

The Refugee Crisis in Europe: Unfolding Right-wing Politics, Racism and Anti-Immigration Political Parties

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In 2015, Europe experienced its largest inflow of refugees since World War II, with 1,015,078 people reaching the continent, which put considerable strain on a number of countries that were forced to allocate sufficient resources to accommodate them. After gaining an appreciation for the severity of the refugee crisis, politicians and policymakers in the European Union (EU) responded by enacting measures to either return refugees to their home countries or limit the number of future arrivals. They clearly viewed this approach as preferable to treating the refugees with the dignity and respect afforded to equal human beings, and more feasible than altering their hegemonic practices and foreign policies that played significant roles in creating or exacerbating the refugee crisis in the first place.

Among the specific measures undertaken by the EU was offering Turkey, which already hosted more than 3-million refugees, financial incentives to take back some of the refugees that had already passed through the country and reached Europe. Since the terms of that agreement were finalized in Brussels in March 2016, Europe witnessed a dramatic reduction[1] in the number of refugees crossing Turkish borders[2]. The European Commission also signed similar agreements with Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal, whereby these nations would institute measures to prevent people from leaving for Europe and facilitate the return of unwanted migrants.

Even though the number of refugees reaching Europe has fallen dramatically in last two years, the 28-member EU is still under considerable strain from the mass arrivals of 2015, combined with an inability to reach a consensus on how to manage the ongoing refugee crisis. On September 23, 2015, the Council of the European Union attempted to respond to the refugee crisis by instituting a quota system, whereby a total of 120,000 asylum seekers would be relocated from Southern Europe, mainly Greece and Italy, to Central and Western European nations. The relocation quota was originally adopted as an emergency measure, limited to a term of two years. That term has already expired and the resolution has not been extended despite the fact that its provisions were largely disregarded when it was in force.

Although most EU governments supported the quota system, it has faced considerable opposition and criticism from certain segments of the EU since first being instituted by the Council of the European Union to manage the relocation of refugees. Specifically, a number of countries from the former communist block[3], including Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and the Czech Republic, openly opposed this resolution, arguing that accepting this marginal number of refugees posed a threat to their ethnic and cultural identities. Poland also expressed support for the stance of these nations.



Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (Source: NEO)

On September 6, 2017, the European Court of Justice dismissed claims made by the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and the Slovak Republic against mandatory refugee quotas designed to achieve a fair distribution of asylum seekers by taking a number of factors into account including population size, unemployment rate, and total GDP. Subsequently, German Chancellor Angela Merkel advised the leaders of these countries to accept the Court's ruling and take in their shares of refugees to help alleviate the unfair burden placed upon countries like Italy and Greece since the refugee crisis began. While Slovakia has relented in its position on the matter, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán rejected the European Court of Justice's verdict, describing it as a violation of Hungary's sovereignty and cultural identity. He is adamant that his government has no intention of changing its immigration policies in order to accommodate the European Court of Justice ruling and has encouraged other European leaders to join him in protecting Europe's Christian identity.

The refugee crisis has exposed Europe's racist and xenophobic underbelly. This is evidenced by the notable rise in support for right-wing, racist, anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant parties in a number of European countries, including Alternative für Deutschland[4] (Alternative for Germany) in Germany, Jobik[5] in Hungary, the National Front[6] in France, *Golden Dawn*[7] in Greece, Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ)[8] in Austria, the Finns[9] in Finland, the Sweden Democrats[10] in Sweden, the Danish People's Party[11] in Denmark, Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV)[12] in the Netherlands, and Lega Nord[13] in Italy. The success of these far-right parties suggests that the onset of the refugee crisis has meant the racist, xenophobic and anti-immigrant discourses expressed by their politicians, which were once considered unacceptable and relegated these parties to the fringes of the political spectrums in their respective countries, are resonating with an increasing number of people across Europe.

This recent growth in support for xenophobic and racist political parties also appears to have emboldened political leaders from some European countries to openly express hostile views vis-à-vis Muslim refugees. For example, in 2015-16, Hungarian Prime minister, Viktor Orbán, expressed concerns that certain policies, such as Angela Merkel's decision to host 800,000 Syrian refugees in Germany, could facilitate significant demographic changes in Europe over the longer term, including the possibility that the population of Muslims could one day eclipse that of Christians. He demonstrated his racist and xenophobic views when he stated:

"I am speaking about culture and the everyday principles of life, such as sexual habits, freedom of expression, equality between men and woman and all those kinds of values which I call Christianity".

He further added that,

“If you allow thousands or millions of unidentified persons into your house, the risk of ... terrorism will significantly increase”.

On this basis, Orbán argued that

“a group of Europe’s intellectual and political leaders wishes to create a mixed society in Europe which, within just a few generations, will utterly transform the cultural and ethnic composition of our continent”.

The Hungarian Prime minister summed up his position by stating,

“for us, Europe is a Christian continent, and this is how we want to keep it. Even though we may not be able to keep all of it Christian, at least we can do so for the segment that God has entrusted to the Hungarian people”.



President Miloš Zeman

Prime Minister Orbán is not the only political leader to hold such views as, in 2015, Czech President Miloš Zeman stated that accepting Muslim refugees would mean host countries would “be deprived of women’s beauty, because they’ll be covered from head to toe ... unfaithful women will be stoned and thieves will have their hands cut off”. Meanwhile, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico promised that not even a single Muslim would be permitted to enter Slovakia, clearly conveying his belief that Slovakia was built for its citizens, not minorities or refugees. Jarosław Kaczyński, former Prime minister of Poland, took a more alarmist approach by claiming that migrants would bring diseases, such as cholera, parasites and protozoa into Europe. The Croatian Interior Minister, Ranko Ostojic, went even further in expressing his anti-refugee sentiments, as he suggested that it might be necessary to deploy the military to seal his country’s borders.

Unfortunately, the racist tendencies of some European leaders were not limited to only making statements. For example, Czech authorities resorted to stamping registration numbers directly onto the arms of refugees in 2015. That same year, Macedonian police used tear gas and stun grenades against refugees, while the country’s authorities actually took the extreme measure of building a razor wire fence around the city of Gevgelija. Furthermore, the international media widely reported that Hungarian police established detention camps with 24-hour police surveillance that offered little in the way of basic human needs, in addition to firing tear gas and deploying water cannons against

refugees. France has also featured prominently in reports describing the mistreatment of refugees, including physical violence, harassment and intimidation at the hands of the police and locals. Many of the measures being taken against refugees in a number of European countries and some statements made by prominent politicians and leaders at the highest levels are equally disturbing.

Such examples of mistreatment, discrimination and xenophobia endured by refugees from African and Asian countries at the hands of Europeans are not entirely unexpected given the perceptions of the East that emerged in Occidental countries on account of their imperial and colonial ambitions. The West has created entirely fictional representations of African and Arab-Islamic cultures and traditions, essentially depicting these regions as parts of a savage world in need of civilizing. Many contemporary Western philosophers and liberal thinkers[14] that made significant contributions to the narratives of the outside world of the Occidental realm held views that were similar to those put forth by Orbán, Zeman, Kaczyński, Fico, Ostojic, etc.

Portrayals of the East/Orient as savage and uncivilized have been exploited by Western political leaders in order to justify the colonial and the imperial ambitions of the U.S. and its European allies in the 20th and 21st centuries, often in the name of civilizing the uncivilized, protecting human rights, installing freedom and democracy, and fighting terrorism. Despite public proclamations of such high ideals, these interventions typically involved committing human rights violations, applying economic sanctions and embargoes, instituting regime change, engaging in covert actions and destabilization efforts, and initiating military intrusions and wars of aggression aimed at establishing hegemony over key markets and natural resources. However, it appears as though the European allies of the US did not anticipate the possibility that their imperial ambitions could eventually result in a blowback at home in the form of refugees arriving en masse.

The refugee crisis is unlikely to be resolved through short-sighted measures like: a largely unsupported quota system to relocate refugees among EU member countries; offering financial incentives to countries like Turkey, Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal, to either take back some of the refugees or tighten security at their borders; or, simply abandoning countries on Europe's frontlines, namely Greece and Italy, to shoulder a disproportionate share of the burden on their own. Such efforts will accomplish little more than masking the problems in the short-term and delaying their consequences to a later date, when they become too large and serious to ignore. In early 2017, European Parliament President Antonio Tajani made the startling claim that "there could be as many as 30 million migrants heading to Europe in the coming years". This is particularly concerning when considering how the last two years have demonstrated that European countries are wholly unprepared and ill-equipped to address the needs of the limited number of refugees that have already reached the continent in terms of providing them with decent shelter, health services, education, professional training, and employment opportunities. Also of concern is a general lack of benevolence and empathy on the part of many European citizens, as demonstrated by the significant rise in support for right-wing political parties and their racist, Islamophobic and anti-immigrant platforms in recent years.



Source: Zero Hedge

The responses to the refugee crisis demonstrate that many of the forces that engendered some of the worst crimes of the 20th century during WWII still appear to be thriving in much of contemporary Europe. That is to say, anyone who dismisses the manipulative power of Viktor Orbán, or the recent successes of far-right political parties in Europe, does so at their own peril. Such individuals need to be reminded that,

“Hitler did not have to destroy democracy; he merely took advantage of the decay of democracy and at the critical moment obtained the support of many to whom...he yet seemed the only man strong enough to get things done.”[15]

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Notes

[1] That view is perfectly stated by Orbán: “we declare that trouble should not be brought here, but assistance must be taken to where it is needed”.

[2] According to a UNICEF report, only 140,000 migrants and refugees have reached European shores from January to October 2017, a far cry from the high numbers reported in 2015.

[3] In all likelihood, most refugees do not intend to remain in these Eastern Europe countries on a permanent basis. Instead, they probably regard them as temporary stopovers on their way to Western European nations like Germany, France, and the UK.

[4] Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) is a right-wing political party founded in Germany in April 2013. It regularly promotes anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic policies. In 2017, AfD became the third-largest party in Germany by acquiring 94 out of a total of 709 seats in the Bundestag in the federal election held that year.

[5] Jobbik is a Hungarian nationalist Christian political party that claims its “fundamental purpose” is to defend “Hungarian values and interests”, which apparently involves advocating for anti-immigrant and anti-Islamic policies.

In 2014, Jobbik won 20.54% of the vote in parliamentary elections to become third-largest party in the Hungarian National Assembly.

[6] The National Front is a right-wing nationalist political party that was founded in France in 1972. Its popularity has been rising recently, as evidenced by the fact that it captured 25% of the vote in the European elections held in 2014. The National Front has expressed unfavourable views about immigration and Islam since it was founded. However, it could be argued that these positions have become more extreme in recent years, particularly since Marine Le Pen was made leader of the party in 2011.

[7] *Golden Dawn* is a Greek far-right and neo-fascist party with extreme anti-immigrant views that *has been exploiting the refugee crisis to gain more support*. In 2015 it captured 7% of the vote in the Greek national election.

[8] FPÖ is an anti-Islamic political party with Nazi sympathies that currently holds 51 of the 183 seats in Austria's National Council. FPÖ obtained 26% of the vote in the most recent election held on October 15, 2017. FPÖ leader Heinz-Christian Strache is of the opinion that about 60% of all Austrians share the xenophobic, racist, anti-immigrant and anti-Islam views advocated by his party. Recent elections in Austria, held on October 15, 2017, resulted in the formation of a coalition of conservative far-right parties, comprised of the Austrian People's Party (Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP) and the Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ), taking control of the government.

[9] The Finns is a Finnish political party that is well-known for its strong *anti*-immigration stance and calls for a *Muslim*-free Finland. In 2015, it became the second-largest party in Finland's parliament.

[10] The Sweden Democrats is currently the third-largest party in Sweden that openly supports extreme anti-immigrant policies and the white supremacist movement.

[11] The Danish People's Party supports anti-immigration and anti-Islamic policies. It is currently the second-largest party in Denmark.

[12] Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) is a Dutch nationalist and anti-Islam party. As of 2012, it is the third-largest party in the Netherlands.

[13] Lega Nord is a neo-fascist and anti-immigrant political party in Italy that currently ranks fourth among all political parties in the country.

[14] Prominent examples include Martin Heidegger, an avowed anti-Semite and racist, Baron de Montesquieu, who defended slavery, David Hume, a declared white supremacist who associated civilization with the white race, and Immanuel Kant, who proclaimed the superiority of the white race over the Indigenous populations of the Americas and Africa. Furthermore, John Stuart Mill defended the notion of colonial powers civilizing unsophisticated nations, John Locke supported the enslavement of Africans and discrimination against Indigenous peoples, and both Friedrich A. Hayek and Ludwig von Mises often made racial and discriminatory comments about non-white people.

[15] Hayek (2007, 108).

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