



## EU Autumn of Discontent: What awaits the V4?<sup>1</sup>

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As summer slowly winds down, European leaders – both in Brussels and national capitals – are going to be exposed to challenges which they had temporarily shelved aside to be solved at a later date.

Some of these issues, notably the refugee crisis and the upcoming EU referendum in the UK, are of a particular relevance to the region of Central Europe, and more specifically to the so called Visegrad Group (V4) countries – Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic.

This article analyses how (if at all) the V4 can better coordinate their positions as a region at the EU level on the aforementioned issues.

### Refugee crisis: fear of the unknown

Italy and Greece have been struggling with the consequences of the massive inflow of refugees for months. Increasingly, the problem is spilling over to other parts of Europe as refugees migrate from the European southern shores to regions further north and west.

The country that has been hit the most by the refugee crisis in the region is Hungary. The first half of 2015 alone has seen as many as 120,000 asylum seekers cross the country's border with Serbia (a figure that is expected to rise to 300,000 by December). The substantial number of border crossings has prompted the government to construct a barbed-wire fence to prevent more people from coming through and to close down one of the country's busiest train stations to refugees who might otherwise board the international trains en route to Vienna and beyond.

In light of the difficult situation, the European Commission is in the process of fast-tracking an emergency aid package for Hungary and the issue is also on the agenda of Prime Minister Orbán's visit to Brussels today where he is meeting with President Juncker of the European Commission.

The situation in neighbouring Slovakia as well as in the Czech Republic is much less dramatic in terms of the sheer number of refugees. However, what these countries lack in real problems is made up by their hysteric reaction to the situation. This response is to a large extent driven by fear of the unknown as well as concerns for the integration of refugees into societies that are highly unfamiliar with Western-style multiculturalism.

Slovakia, itself being a strongly Catholic country, remains the last of the EU member states without a single mosque. Furthermore, Islam is not officially recognised and the Muslim population comprises only around 5000 people. It is therefore of no surprise that the government has not only rejected the European Commission's mandatory refugee quotas but that it has also resisted voluntarily offering any significant help beyond that provided to refugees of the Christian denomination – a notable exception being the temporary housing of some 500 asylum seekers currently located in Austria (although that too was not without some domestic opposition).

As far as the Czech Republic is concerned, the country has seen numerous public protests and marches against refugees and Islam – these two issues are often interchangeably confused in the public discourse. While the majority of the population is suspicious of refugees from Syria and North Africa, the government has in the meantime given the green light to accepting a further 1,500 refugees. The unease of the general

<sup>1</sup> Source: Central European Policy Institute (CEPI), <http://www.cepolicy.org>

public that has mostly no real-life experience with people fleeing war conflicts can be gauged also by an online petition that was originally aimed at rejecting the (now dead in the water) proposal by the EU Commission for mandatory refugee quotas. Some 180,000 Czechs signed the petition – a similar number of supporters have liked the initiative's Facebook page.

Poland, being for now neither a transit nor a destination country, has remained somewhat isolated from the mainstream debates. The main group of refugees coming to its territory consists of Ukrainians fleeing their war-troubled country. However, Prime Minister Kopacz has accepted that Poland might have to budge and accept more refugees currently landing on the southern shores of Europe. Moreover, the authorities are concerned that - following the completion of the border fence in Hungary - refugees may be tempted to explore other routes into the Schengen area, perhaps using Poland as one of their gateways.

### **Moving beyond non-solutions**

The current refugee crisis is a global issue that will require a European solution. The V4 countries therefore cannot pretend they are or will not be implicated.

Moving away from a reactive and passive approach – best demonstrated by their rejection of the EU's mandatory quotas – the four countries in question will have to quickly adapt to the evolving situation and enhance regional cooperation both inwards and outwards.

National governments will have to better coordinate their measures so that, for example, the construction of the fence on the Hungary's border with Serbia does not just simply shift the problem onto the Polish border. Instead, the V4 capitals should strengthen their exchange of information and intelligence in order to combat organised crime that profits from human trafficking. The problem is not distant anymore, as demonstrated by the recent tragic incident on the Austrian motorway near the Hungarian and Slovak borders where 71 refugees, among them four children, were discovered dead in a Hungarian refrigerator truck.

### **UK Referendum on EU Membership**

Another issue that will undoubtedly make it on the radar of the V4 leaders is the UK's referendum on its EU membership. Following the parliamentary elections in the UK and the victory of the Conservative party, Prime Minister David Cameron has announced that his country will hold a referendum on its EU membership by the end of 2017 but most likely next year.

While the polls have recently swung more in favour of the UK remaining part of the EU, a lot will depend on the renegotiation of the terms under which the referendum will take place.

And it is precisely this point – the potential to change the functioning of the whole EU – that the Visegrad countries will have to heed.

Not being burdened by negative historical sentiments towards the UK – unlike some of the EU's older members – the V4 countries can pragmatically approach London's demands on a case-by-case basis. While they might show support for some measures (notably those concerning cutting red tape and enforcing the role of national parliaments in the EU decision-making process), there will be other measures where David Cameron will find no allies in Central Europe.

This is for two reasons: First, the V4 countries will fight any effort to weaken one of the EU's fundamental principles from which the region has benefited significantly – the freedom of movement of labour. With some 800,000 Poles and tens of thousands of Slovaks, Czechs and Hungarians currently living and working in the UK, the region is very unlikely to agree to undermine the rights of its own citizens.

Second, Cameron's struggle to persuade the V4 leaders may lie with his own lack of interest in coalition building - apparent long before his current 'charm offensive' tour of Europe aimed solely at winning support for his proposals. While prepared to negotiate on issues of relevance, the V4 countries may show little appetite for helping Cameron, for example, to protect London's financial sector.

### **Will Poland lead the way?**

Ten years after their accession, the V4 countries are now firmly integrated into EU structures and potent enough to shape its policies.

However, their success lies within the group's unity. When it comes to the UK's EU referendum and the negotiations associated with it, the four Central European countries have more in common than not. But agreeing in principle and agreeing on a single position are two very different things.

Given Poland's stakes in the negotiations it is perhaps not too bold of a prediction to foresee that if any cooperation between the V4 countries is to come to fruition, it will most likely be under Warsaw's leadership. With Slovakia and the Czech Republic opting for a less confrontational approach and with Hungary's high level of unpredictability, Poland will have to step up its game to not only iron out the V4's common position in detail but also to effectively communicate the message to the rest of the EU.

As to what extent Poland's leadership will succeed greatly depends on the election's outcome on 25 October and whether a national united front can be established before any attempts of unity are tried at the V4 level.

### **V4 positions in need of (better) public diplomacy**

On both issues – be it the refugee crisis or the upcoming UK referendum – the Visegrad Group can achieve its goals only if more extensive cooperation between the four countries is fostered.

As regards the refugee crisis, the V4 countries will either stick to their current brief of limited help to refugees – something that will spur increasing pressure from other EU members – or they will be forced into changing their position. In such a case, the V4 countries would be better off focusing their efforts on developing a set of proactive solutions including combating human traffickers and drafting a blueprint for a comprehensive and long-term refugee integration strategy.

While it is yet unclear what precisely the V4 countries stand for on the issue of refugees (beyond the obvious obstruction of mandatory quotas), the challenge posed by the UK's renegotiation efforts is politically more comprehensible. However, for the Visegrad Four to be able to capitalise on the issue, the region will not only have to align and iron out their similar but certainly not identical positions, but also better sell the common position to its EU partners and the UK in particular.

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