

## MIGRANT CRISIS AND THE VISEGRÁD GROUP'S POLICY

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this article is to present the policy of the countries of the Visegrád Group regarding the problem of migrants from the Near East and North Africa. The study is based on materials from the media and it reveals the position of the Visegrád Group, which differs from that of Brussels, because the four countries are against the introduction of quotas for migrants. The article states that according to them the priority of the common European policy on the issue should be the removal of the root causes of migrant crisis, first and foremost the termination of the war in Syria.*

**Keywords:** refugees, migrants, Visegrád Group, Balkans migration route

### 1. Introduction

The deepening of the migration problem over the last 2 years has been the cause for contradictions in the EU regarding the policy that the Member States have to follow. While the countries of Western and Northern Europe are willing to accept the migrants, those of Central Europe are trying to keep them out, as the most complicated situation is the one with Greece and Bulgaria, which, being an EU external border, should control the migratory flow towards the inner part of the continent.

The problem becomes complicated because of the fact that Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians and North Africans have moved to Europe among the refugees from the war in Syria and according to the Geneva Convention they cannot be granted a refugees status from 1951 [1].

Extremely interesting is the position of the Visegrád Group's countries - the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia – on migrant issue which differs from that of the leading countries in the EU. Despite of the criticism that the four

countries receive from Brussels, they assert their position that solving the problem should be responsibility of the Member States themselves.

### 2. Essence of the Visegrád Group's policy on the migrant crisis

Despite the claims in the media that Eastern Europeans are afraid of foreign cultures, I think that they are worried more by the migrants' reasons, most of whom not only profess Islam (including radical one) but come from areas where no hostilities have broken out, they have no documents and have aggressive behavior, and they are not willing to comply with local laws.

These concerns are at the heart of the policy of the Visegrád countries against setting quotas for migrants. After the meeting held in Prague on 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2015 the leaders of the four countries came out with a joint statement to "preserve the voluntary nature of the EU measures" concerning migrants and that "any proposal leading to introducing mandatory and permanent quotas... would be unacceptable"

[2]. As a response to calls for EU solidarity on migration, the Visegrád countries reminded they “have continuously pointed out that an effective management of the root causes of migration flows is the key element” in any solution [3].

The EU states should take sovereign decisions in finding solutions to the migrant crisis, Polish Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz said after an emergency summit of Central European leaders on the spiking refugee influx in Prague [4].

Unlike Germany and France who insist crisis to decide on European soil, the Visegrád four are focusing on long-term and external actions.

They declare themselves ready to provide financial aid to “countries with significant refugee populations (Turkey, Jordan, Iraq/ Kurdistan, Lebanon, including refugee camps, as well as the transit countries of the Western Balkans)”. Visegrád leaders also said they are willing to “provide experts and technical equipment” to protect EU external borders and to manage asylum procedures. While emphasizing the importance of the fight against smuggler networks, they said they would continue to back “the international coalition fighting Da’esh in Iraq and Syria” and efforts to stabilize Iraq [5].

Visegrád countries also confirmed their position at their meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> September, which took place on the eve of the extraordinary EU summit, scheduled for 23<sup>rd</sup> September. The policy of the Visegrád countries is seen as a blow to the common European policy and is a sign of disunity of the EU.

These efforts to be focused primarily on the redistribution of asylum seekers between the Member States are ineffective. Primary consideration has to be given to the political solution of the Syrian conflict and the fight against the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations because the main wave of migration influx is from Syria and Iraq. According to the Czech statesmen the West can defeat the Islamic State only if it

has allies among the moderate Muslims and Muslim countries [6].

At the beginning of 2016 with the deepening of the migrant problem the policy of the Visegrád Group has intensified. The four countries declared they would support plans to tighten border controls on the Balkan route, Greece and Turkey should fail to implement Ms Merkel’s plans to limit the flow of migrants.

“We cannot leave the Balkan countries to their own fate,” insisted the Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka, on behalf of the Visegrád group. The four eastern EU states said they would back plan by Bulgaria and Macedonia to strengthen their borders with Greece in order to deter migrants.

Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orban claimed Germany’s “welcome culture” towards refugees had “encouraged terrorism and spread fear” [7]. His Slovak colleague Robert Fico said Angela Merkel’s refugee policy was a mistake, deploring that she was forcing others to pay for it [8].

The persistent position of the Visegrád countries regarding the migrants issue and the inability of the EU to deal with the situation underlie the search for a new decision by the authorities in Prague. On 15<sup>th</sup> February, 2016 three days before the European Union summit on Migration, the country hosted an extraordinary meeting of the Visegrád Group concerning the refugees. On its eve the Prime Minister Sobotka warned that if the agreement on controlling the borderline between Greece and Turkey did not come into force, the countries of the Visegrád Group would focus on other countries such as Bulgaria and Macedonia, which would be financed by them to take measures to improve the border security [9].

According to him, the real solution is not in closing the borders because it could lead to new conflicts. “The Balkans are the only part that has not yet been integrated and the memories of the wars

there are very fresh”, he said [10]. The Prime Minister has emphasized that preserving the Schengen area is in the interest of all countries and despite strengthening border control no one would like it to be destroyed.

At the meeting in Prague, where the Prime Minister of Bulgaria Boyko Borisov and President of Macedonia Gjorge Ivanov were also invited, the countries of the Visegrád adopted a joint declaration on migration, which stated that for resolving the migration crisis problem it would be of great importance to seek common solutions aimed at tackling the root causes of this migration pressure, including an end to the war in Syria. Given the complexity of this challenge, the prime ministers of the countries of the Visegrád Group called for the most efficient use of all available resources of the European Union, NATO or, where appropriate, at bilateral level to support the managing of migration flows, including its humanitarian aspects and to improve the protection of the external borders. Namely, strengthening the protection of the external borders of the EU has to be the key priority in order not to repeat the scenario of 2015. According to leaders of the Visegrád Group, if decisive practical measures in this direction are not taken quickly to stop the migration flow, the situation risks spiralling out of control. Such a development would risk the European integration and would especially jeopardize Schengen and the principle of free movement. The prime ministers determine as extremely important the progress in two areas: 1) the rapid adoption of the Council's position on the “European Border and Coast Guard” under the Dutch Presidency (from 1<sup>st</sup> January to 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2016), based on the principle of the right balance between EU rights and the sovereign rights of the Member States; 2) rapid and reliable results from the implementation of the EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan. In this respect the role of Turkey regarding stopping the migration

flows and fight against human trafficking is crucial [11].

The leaders of the Visegrád Group countries take the view that efforts have to be made to disrupt the organized criminal groups involved in human trafficking, as well as to cooperate closely between the border and the intelligence services of the different countries.

The prime ministers of the four countries are holding one and the same that the role of the Hellenic Republic remains central to management of migration flows in the Balkan region [12].

Indicative of the strong position of the Visegrád countries on the migration problem are their governing's recent statements. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán addressed the state commemoration of Hungary's anti-Habsburg revolution of 1848/49 with a strong message on migration. Hungary will not allow others to dictate “who we must admit into our houses and home country” and it will not give in to “blackmail or threats” from Brussels. The first step towards stopping mass migration into Europe is “stopping Brussels,” he said [13]. Hungary will not allow Brussels to “place itself above the law”, Orbán insisted. “We will not allow (Brussels) to force onto us the fruits of its cosmopolitan migration policy. We are not going to import crime, terrorism, homophobia or anti-Semitism that sets synagogues on fire ... There will not be any gangs hunting our wives and daughters”. Orbán described the EU's refugee policy as one that would first decide who Hungary has to admit before forcing the state to “serve foreigners in our own homeland” after which “we find ourselves locked out of our own country”. He reiterated Hungary's rejection of the European Union's refugee resettlement scheme [14].

The Czech Interior Minister Milan Chovanec suspended acceptance of Christian refugees from Iraq and Syria under the program to help local Christian communities due to the fact that one third

of asylum are asked to leave the Czech Republic. He said that a group of 25 refugees requesting the release of their travel documents so they can go to another European country. “This means that the project starts very strongly creak and we will deal with what to do next, because we do not want here to import people who are then returned back to the country, which argued that there can not be security reasons, or is brought back closer to the target countries, such as Germany and Sweden. It is not moral to the partners”, explained the Minister of the Interior [15]. According to Interior Minister, it is the same process as in Poland. It received about 150 refugees and the vast majority of them eventually left outside its territory. Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka also supports the suspension of resettlement of refugees. During the summit on nuclear security in Washington (on March 31, 2016) he told reporters that it is necessary to examine whether they really want to live in the Czech Republic [16].

### 3. Conclusions

The Visegrád countries policy on refugees in many cases diverges from that of Brussels. They disagree mainly with quota principle of distribution of the migrants, as well as with the increase in the financial aid for Turkey in order not to let them enter the European countries. It should be noted, however, that the authorities in

Prague, Budapest, Warsaw and Bratislava seek rational solution to the crisis, stressing that the primary task should be the cessation of the war in Syria. They understand clearly that deepening the crisis will inevitably affect their countries.

Not accidentally in the first half of 2016 it has been provided for the formation of the two years ago contracted Visegrád Battlegroup which will exceed 3,300 servicemen and will operate under the auspices of NATO and the European Union.

Having in mind the last terrorist acts in Brussels, the frequent cases of aggression and the participation in mass riots of migrants in lots of major cities in Europe, the Visegrád countries policy appears to be reasonable with a view to national interests and can be defined as a national responsibility. Hopefully their consistent policy will set an example for the other European countries. The adoption of the Belgian Parliament on the proposal for a “declaration of newly arriving” gives a hope in this direction. This declaration provides that people who wish to reside in Belgium for more than three months have to accept local values and promise to prevent and report any attempts of terrorist acts or their application for a residence will be rejected. It is time the other EU Member States to rethink their policy on migrant problem and take adequate measures together in order to deal with the crisis.

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