

The Czech Republic and the Refugee Crisis

Much as it has been the case in the rest of Europe, the refugee crisis and the questions of how to cope with it has polarized Czech society into two distinct camps. One based in the capital and, to lesser extent larger cities, in favor of migration, and the rest of the country, the latter being the larger and more predominant, against migration. The discourse towards refugees and the refugee crisis in the Czech Republic, however, is predominantly anti-immigrant, although windows of opportunities to mold this discourse remain strong. This is partially due to a growing economy with an acute demand for labor and the lowest unemployment rate in Europe, partially because the Czech Republic has little to no experience with refugees, being a transit country.

However, several problematic obstacles remain; a schizophrenic political struggle between the moderate Prime Minister Sobotka and the rabidly populist triumvirate of President Zeman, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Babis, and Minister of the Interior Milan Chovanec, all vehemently anti-immigrant. Media outlets ordering their staff to report critically of refugees, even if it meant wrongfully spinning stories to fit this agenda and compromising journalistic integrity.¹ Lastly, an incident of 89 repatriated Iraqi Christian refugees arriving in the Czech Republic, of which 25 subsequently fled to Germany to apply for German asylum after withdrawing their asylum applications in the Czech Republic, have further compounded the prevailing view in Czech society that refugees are economic migrants first and fleeing war second, which has exacerbated the strong anti-immigration bias.

Fear of the Unknown

As mentioned above, the Czech Republic has little to no experience with refugees. The Czech government has agreed to take in 400 refugees in 2015, 700 refugees in 2016 and an additional 400 in 2017, measly numbers compared to those of most of the rest of Europe. The actual numbers of refugees being granted protection in the Czech Republic is also remarkably lower than most of Europe; out of 1335, a mere 460 – 34 % - were recognized as having right to asylum, of which only 55 were granted refugee status, 15 were granted it for humanitarian reasons. The remaining 390

¹ <http://www.imediaethics.org/czech-tv-news-told-staff-negatively-cover-refugees-leaked-audio-anonymous-sources-tell-czech-news-site/>

were granted subsidiary protection², an outrageously high number compared to most of Western Europe. Additionally, the Czech Republic has 0 % positive final decisions on appeal rate.³

In short, there are very, very few refugees in the country currently, with no prospects of a noticeable increase in numbers within the foreseeable future despite the global number of refugees steadily increasing with little to no indications of abatement. Of those refugees arriving or already arrived in the country, the most dominant group are Ukrainians⁴, who blend in much more easily than refugees from the MENA countries by virtue of lower language barrier and being Slavic. Thus, it is important to note that the Czech resistance to migration primarily revolves around Muslim immigrants rather than any other type of immigrants, although resistance to migration in general has increased as a corollary to the heightened animosity towards Muslim migration. To illustrate this deteriorating public attitude towards refugees, compare the numbers from July 2015 to March 2016;

In July 2015, 72% of the population were against taking refugees from North Africa, 71% were against taking refugees from Syria, 44% against Ukrainian refugees. However, 24% would take some refugees from North Africa, 26% would take some Syrians, and 53% would take some Ukrainians.⁵

Come March 2016, the numbers look drastically different: 61% are against taking refugees altogether, 32% would take refugees only for a limited time, and a mere 3% would allow them to settle. Only 17% would take any MENA refugees at all, while 79% would do so under no circumstances. Only 37% would take Ukrainians, while 55% would not.⁶

While resistance to migration has overall increased, it is particularly the MENA refugees suffering the brunt of the bias. This bias correlates with the heightened frequency of terrorist attacks and incidents such as the Cologne assaults, which are predominantly being reported as issues related to Muslim immigration, despite the fact that often such actions are either only partially or not at all being conducted by refugees or migrants but instead by domestic residents of the respective countries.

² <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7233417/3-20042016-AP-EN.pdf/34c4f5af-eb93-4ecd-984c-577a5271c8c5>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <http://domaci.ihned.cz/c1-64371570-uprchliky-ze-syrie-a-severni-afriky-v-cesku-nechce-70-procent-lidi-ukazuje-pruzkum>

⁶ http://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c1/a7549/f3/pm160422a.pdf

Root Causes of Czech Resistance to Migration

There are several root causes amalgamating into a highly toxic bias towards refugees. The increased frequency – real or perceived – in terrorist activity on European soil plays a major part, as does incidents such as the Cologne affair, because it compounds the prevailing discourse within the country that Muslims fundamentally do not belong in Europe. This discourse has gained traction and attained mainstream status primarily through the efforts of the aforementioned triumvirate of anti-immigrant politicians, Zeman, Babis, and Chovanec. The popularity of all three have risen, in Zeman's case dramatically in large part due to outrageously stating that Muslims are a veritable invading force and cannot be integrated into Europe⁷, since they started promulgating anti-immigrant sentiments, while Prime Minister Sobotka's has fallen as a result of his more moderate stance.⁸

Additionally, the aforementioned media bias extends beyond just Prima TV station, which was recently incriminated in a scandal after it was revealed that the station's editors and administration coerced their reporters to report negatively on refugees and migration if they wanted to keep their jobs. Although only Prima TV has been caught red-handed in this, statistics show that the anti-immigrant voices receive far more air-time than the pro-migrant ones⁹, which shapes public opinion immensely as a survey has shown that 75% of the Czech population follows the refugee crisis actively.¹⁰ Therefore, it is also telling that despite the refugee crisis being the central topic discussed in the country, only 2% of the reporting centers around the conditions and lives of the refugees.¹¹ Thus, it can reasonably be assumed that such shady practices are more widespread than simply one media outlet, especially considering that Andrej Babis, of strong anti-immigrant sentiments, also own two of the largest newspapers in the country (MfD and LN), both of which have a proven track record of publishing factually wrong and heavily negatively biased information about the refugee crisis. For instance, several articles have stated that a “wave of 200.000 refugees will roll over the

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/18/integrating-muslims-into-europe-is-impossible-says-czech-president>

⁸ <http://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/prezident-zeman-je-mezi-lidmi-stale-popularnejsi-predbehli/r~80344c84cb5911e58a2b0025900fea04/>

⁹ <http://manipulatori.cz/analyza-medialniho-pokryti-uprchlicke-krize/>

¹⁰ http://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c1/a7549/f3/pm160422a.pdf

¹¹ <http://manipulatori.cz/analyza-medialniho-pokryti-uprchlicke-krize/>

Czech Republic, armed with makeshift weapons”, or that a coup against Merkel was imminent due to her “naïve” refugee policy.¹²

In sum, it is obvious that the prevalence of risk analysis as opposed to opportunity analysis, the latter of which only a few civil society actors are responsible for, is omnipresent. Fearmongering in order to advance domestic political agendas and aspirations of a select elite of politicians prevail over not only journalistic integrity and nuanced reporting, but also of international obligations, human rights and basic human decency and empathy.

Lastly, the V4-dimension cannot be ignored. Although the Czech Republic itself has close to no experience with refugees, making its resistance to it even more puzzling, the situation in Hungary – real or perceived – has to some extent been appropriated by the Czech populist politicians. The V4 countries increasingly cooperate on political issues and speak as a bloc. In this context, Hungary has been extremely successful in dominating the bloc’s agenda and pitting the V4 against the EU on a wide range of issues, such as the quota system. The quota system’s apparent failure has further vindicated the bloc’s perception that it, not the EU, has the proper approach to the refugee crisis, which largely puts human rights second to concerns such as national sovereignty and European isolationism – something that resonates well with the Czech public, who for the first time feels truly relevant in a European context. It is unlikely that the issue will be dropped anytime soon by the bloc; even if the refugee crisis was somehow resolved, it represents the only contemporary avenue for strong V4 influence (the bloc would say “leadership”, which, alas, is misplaced) in EU-context. Furthermore, it has proven an extremely effective domestic political tool for populist politicians to retain otherwise waning support.

Conclusion

The Czech Republic fears the known unknown. Known in the sense that terrible headlines increasingly dominate the European and Czech media, painting a picture of dire consequences of Muslim migration, unknown in the sense that it has little actual experience with refugees of any sorts, but especially Muslim refugees. The populist Czech politicians taps into this fear and exacerbates it, promulgating a view that the very fabric of not only Czech but, indeed, European

¹² <http://svobodneforum.cz/demonizace-uprchliku-ze-strany-mf-dnes-pokracuje/> and <https://www.respekt.cz/denni-menu/ceska-media-mluvi-jen-o-slabosti-a-naivite-kanclerky-merkelove>

civilization is threatened, more so than by a resurgent Russia¹³ - a bold statement considering the dramatic increase in Russian liaisons with the Czech Republic in recent years.¹⁴

Ever the country of paradoxes, the Czech Republic is in acute need of labor, having a healthy, growing economy but a shortage of workers, which refugees, with proper integration efforts, could help fill. However, the absence of an effective integration program, as well as a lack of political will to integrate refugees due to public resistance towards migration, makes for an inhospitable refugee and integration environment.

Lastly, at this point the moniker “refugee crisis” or “migration crisis” is arguably misplaced; within the Czech Republic, devoid of refugees, the current crisis has developed into a crisis of civilization and fundamental values. Muslims are perceived as fundamentally incompatible with European and Western civilization. There are currently no strong voices penetrating this discourse and presenting a powerful challenge to it. No politicians truly champion the cause of the refugees to counter the sea of populist politicians who nurture their personal careers and powerbases in a race to the bottom. The media, often under the influence of aforementioned populist politicians, blatantly fail in their role as the fourth pillar of democracy, making it extremely hard for the wider populace to adopt a nuanced view when being bombarded with anti-immigrant sentiments.

Currently the strong Czech civil society is the only counter to these developments. However, a diverse civil society cannot be expected to succeed in the Sisyphean task that it is to fundamentally change a country’s discourse when said country’s elites are all too eager to capitalize on unfounded public fear, thus obstructing integration efforts. Given the state of play and upcoming elections, it is unfortunately unlikely that the situation improves in the Czech Republic barring unforeseen circumstances.

¹³ http://zpravy.idnes.cz/babis-uprchlici-jsou-nejveti-ohrozeni-evropy-vetsi-nez-konflikt-s-ruskem-1u9-domaci.aspx?c=A150701_152946_domaci_kop

¹⁴ <https://charter97.org/en/news/2016/5/16/204504/>