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Refugee Crisis: a new East-West rift in Europe?

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1) In February 1991 a summit between Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia gave rise to the Visegrad group. This group was founded on a base of mutual support for European integration. During the Council on 22nd September last all of the EU's Member States voted in favour of a voluntary based distribution of migrants, except for Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Romania in spite of some concessions being granted. How can this paradox be explained? Are we witnessing a return of the East-West rift in Europe that reigned during the Cold War?

Firstly we must relativize the importance of the "Visegrad Group" (V-4) as a cooperation structure between the four Member States concerned: formally this group has been up and running since 1991 but it is relatively rare for it to define a strong joint position. The refugee question seems to have been a notable exception to this – all the more so since the Czech Republic, which holds the revolving presidency of the group at present, has invested a great deal in the V-4 in order not to find itself isolated. But even regarding this question, the V-4 group has not managed to maintain a common stance, since Poland stepped away from its three partners at the last minute.

It is clear that this European discord reflects major differences in opinion between the countries of Central Europe and their other partners within the European Union. These differences are related to political culture, representation, perceptions of European identity and the place of Europe in the world, and even to the meaning and scope of certain common values. But to conclude that there has been a return to an East-West rift seems to me to be more a cliché than a serious

analysis of the situation. On the one hand the rifts revealed by the refugee crisis are to be found within all European societies. There is a share of society in these countries which does not approve of their governments' attitude; and the leaders in the West do not enjoy the unanimous support of their populations. On the other hand of the 11 former Eastern bloc countries, which are now Union members, only four of them adopted a hard line on this issue. And if we analyse the reasons behind this choice we note that there are significant differences from one country to another. In short we are not "in a bloc versus bloc" situation.

This said it is true that societies in Central Europe are generally more closed culturally and are ethnically more homogeneous; overall they are less tolerant of difference than most societies in other regions of Europe. This is a quite logical consequence of their history, for better or worse: on the one hand these countries have no colonial past and on the other their tragic history in the 20th century has not fostered openness toward the Other.

2) The relatively homogeneous countries of Central and Eastern European countries have experienced multi-ethnic empires as well as the persecution of minorities in the 20th century. Moreover these countries do not seem to have had a recent tradition of immigration, whether this has been due to their closure during the communist era or to the lack of attractiveness of their labour markets, in spite of their membership of the European Union. Do these historic reasons explain their reticence regarding immigration?

Yes, that's right. And I might emphasise again the lack of any colonial past which has led to a lack of

familiarity with populations outside of Europe and also the absence of feelings of guilt and a moral debt that needs to be made good.

In the face of extra-European immigration there has been a great amount of fear, mainly founded on this lack of knowledge. To this we might add amalgams that have reached levels that are totally unthinkable in the public arena of many Western countries: an amalgam between asylum seekers and economic migrants and especially terrible equations between migrants, Islam, Islamism and terrorism. This also exists to a greater or less degree in Western Europe, but not at the highest level of intellectual and political debate.

There is also the extremely negative view of the effects of extra-European immigration in Western Europe. In Budapest or Prague you often hear – in all walks of society – comments like *“given what it has led to in the West, we don’t want that here!”* We can understand this: there is little chance that a Czech has heard of immigration in France over the last ten years for example, other than during the riots in the suburbs in 2005 and during the attacks in January 2015. It is easy to reject these ideas by illustrating their obvious lack of discernment and knowledge of the reality of Western societies. But it might be more useful for the West to explore why its examples have turned the idea of “multi-culturalism” or quite simply that of society open to immigration, into something so negative in the East. Of course there are explanations linked to the observer ... but it is not just about this.

3) The leaders of the Visegrad Group countries have insisted a great deal on their refusal of being “forced” to accept a European rule as far as their migratory policy is concerned. How should this opposition be interpreted? Has their view of the European Union changed since their accession?

In this regard there has been a convergence of two trends – at varying levels from one country to another: that of “anti-immigration” and Euroscepticism. Again, this is not unique to Central Europe: the FN in France, the Northern League in Italy, and UKIP in the UK etc. The difference is that in Central Europe, governments are not totally exempt of these trends which in most

other European countries remain mainly in the realm of the anti-system opposition.

Hence Victor Orban’s Hungary, which is moving towards an increasingly sovereigntist position, prefers to counter any idea of quotas, whilst – unlike the other V4 countries – it would be one of the main beneficiaries. But out of principle it rejects a supra-national solution. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia the governments have a rather “pro-European” stance but have preferred to step away from this to avoid conflict with public opinion. In the Czech Republic there is also a determination not to give easy points to the Europhobic opposition and not to complicate relations further with the President of the Republic, who likes to stand as a “Euro-federalist”, but on issues like immigration and Islam, he rivals with Dutchman Geert Wilders and France’s Marine Le Pen. However Poland finally preferred to adopt a pro-European line by placing its relations with its European partners above its domestic political stakes.

Hence it is impossible to interpret this in one way only. The only common point which typifies them is an enduring inexperience in the European political game and also a domestic, divisive, cavalier political culture: the governments in the Visegrad group, with the relative and quite typical exception of the Polish government (which, however, seems to be over after October 25 parliamentary elections), very quickly adopted an extremely hard attitude, which became a totally non-negotiable question of principle. They closed the door too early and too hard so that the political domestic cost of a U-turn would not become too high. This is a particularly powerful factor in those countries which tend to foster a certain inferiority complex within the EU and which are constantly on the look-out for anything which might – directly or indirectly – seem like a diktat on the part of the powerful. Obviously, the trauma of the 20th century – Munich, Yalta and kowtowing to Moscow for 40 years – are also part of this.

To this we might also add a quite deep seated misperception as far as the European Union is concerned: it seems to me that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have always tended to underestimate the depth of European commitment and the fact that progress towards integration over

the last 25 years has to be taken seriously. Many leaders in these countries continue to believe that the Luxembourg Compromise is still topical. And European political culture, which privileges consensus and the patient quest of compromise – totally opposite to the domestic politics that these countries have developed since 1989 – comforts them in the idea that they can always overstep the mark. But this time, the majority of Member States untypically decided to force their way through – to the great surprise of those countries who believed, again, that the Union preferred inertia to internal conflict. This might cause problems within public opinion but paradoxically I believe that there is also a positive side to this: it is not such a bad thing if the European Union breaks with its image of being “a useless, garrulous thing” – to quote Charles de Gaulle as he spoke of the UN.

4) Even though Poland partly stepped away from its neighbours by not voting against the measures of the Council on 22nd September we note a certain solidarity between the various States of Eastern Europe. Does it still make sense to think of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as a bloc?

Not of these countries as a whole, certainly not. In the same way we cannot think of Western Europe as a bloc. As for the Visegrad Group I cannot deny that there is a certain pertinence and reality in terms of this regional cooperation, but we are still far from the Franco-German couple, of Benelux and even of Nordic cooperation. It is a far too imbalanced, heterogeneous group, as much from a geopolitical point of view, as from the point of view of historical relations between countries, mutual perceptions etc... In many respects – for example – the Czech Republic is closer to Austria than it is to Poland. The relationship between Slovakia and Hungary may stay complicated for a long time to come. Poland’s desire to play “with the ‘big’ boys” and to prefer the “Weimar Triangle” as opposed to the “Visegrad Group” is both understandable and problematic for the other three countries which really do not want to grant Poland a hegemonic role. In short, in some areas in which there is real proximity of ideas and interests, solidarity between these

countries can come into play. And this has been the case in terms of the refugee crisis. But it remains an exception.

5) The liberal group in the European Parliament has called for the implementation of article 7 of the Treaty on European Union against Hungary following the recent adoption by the Hungarian parliament of a law allowing the government to deploy its army on the country’s borders. For his part, Robert Fico, the Prime Minister of Slovakia declared “Slovakia has been built for Slovaks, not for minorities.” Do the countries of Western and Eastern Europe share the same values? Ultimately is the East-West rift economic or structural?

Then we should now include Slovenia in this, which has just used its army in the wake of the migrant wave which can no longer pass via Hungary. I have no sympathy with the rhetoric and the way the Hungarian government has managed the situation, but I also find excessive criticism counter-productive and basically, just as dangerous for the European project, whether this involves proposals to invoke article 7 or to “punish” the countries that have voted against quotas, by depriving them of structural funds.

Of course, the Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico says some unpleasant things but who noted that one of the best speeches on our values and the refugee issue was delivered by the Slovakian President Andrej Kiska? Have we forgotten what we heard in Vienna when Jörg Haider’s party was part of the government coalition and when, on several occasions, the Northern League was part of the government in Rome?

There is a structural problem in European identity and collective depression, a lack of self-confidence on the part of Europeans in the face of the challenges and threats with which we are confronted. And this structural problem – which is affecting the Union as a whole – and possibly all of Europe (the recent elections in Switzerland prove this) – lead to more cyclical expressions and responses that are more or less extreme and long lasting. Falling for the simplistic “East/West” vision is the best way of missing the point. This mal-être is European, symptoms might seem

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more violent in the East at present ... but have we already forgotten who won the European elections in France and the UK?

6) Is this divide more significant than that between the North and the South that has become apparent since the start of the sovereign debt crises in the countries of the Mediterranean?

I believe that the North/South economic divide is much more tangible. And unfortunately it has made Europe's structural problem of which I have just spoken much worse. It is clear that if Europe were in a period of full growth and low unemployment the reaction to the migratory crisis would not be the same. Rather than separating out the various factors we should see them as different facets of the same problem: depressed Europe, ageing Europe, Europe that is withdrawing into a backward facing nostalgia, fearful of the Other and of the future. The nostalgia and fear are both quite irrational. Europe's past has not always been so fantastic and our continent is far from lacking relevant assets for the future. But political and intellectual elites seem to be obsessed by the vision of inexorable decline.

7) Could this faint-hearted position regarding immigration turn against the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in other areas, for examples in terms of security and even of the economy?

Even though I know my opinion is far from being shared by all, I believe that the biggest losers of a possible "unravelling" of the European project would be the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. From a geopolitical point of view they would have to get used to living in European Realpolitik again, one that is unregulated and tempered by the Community logic, in a space separating the West from Russia that is traditionally extremely sensitive. From an economic point of view these are countries that really cannot build their prosperity on their national domestic markets – the European internal market is a blessing for them. A return to protectionism in Europe would be bad news for everyone, but for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe it would be an absolute catastrophe. By the way, in Eastern Europe there is in fact a country that has developed over the last 25 years without following the European trajectory, unlike the other 11, which are now part of the Union: Ukraine.

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