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Illiberal Central Europe

Big, bad Visegrad

The migration crisis has given an unsettling new direction to an old alliance

BUDAPEST, PRAGUE AND WARSAW



WHEN Middle Eastern refugees began arriving in Europe last year, Martina Scheibova, a consultant in Prague, felt sympathy for them. Now she is less sure. They create a “clash of cultures”, she says anxiously. Such fears are shared by many Europeans. But unlike Germans or Swedes, Ms Scheibova is unlikely to encounter many refugees. Czech public opinion is solidly against taking in asylum-seekers; Milos Zeman, the Czech Republic’s populist president, calls Muslim refugees “practically impossible” to integrate. In the past year, the country has accepted just 520.

The backlash against refugees can be felt across Europe. Xenophobic parties are at record levels in polls in Sweden and the Netherlands, and even in Germany the Eurosceptic, far-right Alternative für Deutschland party is polling in double digits. But central Europe's response has been particularly strong. Anti-migrant sentiment has unified the "Visegrad group" of Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic—normally a disparate bunch who agree on some subjects (like opposing Europe's climate policies) but are divided on others (like Russia). Rather than noisy opposition groups, it is governments in these countries who trumpet some of the most extreme views. And they are taking advantage of anti-migrant fervour to implement an illiberal agenda on other fronts, too.

Viktor Orbán, Hungary's prime minister, has been the loudest of the anti-immigrant voices. Mr Orbán began inveighing against migrants early in 2015, after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in Paris, when the numbers arriving in Europe were still relatively low. His government now wants to introduce anti-terror laws that worry civil libertarians, though the details are vague. Fidesz, Mr Orbán's party, pioneered Europe's illiberal wave: when it came to power in 2010 it limited the constitutional court's powers, packed it with cronies and introduced a new constitution. Fidesz changed the electoral system, helping it win again in 2014, says Andras Biro-Nagy of Policy Solutions, a think-tank. A new media regulator was set up, headed by a Fidesz stalwart. Public television channels were stuffed with pro-Fidesz journalists, while foreign media were taxed more heavily than domestic ones. (The tax was rescinded after criticism from the main foreign channel, RTL Klub.)



For Visegrad, the game-changer was the November election victory in Poland of the nationalist conservative Law and Justice party (PiS). Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the party leader, has admired Mr Orbán for years. Konrad Szymanski, the deputy foreign minister for European affairs, says Poland now plans to beef up its co-operation with the Visegrad group. The government is dead against any further European deals to allocate refugees among member states. Meanwhile, since taking power in November, PiS has sacked the heads of the security and intelligence services, weakened the constitutional tribunal (and packed it with its own supporters), and passed a new media law that lets it install loyalists to head the public radio and TV channels. The European Commission is examining whether all this violates Poland's commitments to the rule of law.

Politics in Slovakia and the Czech Republic are a bit different, but in both countries politicians have jumped on the issue of refugees. In December Robert Fico, the prime minister of Slovakia (who is seeking re-election in March), launched a legal challenge to the EU's migration policy, which he describes as "ritual suicide". (Hungary filed a challenge soon after.) Bohuslav Sobotka, the Czech prime minister, is less bombastic than Mr Zeman, but he too rejects refugee quotas. Conditions for those already in the country are shoddy.

These populist politics have been a hit with voters. Last spring Fidesz was falling in the polls, while support for Jobbik, a far-right party, was surging. Today Fidesz would win a majority again. Support for Mr Fico's Smer party had stalled last year, but since the refugee crisis erupted it has been rising. PiS's support base is among disgruntled older voters, who are particularly fearful of immigration. This week, at a meeting staged by a conservative group in Warsaw on whether Poland was threatened by a "colour revolution", the question of what to call refugees came up. A woman in the audience suggested "invaders". A speaker opted for "Islamists".

The newfound unity between the four countries delights populist politicians. "Probably the only good thing in the whole migration crisis is that the V4 [Visegrad group] has found a common voice and strategy," says Marton Gyongyosi of Jobbik. The group "allows three small countries to punch above their weight", says György Schopflin, a Fidesz MEP.

The Visegrad group once aimed to accelerate its members' integration into the EU. Its turn towards illiberalism presents Europe with a problem. Since new rules came into force in 2014, the group no longer has a blocking minority in the European Council. But it can cause headaches, particularly if it influences neighbours such as Romania or Bulgaria. Meanwhile, polls show trust in the EU has fallen in all four countries. In fact, Visegrad countries rely heavily on EU funding—it amounted to 6% of GDP in Hungary in 2013. Yet many are disappointed in Europe. "People thought we would have the same living standards as Austrians or Britons," says Ferenc Gyurcsany, who served as Hungary's prime minister from 2004 to 2009.

Rising Euroscepticism could backfire on the group. Informal talks on the next multi-year EU budget have begun, and Germany has hinted that it will favour countries that share the burden of refugees. Already many European officials are growing impatient with the group. Milan Nic of the Central European Policy Institute recalls the days when Austrian politicians, for example,

used to talk about the Visegrad group with respect. “Nowadays”, he says, “Visegrad is like a bad word.”

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