

THE CONVERSATION

Anti-immigrant walls and racist tweets: the refugee crisis in Central Europe

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Migrants are increasingly attempting to enter Europe overland from the East. EPA/Nake Batev

While many citizens of Western Europe don't seem particularly enthusiastic about taking in the refugees fleeing war and poverty in Syria, the crisis has provoked a remarkably strong wave of xenophobia and Islamophobia in the countries of Central Europe.

Hungary is planning to build a four metre-high wall along its border with Serbia in a bid to keep immigrants from crossing. This follows comments from Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, who denounced an EU plan to resettle some of the refugees across member states as "mad".

Orbán's right-wing government has recently run a poster campaign warning immigrants not to take Hungarian jobs. When a group of five opposition activists defaced one, they were arrested.

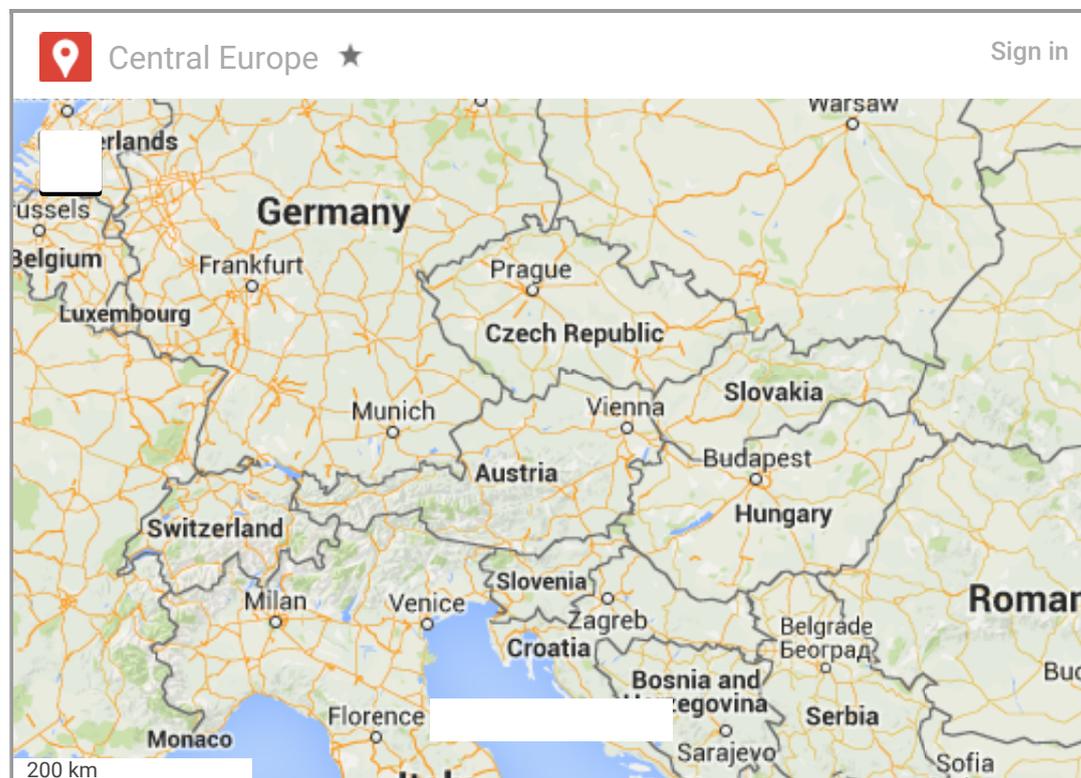
Similarly intolerant reactions to immigrants and refugees are also being voiced in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The European Commission is calling on the Czech Republic to take in around 1,300 refugees as part of the resettlement project. But the proposal has been emphatically rejected by politicians from both left and right. It has been received with remarkable venom on Czech

and Slovak social networks, too, where anti-immigrant groups have attracted thousands of supporters.

When Milan Kohout, a former dissident artist under communism, appealed to common humanity on Czech TV and called for the refugees to be taken in, he found himself in a minority of one in the studio. He was later subjected to a **torrent of abuse** from viewers.

Bohuslav Sobotka, the Czech prime minister, seemed to be riding this wave of xenophobia when he **warned** that the “immigrants may bring about the collapse of the EU”. The same week, Pavel Skácel, a retired colonel in the Czech army and a Czech participant in UN missions to Kurdistan and the former Yugoslavia, said the refugees were “intruders” and that he was unmoved by their drowning in the Mediterranean en route to Europe.



Sobotka has not ruled out taking in some refugees but he says the decision must be made in Prague, not Brussels. In the meantime, he wants the borders closed against migrants and has deployed border police to round up those who have tried to enter the country.

Violent response

Alongside this intolerance towards refugees, Islamophobia appears to be on the rise. An organisation called **We do not want Islam in the Czech Republic** currently has 137,000 likes on Facebook and regularly posts offensive, inflammatory content about Muslims.

When a group of foreign medical students complained about the group displaying an anti-Islamic message on the main square of the Moravian city of Olomouc, it claimed a “large group of Arab immigrants” had **attacked its people**. The students claim they merely voice complaints about a sign depicting a crossed-out mosque.

Now the organisation has **presented a petition** to the national parliament, demanding that immigrants be barred from the Czech Republic. Sponsored by Martin Komárek, a member of parliament for the main government coalition party ANO, this document has received 145,000 signatures from the Czech public.

Local authorities in a number of Czech villages have been informing citizens about the petition and making it available to be signed on local authority premises, in local libraries and in pubs.

Against this backdrop, a young man verbally attacked a Muslim woman in a supermarket in the Moravian town of Brno on June 20. He demanded that she should take off her scarf and threatened to decapitate her.

On the same day, a demonstration of some 6,000 right-wing extremists took place in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. The extremists chanted "Hang the refugees and the traitors in our government" and threw stones at a group of Saudis with a pram.

Like in the Czech Republic, the Slovak government strongly rejects the EU resettlement proposal, although the Slovak prime minister, Robert Fico, has conceded that Slovakia might offer some help, primarily in Africa. In a recent survey, 70% of Slovaks said they opposed the refugee quotas.

Why the venom?

Xenophobic groups parasitically use fear of the unknown to stir up trouble, and this is what we are witnessing in Central Europe at the moment.

Few local people in the Czech Republic have had firsthand experience of immigration – and the Muslim population is practically nonexistent. During the 2011 Census, 3,000 people living in the Czech Republic described themselves as Muslim.

Many former communist countries are home to fairly closed communities, which are largely dependent on local-language media for their information. Without public information campaigns to counteract the voices of intolerance, misinformation is spreading.

The sudden wave of anti-Islamic and anti-refugee hatred in Central Europe is surprising, nonetheless. Some commentators ascribe it to the rise of defensive nationalism and a feeling of insecurity in a Europe where traditional stability seems to be under threat.

That might explain why Hungary wants to literally block the refugees from coming across its borders – and why the Czech government is issuing public warnings to immigrants. But it won't stop them from coming.



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