comparatively wealthy club of states with a population of 500 million could potentially absorb such numbers - in any case, far more than Germany alone or even the segment of the EU committed to the German policy line. The success of the policies

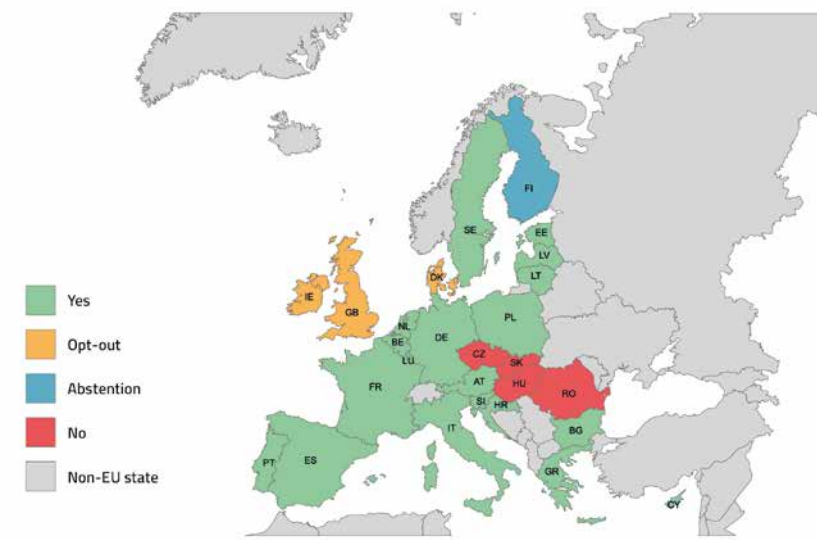
of what we might term the EU's generous half[2] depended on the cooperation of the rest, both in terms of actual logistical support and in terms of common decision-making at the European level.

It emerged quickly that such support would not be forthcoming. Some member states merely rejected the scope of the undertaking while they fundamentally expressed a willingness to share some of the burden. Others - and these were exclusively central and eastern European member states - made clear that they could not even agree to the underlying principle of helping refugees, much less the daunting numbers the German-led camp suggested absorbing. This led to a basic schism between CEE countries and western EU countries, which was further complicated by divisions among western EU countries, within individual member state governments and in the broader political discourse of member states.

2 We use the term "half" loosely here; it is based on an assessment by the German political magazine Spiegel that there are roughly "eleven to 13 [EU Member States out of 28] that basically support Merkel's line" as of this writing (February 2016), which is clearly a lower number than it was a year ago, before the scale of the crisis became apparent, before the Paris attacks, and before the polling figures of populists grew even further. As governments and circumstances change, these numbers will clearly be in flux, though time seems to be working against Merkel and her allies. See: http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/fluechtlinge-angela-merkel-sucht-auf-dem-eu-gipfel-verbuendete-a-1077790.html

Even the question of what terminology to use is a dilemma in the context of an analysis on the refugee crisis, for the words used to describe the persons arriving have themselves becoming intensely politicised. It is clear that the masses of people who moved into the European Union have, as always, been made up of a mix of refugees (i.e., people who have been forced to leave their home countries) and economic migrants (i.e., people who primarily seek to improve their economic lot). The distinction does not imply that one constitutes legitimate grounds for immigrating into the EU and the other does not, but clearly the host country's humanitarian responsibility in terms of granting asylum or right of residence is different in these instances (which are, of course, themselves not necessarily dichotomous; persecution may very well manifest itself in removing the basis for economic subsistence, for example). It would be useful to have a collective term that encompasses both groups and that is not politically tainted, as the term "migrant" has become in many national discourses. For purposes of this paper, we will accept the Council on Foreign Relations' tripartite division between migrants as an "umbrella term" and refugees and economic migrants as the two relevant subcategories in this context (cf. http://www.cfr.org/migration/europes-migration-crisis/p32874). This is emphatically not an endorsement of the recent political connotations of the term "migrant." When speaking about the crisis overall, however, we will be using the term "refugee crisis" because it is obvious that the crisis as such, and the migration movement that lies at the root of it, emerged only because many of the migrants arriving in the EU are in fact refugees; had the masses been made up only of economic migrants, arguably the EU would have found it much easier to react in a restrictive manner and there likely would have been no crisis, at least not at the present scale. Furthermore, the terms will not be used fully consistently, for this paper is primarily an analysis and summary of national political discourses on the refugee/migrant crisis, and in many instances when discussing national discourses or the statements of individual actors, it would have seemed peculiar to use a term that was at odds with the communication of the given speaker. In short, migrants and refugees are often used as interchangeable terms in this essay, and, given the complexity of the issue, neither term implies the author's identification with any particular political agenda.

Map 1: National governments' position in the European Union Justice and Home Affairs Council majority vote to relocate 120,000 refugees (the first round of the so-called quota)*



Far-right populists in particular pushed for western countries to adopt the same position the CEE states insisted on, and, in fact, the chief proponent of the CEE line, the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, was held up as an example by many of these populist parties, such as the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), the German AfD, or the French Front National (FN). Marine Le Pen, the leader of the FN, declared Viktor Orbán the "sole protector of the external borders."[3] Even before the refugee crisis of 2015, these parties were experiencing a massive surge for a variety of reasons. As Policy Solutions and FEPS summed up in their study entitled The State

3 http://www.bfmtv.com/mediaplayer/video/marine-le-pen-viktor-orban-est-le-seul-a-proteger-les-frontieres-exterieures-641101.html

** In the case of Poland and Croatia, the map shows the position of the national governments at the time. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_migrant_crisis#/media/File:2015-09-22_EU_JHA_Council_majority_vote_to_relocate_120,000_refugees.svg*

of Populism in Europe[4], populist parties made enormous electoral advances in the EP elections of 2014, clinching first, second and third positions in an unprecedented number of countries, often with levels of support which, if sustained, would make them likely players in national governments.

The unofficial rhetorical alliance between far-right western European parties and mainstream CEE governments became a key influence in shaping the EU's handling of the crisis, or, rather, its inability to formulate a proper policy response. When central and eastern European leaders were under pressure from either western partners or western-oriented politicians in their own countries to be more open to compromise in coming up with solutions, they could argue that the western political elites were simply out of touch with their own electorates. Voters, they argued, demanded a much tougher line concerning migrants than the western governments pushed the CEE countries to adopt. The growing popularity of far-right populists in the EU was a key indication of the gap between what the public presumably expects in western Europe and what the political elites intend to do. Moreover, Eurobarometer surveys in the spring and fall of 2015 showed that the EU's public was overwhelmingly apprehensive about immigration from outside the EU, and this was especially true of CEE countries: "Majorities of the population have a negative feeling about immigration of people from outside the EU in 25 countries (up from 23 in spring 2015), in particular in Slovakia (86%), Latvia (86%), Hungary (82%), the Czech Republic (81%) and Estonia (81%)" - thus the Eurobarometer for autumn 2015.[5] These findings are especially striking in light of the

4 http://www.policysolutions.hu/userfiles/elemzes/243/the_state_of_populism_in_europe_in_2015.pdf
5 http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/70150, p. 27

fact that out of these five countries, only Hungary has been directly affected by the refugee crisis.

The policy differences between western and eastern EU countries were also manifest in the communication about the crisis. While mainstream western parties and governments presented the issue primarily as a humanitarian problem, their eastern counterparts tended to portray it as an existential challenge that would undermine the economic substance and identity of Europe and their own countries unless met with great determination and a willingness to reject migrants. The inability of the parties involved to find a common ground was a serious impediment to the EU's ability to manage the crisis. This made the crisis much worse, of course, thereby giving more ammunition to those who had argued right from the start that the EU should react restrictively. In a sense, the rejection of any compromise generated its own "success" because a key underlying argument was that the EU would be unable to manage the crisis - and without compromises on policy, that was inevitably the case.

Though communication was only an instrument to interpret the events, ultimately the way governments and political parties talked about the refugee crisis emerged as a distinct tool for shaping public policy responses. The failure of a common action in this area is thus also a consequence of the political communication used by the various actors involved, and their respective success in framing the public's understanding of the crisis. There is also a feedback loop between political communication and the public's prevailing view of the refugee crisis, as they both continuously shape each other.

The consequences of this particular crisis and of similar crises in the future can be immense. The full impact of the refugee crisis is still impossible to fathom, but it might substantially retard the EU's functionality to a minimum when compared to the ambitious vision of broad integration that underlies it. In fact, as the member states are grappling with finding a common stance towards the crisis, it is difficult to imagine how integration might go forward in a community as divided the European Union is right now. This is a huge challenge for the EU, and it is vital to better understand the processes that have allowed the refugee question to turn into a full-blown crisis.

To help further our understanding of what happened in the CEE countries, this paper will explore the political communication about the refugee crisis in four of these countries (Hungary, Croatia, Poland and Slovakia), along with Austria, a central European but not former communist country whose crisis management was strongly intertwined with the CEE region's public policy response and communication.[6] In the conclusion, we will discuss some key similarities and differences between the ways in which leading politicians in these countries communicated about the crisis, propose some potential explanations and highlight the implications for the European Union.

6 One crucial methodological limitation of the current analysis is that in three countries (Croatia, Poland and Slovakia), it was limited to English (and to a lesser extent German) language sources, including international and domestic reports. For the most part, limited English language coverage of these countries focuses on events rather than debates. Often the positions of key players would be reported in the context of specific policies they proposed or enacted (or opposed, if they were in opposition), without highlighting the debates/discourse that preceded them. By necessity, this obscured some of the nuances that were more readily apparent in those countries where the research could rely on more detailed coverage in the national languages.

Table 1: Overview of the governments in the selected CEE countries and their stance on the refugee quota system

Country	Governing parties	Ideological self-identification of main governing party/parties	Change of the governing parties' popularity between Spring 2015 and Autumn 2015	Head of government	Political affiliation of the prime minister	Opinion on the European quota system
Austria	SPÖ ÖVP	Centre-left + centre-right (grand coalition)	SPÖ: -2% ÖVP: -5%	Werner Faymann	Centre-left	Agrees
Croatia	SDP HNS-LD IDS-DDI	Centre-left	Croatia is Growing coalition: +7%	Zoran Milanovic	Centre-left	Agrees
	HDZ MOST	Centre-right	HDZ: +2%	Tihomir Orešković*	Independent	Agrees
Hungary	Fidesz-KDNP	Centre-right	Fidesz-KNDP: +11%	Viktor Orbán	Populist right-wing	Rejects
Poland	OP	Centre-right	OP: -11%	Ewa Kopacz	Centre-right	Agrees**
	PiS	Centre-right	PiS: +3%	Beata Szydlo***	Populist right-wing	Rejects
Slovakia	SMER-SD	Centre-left	SMER: +2%	Robert Fico	Left-wing	Rejects

**Assumed office in January 2016 after the government of Zoran Milanovic lost the November 2015 election.*
***The Polish government relented after massive international pressure, but maintained that it would be in favour of a voluntary quota.*
****Assumed office in November 2015 after the government of Ewa Kopacz lost the October 2015 election.*

2 | CEE countries and the refugee crisis: case studies

2.1. Hungary

If there was an antithesis to the German policy of admitting migrants generously, it was that of the Hungarian government. In fact, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán began publicly announcing that Hungary was opposed to any type of immigration well before the issue emerged as the top item on the public agenda in the European Union. The government spoke relentlessly about the dangers of immigration, and the key message was that the vast majority of new arrivals were economic migrants who were essentially trying to abuse the Hungarian welfare system while taking away Hungarian jobs. A crucial aspect of the government's communication was that the "lives of these people are not threatened on account of their nationality, religion or political creed, they leave their home country for economic reasons, they are trying to make an easier living" (thus a junior minister in the Ministry of the Interior in Parliament[7]). At this point, the government actively sought to conflate various categories of migrants, consistently avoiding the term "refugees" in order to drive home the idea that those arriving were not deserving of help. One must add that in February 2015 the government cited a number to back up its claim: of the 30,000-odd illegal entrants caught in Hungary by mid-February, Fidesz's representative claimed, roughly 25,000 had arrived from Kosovo, which is not a humanitarian disaster area in the sense that Syria or large parts of Iraq are.

7 http://index.hu/belfold/2015/02/20/gyulolethadjaratot_inditott_a_fidesz_a_menekultek_ellen/

The public response at this time was muted, for there was little appreciation of how serious a crisis was afoot. According to a Eurobarometer survey, in autumn 2014 a mere 1% of Hungarians indicated that immigration was a key problem in their personal lives (the EU average was also low, at 5%), and only 3% figured that immigration was a major problem for Hungary.[8] The latter was a striking contrast to the EU average, which stood at 18% and was especially high in western countries, including those that would soon emerge as the chief destinations of migrant movements, such as Germany (where 37% of respondents mentioned immigration as one of the top two problems facing their country, the third highest ratio in the EU), the UK (38%), Denmark (34%), Sweden (24%) or Austria (20%). Among the issues surveyed by Eurobarometer, immigration was the least frequently mentioned as a major problem (along with the environment) by Hungarians. At 18%, the share of Hungarians who considered this as one of the top two pressing issues for the entire EU was significantly higher, but still well below the EU average (24%) and especially far below the rates observed in the most important destination countries.[9]

Thus, when the government launched its anti-immigration national consultation[10] in the spring of 2015, followed by an anti-immigration billboard campaign in early summer, many perceived these as efforts to divert attention away from a seemingly unceasing stream of corruption efforts that were chipping away at the government's formidable popularity ratings.[11] Based on surveys of attitudes

---

8 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb82/eb82_anx_en.pdf, p. T19, p. T21.
9 Ibid, p. T24.
10 The government's euphemistically called national consultation on immigration was essentially a questionnaire mailed to all citizens in which the authorities asked heavily biased questions that strongly suggested there was only one reasonable position vis-à-vis migrants, namely the government's course of staunch rejection. In essence, the fake consultation was a propaganda leaflet that allowed the government to coat its own hard-line position in a seemingly non-partisan piece of propaganda. In a resolution of 10 June 2015, the European Parliament criticised the consultation as "highly misleading, biased, and unbalanced; establishing a biased and direct link between migratory phenomena and security threats", echoing the previous criticisms of several EU politicians.
11 http://www.policysolutions.hu/userfiles/elemzesek/hungarian_politics_in2015_web.pdf, p. 13-19.

towards foreigners and minorities, there was reason to believe that the public would not be all too welcoming to immigrants. Nevertheless, early in the year, when the migrant numbers were merely a trickle compared to the figures we would get accustomed to in the summer and fall of 2015, the government's campaign seemed like a mere communication stunt, even among many who naturally shared Fidesz's newly propagated views concerning migrants.

Meanwhile, sensing that European public opinion was becoming increasingly apprehensive in light of the massive migration stream, Orbán sought to target the public beyond Hungary with its anti-migrant communication. The goal was to portray those European leaders who advocated a generous asylum policy - in particular towards refugees from countries where the humanitarian situation was obviously disastrous, pre-eminently Syria - as out of touch with the views and fears of their own populations. Statements by spokespersons of the Hungarian government criticised with growing openness the EU's policy towards immigration, often singling out Germany as the culprit with respect to the difficult situation that had emerged. It is not unusual for the Hungarian government to communicate very differently (to wit, more aggressively) in domestic discourse than in European public forums. Yet on the migration issue the gap that often characterises the government's domestic and international communication was increasingly small, as Orbán sought to establish himself as the leading voice of the anti-immigration movement in Europe. To this end, the Hungarian government's criticism of European policies grew fiercer over time, also reflecting its frustration with the unwillingness or inability of its European partners to quell the mass influx of migrants. From the Hungarian perspective, certain EU countries were allowing an unmonitored inflow of migrants (in particular Greece and to a lesser extent Italy), creating a push factor within the EU, while other

countries, especially Germany, exercised a pull factor with their open border policy and willingness to absorb a seemingly unlimited number of refugees.

As a transit country, Hungary could theoretically have taken a laidback position and left the problem of managing/controlling the migration flows to the destination countries. Yet there were several practical problems. For one, the public response grew increasingly shrill, fuelled by the government's rhetoric and the coverage of the issue in the public media and in pro-government commercial media. Per capita, Hungary became the country with the heaviest flow of migration in the EU, and even in terms of absolute numbers it was second only to Germany - a far wealthier country with eight times the population. Moreover, because many migrants arriving in Hungary were registered by the authorities as asylum seekers based on the Dublin Regulation, there was also an inordinately high number of asylum applications (per capita, Hungary once again received the highest number, while it was second only to Germany in absolute figures).[12] In reality, this did not change Hungary's status as a transit country because most of those who submitted such an application subsequently moved on to Germany or other typical destination countries, but the fact that pro forma Hungary had the highest number of asylum applications per capita in 2015 showed the scope of the crisis.[13]

Correspondingly, the authorities were struggling with the management of the huge masses of migrants. Their capacities, which were set for far lower levels of migration, were quickly exhausted, and this was also true of the civil aid organisations. The main refugee NGO in Hungary, Menedék, had run through its annual budget by early July and had to withdraw its staff from the

12 http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics
13 http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911

arrival stations for migrants[14] just as the flow was about to peak. It did not help that the government refused to proportionally expand the allocations for aiding new arrivals; the vast majority of additional funds were poured into the police (which was still underfunded, especially in light of the magnitude of the challenge) and the building of the border fence. There was also a key legal problem: for months, the government insisted that it would comply strictly[15] with the relevant EU legal requirement, the so-called Dublin Regulation, which mandates that each refugee must register as such in the country where she first enters the EU. This was very unpopular both with the migrants and the Hungarian authorities, for the same reason: neither wanted the migrants to stay in Hungary.

Ultimately there was a two-pronged solution to this dilemma. On the one hand, after a protracted standoff at Budapest's train stations, where thousands of migrants had lived for days or weeks without adequate logistical arrangements, masses of migrants set off on foot towards the Austrian border, with Germany as their destination. After a brief hesitation, the German authorities decided to let everyone in, and Austrian authorities, in turn, allowed the refugees to transit through their country. At the same time, the Hungarian government announced that it was going to combat the illegal entry of refugees into Hungary by building a border fence along its southern border, complemented by legislative measures that effectively rendered legal entry for migrants impossible; all countries from which the current refugee streams could approach Hungary were declared safe countries, and new legislation ruled out the possibility of granting asylum to someone who had passed through a safe country on their way to Hungary.

---

14 http://hvg.hu/itthon/20150630_Kivonjak_a_menekulttaborokbol_a_Menedek_E
15 See for example: http://444.hu/2015/06/24/a-kormany-mar-visszakozik-termeszetesen-betartjuk-a-dublini-rendeletet-csak-technikai-turelmet-kerunk

In parallel with effectively sealing off Hungary from migrants, the government became increasingly alarmist in its communication; migrants were no longer just seeking to leech economic benefits, but were "invading" Europe,[16] a process that would destroy the continent unless the streams were halted. Orbán now cast himself as the protector not only of Europe, but of Christianity itself.[17] As Pope Francis was declaring that helping refugees was a Christian duty and that Catholic churches were obliged to offer shelter to those in need, Orbán was arguing that letting in migrants was tantamount to destroying Christianity in Europe. In line with the claim of an "invasion", Orbán's reasoning took a turn towards the more sinister when it came to identifying the causes. He began openly stating that there was a conspiracy behind the vast movements of people. This is not an unusual occurrence in the Hungarian government's communication. According to the governing party, ominous international forces were also driving the series of official protests at the European level against the government's various measures violating the basic tenets of democracy and the rule of law.

This time, too, the culprits behind the invasion were simultaneously or interchangeably the international left, the Brussels elite and George Soros, who was singled out a while ago as Public Enemy No. 1 because of the funding he provides to Hungarian NGOs, many of which tend to be critical of the government's activities in various policy areas. Fidesz's propaganda machinery also zeroed in on liberalism as the chief set of values that undermines Europe, in this particular context through its commitment to immigration. This not only created a neat continuity with Orbán's previously formulated objective of building an "illiberal democracy", but also sought to identify the "pro-refugee agenda", as it were, with an ideology - liberalism - that has fallen into considerable disrepute in Hungary.

16 http://www.hirado.hu/2015/12/02/orban-a-migransok-lerohanjak-europat/
17 http://index.hu/belfold/2015/10/23/orban_kereszteny_europa_menekultek/

Fidesz's communication on this issue was also driven by a desire to flank its far-right rival, Jobbik, from the right. In 2014 Jobbik announced a change in its communication: it became more moderate in tone to compete for voters at the centre of society. Chairman Gábor Vona proclaimed a "cuteness" campaign that seeks to turn his formation, often decried as one of the most extreme among Europe's far-right populist parties, into a conservative "people's party." In the polls, at least, the strategy paid off – with Jobbik steadily rising in the second half of 2014 and the first few months of 2015 – until the refugee crisis came to dominate public discourse.

There were indications that Jobbik was caught off guard by the intensity of Fidesz's communication on the refugee crisis, which is in part explained by the timing: Fidesz started framing the issue early, long before it was addressed with such intensity in other European countries or at the EU level. Also, Jobbik was "out of rhythm", so to speak, for it had just began to move away from extremist rhetoric when that was exactly what it would have had to engage in to keep up with Fidesz. After a parliamentary debate on migration in mid-February 2015, still well ahead of the full-blown crisis that would emerge a few months later, Jobbik's spokesman, Dániel Z. Kárpát, found himself admitting that upon hearing Fidesz's politicians on the issue, "it would be difficult to flank the government from the right."[18] Jobbik did try, but ultimately it was too late. By the spring Fidesz had established itself as the leader on this issue, and its popularity recovered to previous heights, with Jobbik falling far behind. It is crucial to point out that just like Orbán's European partners, Jobbik, too, had been unprepared for a scenario in which the EPP member party Fidesz would recast itself as a far-right populist party; given Fidesz's history and its thin commitment to the fundamental tenets of moderate European conservatism, it should not have been surprising.

18 http://index.hu/belfold/2015/02/20/gyulolethadjaratot_inditott_a_fidesz_a_menekultek_ellen/

Fidesz's position on the far right of this issue was made considerably easier by the fact that there was no strong challenge from the left. The largest party on the left, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), suffered from a conundrum. It assumed that many of its voters actually agreed with Viktor Orbán on this issue, even if this did not necessarily imply agreement with the xenophobic rhetoric (nor did it rule out such an agreement). Therefore, after some criticism early in the crisis, MSZP decided to sit out this debate. Citing sources within the party, the media claimed that in internal debates this was referred to as "positive neutrality" (former MSZP Chairman Attila Mesterházy confirmed that this was the party's approach).[19] The party's representatives tended to comment less on this issue, and on the whole MSZP neither openly endorsed nor clearly condemned Fidesz's policies in this context. Incidentally, this lukewarm attitude was also reflected in the parliamentary votes, where MSZP's faction voted for some of the tough anti-immigration measures that Fidesz proposed while rejecting others. Yet the schizophrenia in MSZP's positions went deeper: even as it opted to stay above the fray and thereby essentially ceded the rhetorical and public policy ground to Fidesz, the party allowed the volunteer organisations helping refugees to use its empty headquarters, which had been put up for sale at the time. This was, of course, done without touting the move in public.[20]

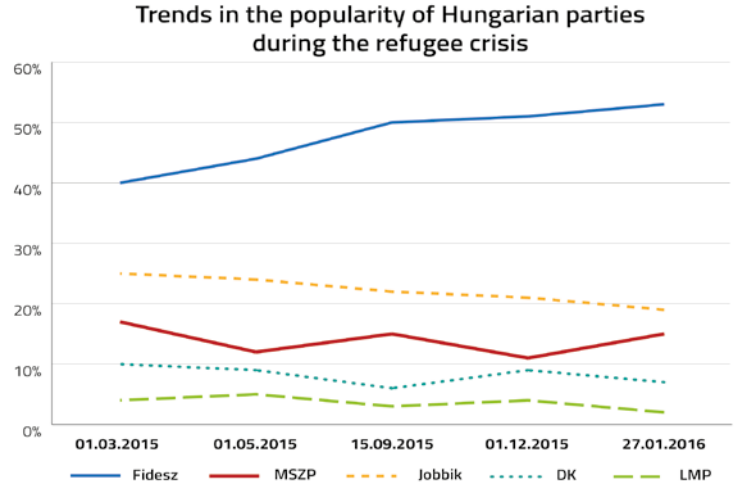
In public discourse, the main opponents of the government's hardline policy were the smaller leftwing opposition parties (e.g., Democratic Coalition (DK) and Együtt) and some recently created NGOs which successfully organised logistical help for the tens of thousands of migrants who passed through Hungary on their way west. Though there were some differences in the details, essentially these organisations advocated a humanitarian approach towards

19 http://hirtv.hu/ahirtvhirei/mesterhazy-megerositette-a-pozitiv-semlegesseg-mellett-az-mszp-migransugyben-1305960

20 It was not clear who in the party made this decision and whether there was any official trace of it, but the author has personally confirmed the fact that MSZP's headquarters was used by NGOs engaged in helping refugees.

migrants. Unlike Fidesz, which managed to shore up support through its successful communication on this issue, the leftwing parties that formulated a clear alternative failed to improve their standing in the polls. Though there was no indication that public opinion was shifting towards them, neither did their support collapse, which suggests that their voters essentially agreed with the stance these parties took. The NGOs dealing with refugees, most of which were created out of thin air during the spring and summer of 2015, had a considerable practical impact in terms of providing humanitarian assistance to the migrants passing through Hungary, and they arguably created a civil response that was unexpected in its energy and commitment. Nevertheless, they did not have a major impact on public discourse.

Figure 1

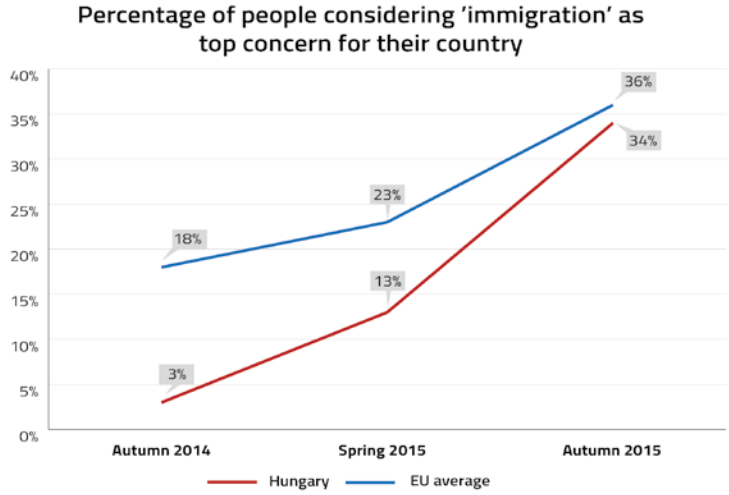


Source: Medián.[21] Only parties with a level of support repeatedly above the threshold (5%) to enter parliament were included.

21 http://kozvelemenykutatok.hu/2015-marciusi-kutatasi-eredmenyek-median/; http://kozvelemenykutatok.hu/2015-majusi-kutatasi-eredmenyek-median/; http://kozvelemenykutatok.hu/2015-szeptemberi-kutatasi-eredmenyek-median/ http://kozvelemenykutatok.hu/2015-novemberi-kutatasi-eredmenyek-median/; http://kozvelemenykutatok.hu/2016-januari-kutatasi-eredmenyek-median/

Supported by incessant media reports about the high number of migrants arriving in Hungary, Fidesz's anti-migrant communications campaign was among the most successful in Europe. When the autumn 2015 Eurobarometer survey was performed, the share of Hungarians who indicated that immigration was one of the top concerns facing Hungary had risen to 34%, a 21-point surge as compared to the spring and a massive 31-point increase as compared to a year earlier.[22] Immigration had at this point emerged as, by far, the top public policy priority in Hungary (as it had in many other European countries), and compared to figures from the spring and previous autumn, the Hungarian public was growing concerned far more quickly than the European average.

Figure 2



Percentage of those people who mentioned 'immigration' in their answers to the following question: "What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?"[23]

22 http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/70297, p. T31
23 Source: Eurobarometer, http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/

Measured by what one can reasonably assume were Fidesz's goals in this context, the governing party's anti-migrant communication was an unmitigated success. After its triple election victories in 2014 (in the national parliamentary, European parliamentary and local elections across Hungary), the governing party's popularity had started to plummet, falling from heights of nearly 60% in the summer of 2014 to under 40% in some polls in the spring of 2015. While there is now some disagreement among pollsters about the strength of Fidesz's resurgence - estimates range from a low of 44% to a high of 54% among likely voters in early 2016[24] - there is a consensus that the party has halted the loss of support it experienced between autumn of 2014 and the spring of 2015, and instead of undergoing a slump that often characterises governments in the middle of their term, Fidesz enjoys a polling high that even led to speculations that it might call a snap election. What's more, Orbán has established himself as a presence on the European stage, with the European edition of Politico crowning him top among the 28 leading figures of 2015,[25] arguing that "[t]he Orbán brand of politics is a new norm in Europe." In the meantime, many of Orbán's chief opponents at the European level are either defeated or severely embattled.

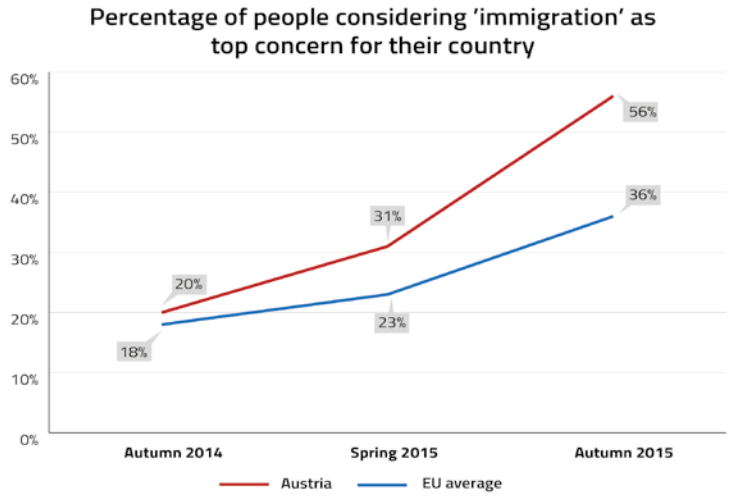
2.2 Austria

Austria was the only country among those discussed here where a genuine, policy-centred public discourse about refugee policy was already present in early 2015. This was a reflection of both the realities on the ground, that is increasing numbers of migrants arriving, as

24 http://kozvelemenykutatok.hu/partpreferenciak-2016-januar-tovabbra-is-orzi-elonyet-a-fidesz-kdnp-az-ellenzeki-taboron-beluli-viszonyok-viszont-keplekenyek/
25 http://www.politico.eu/list/politico-28/

well as a public awareness that the issue was important. In the fall 2014 Eurobarometer survey, 20% of respondents had assessed that immigration was among the top two issues facing their country, thereby making this the only country in our sample in which this value exceeded the EU average (18%) at the time.[26] By the spring of 2015, Austrians' concern about this area had visibly increased, with 31% indicating that this was a top issue, a rate of growth twice that of the EU (where this ratio rose to 23% from the previous 18%).[27] When Eurobarometer administered its regular survey in the fall 2015, there was another dramatic increase that was double the European average: now 56% of Austrians thought that immigration was among the top issues facing their country, a 25-point surge as compared to the figures measured in the spring.[28]

Figure 3



26 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb82/eb82_anx_en.pdf, p. T18.
27 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83_anx_en.pdf, T. 21.
28 http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/70297, p. T31

Percentage of those who mentioned 'immigration' in their answers to the following question: "What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?"[29]

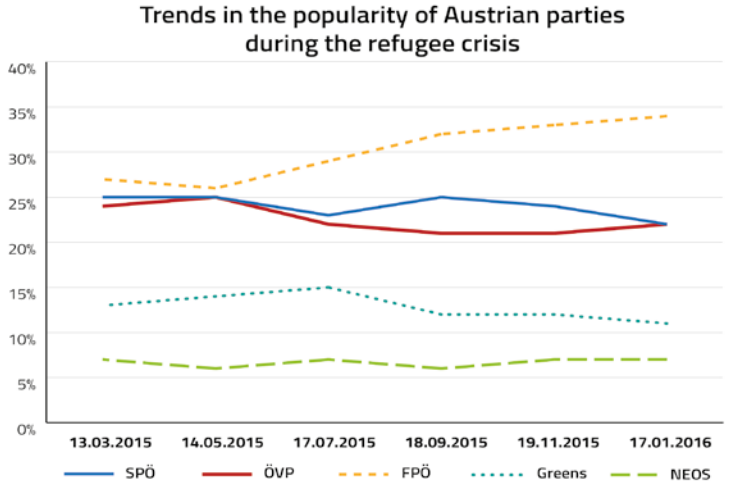
For Austria, the initial signs of what would become the refugee crisis were already present in late 2014 and early 2015. The authorities reported growing numbers of migrants arriving in the Italian-Austrian border area, and their total number in 2014 marked an 80% increase over the corresponding figures for 2013 (though the figures were still miniscule when measured by the standard of the summer of 2015).[30] Already at the end of January 2015, the interior ministry presented a plan to make Austrian asylum policies more restrictive, thereby triggering the internal debate about how to handle refugees.[31]

There were three major players in the Austrian debate. The first was the leading government party, the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), led by Chancellor Werner Faymann. The second key player was the centre-right Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), which is the junior partner in the wobbly coalition. ÖVP controlled the interior and foreign portfolios in the government, which played a crucial role in refugee policy and thus proved vital in the Austrian government's subsequent management of and communication about the refugee crisis. The third player is not involved in government, but is a key outsider: the largest opposition party, the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), has thrived for decades now on inciting resentments against foreigners, and it has established itself as a major player in Austrian politics precisely by relentlessly emphasising the issue of immigration and integration.

29 Source: Eurobarometer, http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/
30 http://derstandard.at/2000010294443/Immer-mehr-Fluechtlinge-am-Brenner
31 http://derstandard.at/2000010876961/Die-Asylplaene-der-Innenministerin-im-Detail

In terms of communication about the refugee crisis, each of the three players occupied a different niche. At one end, SPÖ emphasised generosity and humanitarian aspects, while at the other end FPÖ stood for the kind of policies and rhetoric that Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Robert Fico in Slovakia embodied (except, of course, that FPÖ's anti-immigration rhetoric went back far longer). In fact, the Freedom Party often set out Orbán as a model for Austria. This trio was complemented by the Green Party, a smaller party that consistently stood for a more relaxed and humanitarian-centred attitude towards the influx of migrants.

Figure 4



Source: Gallup Österreich via Neuwal.com.[32] Only parties with a level of support repeatedly above the threshold (4%) to enter parliament were included.

32 https://neuwal.com/wahlumfragen/wahlumfrage.php?uid=910; https://neuwal.com/wahlumfragen/wahlumfrage.php?uid=939; https://neuwal.com/wahlumfragen/wahlumfrage.php?uid=965; https://neuwal.com/wahlumfragen/wahlumfrage.php?uid=988; https://neuwal.com/wahlumfragen/wahlumfrage.php?uid=1021; https://neuwal.com/wahlumfragen/wahlumfrage.php?uid=1065

Within the government, it was primarily the conservative ÖVP that was pushing for a harder line towards asylum seekers. The abovementioned reform of the asylum system was proposed by the ministry of ÖVP politician and minister of the interior Johanna Mikl-Leitner, who invoked the idea that the Austrian system was overloaded and asylum procedures needed to be expedited to ensure "that persons from safe country of origins [do not] block our systems [...] and make way for persons who are deserving of protection, such as refugees from war."[33] To this end, ÖVP proposed, among other things, to cap the length of asylum decisions for certain categories of refugees at 10 days, and to deny basic social services to those whose asylum requests had been denied in the first instance.[34] FPÖ welcomed the proposal, even claiming credit for the intellectual authorship,[35] but the social democrats reacted negatively, rejecting certain proposals out of hand.[36] Ultimately, a considerably relaxed version of the law was adopted that lacked several of the controversial elements that the social democrats, NGOs and Greens had criticised.[37] Throughout the year, Mikl-Leitner played the role of the coalition government's chief sceptic about migrants and called for major policy changes to improve Austria's ability to handle the refugee crisis.

Following the January-February debate about the new restrictions in the asylum law, the issue moved out of the centre of public discourse for a while, but from May on it emerged as the dominant issue in the news. In April 2015, a demonstration organised by NGOs to commemorate refugees who had drowned in the Mediterranean while trying to cross into the EU drew an impressive array of the country's top officials (including the three highest, the President, Chancellor and Speaker of Parliament) from both

33 derstandard.at/2000010950782/Mikl-Leitners-Asylplaene-verstimmen-die-SPOe
34 http://derstandard.at/2000010876961/Die-Asylplaene-der-Innenministerin-im-Detail
35 http://derstandard.at/2000010897767/Asyl-Verschaerfung-Funk-befuerchtet-Obdachlosigkeit
36 http://derstandard.at/2000010950782/Mikl-Leitners-Asylplaene-verstimmen-die-SPOe
37 https://www.parlament.gv.at/PAKT/PR/JAHR_2015/PK0488/

governing parties.[38] In this context, Chancellor Werner Faymann (SPÖ) spoke of a "disgrace for humanity" and called for a European solution involving the "countries and the regions" from whence people fled.[39] While she also called for an end to "death trips", Mikl-Leitner asked the UN to create refugee centres in Africa to accommodate refugees there.

Despite internal divisions within the governing coalition, on a crucial issue social democrats and conservatives were united: both called for a European solution to the refugee crisis that would distribute migrants fairly between European countries. And even as the most vocal advocate of a tough asylum policy, Mikl-Leitner's communication on this question opposed the majority position of central and eastern European member states, which rejected the so-called quotas. Of course, given the high number of refugees in Austria, a call for quotas reflected not only a commitment to joint European solutions but also a desire for burden sharing, Still, this desire arose only because Austria did, in fact, assume a disproportionately high burden. Incidentally, federal government officials of both parties also called on the federal states to respect the rules governing the fair distribution of refugees. Yet while there was a rough agreement in the coalition with respect to what the parties demanded from the EU partners and Austrian federal states, in terms of Austrian federal policy, their views increasingly diverged.

As the crisis deepened, the conservative voices in the governing coalition became increasingly adamant in calling for restrictive solutions, while the social democrats increasingly withdrew from the public debate. In June 2015, Mikl-Leitner announced that she had ordered the assessment of asylum requests to be backlogged in order to have the so-called Dublin cases treated as a priority, as those might result in asylum seekers being returned

38 http://derstandard.at/2000014580938/Gedenken-an-die-toten-Fluechtlinge-im-Mittelmeer
39 http://derstandard.at/2000014508874/Mikl-Leitner-und-Strache-fuer-Aufnahmelager-in-Nordafrika

to the EU country from whence they had entered Austria. As the minister herself indicated, this signalled a growing frustration with the inability of the EU to address the problem. She was joined at this point by another conservative heavyweight in the cabinet, foreign minister Sebastian Kurz, who said "Mikl-Leitner had been left alone too long" with this problem.[40] Kurz bemoaned the fact that neither the federal states nor his colleagues in the cabinet had taken the problem seriously enough, while there was no fair distribution of refugees within the EU. At the same time, the foreign minister also sharply distanced his position from that of the far-right FPÖ, arguing that "deportation fantasies" concerning the country's already huge immigrant population were "absurd", and that "we must clearly continue on the path towards integration. We need to be aware that none of these people will leave our country. This incitement against immigrants who are here legally, often as second or third generation immigrants, won't help us one bit."[41]

Towards the end of 2015 and into early 2016, Mikl-Leitner and Kurz had shifted further towards a stricter policy line. By late October, Kurz argued that "borders can be secured if one wants. [...] It is possible to have refugees enter in an orderly fashion, fences have proven themselves and work."[42] This was controversial especially in light of Chancellor Faymann's intense criticisms of the Hungarian border fence. In early 2016, Mikl-Leitner called on the social democrats to "abandon their *Willkommenskultur*", that is, their culture of welcoming refugees,[43] and advocated increasingly severe measures to keep out newly arriving migrants, arguing that theirs "is no

40 http://derstandard.at/2000017904216/Kurz-zur-Asyldebatte-Mikl-Leitner-wurde-zu-lange-alleingelassen
41 htttp://derstandard.at/2000017746218/Diese-Menschen-werden-unser-Land-nicht-mehr-verlassen
42 http://www.krone.at/Oesterreich/Kurz_stellt_klar_Die_Zaeune_funktionieren-Will_man_es_tun-Story-478451
43 http://diepresse.com/home/politik/innenpolitik/4904858/MiklLeitner_SPO-muss-sich-von-Willkommenskultur-trennen

longer a search for protection but often a search for the most attractive country."[44] There was also an element of resignation in this shifting tone, for it appears that the Austrian interior minister has given up hope that there will be a European solution that can alleviate Austria's disproportional burden of the crisis. While rejecting criticisms by the European Commission concerning certain restrictive elements of Austrian refugee policies, she wrote: "Since a European solution is still not in place, Austria will implement necessary measures to counter the migration streams and the disproportional and enormous pressure on our asylum system. All in accordance with the law, of course."[45] In speaking to the rightwing tabloid *Krone* about the letter, she added that if "everyone complied with what was set out in [the European Commission's] letter, then Austria would have no problems. The letter was obviously sent to the wrong address. I am not the interior minister of Greece."[46] At the same time, conservatives would still occasionally distance themselves from the Freedom Party as well to show that their criticisms differed fundamentally from those of the far-right. In a parliamentary debate in September about a bill on the internal distribution of refugees, the highest-ranking conservative in the government, Vice Chancellor Reinhold Mitterlehner, who often preferred to let his fellow party members Mikl-Leitner and Kurz do the talking when it came to the refugee crisis, stated that the FPÖ's attacks constituted an "insult to our humanitarian tradition."[47]

Though news reports suggested that on actual public policy the coalition partners clashed frequently behind the scenes, in public SPÖ politicians mostly left the increasingly sharp tone of their coalition partner unanswered, taking a leave of absence from the debate. This was also likely explained by

44 http://www.heute.at/news/politik/Mikl-Leitner-Asyl-Eklat-vor-laufender-Kamera;art23660,1259020
45 http://www.krone.at/Oesterreich/So_hoeflich_schickt_Mikl-Leitner_Goetz-Zitat_an_EU-Asyl-Antwortbrief-Story-497055
46 ibid.
47 http://derstandard.at/2000021553176/Nationalrat-tagt-zu-Asylpolitik-und-Griechenland

increasing divisions within the social democratic party itself; especially at the local level, a growing number of SPÖ functionaries called for a change in Austria's approach towards the refugees. When it came to opening new camps, social democratic-led municipal governments were likely to protest as well. Thus there was a gap between the domestic Chancellor Faymann and the international Chancellor Faymann. The domestic Faymann often absented himself from the refugee debate. The international Faymann continued to strongly advocate a joint EU policy and repeatedly attacked his Hungarian counterpart, Viktor Orbán, for failing to cooperate in this joint policy and for the lack of humanitarianism in Hungary's treatment of migrants, noting that refugees who had arrived in Austria from Hungary "reported that they had received nothing to eat [in Hungary] and that the medical care was awful."[48] Faymann was among the most forceful proponents of the quota - on this point the two parties of the coalition were in agreement - and intensely criticised the recalcitrant central and eastern European states for refusing to shoulder their share of the burden.

The relationship with the EU was also an issue in the growing split between the parties of the governing coalition. This was apparent, for example, when Faymann's chancellery spoke out against an initiative by two conservative ministers to sue the European Commission for its failure to ensure a fair distribution of the refugee burden, which the two ministers assessed would have been required by EU law.[49] As the crisis progressed, even the assessment of the Hungarian government began to divide conservatives and social democrats. ÖVP did not echo Faymann's criticisms of Hungary, and without adopting the Hungarian tone towards refugees, both Mikl-Leitner and Kurz expressed more sympathy for the Hungarian position and strove to maintain cordial professional relations. Mikl-Leitner lent police

48 http://index.hu/kulfold/2015/09/12/faymann_a_nacikhoz_hasonlitotta_orbant/
49 http://derstandard.at/2000020978888/Regierung-uneins-ueber-Asylklage-gegen-EU-Kommission

to help the Hungarians monitor the border,[50] while Kurz found supportive words for the Hungarian border fence, arguing that if the EU fails to implement a solution, "then states are practically compelled to adopt their own measures",[51] which subsequently emerged as the Austrian policy line once the hope of a joint EU policy was abandoned.

The shift in the tone of ÖVP politicians and the domestic silence of the SPÖ, along with the increasing severity of the government's policies towards migrants over the year, were obviously also a reflection of a shift in opinion among a public that was increasingly worried about the refugee crisis. A survey in June 2015 showed that 29% of voters thought that far-right FPÖ had the best policy approach towards refugees. Though that was not even close to a majority, it was nevertheless an impressive lead over the governing parties ÖVP and SPÖ, whose policies enjoyed the backing of 12% and 10% of the public, respectively.[52] Clearly, the vast majority of the public, including majorities of their own voters, did not trust the governing parties to handle the crisis. For Chancellor Faymann, the figures were worse: he has not been popular since roughly six years ago, but in 2015 his popularity dropped to new lows, and by summer his "trust" rating stood at a net value of -15%, meaning that the ratio of those who did not trust the chancellor was 15% higher than the proportion of those who did. The leader of the far-right FPÖ, Heinz-Christian Strache, had improved over the last years from a low of -49% to a low of only -8% in June 2015, an indication that the far-right party was moving into the mainstream.[53] A survey in September showed a dramatic deterioration in the already negative public outlook: 90% of respondents were concerned about the number of refugees, 72%

50 http://orf.at/stories/2287038/2287039/
51 http://www.heute.at/news/politik/Ungarn-Traenengas-und-Grenzzaun-fuer-Fluechtlinge;art23660,1203284
52 http://derstandard.at/2000017791295/FPOe-ist-Asyl-Partei-Nummer-eins-was-tun
53 http://derstandard.at/2000018165361/Vertrauensindex-Faymann-buesste-viel-Vertrauen-ein

feared that Austria would have "too many aliens", 76% said the government would not be able to handle the crisis and 67% felt that the media were not informing them properly.[54] Along with three regional elections in which the FPÖ significantly increased its vote share, the signs were clear enough to make social democrats understand that advocating a generous asylum policy would lead to serious trouble with their voters.

The Austrian government's course during the crisis was similar to those we observe in many western countries of the EU: a growing awareness that 2015 is not like previous spikes in immigration/refugee numbers, but an entirely new dimension, and that unless it was managed properly, the crisis could potentially topple the government and even damage the entire EU. Additionally, the Austrian government was burdened by a split within the coalition and a very successful far-right challenger that owed its previous success to relentlessly castigating foreigners and warning of the dangers of immigration. Neither of the governing parties came down fully on what one might refer to as Viktor Orbán's side, but ÖVP's communication - while it remained committed to the fundamental idea of helping those fleeing war - drifted gradually rightward in response the crisis, the failure of the EU countries to act and pressure from the public. SPÖ, frequently criticised as a hapless and overly pragmatic governing party to begin with, acted the part, allowing politicians of its junior coalition partner to shape the government's domestic communication about the crisis. This also allowed conservatives to shape the public policy response to a significant extent, with the result that a series of restrictions were adopted, culminating in Austria's announcement that it would cap the number of refugees who can enter the country in 2016.

54 http://derstandard.at/2000022148634/Fluechtlinge-Wie-mehrheitsfaehig-ist-die-Hilfsbereitschaft-wirklich

2.3. Croatia

For a long time, it appeared that Croatia would be able to sit out the refugee crisis and, thus, would not even have to formulate a detailed response to the growing stream of migration to the European Union. Throughout much of 2015, the refugee crisis did not come up as a major issue in the internal Croatian debates, even as the country was gearing up for a national election in the fall. While this may seem somewhat surprising in hindsight, it is understandable that Croatians themselves did not initially realise the implications of the crisis for their country. As a detailed report by Al Jazeera showed, Croatia was experiencing a *decline* in the number of asylum applications in 2014, even as the pace of immigration to the EU was increasing quite dramatically at the time, though not anywhere near the levels the continent would experience in 2015. Specifically, Al Jazeera wrote, "[w]hile other European Union members are seeing dramatic increases in arrivals of people seeking asylum, Croatia - the EU's newest member after joining in July 2013 - is a destination most migrants avoid. [...] Last year, while the EU registered a 44-percent surge in asylum claims, Croatia saw a decrease of 58 percent. [...] According to EuroStat, a total of 450 asylum applications were submitted in Croatia in 2014 [...]."[55] While Croatia is a comparatively small EU country with a population of 4.2 million, these miniscule numbers were disproportionately small, and the trend was strikingly different from that experienced in the EU overall.

It is no surprise that Croatians were unperturbed by the issue of immigration in the autumn of 2014, with only 2%, indicating that this was among the top two issues for their country.[56] Even with respect to the EU overall, Croatian

55 http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/05/welcoming-croatia-shunned-refugees-150513065939048.html
56 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb82/eb82_anx_en.pdf, p. T19, p. T21.

citizens were less likely to view immigration as a major challenge: only 11% indicated that it ranked among the top 2 challenges facing the European Union, less than half the average.

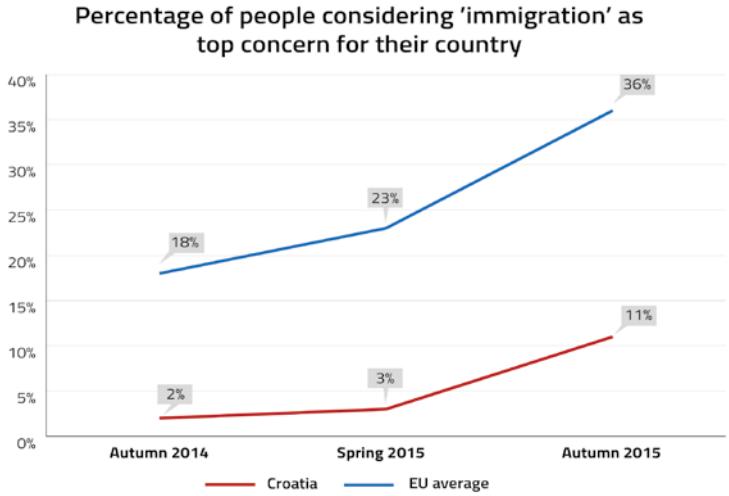
As of May 2015, before the brunt of the crisis reached Croatia, it was one of only five countries in which more people saw immigration in a positive light than in a negative light (Ireland, Romania, Spain and Sweden being the others, though only in the latter did an absolute majority of respondents share this view).[57] In the spring, Croatia also had the highest level of respondents in the EU who thought that no additional measures were necessary to control migration, though at 25% the ratio of "relaxed" respondents was not very high here, either.[58] What made Croatia especially interesting is the fact that even once the refugee crisis intensified and dominated the news, the spike in the ratio of concerned citizens (8 percentage points between spring and autumn 2015) was still fairly low, and the overall figure of 11% of citizens who assessed that immigration was one of the top two issues facing their country was among the lowest in the European Union, despite the fact that by November, when the survey was taken, Croatia was squarely in the midst of the crisis.[59]

At the same time, it must be pointed out that Croatia's recognition rate for refugees was paltry and consistently far below the European average - in the fall of 2014 only 15% of asylum seekers were recognised as refugees, though it may be hard to draw inferences from such a vanishing sample.[60] Regardless, the point was that Croatians saw themselves as welcoming but unattractive for refugees, as both Al Jazeera and Eurobarometer's surveys confirm.

---

57 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83_publ_en.pdf, p. 153.
58 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83_publ_en.pdf, p. 156.
59 http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/70297, p. T31ĺ
60 http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/8/88/First_instance_decisions_by_outcome_and_recognition_rates%2C_3rd_quarter_2014.png

Figure 5



Percentage of those people who mentioned 'immigration' in their answers to the following question: "What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?"[61]

Correspondingly, in the quota negotiations at the EU level, Croatia took a constructive approach, though with some reservations. Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic declared that for "humanitarian reasons" Croatia was prepared to "accept a small number of people," but also stressed that "we cannot go beyond that."[62] While in terms of its enthusiasm, this was not precisely on par with Angela Merkel's famous "We can do it!" dictum, it was a striking contrast to the intransigent position of many of the region's other countries, which refused to entertain the notion of accepting even small quotas. Moreover, even the very limited contingent of roughly 1,000 persons that Croatia was prepared to accept marked a significant increase in the number of refugees the country will have to absorb. Finally, while the number was a rounding error in light of 10,000 refugees arriving on peak days, given Croatia's population, which is

61 Source: Eurobarometer, http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/
62 http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/croatia-to-take-share-of-eu-refugee-burden

less than one percent of the EU, and its substantial economic problems (the country has been in recession since 2009), the figure appeared appropriate. In subsequent comments, government officials reaffirmed Croatia's humanitarian obligations. Thus, the then-minister of the interior, Ranko Ostojic, stated that "[t]he government's decision on the relocation and resettlement of nationals of third countries who meet conditions for international protection is a response to the numerous humanitarian disasters that have been happening in the Mediterranean lately, and to the resulting increase in pressure on the EU asylum system."[63] In addition to the humanitarian dimension, Prime Minister Milanovic also cast the issue as one of solidarity and reciprocity towards the country's EU partners: "I have been saying from day one, both in Croatia and in the European Council and among the prime ministers of the European Council, that we are a country which received help from others when it was hardest. Therefore, in line with our possibilities, which are small but do exist, we are willing to help and will do so."[64] This was a key statement because it looked at the issue from a perspective that Merkel and other western politicians bemoaned was lacking among the governments of the other countries in the region, e.g., Hungary and Slovakia. They had received and were continuing to receive, thus the argument, and were now unwilling to give back to help the EU tackle this major challenge. However, in the same breath Milanovic intimated that his government's rhetoric was based on an optimistic assumption that Croatia would not be called upon to do more in the name of solidarity: "Milanovic said he did not expect the refugee crisis to spill over into Croatia but that if it did, 'we must be human, have heart and give our all."[65]

When the full force of the refugee crisis did catch up to Croatia, this kind of optimism did not prevail. Even as the Hungarian authorities were busy

63 http://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/254-croatia-to-accept-up-to-550-asylum-seekers-over-next-2-years
64 http://arhiva.dalje.com/en-croatia/croatian-pm-about-refugees--we-wont-run-away-from-our-responsibility/553439
65 ibid.

constructing the fence along the Serbian border - and it was clear that this would divert the course of the migrant streams towards Croatia, for that was the quickest route towards Germany and the West - Milanovic retained his optimism. As late as 4 September 2015, he responded to plans that Croatia should accept a higher number of refugees (3,200) by saying that "[t]he European Commission in Brussels works with numbers about the admission of refugees, and it is not unacceptable to me that they should set quotas which individual countries should accept. We are ready to discuss it."[66] He also criticised Hungarian plans to extend the border fence under construction to the Croatian-Hungarian border, taking aim at the broader philosophy underlying the Orbán government's policy towards migrants: "Orbán is talking about danger for the Christian values in Europe. Like hordes of Muslims who are less valuable are coming here. However, that is only 0.1 percent of the European population and these are people who are highly motivated to succeed and to live here. People die for a chance to succeed. I do not believe in border fences. These are not our enemies, and the wall will not help Hungary at all. People will go around it."[67] And, in fact, people did - to Croatia. The Croatian position was that they would handle the influx with greater humanitarianism than the Orbán government had demonstrated, but there was a hint of self-confidence in the Croatian attitude which suggested - in hindsight, as did so many other developments of this crisis - that the government was not fully aware of the magnitude of the challenge. Once the Hungarian government did seal the border towards Serbia, the tone of the Croatian government changed a mere two days after being exposed to the full brunt of the crisis, as the country became the target of the pressure that Hungary had been subject to until that point.

Roughly 13-14,000 people arrived in Croatia within two days, and by the end of September an estimated 85,000 were thought to have entered the country.[68]

66 http://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/761-milanovic-i-do-not-believe-in-border-fences-to-stop-refugees
67 Ibid.
68 http://news.yahoo.com/hungarys-border-policy-unacceptable-croatia-pm-135531994.html

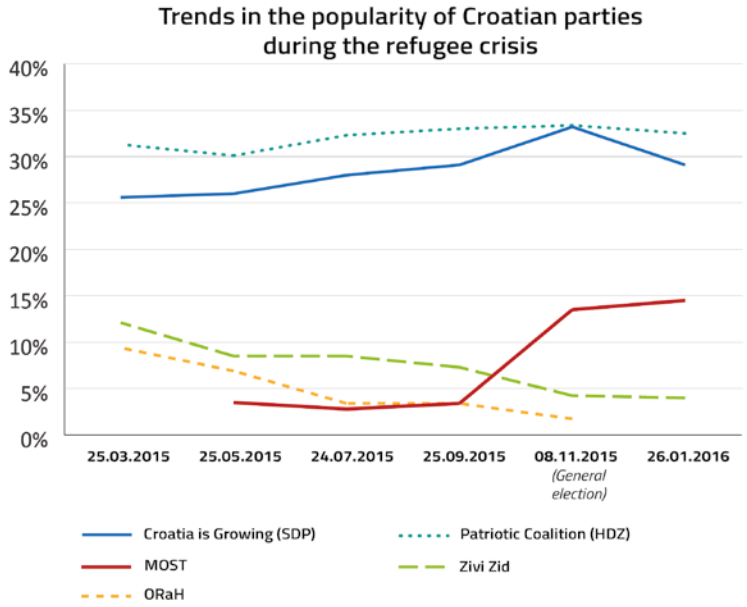
Already on the second day of the Hungarian border closing, the Croatian prime minister stated that his country "cannot register and accommodate these people any longer. They will get food, water and medical help, and then they can move on. The European Union must know that Croatia will not become a migrant 'hotspot.' We have hearts, but we also have heads."[69] Croatia also quickly closed all but one of its border crossings to Serbia. Interior minister Ostojic claimed that Zagreb had an "emergency plan in the case of an influx of thousands of refugees", which it would "quickly activate [...] if need be."[70] The plan had to be activated, and it turned out that it was the same that every country, save for a few exceptions led by Germany, used in this situation: letting the masses transit through the given country, even helping them do so, but quickly passing them on to other countries that accepted them in the hope of doing the same, all the way to Germany. In Croatia's case, this implied helping the refugees cross into Hungary, which further exacerbated the tensions that had previously erupted on account of the two governments' different attitudes concerning the refugee crisis. The relationship between the two governments reached a low point as a train from Croatia, which transported migrants escorted by Croatian police, entered into Hungary allegedly without authorisation to do so. At least in public communication, the Hungarian government treated this as a serious "border violation" and claimed to have "disarmed" the Croatian police officers before sending them back.[71] The militaristic tone was indicative of both the confrontational stance of the Hungarian government and the extreme tension that prevailed between neighbouring countries which approached the problem from different perspectives. The fight even became personal, with Viktor Orbán referring to Milanovic as "an emissary of the Socialist International whose job is to attack Hungary."[72]

69 https://www.rt.com/news/315892-croatia-refuses-accept-refugees/
70 http://inavukic.com/2015/09/16/refugee-crisis-diverted-to-croatia-as-hungary-seals-borders/
71 http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/hungary-seizes-refugee-train-arriving-croatia-150919003810139.html
72 http://bigstory.ap.org/article/7b4908acb14045ddb83a26376bca4d2b/hungarys-anti-migrant-steps-aid-orbans-right-wing-shift

As the number of migrants moving through Croatia rose explosively, the issue moved into the focus of Croatian public discourse, and predictably also shaped the campaign discourse in advance of the fall 2015 national elections. In a display of the rift within the government, President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, who had been nominated for her office by the main centre-right opposition party HDZ, distanced herself from the centre-left government of Milanovic.[73] Already on 1 September, a week after Milanovic (who was running for re-election as the candidate of the Croatia is Growing party alliance) said that he did not anticipate the crisis to "spill over" into Croatia, Grabar-Kitarovic warned that "[w]e can expect that a larger number of refugees will head towards Croatia",[74] and called on the government to prepare for this eventuality. Once masses of migrants started to arrive, she was critical of what she considered the government's lack of preparedness, and in a pointed letter to the prime minister she warned of the consequences of the crisis, using language that was strongly reminiscent of Orbán's rhetoric.[75] Then-opposition leader and HDZ president Tomislav Karamarko echoed her concerns.[76] In a departure from her previous stance that "Croatia, a European Union member, should show solidarity with the people fleeing war and poverty in their countries",[77] Grabar-Kitarovic also attacked Chancellor Merkel for causing chaos with her policies.[78]

73 http://news.yahoo.com/eus-tusk-condemns-racism-xenophobia-against-migrants-154712110.html
74 http://news.yahoo.com/eus-tusk-condemns-racism-xenophobia-against-migrants-154712110.html
75 "It is my duty to warn of the refugee wave and all of its societal, economical and security implications. The most important thing that I insist on is the safety of Croatian citizens, the stability of the state and the control and surveillance of the border. Before anything else, we have to think of our own citizens and our diaspora, and our standard. I don't exclude the possibility of raising a border fence in the future. We have been flooded with migrants, and it has become very difficult to manage the flow of people." http://www.x-pressed.org/?xpd_article=croatia-securitisation-of-the-refugee-issue-by-the-political-elites
76 http://www.x-pressed.org/?xpd_article=croatia-securitisation-of-the-refugee-issue-by-the-political-elites
77 http://news.yahoo.com/eus-tusk-condemns-racism-xenophobia-against-migrants-154712110.html
78 http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/angela-merkel/11883426/Croatia-president-blames-Angela-Merkel-for-refugee-crisis.html

Figure 6



Source: IPSOS PULS[79] and election results on Parties and Elections in Europe.[80] Only parties with a level of support repeatedly above the threshold (5%) to enter parliament were included.

Generally speaking, ideology did not appear to play a major role in shaping the attitudes of major parties in the central and eastern region towards the refugee crisis. As we will see in the following chapters, centre-left governments in the Czech Republic and

79 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_for_the_2015_Croatian_parliamentary_election; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_for_the_2015_Croatian_parliamentary_election; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_for_the_2015_Croatian_parliamentary_election; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_for_the_2015_Croatian_parliamentary_election; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Croatian_parliamentary_election,_2015; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_for_the_next_Croatian_parliamentary_election

80 http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/croatia.html

Slovakia found themselves taking a very similar position to the rightwing governments in Hungary and Poland. However, in Croatia the ideological divide did appear to play a significant role. While the centre-left government emphasised cooperation with the European Union and the country's humanitarian obligations, the centre-right warned of the dangers of migrants. In addition, while Prime Minister Milanovic and his government were on a course of confrontation with the Hungarian government, centre-right politicians, especially Grabar-Kitarovic, not only borrowed from Orbán's rhetoric but also pointedly sought to emphasise that relations with Hungary should and would be mended.[81] In terms of public policy, it is not clear if there was a massive difference between the centre-left Croatian government's approach and that of the Hungarian government: effectively, both countries did their utmost to transfer the "problem" westward. However, unlike Viktor Orbán's cabinet, the Croatian government did not launch an anti-migrant communication campaign. Moreover, on the ground the UNHCR clearly saw some differences, for it lauded the Croatian authorities for their handling of the migrants transiting the country.[82]

From the perspective of political communication, it is difficult to draw conclusions regarding the success or failure of the Croatian government's handling of the issue. On the one hand, the shift in the Croatian government's rhetoric did indicate that it was adapting rather hastily to the changed circumstances by toughening up a stance that was previously emphatic in its humanitarianism and commitment to European cooperation. The government never came full circle on the issue, however, and maintained a distance from the harsh Orbán

81 http://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/1104-hungary-to-return-train-66-of-croats-support-government-crisis-handling
82 https://about.hr/news/croatia/croatia-sets-high-standards-refugee-treatment-conference-3662

rhetoric in Hungary. Moreover, as late as October, a month before the national election, polls indicated that an overwhelming majority of Croatians (66%) approved of the government's handling of the crisis.[83] Though it is true that ultimately the centre-left lost the election in November, the margin of its defeat was far narrower (only 1%) than HDZ's 5% lead in July and August,[84] **before the crisis came to a head in Croatia.**

2.4. Poland

Poland was the scene of an unusually intense clash in the political elite between two radically opposed views concerning refugees. One position held that Poland should take no refugees at all, period, and the other held that Poland should take no refugees at all unless under very significant international pressure, in which case it would take a very limited number to demonstrate its goodwill towards the EU. For the refugees, the difference was not overwhelming, to say the least, but it did have some impact on the internal debate in Poland: the 7,000 refugees overall whom the Polish government pledged to accept[85] after massive pressure in consecutive rounds of quota negotiations led to a fuming opposition and massive anti-refugee demonstrations (as well as some smaller pro-refugee demonstrations).[86]

Due to its geographic position in the north, the lack of an immigration tradition, and its status as a transition economy far better known for

83 http://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/1104-hungary-to-return-train-66-of-croats-support-government-crisis-handling
84 http://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/414-hdz-still-the-strongest-party-president-grabar-kitarovic-the-most-popular-politician
85 http://www.krakowpost.com/10477/2015/09/poland-to-accept-5000-refugees
86 http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21664726-politics-are-shifting-right-and-willingness-help-muslims-or-europe-short-supply-resistant

exporting labour than being able to create jobs for masses of immigrants, Poland was never going to be at the centre of the refugee crisis. Even migrants who did come (primarily from the CIS or from Ukraine) generally considered Poland a transit country - this was an often-stressed point by officials of the beleaguered Polish government.[87] Correspondingly, Poles were not very worried about immigration as an issue before 2015, and only 7% indicated that the issue was among the top two facing their country in autumn 2014.[88] Incidentally, this was a fairly high rate in comparison with most other central and eastern European countries (only Bulgarians, Latvians and Lithuanians were marginally more concerned with immigration in 2014), but it was far below the European average of 16% and negligible, especially when compared to those western European countries that are traditionally seen as destination countries for immigrants. A year later, Eurobarometer measured a sharp increase in the level of concern about immigration, as 17% of Poles indicated that immigration was one of the top two issues facing Poland.[89] Nevertheless, even this growth was far less pronounced than the 20-point surge in the EU overall (36% of EU citizens considered immigration to be one of the top two national issues in autumn 2015), or the massive spike in the number of concerned citizens in the far more affected countries, Austria and Hungary, for example. Polish figures were more in line with Slovakia's, and in European comparison the citizens of these countries were moderately concerned at most, which is, of course, a reflection of the fact that, for the most part, the practical consequences of the refugee crisis passed them by.

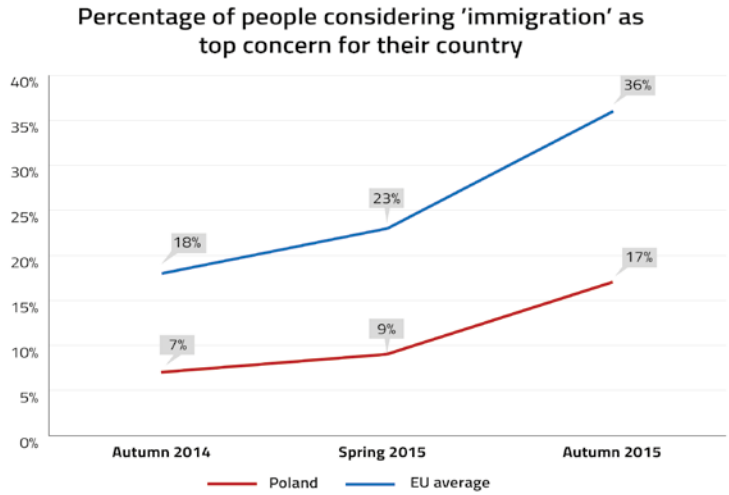
---

87 http://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/international/fluechtlinge-in-europa-so-laeuft-es-in-polen/12159548-4.html

88 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb82/eb82_anx_en.pdf, p. T18.

89 http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/70297, p. T31

Figure 7



Percentage of those people who mentioned 'immigration' in their answers to the following question: "What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?"[90]

Though the overwhelming majority of the Polish political elite rejected any notion of serious involvement in helping the EU tackle the refugee crisis, there were significant differences between the Polish debate and the public discourse in Hungary and Slovakia, two key allies of Poland in the EU when it came to the refugee question. In Hungary and Slovakia, the governing parties vituperated against migrants in the vein of western far-right populists, warned of Europe succumbing to a Muslim invasion and flat-out denied that they had an obligation to participate in EU schemes to alleviate the crisis. Despite its overall negative attitude towards the EU's attempts at handling the crisis by redistributing refugees, the Polish governing party, the centre right Civic Platform (PO), did not go as far as its Hungarian and Slovakian partners.

90 Source: Eurobarometer, http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/

Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz did not completely rule out that her state would co-operate with the EU to help resolve the crisis, but very early she emphasised that not much was to be expected of Poland, for "solidarity must be in line with a country's capabilities."[91] Such a capacity-based solidarity must be voluntary, Kopacz argued. During the EU negotiations about quota she stated at the end of May 2015: "Poland has said clearly - and it is by no means alone with this in the EU - that such quotas would be unacceptable for us. But I think we can talk about a voluntary Polish contribution, just not under compulsion, but on a voluntary basis."[92] A mandatory quota, Kopacz emphasised, was "the road to nowhere."[93]

The Polish government was trying to chart a course between the fellow V4 countries' total rejection of the EU's efforts and any outward indication that it would actually be involved to any discernible degree in relieving the migrant pressure. Importantly, it also refrained from the far-right verbal incitement against refugees that accompanied the rejectionist attitude in Slovakia and Hungary. Still, despite this relative moderation, the Polish government, too, made clear that the fact that the likely arrivals would be overwhelmingly Muslim weighed heavily in its decision, and it stressed this point by voluntarily pledging to help persecuted Christians outside the EU. When announcing that Poland would take in 150(!) Christian families from the Middle East, Kopacz explained: "Christians who are persecuted in such a barbaric fashion deserve to be helped by a Christian country such as Poland."[94] The statement was remarkable in that it simultaneously recognised that "barbaric persecution" constituted a legitimate basis for an obligation to help *and* that this obligation was limited on a religious basis, to helping only coreligionists; the basic insight that many Muslims suffered

91 http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/massensterben-im-mittelmeer-wenn-ideale-versinken-1.2451303
92 https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/eu-kommission-fluechtlinge-101.html
93 http://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/ausland/eu/id_75352178/verteilung-der-fluechtlinge-polen-verbitten-sich-belehrungen.html
94 http://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article143093749/Polen-will-nur-christliche-Fluechtlinge-aufnehmen.html

from religious persecution in the Middle East - which frequently included their murder - due to their particular interpretation of Islam or their lacking religiosity did not figure in this moral calculus. In September, Kopacz also emphasised the distinction between actual refugees and "economic migrants", acknowledging a moral obligation to help the latter while emphasising that "we aren't able to accept economic migrants." Because this was a frequently recurring argument in the CEE governments' communication, it is important to highlight that it is a strawman: no one in any position of political consequence advocated an obligation to accept economic migrants.

The PO's complicated position, including the back and forth regarding whether and whom to accept, is perhaps best understood as the result of complex pressures pushing the government into two opposing directions. For starters, the country was under tremendous pressure to be constructive because, for symbolic reasons, the rest of the EU considered Poland pre-eminently important as the CEE region's largest member state by far (Poland is larger than all of the other V4 countries combined, and, in fact, it alone makes up 40% of the total population of the EU's 10 CEE member states). A failure to tie Poland into a refugee policy scheme would thus obviously weigh heavily on the negative side of the ledger when assessing the success of the EU's ability to adopt a joint policy. Moreover, the fact that the President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, was Kopacz's predecessor and the PO's most prominent political figure would have made a failure to involve Poland all the more glaring. In fact, Tusk's selection probably also owed to the hope that it might make the country, which had a history of torpedoing joint decisions, less likely to veer off the common course. Finally, there were claims that the PO's own more moderate, urban and liberal base was more open to taking on a higher share of the burden than the Polish public in general, though it is unclear whether the difference to the general public was substantial. The pressure in the other direction weighed even heavier on the minds of Polish

decision-makers, however. First, it was reasonable to assume that on the whole the Polish public was no more likely to be welcoming of migrants than their counterparts in the other V4 countries. Second, the impending national parliamentary election of October 2015 was a major consideration for the PO leadership. By the time the refugee issue emerged as a full-blown crisis in the summer of 2015, the PO's candidate in the presidential election, the incumbent Bronisław Komorowski, had lost unexpectedly to his opponent, Andrzej Duda, a representative of the main opposition party, the rightwing populist Law and Justice Party (PiS). Surveys showed clearly that PiS was well-positioned to win the parliamentary elections as well, and given the overall attitude of Poles towards migrants, a conciliatory position to the EU's refugee quota would hardly help the governing party with uncommitted voters. The PO's leadership likely assessed that this issue might be sufficient in itself to undermine a potential victory. While comparative surveys showed Poles being more amenable on this issue than their Czech and Slovak counterparts, Polish society was less open than even the Hungarian public, for example.[95]

Despite the calls by Pope Francis to help refugees, the Catholic Church, traditionally an important player in Poland, was also not helping soften the Polish public, though at times its communication on the issue was divided among those who accepted Francis' guidelines and church leaders whose views mirrored those of the Polish public. In warning of the dangers of terrorism, the influential bishop of Cracow, Tadeusz Pieronek, said that fears of Muslim refugees are "justified", which is why the church should only "open its doors to Syrian Christians."[96]

Moreover, with the election of Duda there was now a top opposition politician in a key government position, and like his Croatian counterpart, Duda used the weight of his office to keep the government under pressure during the

95 http://www.tarki.hu/hu/news/2015/kitekint/20151118_befogad.html
96 http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/polen-angst-und-kalkuel-1.2640725-2

campaign for the parliamentary election. Unlike Grabar-Kitanovic, however, Duda's rhetoric was anything but restrained, showing that the governing party in waiting would unequivocally align Poland with the other V4 countries, not only in terms of rejecting the EU's quota policy but also with respect to the sharp communication used by the other CEE government. In an interview, Duda warned that if the government was willing to make any concessions to the EU and accept refugees, it had "to ensure that Poles are well protected against epidemiological risks", noting that refugees were "bringing in all kinds of parasites which are not dangerous in their own countries, but which could prove dangerous for the local population."[97] A PiS spokeswoman added that refugees are a "European problem, not a Polish one", setting her country clearly apart from the EU.[98]

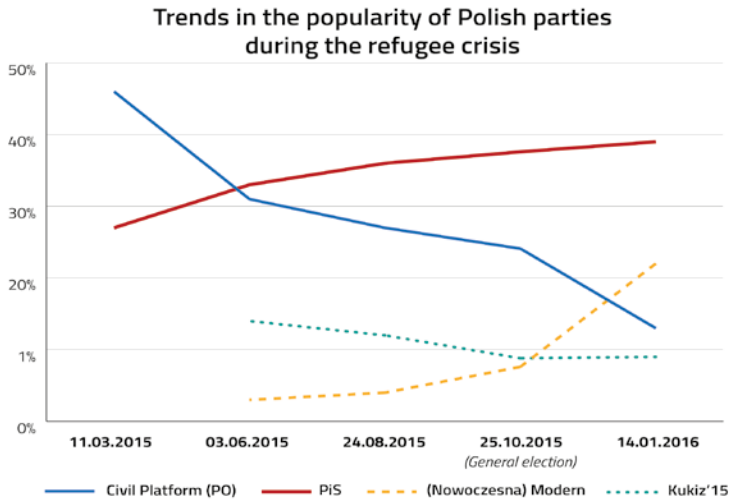
The conflicting pressures also manifested themselves in the PO's communication, which veered openly between rejecting the European position and accepting Poland's obligation to participate in a joint scheme. Even as Prime Minister Kopacz signalled Poland's willingness "to do more" and assume a greater number of refugees than its initial commitment of 2,000 - subject to a number of stringent conditions - her defence minister, Tomasz Siemoniak, had harsh words for Germany, as the leading EU power on the refugee issue, and the European Union: he said Germans had no business "lecturing Poland on solidarity" and, echoing a widespread criticism of the EU's policy, added that it would be a mistake to "invite tens of thousands of other refugees to Europe only because [the EU] is at a loss."[99]

In the end, the PO government in Poland succumbed to the European pressure and abandoned the joint stance it had previously adopted with the

97 http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/10/poland-president-refugees-epidemics-151018162358594.html
98 http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/ost-mitteleuropa-vier-ohne-erbarmen-1.2635794
99 http://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/ausland/eu/id_75352178/verteilung-der-fluechtlinge-polen-verbitten-sich-belehrungen.html

other V4 countries.[100] At the end of September 2015, the PO government acceded to the request that it take on a further 5,000 refugees in addition to the 2,000 it had already pledged in the summer. It is not clear what role this played in sealing the PO's electoral fate a few weeks later, or whether, in fact, the government had already given up all hope of winning the election and was willing to compromise to save Donald Tusk some face at the EU level. In any case, PO lost and a new PiS government was in, and it predictably cancelled all commitments made by its predecessor.

Figure 8



Source: Centrum Badania Opinii Spolecznej (CBOS)[101] and election results at Parties and Elections in Europe.[102] Only parties with a level of support repeatedly above the threshold (5%) to enter parliament were included.

100 http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/ost-mitteleuropa-vier-ohne-erbarmen-1.2635794
101 http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2015/K_033_15.PDF; http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2015/K_077_15.PDF; http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2015/K_116_15.PDF; http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2016/K_007_16.PDF
102 http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/poland.html

The PiS government provoked a fight with the EU on several fronts, most notably through a series of controversial decisions that were widely perceived as violating the rule of law. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that it had no qualms about reversing a policy that it assumed was massively unpopular with the public. By the end of 2015, the Polish position had shifted from rhetorical moderation and modest policy compromises to an Orbán-style harsh rhetoric and total policy obstructionism at the EU level. The incoming prime minister, Beata Szydlo, who started with the symbolic move of having the EU flag removed from her press conference, stated that "[a]fter Paris, the situation has changed."[103] Given PiS's stiff opposition to any refugees being brought to Poland, it did not seem likely that this was the actual reason, but in the end the point was the same: a tad bit more politely than its Hungarian and Slovakian counterparts, but the Polish government, too, was saying no without the room for compromise that its predecessor had allowed. After the shift in the Polish government's position, the governments of the V4 are in even closer alignment in their rejection of the EU's common refugee policy than they were before. As in the case of Croatia, it is unclear what impact the refugee crisis had on the parliamentary election, and it stands to reason that the PO was on the way out even before the issue was fully recognised as a full-blown crisis. It bears pointing out, however, that PO's polling figures started dropping precipitously in the few months before the election, while PiS's figures improved steadily, though less dramatically. The least that can be said is that the PO government's equivocating stance on the refugee crisis did not help its popular standing.

103 http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3333233/Poland-s-new-PM-says-country-not-accept-EU-quota-4-500-refugees-wake-Paris-terror-attacks.html

2.5. Slovakia

Slovakia was, in a sense, among the "lucky" countries in the context of the refugee crisis. It was neither a transit nor a destination country, and thus for the most part it could afford to simply observe the turmoil in the affected EU member states. It owes much of this outside position to its geographic location, its relatively low level of economic development and the Hungarian government's resolute policies against migration, especially the border fence. Despite a considerable history of friction between Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán and his Slovakian counterpart, Robert Fico, they were in full agreement on this particular issue, and the Slovakian government gave every indication that it appreciated Orbán's hard line. Their agreement made the situation easier for both, as for once neither was the sole "bad boy" of the EU. Though nominally leftwing and a member of the main centre-left group in the European Parliament, the Socialists & Democrats Group (S&D), under Robert Fico's leadership, the governing party Smer does in many respects not appear to mesh with the mainstream of European social democracy.

During his previous term in office (2006-2010), Fico provoked a scandal on the European stage by entering into a coalition with a far-right - and, on occasion, racist - political organisation, the Slovak National Party (SNS), as well as the party of Slovakia's former authoritarian ruler Vladimir Meciar, the HZDS. Given that he lacked a majority, there was a general perception that Fico should have tried to enter into a coalition with centrist or moderate rightwing parties. This was prevented by the incompatibility between Fico's Smer and the Slovakian mainstream right, both at the personal and the ideological levels. Ideologically speaking, Smer joined with the far-right in Slovakia in trying to stake out a nationalist-authoritarian position, while large segments of the centre-right appear more strongly committed to the value of liberal constitutionalism.

In his second term, Fico had mellowed, and clashes with the EU became rare. Yet the refugee crisis once again pinned the Slovakian government against the EU's western-dominated leadership and simultaneously brought him closer to Viktor Orbán, a most unexpected friend. Like Orbán, Fico started railing against immigration relatively early, in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo attack in January 2015. He remarked that as a Christian country, Slovakia could not allow hundreds of thousands of Muslims to settle in Slovakia and start building mosques, for example.[104] It is worth pointing out that Fico's rhetoric was more extreme at this point than that of his Hungarian counterpart, who was mainly focused on the economic impact of immigration. Fico's rhetoric, which Orbán would quickly catch up with, was already fully in line with that of far-right parties in western Europe.

Nevertheless, the Slovakian government did not build as concerted a campaign around this issue as the Hungarian government did, and for the most part it was not a focal point in government communication until the refugee crisis unfolded in all its severity in late spring and summer. This was probably also due to the fact that for a fairly long time, Slovakians correctly assessed that the refugee crisis had little to do with them or their country. In the fall of 2014, a mere 1% of Slovakians saw immigration as one of the two top issues for their country, the lowest level in the EU.[105] As the crisis peaked and dominated international news coverage in the summer of 2015, Slovakians still felt unperturbed: only 4% thought that this was a major problem for their country, and only 1% thought it was an issue in their personal lives. It is worth recalling that with 23% of all EU respondents selecting it as one of the top two priorities, at this point immigration had emerged as among the most worrisome issues for Europeans overall.[106] It was only at this point that a marked increase came about in the public perception: within the span of a mere few months, in the

104 http://voxnews.info/2015/01/28/premier-slovacco-non-permettero-immigrazione-islamica-e-moschee/
105 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb82/eb82_anx_en.pdf, p. T18.
106 http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83_anx_en.pdf, p. T20, p. T22.

fall of 2015 the number of those who viewed immigration as one of two top issues facing their country surged from 4% to 19%. Slovakia's overall figures were still among the lowest in the EU at that point, but fear was spreading at a pace that was more typical of what was going on in Europe: the 15-point surge since the previous measurement exceeded the European average of +13 points since spring, which is especially significant because Slovakia was among the least-affected countries.[107]

As in Poland and Croatia, the government's communication on the refugee issue was increasingly dominated by the temporal proximity of the elections.[108] An interesting twist to the Slovakian government's communication approach was that government politicians accused the opposition of exploiting the xenophobia in Slovakia to earn "cheap political capital."[109] This was ironic because press outlets in Slovakia and beyond repeatedly accused the government of doing exactly that, and, in fact, the government's frequently voiced emphasis on the dangers of Muslims and their incompatibility with Slovakia's Christian culture was a prime example of such "cheap political capital."[110] Even more hypocritically, Slovakia's foreign minister warned of the "scary" prospect of the refugee crisis "uniting the Slovakian far-right."[111] What the minister forgot to mention was that one of the prime far-right beneficiaries of the xenophobic mood fostered by the government was Smer's former and future coalition partner, the Slovak National Party (SNS), which Smer prefers to moderate rightwing alternatives.[112]

---

107 http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/70297, p. T31

108 To some extent this was also true of Austria, where national elections are scheduled only for 2018, but state elections take place regularly, including three in the time period investigated.

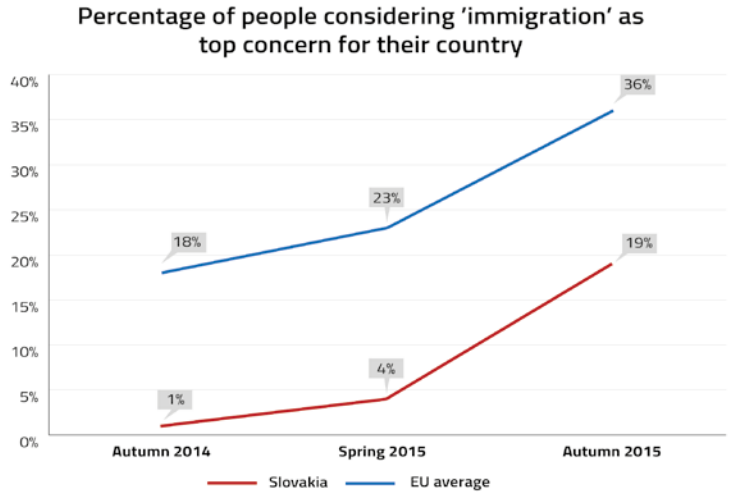
109 http://diepresse.com/home/politik/aussenpolitik/4792334/Slowakei-sperrt-sich-gegen-Fluchtlinge

110 Ibid.

111 http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/9/2/slovakia-FM-says-refugee-crisis-could-unite-far-right.html

112 After SNS returned to Parliament after the March 2016 election - it had missed the 5% threshold in 2012 - with 8.6% of the votes, Smer quickly moved to include it in its coalition government.

Figure 9

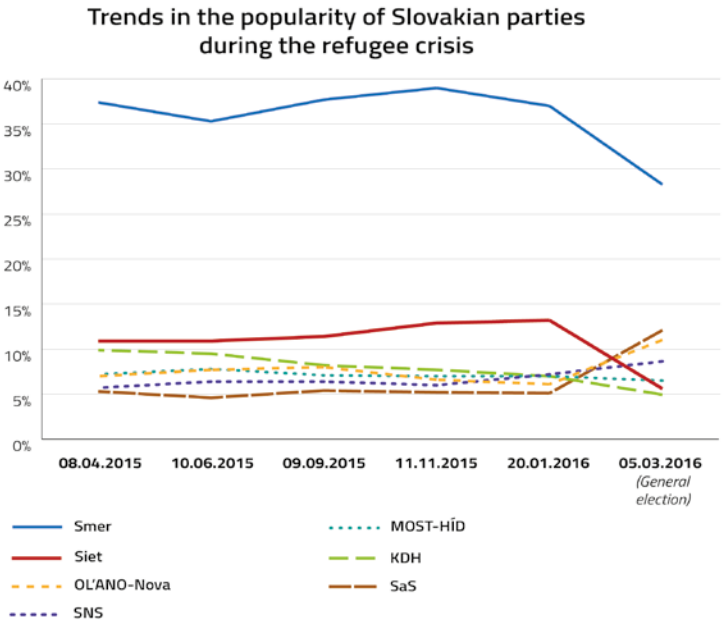


Percentage of those people who mentioned 'immigration' in their answers to the following question: "What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?"[113]

To prevent losing support ahead of the upcoming general elections, the government stepped up the intensity of its communication against migrants in the second half of 2015. It warned repeatedly about the consequences of Muslim immigration and claimed that Slovakia, in particular, was ill-suited for accepting Muslims because it lacked the integration experience of western societies, which was illustrated, for example, by the fact that it had no mosque, a government official argued.[114] Like Poland, Slovakia initially declared that it would accept only Christian refugees, though a statement by the interior ministry later qualified this by declaring that though "Christians would be easier to integrate", no one "would be discriminated against on religious grounds."[115]

113 Source: Eurobarometer, http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/
114 http://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/muslimen-gefaellt-es-hier-nicht-haben-keine-moscheen-slowakei-will-nur-christliche-fluechtlinge-aufnehmen_id_4891324.html
115 http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2015-08/slowakei-fluechtlinge-christen-muslime-asyl

Figure 10



Source: FOCUS (polls)[116] and Parties and Elections (elections results).[117] Only parties with a level of support repeatedly above the threshold (5%) to enter parliament were included.

Typically for the refugee-crisis-related government communication in the V4, exclusionary comments were made at the highest level (in this specific instance, by the prime minister and the interior minister), while statements

116 http://www.focus-research.sk/files/187_Volebne%20preferencie%20politickych%20stran_april%202015.pdf ; http://www.focus-research.sk/files/191_Volebne%20preferencie%20politickych%20stran_jun%202015.pdf; http://www.focus-research.sk/files/194_Volebne%20preferencie%20politickych%20stran_september%202015.pdf; http://www.focus-research.sk/files/198_Volebne%20preferencie%20politickych%20stran_november%202015.pdf; http://www.focus-research.sk/files/200_Volebne%20preferencie%20politickych%20stran_janu%C3%A1r%202016.pdf

117 http://www.parties-and-elections.eu/slovakia.html

that aligned a given government's policy with EU laws were made by subordinate bodies or persons (in this case, a non-personal communiqué by a government department).

A key aspect of the government's communication was the rejection of the mandatory quota proposed by the EU. The Slovakian government went even further in trying to foil the quota and announced that it would turn to the Court of Justice of the European Union because, Fico argued, the decision should have been taken by the European Council, where Slovakia could have exercised its veto to block it.[118] In explaining his rejection, Fico argued that he did not "want to wake up one day and have 50,000 people here in this country about whom we know nothing."[119] In the wake of the Paris attacks, which Fico framed as the affirmation of his fears about Muslim immigration, the prime minister added that the government would be "monitoring every Muslim in the territory of Slovakia."[120]

There was not much resistance in Slovakia to the government's views about migrants. The most important voice by far was the President of the Republic, Andrej Kiska, who took a very strong public stance against what he interpreted as the government's incitement against refugees. In a major speech in September, on the heels of a V4 summit that resolutely rejected the EU quota, Kiska warned that "[w]e will lose the battle for the heart and soul of our country if we, both as citizens and as politicians, will not be able to make a distinction between fearing the unknown and unconcealed hatred, contempt for human life, extremism, xenophobia and fascism. And also if we fail to clearly and categorically refuse such expressions of

118 http://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/slovakia-pushes-ahead-with-legal-action-over-eu-refugee-quotas/
119 http://news.yahoo.com/slovak-pm-says-not-bow-germany-france-migrants-183138391.html?nf=1
120 https://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/slowakei-113.html

intolerance."[121] In his speech, Kiska sought to rebut the government's position in detail, calling for "an end to scare-mongering" and solidarity with refugees and the European Union. Among the opposition parties, such a stance was not widespread; however, Híd-Most, a party that is emphatic in its desire to bring together the ethnic Hungarian minority and ethnic Slovak majority, also issued a statement to the same effect a few days before Kiska, noting that "[w]e are worried about the increasing intolerance and political exploitation that accompany the European humanitarian crisis, and the statements by the representatives of our government, which keep making the situation worse."[122]

These statements had little impact on Slovakian public opinion, but Kiska's involvement was nevertheless remarkable: it was the only statement by a leading government official in any V4 country that identified with the broader goals of the refugee policy that a majority of western European EU members wanted to pursue at this time, and with the values on which this policy was based.

121 https://www.prezident.sk/en/article/vyhlasenie-prezidenta-kisku-k-teme-utecencov/
122 http://parameter.sk/menekultek-hid-hagyjon-fel-fico-kormany-szandekos-felelemkeltessel

3 | Conclusions

The refugee crisis has already reshaped European politics, and given that it is far from resolved, it is impossible to tell where the European Union, the relationships between its countries and regions, or the domestic politics of its member states are headed. Nevertheless, even as the situation continues to be in flux, a variety of tentative conclusions can be made.

What is clear is that for the first time, several of the central and eastern European EU member states presented a nearly united front against a planned EU policy, and they have thus far played an instrumental role in foiling joint European action on the refugee crisis. It would be improper to speak of winners in this crisis, which has produced and is producing humanitarian tragedies on an ongoing basis, most importantly people fleeing from war zones who are increasingly running into barriers when they try to find a safe and reasonably accommodating environment. Focusing on a very narrow political dimension, there are actors who have been successful, however.

Roughly summarised, CEE politicians have emerged as a major factor in ensuring that Germany and its allies in the EU have found themselves unable to implement a joint policy based on the distribution of refugees. The central and eastern Europeans have not fully prevailed with their position that the European Union address the crisis exclusively by sealing off the EU borders to prevent migrants from entering, but in practice this approach is gaining ground. As of this writing, the Balkan route, previously one of the major migration routes into the EU, is largely inaccessible to migrants. Many of

Angela Merkel's key allies have adapted their positions (under pressure, Sweden has abandoned its policy of unlimited admission[123]) or turned away from the German policy line (the French prime minister Manuel Valls, for example, has recently heavily criticised Angela Merkel's policies, [124] even though the French government had been among the staunchest critics of Viktor Orbán). Indeed, Angela Merkel has also quietly adjusted her position on the refugee crisis, and she now places a greater emphasis on acknowledging the desire for securing the EU's outer borders and limiting the number of migrants who come to the EU.

This is not surprising. There was no quick solution to this crisis and it was clear from the beginning that the European public would not acquiesce to a totally uncontrolled inflow of migrants if it went on for a long time. Whether Viktor Orbán, to identify the Hungarian PM as one of the extreme positions of the intra-EU dispute, was right or not in his hardline position is to a significant extent a question of ethics and ideology. Empirically, however, it is clear that he was one of the first to publicly stress the seriousness of the issue and that he immediately reacted to and inflamed public fears about the implications of increased migration. This was the groundwork, and he later reaped the benefits when the inevitable happened and the public became increasingly concerned about this issue.

As a result, Orbán and those who emulated him set up a yardstick towards which many European politicians ultimately gravitated, even though many have not yet reached that extreme position and many may never do so, and even if Orbán's far-right rhetoric is not yet likely to become dominant in the communication of mainstream European parties. What the case studies above have made very clear is that as the crisis deepened, there were significant changes in all countries involved, both in terms of politicians' rhetoric

123 http://dailysignal.com/2015/12/31/sweden-accepted-more-refugees-per-capita-than-any-other-eu-country-now-its-tightening-borders/
124 http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2016-02/manuel-valls-asylpolitik-frankreich-kritik-angela-merkel

and their actual public policy decisions. Furthermore, the movement was always unidirectional, towards a position of controlling or even halting the inflow of migrants and securing the borders. The change was most conspicuous in the case of the Croatian government, which quickly admitted that it had difficulty controlling the masses once the routes used by migrants shifted to include Croatia.

There was also a shift in Orbán's rhetoric. Though his rhetoric was tough from the start, he added another layer to his menacing tone by becoming increasingly hostile towards the German government. In the case of Austria, it was striking how conservative politicians dominated the SPÖ-led government's public communication on refugees, as was the actual shift in public policy response towards the right and towards closing off Austria, even with the social democrats still in power.[125] Of course, it must also be added that of the countries analysed here, Austria bore the biggest burden, for it was both a major transit *and* destination country, while the other two massively affected countries, Hungary and Croatia, did not have to grapple with the latter.

It is important to point out that in some sense Orbán's policy generated its own success. Merkel's strategy was, from the very start, based on the assumption that the EU would be able to tackle the masses of refugees only by adopting a joint policy and spreading the burdens among member states. Orbán's strategy, by contrast, would have been easier (read: cheaper and quicker) to enforce with a coordinated response, but it did not depend on it. As Hungary and other countries have since shown, at least for the time being it is possible to largely seal off borders alone. Yet the refusal of several countries to join in a common policy solution increased the burden on the rest, leaving them with the challenge of not wanting to shoulder the brunt of the problem with very few collaborators. This was a classic collective action dilemma, with individual actions prevailing over

125 The issue has given rise to an increasingly deep rift within the SPÖ.

a joint compromise solution that could have alleviated the crisis without going to the extreme – in either direction – of the "let everyone in" and "let no one in" spectrum. There seemed to be very little room for a reasonable compromise on EU policy when a significant number of countries joined the Hungarian line of refusing to accept any share of the burden. Humanitarianism and Schengen may have been collateral victims of this approach, but the former is completely irrelevant in Orbán's calculus, and the latter is likely to be temporary.

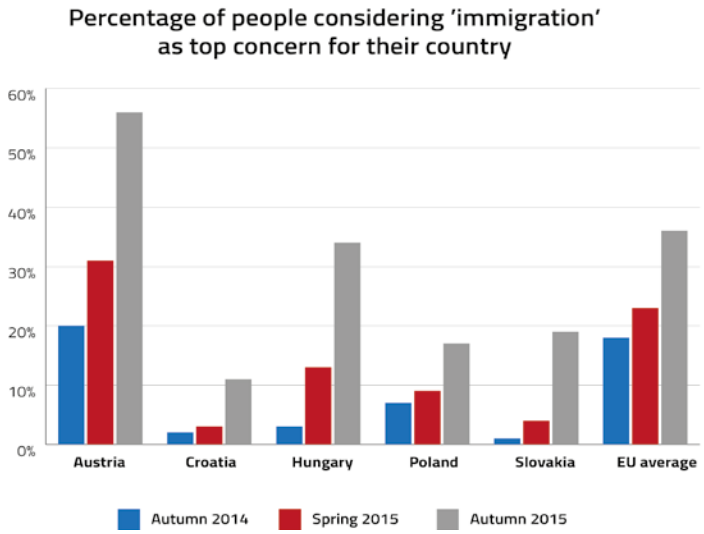
As one would expect, electoral considerations played a key role in the communication of the crisis. Three of the countries investigated (Croatia, Poland and Slovakia) faced national elections during the crisis, while another (Austria) experienced three important regional elections. This particular impact was most pronounced in the case of the centre-right government in Poland, led by the Civic Platform (PO), which is also the political home of a significant portion of the country's pro-EU, pro-western and liberal voters. Under pressure from all sides, PO's rhetoric and policies vacillated, though it is also remarkable that when the government did finally give in to the EU's updated quota request, it did so just before the election, only to lose dramatically.

Also under electoral pressure, Slovakian PM Robert Fico chose a different strategy. He tried to dominate the Slovakian election campaign with harsh anti-migrant rhetoric. In the end, this was not enough to successfully defend his party's majority, as Smer lost nine points in the polls between the spring of 2015 and March 2016. As a result, the governing party was forced into a difficult coalition with parties ranging from the far-right populist and nationalist spectrum to centrist parties, including, ironically, Most-Híd, a party representing large segments of the Hungarian minority that was among the few critics of Fico's anti-migrant rhetoric.

Though politicians in the countries analysed clearly sought to take into account the presumed concerns of citizens to avoid an electoral backlash, Croatia may be an exception in one sense: despite criticisms from the opposition that it was too nonchalant about the dangers for Croatia, and a refusal to demonise migrants even after Croatia became the subject of a massive influx, the government did not appear to suffer in the polls. It barely lost the election even though it was behind by a far larger margin *before* migrants arrived in Croatia in any significant numbers. At the same time, it is also true that the Croatian government instituted restrictive measures and did its utmost to quickly move migrants out of the country. Moreover, we will never know how the election would have turned out without the refugee crisis's impact on Croatia; it is conceivable that Zoran Milanovic's leftwing alliance would have been re-elected. Though this is impossible to verify without further comparative analysis, Croatia *may* be an example showing that if a government casts the problem in a positive/humanitarian light, and as one of solidarity with the EU and those in need, the public may be willing to give it some latitude in handling such a crisis situation. The fact that the Croatian public did become more concerned about the unfolding events but was nevertheless more relaxed about them than most of the EU might be an indication of this.

Hungary was the only country without an election in 2015, but for Viktor Orbán, other issues were at stake. His governing party had been losing support on a massive scale before the public attention shifted to the crisis, and the main beneficiary was far-right Jobbik. Orbán halted both the downward slide of his own party, which is once again, by far, the most popular party in Hungary, as well as the rise of Jobbik, which had previously appeared unstoppable. That this owed in large part to the instigation of public fears about migrants is beyond doubt, as is the fact that the issue proved very successful in removing corruption news from the front pages of newspapers.

Figure 11



Percentage of those people who mentioned 'immigration' in their answers to the following question: "What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?"[126]

Presidents played an important role in the communication of the crisis in several of these countries. All but one of the countries discussed here have directly elected presidents, which gives them an independent stature and a freedom to speak their minds that presidents elected by parliament and monarchic heads of state usually do not enjoy. The only president elected by parliament in this sample, the Hungarian János Áder, played no role in the communication of the crisis, and given that he is generally considered a loyal cadre of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz, he was unlikely to challenge the government, in any case. His Austrian counterpart, who also represented one of the governing parties, the SPÖ, spoke out occasionally, but his pronouncements were broadly in line with the government's communication.

126 Source: Eurobarometer, http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/

In all three remaining countries, however, the presidents had been elected as candidates running against the governing parties, and all three took forceful positions against the government. In Croatia and Poland, the rightwing presidents were pushing public discourse to the right, creating a very visible counterpoint to their governments, which they portrayed as either not tough enough (Poland) or downright accommodating to migrants (Croatia). Both presidents saw their own parties succeed and assume control of the government in the parliamentary elections that followed. Slovakia was unique in this respect, for President Kiska was an independent and one of the very few major politicians in the CEE region to push for a more open attitude towards refugees. Importantly, however, as an independent, Kiska did not appear to take party political considerations into account, and it stands to reason that had he been elected as the candidate and former politician of a specific party, he might have been more cautious about taking such an unpopular stance for fear of hurting his party.

CEE governments might point to the harshness of their communication and policies as a factor in preventing the massive breakthrough of far-right parties. Far-right populists are on the rise in several western European countries, including Austria, at least in part because governments and mainstream opposition parties failed to convince large segments of the public that they take their concerns about immigration seriously. The idea of anti-migrant communication as an instrument for pre-empting the rise of far-right parties was openly advanced by the Slovak foreign minister, for example, as we noted in the chapter on Slovakia. If an issue is likely to raise xenophobic reactions in the public, the argument essentially suggests, it is better if that sentiment is channelled by moderate mainstream parties. It is difficult to assess the empirical merit of this argument, though it is worth pointing out that in

Slovakia specifically this did not work well in light of the unexpectedly strong performance of nationalist and far-right parties in the March 2016 election.

Even if one were to accept that xenophobic rhetoric is useful in keeping parties that self-identify as far-right at bay electorally, there is also the question of what such communication does to the mainstream parties that embrace it and to the public debate in these countries, and whether the vanishing dividing line between extremist and mainstream parties, as well as the increasing mainstreaming of what used to be extreme positions, is really more beneficial than ceding some electoral ground to extremists. In certain respects, the differences between Fidesz, Smer and PiS on the one hand, and major far-right populist parties in western Europe on the other, are often not readily apparent. Many comments by Viktor Orbán (not to mention the actual policies) in the context of the refugee crisis and beyond manifest xenophobia and a sympathy for authoritarian values that would be unacceptable in most if not all mainstream conservative politics in western Europe. More importantly, the deeper one digs into the layers that constitute the governing party in Hungary, including the media outlets affiliated with Fidesz and its local politicians, the more likely one is to encounter extremist sentiments that squarely place the persons pronouncing them on the far right of the political spectrum. The idea that mainstream parties have subsumed the electoral potential of extremists by copying their rhetoric casts some doubt on the claim that the EU, as such, has benefitted from the "success" of the anti-refugee positions and campaigns of mainstream governments in the CEE.

A major question that this analysis cannot answer concerns the relative impact on the public discourse of politicians' communication and the media coverage of the refugee crisis, respectively. The case studies here have revealed a wide range of political responses. In Hungary and Slovakia, the issue was first raised by political leaders who sought to

benefit from it politically, and because Slovakia was never exposed to the full brunt of the migrant streams, the centrality of the issue in terms of the government's communication seemed to serve little purpose apart from strengthening the governing party's hardline image. In Austria and Poland, the governments appeared far less keen to respond to this issue, and their stances shifted over time as a reflection of the unease with which they handled it. Finally, in Croatia the government adopted the most relaxed and welcoming attitude, but there were indications that it assumed that the problem would pass by Croatia. Once it was apparent that, at least for a while, Croatia would become one of the central players in the crisis, the centre-left's government's rhetoric shifted, though it tried to preserve some elements of its previous liberal communication while emphasising the security aspects of the refugee crisis.

Ideology, or, rather, the nominal ideological positioning of parties in the European context, played a limited role in shaping the attitudes of political players. It was most relevant in the Croatian and Austrian contexts, where the governing social democratic parties took a broadly refugee-friendly position, which was challenged moderately by a rightwing party in government (Austria) and intensely by rightwing parties in opposition (both countries). Yet both of these centre-left parties succumbed to pressure and partly adjusted their communication, while they made even more significant concessions in terms of public policies. Also, SPÖ in Austria was remarkably inactive in the *domestic* public debate on the refugee crisis. In Slovakia, a nominally leftwing government led the chorus against refugees, and in the Czech Republic (which was not discussed above), the governing social democrats also identified with the prevailing anti-migrant mood in the region. In Poland, the centrist pro-EU government was only marginally more welcoming than its populist challenger.

It is important to emphasise once again that ideological self-identification is often irrelevant when trying to understand where parties in the CEE region stand. Traditional party systems with fixed left-right divisions on the economic policy spectrum often failed to develop in the region, and other cleavages, such as the strength of anti-communism and especially nationalism, often play a greater role than whatever weak ideological attachments parties have to certain economic and social policies. Issues involving national identity have traditionally played a great role for a variety of reasons, and governments have often found it easier to cater to such sentiments than to explain why their countries' convergence with the EU's wealthy states is progressing slowly, or why corruption is endemic in the region. In part, this explains why, overall, regional politics hews to the right and why even left-wing parties such as Fico's Smer occasionally turn towards intense nationalism, or why they often fail to challenge the prevailing nationalist - and sometimes even xenophobic - communication of right-wing parties. Thus, party ideology is often not a reliable predictor of a party's actual positions; this problem was exacerbated by the intense pressures of the crisis and the widespread assumption - often borne out by polls - that the public overwhelmingly prefers a hard line on the question of admitting migrants.

There are several far-reaching implications of the differences that were manifest in national political responses to the refugee crisis. For one, the refugee crisis is another indication that in pushing for enlargement as a symbolic act to re-unify the continent, western decision-makers underestimated the strength of cultural and political differences between the CEE region and the old EU. The depth of this problem went largely unnoticed for years because many of the problematic elements manifested themselves at the domestic level, and when they did arise in the context of EU-level decision-making, it was possible to isolate "troublemakers."

This is the first time that the division between new and old member states has massively contributed to a full-fledged and protracted crisis in the EU, and though it is possible that this will not become a regular feature of EU politics, it does imply major risks for further integration. The EU has always worked most smoothly when its members' interests were in alignment, but, of course, that was often not the case, and qualified majority voting was meant to facilitate decision-making in situations when minority interests would have blocked progress. With an EU enlarged to 28 members, that was an absolute necessity, but based on the current situation it appears that it is not nearly enough to tackle major disagreements on key issues. Moreover, major disagreements have become much more likely due to the number of member states and, more importantly, the vastly greater levels of cultural/political diversity between them. The usual methods for pressuring recalcitrant players failed to work in the context of the refugee crisis, and the EU apparently lacks a strategy for managing a deep rift that has opened up between Brussels and several of the club's eastern members.

Furthermore, political communication in many countries is at times downright hostile to the EU, and at least at the political level there is a growing scepticism towards future integration and an increasing insistence on more national sovereignty. This boosts the influence of euro-sceptic ideas and pushes them into the mainstream of European politics, for example, through Fidesz, which is a member of the conservative EPP group. Over the past years, Fidesz has relentlessly emphasised Brussels' alleged (sometimes real, sometimes made-up) attempts at influencing Hungarian affairs, and has called for a fundamental rearrangement of the supranational organisation to give fewer powers to the centre. The refugee quota, which the government now seeks to turn into a referendum issue, serves as a welcome pretext for pushing this agenda further.

For the EU, it is crucial to find ways of communicating with the central and eastern European public that pre-empts the charge of condescension and outside control. Yet even if successful, it will not be enough in many cases. Populist governments will have an interest in portraying any Brussels policy they disagree with as a violation of national sovereignty and undue outside interference. This was very clearly apparent in the refugee crisis, in which government politicians in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia all resorted to such talk. In the long run, it will be difficult to counter this communication, especially on the opponent's home turf and with a public that has shown a keen receptiveness to such messages. Moreover, as was noted in the introduction, European integration has often depended on the willingness of member states' governments to compromise on national sovereignty, and occasionally on their willingness to fight hard to persuade their sceptical domestic public of the value of such compromises. It is very unlikely that there will be a significant number of eastern European leaders in the foreseeable future who will go to the mat over European integration, who would sacrifice any votes for a stronger European community.[127]

The division over the EU's response to the refugee crisis and the way it was communicated in some central and eastern European countries suggests that this issue was more than a mere policy disagreement - it increasingly looks like another symptom of a fundamental rift between what might be called the western core of the EU and large segments of the recently acceded eastern member states. The EU has always had to grapple with countries and governments that sought to halt or even reverse integration. With the rise of populists all across the EU, there are more parallel storms brewing for the EU than perhaps at any other time in its history. However, though there are some key overlaps and common causes, on the whole the growing strength of euro-scepticism in western Europe is not the same as

127 And, of course, this is increasingly true outside central and eastern Europe as well. That is not the focus of this paper, however.

the particular challenge that the dominance of eastern European populists represents. Correspondingly, the strategies for handling western euro-sceptic movements, parties or governments must also differ, at least to some extent, from the way the European Union will address the tensions with its new member states in central and eastern Europe. The EU's ability to identify such a strategy and to interact in new ways with its CEE members will be one of the key determinants of its ability to continue the integration project.

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES

Foundation for European Progressive Studies

FEPS is the first progressive political foundation established at the European level. Created in 2007 and co-financed by the European Parliament, it aims at establishing an intellectual crossroad between social democracy and the European project. It puts fresh thinking at the core of its action and serves as an instrument for pan-European intellectual and political reflection.

Acting as a platform for ideas, FEPS relies first and foremost on a network of members composed of more than 58 national political foundations and think tanks from all over the EU. The Foundation also closely collaborates with a number of international correspondents and partners in the world that share the ambition to foster research, promote debate and spread the progressive thinking.

www.feps-europe.eu

POLICYSOLUTIONS

Policy Solutions

Policy Solutions is a progressive political research institute based in Brussels and Budapest. It is committed to the values of liberal democracy, solidarity, equal opportunity and European integration. Among the pre-eminent areas of its research are the investigation of how the quality of democracy evolves, the analysis of factors driving euro-scepticism and the far-right, and election research.

Policy Solutions considers it important that political research should not be intelligible or of interest to only a narrow professional audience. Therefore, Policy Solutions shares its research results in conferences, seminars and interactive websites with journalists, NGOs, international organisations, members of the diplomatic corps, leading politicians and corporate executives.

www.policysolutions.eu

Published with the financial support of the European Parliament.

www.feps-europe.eu
www.policysolutions.eu