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# THE CONVERSATION

## Beyond Hungary: how the Czech Republic and Slovakia are responding to refugees

September 7, 2015 1.32pm BST

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Hackles raised at an anti-migrant protest in Brno, Czech Republic. EPA/Filip Singer

After Hungarian authorities finally allowed trains to leave Budapest's main railway station on August 31, about 200 refugees arrived on the territory of the Czech Republic. They were taken off the train by Czech police in the town of Břeclav on the Austrian-Czech border and placed in detention.

The Czech police, apparently unconcerned about the potential for horrifying associations to be made, wrote numbers on the refugees' forearms with felt-tip pens.

The Czech government has now stopped them from doing this, but it is already too late, and the world was shocked. The European Union (which, after all, includes the Czech Republic) was founded on the principles that the horrors of Nazism should never happen again, and this all-too-familiar sight at a time of international crisis was received with horror.

Nonetheless, the Czech authorities continue to adopt an arrogant, bureaucratic, dehumanising and contradictory attitude towards the refugees.

## Charged for detention

The social democratic prime minister, Bohuslav Sobotka, has said that when detaining refugees, his country is acting strictly in line with international covenants and Czech law – but this is highly debatable.

Refugees have the right to enter the territory of other countries even without passports. States have a duty to provide protection for them when they do. And since many of the refugees entering Europe via the East seem to want to travel to Germany anyway, there seems to be little reason to stop them doing so via Czech territory.



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Yet the Czech Republic detains the refugees for six weeks. Before detention, small children are sent to Czech hospitals to be X-rayed to determine their age from the level of development of their bones. While in detention, refugees have complained of insufficient food; they are kept incommunicado in secure detention centres, relieved of their belongings, and charged for their detention. After six weeks, in line with the controversial EU Dublin protocol, the authorities try to send the refugees back to the first EU country they entered.

Often, these countries refuse to take them, and so the Czech authorities eventually have to release them to continue their journey to Germany.

## Climate of hate

Now this system has essentially failed, the Czech authorities have made a significant concession: they will no longer incarcerate refugees from Syria, but will let them continue their journey to Germany straight away. Any new arrivals from different countries, however, will have to continue to suffer the indignities of incarceration.

Although the Czech Republic has only received 884 asylum requests this year and Slovakia has agreed to take only a few hundred, both countries are still in the grip of anti-refugee hysteria, which is irresponsibly fed by the media and politicians.

Refugees are depicted as a dangerous, threatening, foreign force that will destroy central European countries. One particularly heinous example is an advert broadcast on Slovak television by the chicken firm Hyza.

The advert begins with a happy Slovak family about to sit down to a delicious Slovak dinner. They are alarmed by a report on the television about ugly, diseased, foreign chickens entering the country in the back of cars. Mercifully, mum has been prudent enough to buy a "good quality, well trusted" Slovak chicken for their evening meal and all is well.

Hyza is owned by the Slovak oligarch Andrej Babiš, who is also deputy prime minister and finance minister in the Czech Republic. Babiš has called for the Schengen zone to be sealed, and for NATO troops to be deployed against the refugees. In an unfortunate coincidence, Hyza used to own the lorry in which 71 refugees suffocated in Austria. The lorry had been sold, allegedly for spare parts, and was obtained by people smugglers who kept the chicken firm's logo on the side as camouflage.

This atmosphere of intolerance is constantly being fuelled by anti-immigrant activists and politicians. Inflammatory statements abound. In a recent video, watched by 1.5m Czechs (15% of the Czech population), MP Tomio Okamura (who is himself of immigrant origin) railed against refugees, saying that "Muslims are uninvited intruders from an enemy culture will destroy our democracy and our freedoms."

And indeed, a recent opinion poll by the Focus polling agency found that 94% of Czechs demand that all refugees should be deported and the borders should be sealed. There are small groups of pro-refugee activists in the Czech Republic, but many remain hostile.



Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka (L) and President Miloš Zeman. EPA/Filip Singer

President Miloš Zeman defended "ordinary" Czechs by saying their anti-immigrant feelings "cannot be seen as racist or fascist" and has warned that "refugees will invite their relatives to join them" if allowed to stay. He compared the refugee crisis to a tsunami: "I feel like a

tourist on a beach in Thailand who is taking a picture of a small wave in the distance, not knowing that it will kill him.”

It's hard to say exactly how central Europe came to be gripped by this hysteria and fear. A near-total lack of empathy is on display, cultivated by 25 years of neo-liberal, anti-communist right-wing regimes that have prevailed in the region over the past.

It is perhaps interesting that debaters in the Czech Republic constantly argue about what there is in it for them, should they accept refugees, but it never seems to enter their minds that they should actually help their fellow human beings.

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