

THE NEW IRON CURTAIN? THE V4 AND THE REFUGEE CRISIS AS SEEN FROM THE POLISH PERSPECTIVE

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When in February 2016 three US senators published an open letter to the Polish prime minister it was certain that they neither expected her to respond so rapidly, nor for the answer to come in a tone which was somewhat different from previous Washington-Warsaw exchanges. John McCain, Richard Durbin and Ben Cardin, concerned by the worrying news reaching them about the erosion of the rule of law in Poland, wrote their letter in order to ask their central European ally to follow the letter of the law, as would be expected of any liberal democracy.

Not a week had gone by before Beata Szydło, Poland's prime minister, assured them in writing that the state of the democratic process in Poland had never been better. The suggestion was that unfair gossip about the conduct of her Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość [PiS]) party had been disseminated by her political enemies across the globe. The following extract from her response letter seems especially interesting: "Sirs, your concern over the affairs of Poland is important and valuable. And yet the curiosity and good will of American politicians *cannot turn into lecturing* and the imposition of actions which will influence the internal affairs of my Homeland".¹

The diplomatic tone does not quite conceal the intended message: "Please mind your own business". This is no linguistic lapse or one-off blunder. Similar statements have already been heard from the mouths of Poland's new political elite, such as the new minister of foreign affairs who, following the first wave of foreign criticisms of the activities of PiS, stated, diplomatically, "We are regaining our independence", or Jarosław Kaczyński, the head of PiS himself, who warned that foreign criticisms of the Polish government (in relation to the dispute over the constitutional court) were "a very serious challenge to our sovereignty".

The open letter incident is highly instructive for understanding what is happening in central Europe. For the idea of "regaining our independence" touches other areas of political life, including the refugee crisis (2015-2016). If we do not picture the larger context, it will be difficult to understand not only the utterances of Ms. Szydło and other

1. From: wPolityce.pl. "Premier Beata Szydło błyskawicznie odpowiada amerykańskim senatorom na ich list: «Chcemy by szanowano nasze suwerenne wybory i decyzje»", (2016, February 14), (on-line) [Date accessed: 21.12.2016] <http://wpolityce.pl/polityka/281662-tylko-u-nas-premier-beata-szydlo-blyskawicznie-odpowiada-amerykanskim-senatorom-na-ich-list-chcemy-by-szanowano-nasze-suwerenne-wybory-i-decyzje>.

Polish politicians, but also that of Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, who in the context of the migration crisis has also spoken about the “Sovietisation of the European Union” (Mickiewicz, 2016).

Here I would like to focus on selected aspects of the refugee crisis in the V4 countries as seen from the Polish perspective. First, in section 1 I will outline the background of the refugee crisis, describe what has happened in Poland since the last parliamentary elections in 2015 and describe some political paradoxes related to these changes. Secondly (section 2), I will analyse certain aspects of the V4 and the refugee crises: namely, the first reactions to the crises and the possibility of the new Iron Curtain. I will then (3) describe the radicalisation of the language of Polish public debate concerning the migration crisis in Europe and provide an overview of the results of *Kultura Liberalna's* Public Debate Observatory Reports (2015-2016). Finally, (4) I will describe the refugee crisis (2015-2016) in the post-communist countries and (5) draw conclusions.

Background of the refugee crisis. General description of the Polish situation after the last parliamentary elections in 2015

In 2015, the conservative-rightist Law and Justice (PiS) party, led by Jarosław Kaczyński, won a bravura victory in both presidential and parliamentary elections in Poland. The basis for the party's programme was a mix of sovereign, nationalistic and patriotic terminology, peppered with fashionable phrases about a struggle against economic inequality. Not surprisingly, during the election campaign, Kaczyński made enthusiastic reference to Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Campaign trail promises, based on a critique of existing elites and reputedly ineffective modernisation, found favour with the majority of those who ended up voting.

Following an overwhelming victory in the ensuing elections, PiS then initiated a spectacular (in terms of both speed and intensity) process of subjecting various segments of government to their will. Rapid reforms were followed by an assault on elite spheres of influence – the tsunami of changes hit the public media, the civil service and the judiciary, and direct moves were made to marginalise the Constitutional Tribunal. Needless to say, not a thing was said about such aims during the election campaign.

The Polish constitutional court, whose aim is essentially to oversee the constitutional validity of laws being put in place, did not surrender to this assault and entered into a real political and legal struggle in order to retain its independence from the ruling party. As a result, for the first time ever, many Poles have recently begun taking an active interest in documents relating to the national constitutional legislation put in place at the start of Europe's post-communist era.

This political thriller is far from over. When the line between an elected party and governmental structures began to be erased, Frans Timmermans, vice-president of the European Commission, informed Poland that the EU had decided to take the first steps of a procedure

designed to stop the threat to the rule of law in Poland. A major shock was also brought by the decision of Standard and Poor's to lower Poland's credit rating from A- to BBB+. This happened as a direct result of the early decisions made by the PiS government, in spite of good overall economic results. As if that wasn't enough, in March the advisory committee of the Council of Europe, the so-called Venice Commission, published a highly critical statement relating to the reforms introduced to the Polish Constitutional Tribunal. It wasn't only McCain, Durbin or Cardin who sent their concerns in writing. Barack Obama's administration also expressed its concerns over the Constitutional Tribunal during the last NATO Summit held in Warsaw.

Trying to view Poland from the outside, one can see it as little more than a battle ground of paradoxes. Why are the people of a nation which has undergone such a successful – even model – transformation from communism to liberal democracy suddenly handing over power to politicians who, in the space of just a few months, are attempting to subvert the independent role played by key institutions of governance? A country which essentially avoided any sort of fallout from the 2008 global economic crisis, with low rates of unemployment, renowned for years of unprecedented economic growth (in the last quarter of 2015, Polish GDP rose by 3.9%, the fastest growth in the past four years), is suddenly taking the so-called “Hungarian path”, a shock therapy of statist reforms the likes of which Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, resorted to during a dramatic political and economic crisis. We should add here that Poland is also a country which is not experiencing any real challenges related to the influx of mass migration (in fact, it has almost no such problems), but has a falling birth rate and is suffering from what the EU terms a “brain drain”. For all that, Poland is not proving keen to take in immigrants, much like other countries in the region.

Hence, the question “What has happened to Europe's model pupil?” is being asked more and more often. In order to answer it, Poland's case should be treated as a piece of a puzzle which fits into the bigger regional picture, as well as a measuring stick to assess the effectiveness of systematic changes taking place, for better or worse, in states which have been moving away from communist pasts towards liberal, democratic futures since 1989. These questions apply to all of the other “good students” of central Europe, including the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, which in the past years have surprised European and American partners by starting to question the direction of transformation as well as the established ways of doing international politics.

Analysis of selected aspects of the V4 and the refugee crises

Since the second half of 2015, images of endless crowds of refugees and immigrants streaming into Europe by boat and dinghy, crossing rivers and traipsing along motorways towards the heart of Europe have turned out to be a test for its declared values of tolerance, solidarity and human rights. What is more, the attitude towards the issue of mass migration has revealed an attitude among the V4 countries that suggests they have

no intention of agreeing with the orders imposed by EU policies and those suggested by authority figures from western Europe.

When the French minister of foreign affairs, Laurent Fabius, criticised central European countries half-way through 2015 for conducting “scandalous politics” in the face of the refugee crisis, the prime minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico, publicly protested against this sort of moralising tone from Paris. He shot back that it was not Slovakia which took part in destabilising countries such as Syria or Libya. In February 2016, Fico announced that, as long as he remains in charge, Slovakia will not take in a single Muslim refugee.

The Czech president, Miloš Zeman, is almost renowned for his politically incorrect comments on the subject of mass migration. In one of his infamous interviews he explained to his fellow citizens that an influx of refugees was an “organised invasion”. Then there was Orbán, trying to convince his countrymen in various media campaigns that only he is capable of defending national borders from the “flood of terrorism”. Radically anti-migration rhetoric isn’t costing anyone votes in the region, quite the opposite: Orbán’s Fidesz party enjoys the biggest backing of any political faction in Hungary (some 32%–25% of votes). Second place, with half the votes garnered by Fidesz, is taken by the far-right, or, as some claim, neo-Nazi, Jobbik party.

In mid-2015, *Le Monde* wrote about a new Iron Curtain going up across the old continent, caused by a dispute over the issue of refugees (Kauffmann, 2015).² The events which have followed show how the attitudes of various western European states have evolved in respect of this. Some reclaimed control of their own borders, others permitted legislative changes which dissuaded new arrivals from applying for asylum (such as Denmark), while still others adopted a sneaky stance in terms of their actual responsibilities for accepting refugees. Also, support for political factions with anti-immigrant rhetoric has visibly increased, regardless of how Europe was divided prior to 1989.

And yet the image of central Europe torpedoing the politics of obligatory immigrant quotas in the post-communist bloc remains. This can be seen in the speech given recently by the former prime minister of Italy. In February 2016, during a summit meeting in Brussels, Matteo Renzi almost threatened central European states by saying that EU funds would be withheld if they refused to show solidarity with the West on the issue of migration. He repeated it recently (October 25th) in an interview for RAI television (Polish Press Agency, 2016).

Inhabitants of central Europe often feel disrespected by negative stereotypes of their region. But let’s assume for a while that there is a grain of truth in them and that the reaction of Polish and V4 inhabitants to the refugee crisis shows some deeper change in their societies. Perhaps this change might be illustrated by the attitude of the youngest generation to the crisis. The shape of the public debate about it would thus be very meaningful.

Young Poles, Czechs, Slovaks and Hungarians are the first generation which can feasibly travel across borders without using passports, but also without the need to compare themselves with peers from Berlin

2 See also: Kuisz, Jarosław, interviewed by Jonathan Chalié, “La Position de la Pologne. Entretien avec Jarosław Kuisz”. *Esprit* (November 2015), vol. 419, p. 111-113.

or Paris. This doesn't, however, instantly convert into a sense of unity with refugees. It has turned out that in the most recent parliamentary elections in Slovakia an unfeasibly high number of young voters came out in support of the as-some-claim neo-Nazi Lidová Strana party led by Marian Kotleba. Surveys suggest that in Poland it is the youngest (18–35 years old) who most often disagree with taking in refugees from places experiencing armed conflict (according to the Centre for Public Opinion Research).³

The debate on the refugee crisis in Poland and the rest of the V4

In 2015 and 2016 the debate on the refugee crisis in Poland has become gradually more radical than before. In the mainstream mass media the negative stereotyped picture of refugees has been presented on many occasions and arguments against refugees have been heard in western Europe as part of far-right rhetoric. Especially peculiar is the fact that the refugee crisis has not been directly experienced in any way in Poland, either recently or ever before. In this sense one could speak of “virtual refugees”, rather than the real ones (Kuisz, 2015).

In 2014 at *Kultura Liberalna* we established the Public Debate Observatory, a research institute whose purpose is to collect and analyse cases of radicalisation in Polish public debate.⁴ Public Debate Observatory research is not only concerned with hate speech – a phenomenon that is well known and partially monitored by other organisations – but also other forms of radicalisation, which include antagonistic, simplified and insulting communication. These changes are interconnected with broadening the gap between ideological groups. Not only are the opinions expressed in electronic and paper media radicalising, the forms of these expressions are too.

Among groups of topics the Public Debate Observatory have chosen seven common perceptions that are most likely to be influenced by radicalisations present in the media, including “Alien, Other. Attitude towards immigrants and national minorities”. The Public Debate Observatory constantly monitors selected magazines from different sides of the ideological spectrum: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Fakt*, *Polityka*, *Newsweek*, *W sieci*, *Do Rzeczy*. In justified cases we also monitor selected radio and television stations and web forums. The results of the ongoing monitoring were published monthly on the *Kultura Liberalna*'s Public Debate Observatory website.

The large article by Karolina Wigura and Łukasz Bertram based on the Public Debate Observatory reports was published in *Polen-Analysen* (Bertram & Wigura 2016). The main feature of the radicalisation diagnosed was that the language of the far right moves very easily to the political centre (the tendency is sometimes presented as an example of widening the democratic pluralism in the mainstream media). In our report the radicalisation of debate was described in the following order:

A gradual popularisation of the language of the clash of civilisations was to be observed in the 2015–2016 period. In order to describe the refugee crisis, the right- or far-right-wing weeklies, websites and so

- 3 See for example: Centre for Public Opinion Research “Komunikat z badań nr 149/2015”. (November 2015) (on-line) [Date accessed: 21.12.2016] http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2015/K_149_15.PDF.
4. For the official description of the Public Debate Observatory of *Kultura Liberalna* see: <http://observatorium.kulturaliberalna.pl/english/>.

on began to more straightforwardly paint a picture where a Christian (or post-Christian) European citizen is opposed to a Muslim migrant. The concept of welcoming culture (*Willkommenskultur*) was therefore presented as a *leftist idea of the degenerated EU* as well as *suicidal for European civilisation* (Bertram & Wigura 2016, p. 5).

In the 2015–2016 period the concept of multiculturalism was under severe attack from the Law and Justice politicians and public intellectuals supporting the Kaczyński party. And, paradoxically, the statements of those western leaders who expressed their doubts about the multiculturalism policy (Angela Merkel, David Cameron and Nicolas Sarkozy) were enthusiastically quoted (Bertram & Wigura 2016, p. 7). It is perhaps particular to the V4 countries that one could observe comparisons of multiculturalism to “soft totalitarianism”. In particular the attacks on women in Cologne on New Year’s Eve were described as “the end of multicultural Europe”.

Since the beginning of the refugee crisis, in more and more opinions in the mass media it has been virtually impossible to see any difference between a refugee and terrorist (Bertram & Wigura 2016, p. 5). A series of terror attacks (like the Charlie Hebdo shooting or those in Brussels) were presented as a consequence of the welcoming culture concept. It was not the explanation itself, but its popularisation on a massive scale that was striking in 2015–2016. The conclusions of this kind of thinking may be presented as a basic statement: welcoming the refugees poses a terrorist threat (now or in the future), so politicians should not allow the V4 to make the Western countries’ mistake (Bertram & Wigura 2016, p. 6). It is one of the main examples of the thesis that for the first time in the EU’s history of enlargement V4 countries have radically sought not to follow the scheme of “copy-paste” modernisation.

The stereotype of a Muslim refugee that migrates not in order to save his/her life, but to receive benefits from the social security system. Refugees are stigmatised as people that are not willing to join the European culture of work. In the long run the refugee crisis is presented as a threat to the welfare state (Bertram & Wigura 2016, p. 6).

Angela Merkel’s positive attitude towards the refugees and the *Willkommenskultur* has been under permanent attack in the Polish mass media. The quotas on migrants were often presented as imposed by larger EU countries on the V4 group. Here the alleged political pressure from Berlin has been particularly underlined and criticised. Obviously, in the context of the refugee crisis debate (2015–2016) one could easily find the anti-German sentiments, with occasional references to anti-German WWII stereotypes (Bertram & Wigura 2016, p. 6).

It is highly difficult to conduct any rational discussion about the refugee crisis. One should underline that some opinions are copied from the right or far-right statements of Western politicians. At the same time the EU is presented as ideologically weak or even harmful to its members (Bertram & Wigura 2016, p. 4). In spite of the fact that the relocations did not take place and in Poland the refugees are still “virtual”, one could be afraid of the fact that intolerance towards foreigners seems to infuse the public discussion with unprecedented ease (since 1989).

The V4 and the refugee crisis: series of crises

At first some commentators explained Poland's anti-immigrant stance through its strong Catholic tendencies and reluctance to embrace other faiths. Yet it seems that in fact fears of an influx of immigrants have nothing to do with the levels of religiousness in central Europe: the same fears seem to be shared by both Czechs (one of the most secular societies on earth) and Poles (one of the most religious in Europe, according to studies from 2011, which showed that up to 86% of Poles declared themselves to be Catholic) (Central Statistical Office in Poland, 2013). What is more, the negative attitude to the refugees coming to Poland is in obvious contradiction to Pope Francis' declarations on the need for human solidarity in times of war and migration crisis.

Perhaps, then, another explanation for Poland's attitude towards the migrant crisis is possible. My hypothesis would be that the negative reaction is a part of a wider cultural change happening in Poland, the main feature of which is a distancing of Poland from the West and its popular image. In this interpretation the refugee crisis of 2015–2016 is treated in the V4 as one of the series of moral disasters attributed to the West: lies about the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Polish and German cooperation in building secret prisons enforced by the CIA, the use of ancient forms of torture under fancy new names, the dirty dealings which led to the 2008 stock market collapse, WikiLeaks, troublesome disputes over Grexit and Brexit, the successes of Eurosceptics in EU parliamentary elections and so on.

This list can go on and on, branching out along a number of paths. This new way of seeing the countries of western Europe and the United States is connected with a series of crises which have meant that the West no longer represents the peak of anyone's moral aspirations. The above-summarised main features of the public debate in Poland about the refugee crisis are a good illustration of this. As seen above, the European Union is shown as weak, valueless and degenerated. It is not one single event, but a whole sequence of disappointments relayed to the residents of central Europe without any form of censorship. The naïve perceptions of the West have thus undergone a process of defragmentation and disintegration. And this is a process that has dragged out over time and been accompanied by the discreet return by western European elites to the "*Der Untergang des Abendlandes*" (*The Decline of the West*) narrative, with a definite Spengleresque undertone.⁵

A key influence here has also been the gradual "discovery" that the European Union is not just a wonderful ideal, some dreamlike version of Immanuel Kant's notion of eternal peace, but also an everyday, decidedly less attractive *Game of Thrones* between competing nation-states. Countries which until only a few years ago represented the peak of aspiration for post-communist states, such as Greece, go on experiencing serious troubles. The wave of EU-scepticism sweeping the West itself is also not without influence, stronger than at any time in the past quarter of a century, forcing many to ask questions about sovereignty and influence under EU rule.

5. Oswald Spengler (1880 -1936), author of the classic work *The Decline of the West* is here a constant point of reference. For example "The Future of the West", *European View*, vol. 9, number 2, December 2010, in which, alongside "professionally" optimistic texts by Herman Van Rompuy, we can also read "Is the Decline of the West irreversible?" by Maurice Fraser, or Franck Debbie's "The Decline of the West in Contemporary French Literature".

In effect, we are dealing with a very complex situation: on the one hand, residents of eastern Europe do not intend to leave the EU, on the other they are not willing to accept all the ideas put forward by Brussels. This is clearly seen in the results of surveys, which indicate that Poles, for example, are declaring their wish to remain in the EU, while at the same time remaining against accepting the euro (in 2014, this was almost 70% of those questioned by the Centre for Public Opinion Research). In the region, only Slovakia has thus far tried to join eurozone.

Conclusion

“Who are we?” Globalisation and the flow of migrations is forcing all the nations of Europe to pose this question today. In post-communist Europe, which has experienced neither its own “Trente Glorieuses” nor a cultural revolution during the 1960s and 70s, but has weathered the storms of two totalitarian invasions, the Holocaust and the annihilation of the old noble-bourgeois elites, this question comes across quite differently. For almost three decades since 1989, the desire to capture the myth of the West, to replicate its moral and material good and create a better world has, paradoxically, relieved the V4 countries of accepting their own full responsibility for the reforms.⁶

Today, central European politicians often bring up arguments for a return to *realpolitik*. This is hollow rhetoric. We are rather dealing with a reversal of previous scenarios and a return to defensive forms of political positioning. Neither Warsaw nor Prague nor Bratislava nor Budapest have put forward any constructive plans for the future of the European Union. Quite the opposite, many elements of present-day politics emerging from the governments based in these capital cities can still be read as a continuation of “imitating the West”. The only difference is that now they are drawing their inspiration from political factions just beginning to develop within Western democracies – those led by nationalistic and Eurosceptic philosophies. In practice, this means that the border between Eurosceptics (such as UKIP and the Front National) and parties wishing to be seen in central Europe as centre-right is vanishing as we speak.

The refugee crisis is a challenge for each and every European country. Each of them has tried to solve the problem in its own way and a part of the societies in both western and eastern EU countries did not always react in the most welcoming way (as Brexit itself proved). There is, however, indeed something that makes the V4 countries similar. Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, and Slovaks seem to fear that their communities, re-established after the collapse of communism (also in the meaning of material wealth), would be endangered by numerous newcomers. At the same time, at least a part of the public opinion did not want to be lectured by their western partners. It is a pity that the so many politicians from Poland and other countries so eagerly strengthened those attitudes, instead of understanding that the V4 countries themselves have become a part of the West within the past twelve years. There was an opportunity window for the V4 countries to launch new initiatives for better EU integration and present more a solidary policy on the old continent.

6. See more: Kuisz, Jarosław. “Ende eines Mythos. Polen, Ostmitteleuropa und das Bild vom Westen”. *Osteuropa*, no. 1-2 (2016), p. 201–208.

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