



CLASH OF VALUES:

Political Background of the Refugee Crisis in Hungary

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In late summer 2015, the Hungarian refugee crisis was the breaking news on almost all important international television channels. The images depicted were previously mostly shown in connection with events on the Mediterranean Sea.

Now a new region, Central and Eastern Europe, is confronted with the arrival of tens of thousands of (mainly) Syrian people. Usually, Germany is the final destination of these refugees, but as Hungary is the first safe Schengen-country on their migration route, most of them are stuck in Budapest and its surroundings, where they have to go through the registration process – and become targets of the Hungarian government's anti-immigration campaign.

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Why Hungary is different

The difference between these crises is not only one of geographic locations; the political context in Hungary also differs substantially from the circumstances in Southern Europe. The position of the right-wing populist governing party, Fidesz on asylum policy is at odds with that of the European mainstream, and they claim that the European initiatives drafted to date haven't solved the problem. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's basic doctrine is that European multiculturalism has failed, and that the Europe Union, and Hungary within the EU, should not take in large numbers of people with 'different values', who hail from countries with different cultures. The government's official communication declares that those people currently arriving in Europe are *not asylum-seekers* but predominantly *illegal immigrants* who left their country only to find a better life, better wages and better social security – and the European Union should treat them accordingly. Consequently, the Hungarian government doesn't want to take in these people. Instead, it wants to 'defend Christian Europe' from them.

How is it possible that where the media, NGOs, European progressives and even European conservatives see unfortunate people running away from war, the Hungarian government by contrast sees people who break into Europe violently and illegally? A number of phenomena can describe this, but the most important one must be the difference between certain core values of European societies. While the majority of the population in Western European countries are open towards refugees, immigrants and other cultures in general, in most Central and Eastern European countries – and in Hungary, especially – the broad majorities of societies are more inward-looking. Opinion polls show that 80 percent of Hungarians haven't travelled abroad during the last 12 months, 75 percent don't speak any foreign language at all, and (also as a consequence of the aforementioned) 66 percent think that refugees pose a threat to Hungary and none of them should be admitted to Hungary.

Populism in Action

Most of the measures taken by the Orbán-government are driven by its understanding of how 'ordinary people' think about political issues. Correspondingly, in line with the attitude of the overwhelming majority of Hungarians, Fidesz launched an anti-immigration campaign back in spring 2015. The campaign aimed at stopping the fall of Fidesz's popularity and at diverting attention from the government's corruption scandals and infighting. The government's communication was based on the 'principle' that Europe is under attack by non-Christian illegal immigrants, who should be deterred by a mix of harsh communication and a fence on the Serbian-Hungarian border. However, while the government's rhetoric is cruel and xenophobic, its actions have been considerably more moderate. Though it hasn't provided the refugees with much help, the government has protected them from any physical atrocity and allowed them to move freely through Hungary.

Meanwhile, the Hungarian left-wing parties face an important political dilemma. The principles of progressivism, that is, humanism, inclusion and tolerance are at variance with the attitudes held by their own core electorate on the question of immigration. The Catch-22 of the Hungarian (and also the European) left is whether to stand with its values or its voters on this issue.

Western Europe is changing too

Although the Hungarian prime minister called for the defence of Europe because of the clash between the values of the 'Europeans' and those of the 'immigrants', this clash is more clearly apparent within the European Union. Not only can we observe the dissimilarity between some of the core values espoused by the societies of the 'old' and the 'new' member states, respectively, but there are in fact an increasing number of tangible differences in values within most Western European countries as well. Those political parties that consider themselves as the 'defenders of traditional values' (against modern and post-modern values) are becoming increasingly popular in a growing number of EU countries. Populist and anti-immigrant parties are attracting the support of as many as 15 percent of likely voters in Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland and Sweden. Furthermore, mainstream parties increasingly copy the agenda of the populists to win over their voters in several other countries too. In the short term, we can expect that the popularity of populist parties will grow further as a consequence of the new influx of migrants and refugees, which will put the left into a difficult spot.

Losers all around

The example of Hungary – in other words how populists handle a refugee crisis and who become the winners and losers in such a situation – could be of importance for the whole of Europe. Though a few weeks ago it has seemed that the only political loser of Fidesz's anti-refugee campaign would be the Hungarian opposition, by today the situation has become too complex for such a simple verdict. It turned out that Fidesz had only prepared for the current situation on the level of communication, without making any practical arrangements to actually handle the logistical and other issues that arise from the vastly increased numbers of new refugees. Since it emerged that the PR instruments (billboards, fence) were not effective, Hungarians see that thousands of new refugees gather at train stations and other points in major cities, while the government appears increasingly helpless as well.

Although Fidesz looks upon this issue as a clear communications victory, the governing party might well fall into a trap of its own making -- at the very point when the anti-refugee rhetoric dominates the public agenda, it emerges that Fidesz in fact has no solution to the problem. Moreover, the situation has unexpectedly strengthened the feeling of solidarity in tens of thousands of Hungarians, who have turned out in vast numbers to help the refugees with food, drink and transportation. However, still they are a minority within the society.

But those who stand to lose most from the current scenario are unfortunately the refugees themselves, who may be caught between people who have been incited to reject them for months and an institutional framework that is ill-prepared to handle such masses.