

## **The Refugee Crisis and the Reaction of the Visegrad Countries**

### **Government Policies in National Contexts - Slovakia**

#### **Introduction**

As in most central European countries, the refugee crisis was the main political issue in Slovakia during 2015/2016, generating heated discourse and influencing general elections campaign taking place in March 2016. Prime Minister Fico has taken a hard stand (echoing Kaczyński, Orbán and Miloš Zeman) in an openly islamophobic campaign against the refugees and the EU attempt to redistribute them amongst countries under the system of “quotas”.

#### **Background**

Slovakia has little to no experience with refugees. It has never been one of the final destinations for refugees or migrants. It is a culturally homogeneous country where the representation of foreigners in population remains still very low. In 2015 there were 84,787 foreigners with residence permits in Slovakia which represent only about 1.5% of the total population of Slovakia.<sup>1</sup> Out of all the EU countries, Slovakia has the sixth lowest proportion of foreigners.<sup>2</sup> Traditionally, the most numerous category of foreigners in Slovakia is formed by the citizens of neighboring countries. In last years, the number of asylum applicants has stabilized at several hundred per year.<sup>3</sup>

Surprisingly, and not without some irony, in the context of the heated anti-immigration sentiment, the numbers of asylum-seekers over the said period dropped to the historical low. Only 330 asylum-applications were submitted in 2015 and mere 62 between January - August 2016. 8 applicants received refugee status in 2015 and 155 between January and August 2016, respectively. These are mostly citizens of Iraq, Afghanistan and Ukraine who apply for asylum in the country (same source).

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<sup>1</sup> Statistical Overview of Legal and Illegal Migration in the Slovak Republic in 2015

([http://www.minv.sk/swift\\_data/source/policia/hranicna\\_a\\_cudzinecka\\_policia/rocniky/rok\\_2015/2015\\_rocenka\\_UHC\\_P\\_EN.pdf](http://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/policia/hranicna_a_cudzinecka_policia/rocniky/rok_2015/2015_rocenka_UHC_P_EN.pdf))

<sup>2</sup> Eurostat – Population by citizenship – Foreigners (Statistics as of 31 December 2013)

(<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tps00001&plugin=1>,  
<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1&language=en&pcode=tps00157>)

<sup>3</sup> Statistics of the Migration Office of the Ministry of Interior of the SR (<http://www.minv.sk/?statistiky-20>)

#### **The Slovak government hoped to win re-election with anti-refugee rhetoric**

Róbert Fico as the leader of a nominally center-left party, Smer-SD (Smer-Social Democracy, the only party in power between 2012-2016), made various anti-refugee, islamophobic statements and threatened to take the EU to the European Court of Justice over its refugee plan with the aim of wining voters in 2016 general elections

PM Fico initially agreed to accept a very small number of refugees under condition that they were Christians. “I can hardly imagine Muslims integrating in Slovakia, without the members of their family, out of their environment. They would not have the opportunity to practice their religion,” he said at a press conference on 9 September 2015 adding that “given that Slovakia is a country where the Catholic Church dominates [...] we cannot tolerate

an influx of 300,000 to 400,000 Muslim immigrants who would start building mosques all over the place.” Robert Fico further added that Slovakia was “incapable of integrating the Roma. But still we pretend that we are able to integrate someone from Eritrea or someone from a completely different religion with different traditions”.

As the elections were coming closer Fico stepped up his rhetorics. After the Paris Attacks he even proposed to put every Muslim in Slovakia under surveillance arguing that jihadists could slip into Slovakia masquerading as refugees. “[...] the Slovak government sees a direct link between the current migration flows and the attacks in Paris and recent events in Germany,” he said at a press conference in Bratislava on 7 January 2016 alluding on the violence against women incidents during Cologne New Years Eve celebrations.

During the election campaign Fico even changed Smer-SD party slogan from “We are working for you” to “Protecting Slovakia”. Although asylum requests remained close to none, as mentioned before, SMER’s campaign stressed the need to protect “Christian Slovakia” from “Muslim threat”. “I can tell you we will never - under a quota system - bring one single Muslim to Slovakia. And we will never - not even voluntarily - create a self-contained Muslim community, because it would represent a serious security risk.” he said and added that his government has always been opposed to the EU “forcing the member states to accept refugees with diametrically opposed values and ways of life” and “different relationship to women”. Slovakia has only agreed to voluntarily accept 180 Christian Syrian refugees at that stage.

Political analysts claim that while this strongly anti-refugee stance earned Fico and his party political momentum in early campaigning, its impact has waned as refugees have preferred to move to western countries (Germany, Austria and Sweden). Furthermore, Fico kept targeting Muslim refugees while ignoring ongoing demonstrations of Slovak teachers and nurses, unemployment, health care and the rising living costs – themes that Slovaks were arguably more concerned about. As a result, the anti-refugee rhetoric has not secured SMER-SD the majority in the Parliament; on the contrary, a number of above-mentioned internal political issues has shifted voters' attention elsewhere and the support for his party has dropped significantly from 44,42% in 2012 to 28,28% in March 2016, although the voter participation was not markedly higher.

As far as the political actions are concerned, the governmental rhetoric was far away from real actions. The legal changes and actions were, in contrast to Hungary, of rather minor importance. These were not pieces of immigration or asylum law that were altered; there was a couple of amendments to existing provisions related to fight against terrorism instead. The incumbent SMER-SD government with the support of opposition Most-Hid has changed the Constitution to allow 4 days of confinement for individuals suspected of committing acts of terrorism (doubled from two days). The time for the judge to decide on the matter has been also doubled from 72 to 144 hours. The police does not have to provide reason when the suspicion is based on ‘terrorism’.

Moreover, many other amendments have increased the privileges of police, military police and secret services, such as easier tracking of communication of individuals and the punishments became more severe for terrorism. While there have been some concern among pundits and human rights defenders that these new “powers” would be misused against uncomfortable political activists, no such incident occurred as of August 2016.

Fico’s government can be accused of being consequently against the quota and resettlement system - in July 2015, it vowed to accept 100 Syrian (Christian) refugees and 100 refugees as part of relocation from Italy and Greece. Nevertheless, it has without a word accepted the quota system shortly after the elections and adhered to „Next operational steps in EU-Turkey cooperation in the field of migration” as of 17th March. This agreement does bind Slovakia to adhere to the relocation program, under which none have apparently taken place as of yet.

There is also a program of relocation under UNHCR, ORA and IOM, where Somali citizens are to be relocated to Slovakia (58 persons). There are also some refugees temporarily housed in Slovakia, who are under 'humanitarian transfer', i.e. they did not claim asylum here but elsewhere and their claims are administrated here for their further relocation (mainly to Austria). Under the EU-Turkey pact and the quota system, Slovakia will accept 1200 refugees in the future.

### **Rise of the far-right**

Even before the refugee crisis, Slovaks belonged to the least positive European countries towards immigration. In late July 2015, Slovakia agreed to temporarily house 500 refugees from Austria in the Gabčíkovo camp. In August, however, the townspeople organized a referendum that garnered a nearly 97 percent vote against allowing refugees to stay in the camp.

It is no surprise that the far-right party Kotleba-LSNS (Kotleba – People's party Our Slovakia) misused the refugee crisis to bolster their own election campaigning hoping to finally get into parliament after winning regional elections 2 years ago. Approximately 1,000 people protested against purported "Islamisation" of Slovakia and Europe in Bratislava just a day before the group of refugees arrived to Gabčíkovo. The activists, who said they are against the '*Islamization of Europe*' and migrants from the Middle East and Africa, were chanting slogans like "*Slovakia to Slovaks*," "*Stop Islamization in Europe; Together Against dictate of Brussels; Europe for Europeans!*"

Some of the banners read "*Slovakia is not Africa.*" [ *Insert the footnote: "Slovakia to Slovaks': Thousands join anti-Islamization protest in Bratislava, dozens arrested, <https://www.rt.com/news/268615-slovakia-islamization-protest-arrested/> ]*

Most of the participants were not members or sympathizer of this or any other smaller far right party but, more disturbingly, rather non-affiliated, average citizens. Few of the hard-core followers of Mr. Kotleba attacked a muslim family shortly after the official ending of the march in the center of Bratislava. Although the protest and its smaller followings were not particularly successful it was widely discussed in the media which was clearly the main goal of the organizers.

Kotleba-LSNS gained shocking 8% in the March elections, a fact even more alarming when considering the high turnout (59%) and that one of the attackers of the Muslim family a year ago is now a member of parliament. It is, however, a point of some discussion among experts and analysts whether the electoral success of the openly neo-nazi party could be attributed to their xenophobic hate-speech or it is rather the result of objective frustration with mainstream parties across the whole political spectrum among Slovak voters. Regardless the motives of the voters, the party stepped up its anti-refugee and anti-EU rhetorics and activities once in parliament. The day after the results of the British "brexit" referendum, Kotleba-LSNS started collecting signatures for a similar referendum to held in Slovakia next year.

### **Behind the rise of the far right**

It would not be correct to state that the political rhetoric of the former SMER-SD government is the sole or the most voracious anti-immigrant actor in Slovakia. Although the party is to be blamed for a ruthless capitalization on the anti-immigration sentiments, SMER-SD is, among all, arguably a soft-liner. There is a rare consensus amongst political parties; one example for all is embodied by leading opposition party SaS ("Freedom and Solidarity") leader Richard Sulik who claimed he would use "water canons" against the refugees at the border and never retracted his comments bordering on hate speech.

The public discourse is shaped by the media portraying the refugees as a "threat", "economic migrants" and depict them as possible terrorists. Notable exceptions are the dailies SME and Dennik N but whose reach is very limited and especially in the case of Dennik N read almost exclusively by liberal elites in Bratislava. The only exception in on-line space is newsportal Aktuality.sk, which made serious journalistic efforts to bring a complete and balanced story of the refugees, while not as elitist as abovementioned Dennik N, it is not one of the Top 5 newsportals in Slovakia. Yet

another factor is behind the shaping of the hateful public discourse and also behind the rise of the far right in Slovakia – the emergence and empowerment of the so-called “alternative” media.

Throughout 2013 Slovakia witnessed an exponential growth of many “alternative media”, initially published online, increasingly in print versions. These media often cooperate with “traditional” far-right websites and organizations which have been politically present since the 1990’s. They turned seemingly harmless conspiracy theories into a platform for hate-speech, extremism, and antisemitism. From the absurd “hollow-Earth theory”, suggesting that an alien race has its headquarters in the middle of the Earth and that the entrance is the very spot where the Slovak, Hungarian, and Austrian borders meet, to the more sinister “world Zionist conspiracy”, or blaming the Roma for Slovakia’s economic situation and demonizing LGBT people. It did not take long for human rights activists and NGOs themselves to be demonized as “American agents”, or worse. By 2014, the so-called alternative media began entering the mainstream public discourse in their own special way.

While still referred to as “controversial”, they were regularly quoted in the mainstream press. This was unheard of no more than a year earlier. The most prominent among these is the so-called Slobodný vysielač (“Free Broadcaster”), an internet radio station and a website, notoriously extremist in its content, abusing the name of the short-lived radio station of anti-fascist insurgents during the Slovak National Uprising (SNP) in what was arguably the Slovaks’ finest hour, August 1944. It has promoted and largely assisted in the victory of the openly neo-Nazi candidate for regional governor, Marián Kotleba, as an alternative to the current “establishment and state”, thus legitimizing neo-Nazi leaders. Neo-Nazis and fascists are often guests on the radio where they are introduced as experts on “Roma issues”, international affairs, human rights, or even science.

Another example is the a monthly magazine called Zem&Vek (Earth&Age), edited by a well-known conspirator and anti-Semite, Tibor Rostas, which saw phenomenal success with sales rocketing by 500% within the first three months of its release. A good example of what is treated as an “alternative” here is the issue marking the 50th anniversary of the afore-mentioned Slovak National Uprising, which included many pages of reprints of Nazi propaganda published by the puppet government during the Uprising. Technically, this is allowed due to a legal loophole concerning the wartime “Slovak state”; an issue for more concern is the ability with which the magazine is able to demonize the anti-fascist resistance, relativize the historical events and the crimes of fascism itself, presenting itself as a relevant historical “Slovak source” about the Uprising. The biggest “success”, and a real cause for concern, is the extent to which these media present the extremist message in a more sophisticated way, making it harder to spot at first glance. By doing so, these publications reach larger parts of the society. Cloaked under the veil of the fight against censorship, these media publish outright lies against refugees, claiming there are “waves” of islamists behind Slovak borders, there is a “danger of invasion”, or that there is a public disorder in the Western countries that accepted larger numbers of refugees, i.e. Italy, Greece. One could argue that it is in large part to their credit that today, the anti-immigrant mood in Slovakia is as high as in Hungary, although only a few individual refugees have reached the Slovak soil.

Since 2015, virtually any significant alternative to the existing mainstream media promotes fascist ideas. It is not exceptional for progressive voices and environmental protection experts to appear in the same studio or give an interview to the same magazine as neo-Nazi leaders. In addition, more and more establishment figures such as right-wing MPs are starting to accept the “alternative media” as mainstream media outlets and regard their output as journalism, instead of unsupported, incendiary opinion with no regard for professional standards or ethics. The attitude of the publishers is thinly veiled self-righteousness. They often defend themselves by citing freedom of speech, claiming they are open to everybody and everything, and even accusing all those who refuse to appear in one of their “talk-shows” of censorship. The effect on their recipients is perverting the very idea of freedom of speech by maintaining that our country’s biggest problem is the “censorship“ of fascism and other extremist ideologies in the media and by law.

## **Conclusion**

To no exception to the other V4 countries, Slovak reaction to the so-called refugee crisis was that of refusal and marked by a political capitalization on the fate of these people by virtually all political actors. The leading government party

SMER-SD has vested all pre-election efforts to the topic, with full-scale anti-immigration rhetoric at any cost, obfuscating domestic political issues. The other mainstream parties followed suit. The government has been a harsh opponent to any European-wide solution, particularly against quotas; these seemed to be rather verbal threats, as shortly after the March 2016 elections the government has declared full collaboration with other EU states.

It is hard to understate the importance of the election of the openly neo-nazi party to the parliament, under these circumstances. It is far from certain that Kotleba-LSNS will be able to gather the required 300 000 signatures to launch the referendum for Slovak exit from the EU, and it is highly improbable there would be a legally required 51% voters' turnout to the event. It nonetheless is an alarming signal that puts Slovakia in line with similar tendencies in other European countries, where the right wing extremism is increasingly successful in penetrating mainstream politics and public discourse.

The mainstream media are under pressure from rising success of the so-called alternative media. These attract ever larger audiences with tabloid anti-refugee manipulations, which consequently influence the thinking of the mainstream media that gradually include this kind of content into their publishing in order not to lose the audience and henceforth the source of income. Nevertheless, although a clear social consensus against "muslim" refugees is now firmly set, due to the geopolitical events and the fact that the main wave of refugees is now not targeting Slovakia, the media attention is largely focused on other political events, thus creating a window of opportunity to approach the public discourse with more moderate views, as the situation is less tense.