

THE CONVERSATION

Fencing off the east: how the refugee crisis is dividing the European Union

September 16, 2015 1.54pm BST

EPA/Darko Dozet

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Having finished construction of a razor-wire fence along its border with Serbia, Hungary now plans to extend it to Romania. Tampering with the fence is punishable with prison or deportation.

These are its latest moves in a stand-off between the thousands of migrants trying to reach Europe through Hungarian territory.

Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán has said that this is a “German problem”, not a “European problem”, while leaders in western Europe talk about a shared responsibility.

Two very different responses to the crisis are emerging on each side of Europe. The west might be failing to handle the crisis well but the east is simply rejecting any role in it. Resentment is building on both sides and is threatening European unity.

United in defiance

The leaders of the four so-called Visegrad countries – the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia – met in Prague in the first week of September to discuss the refugee crisis. There, they agreed to emphatically reject Angela Merkel’s call for a more even distribution of refugees and immigrants across the European Union.



The Visegrad leaders. Reuters/David W Cerny

Czech prime minister Bohuslav Sobotka and his Slovak counterpart Robert Fico took the message to Austrian chancellor Werner Faymann a few days later at a meeting in Bratislava.

Fico went further than Sobotka, saying that Slovakia would only accept refugees who would be willing to integrate fully into Slovak society. And since there are few such people, he suggested, there is no point in introducing compulsory quotas.

This is an argument often repeated by central European politicians. Never mind that it is somewhat hypocritical, given that most of the refugees have already sensed the hostility towards them in these countries and are not seeking to stay.

Two Europes

For years, the post-communist countries of central and eastern Europe were left to their own devices. Western Europe took not even the slightest notice of what was actually going on in the region – culturally or politically. This was true even after the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia joined the EU in 2004.

Now, as this continent-wide crisis deepens, people are beginning to realise (with some surprise) that the post-communist societies of central and eastern Europe have been developing differently to the west. It is starting to look like the presumed unity of values of the 28 countries of the European Union may have been a mirage.

The difference can even be seen in the way religious leaders approach the refugee crisis. While the pope urges Christian parishes to house a refugee each, Hungarian catholic bishop Laszlo Kiss-Rigo, disagrees: “They’re not refugees,” he recently said. “This is an invasion. They come here with cries of ‘Allahu Akbar’. They want to take over.”

Prague catholic cardinal Dominik Duka, spoke in similarly hostile language in a recent radio interview when he said that “the right to life and security of Czech families and citizens are superior to all other rights” and warned against allowing enemies to cross national borders.

While hostility towards refugees is considerable throughout the countries of the European Union, polling suggests Czechs, Slovaks and Hungarians and some of the Baltic countries are the most hostile towards foreigners – wherever they come from. Perhaps the fact that these countries are relatively small, and feel therefore that their culture would be overwhelmed by an influx of foreigners, plays a part in this – although the relative openness towards foreigners in small countries such as Croatia and Ireland might undermine this view.



Tensions rise at a rally in Prague. EPA/Filip Singer

Racism of course exists in western Europe, but the strength of feeling in this region, among politicians as well as the general public, has caused alarm. Western Europeans are disgusted by how refugees are being treated in the east, which is even beginning to cause diplomatic tension.

“Their semantics are changing,” a Czech diplomat in Brussels recently told a Czech news agency. “They no longer talk about us here as the new EU members, they now refer to us as ‘eastern Europe’.” According to this diplomat, a Belgian delegate at one European meeting even refused to say “hello” to the Czechs.

Meanwhile, people in the east complain that the west simply doesn’t understand what is happening on their borders. As has been noted, the European Union was presented to these countries as an opportunity, rather than an obligation. Now they find they are expected to share in the biggest burden the union has ever had to take on.

“Eastern Europeans believe that they are the ones to be helped, that this was part of the promise of unification,” Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev recently wrote in the *New York Times*. “Being poorer than western Europeans, they point out, how can anyone expect solidarity from us? We were promised tourists, not refugees.”

This crisis has raised a lot of questions about what it means to be European, nowhere more so than in the east of the continent. Fissures are appearing under the strain and if common cultural ground can’t be found soon, this could signal an end to the union.



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