

Does the migration stick for Visegrad countries require a carrot as well?

Blog post by Practice Lead Alexander Smotrov, 15 June 2017

Migration has drawn the most serious division line between the 'old' and 'new' EU member states in a decade. This week's European Commission infringement decision against Poland, Hungary and Czech Republic for their refusal to pledge to accept refugees is just another strong indication of that.

The end of June deadline for a new deal on asylum policies set by the Maltese EU presidency, and pushed by Germany, is now likely to be postponed as the national governments remain in the wait-and-see mode on the concurrent developments in various EU institutions. The European Court of Justice is expected to rule at the end of July on Hungary's and Slovakia's application, challenging the mandatory nature of refugee quotas. At the same time, the Commission will expect Poland, Hungary and Czechia to respond to the infringement letter within two months and insists that the migrant relocation scheme should remain binding in the meantime.

This creates a certain 'Catch 22' moment, but the Commission is firm in its approach, having said that "Europe is not only about requesting funds or ensuring security". But why has Brussels struggled so far to get the key new member states onboard while others - like Romania or the Baltics - seem to be more accommodating?

First, the populist and socially conservative governments of the Visegrád Four countries try to exploit people's fears of 'uncontrolled' migration from outside the EU and convert them into anti-EU nationalist policies.

Second, the need to address the economic and welfare impact of returning intra-EU migrants - be it looming Brexit or changing macroeconomic conditions - reduce the CEE countries' appetite to share the burden of settling extra-EU refugees.

Third, opposition to the quota system of allocating refugees in a number of member states has been further aggravated by lack of political and policy instruments, such as a review of the Dublin Agreement regulating common asylum system and readmission mechanisms, that would ensure confidence in the system.

The prospect of punishment and financial sanctions (up to €250,000 per refugee) for non-compliance will only further alienate Warsaw, Budapest and Prague who are already at loggerheads with Brussels on issues like rule of law, media freedoms and NGO activities. They are unlikely to concede on national competencies in areas like migration and home affairs which are inseparable

from security in the minds of CEE politicians and policymakers. The Czechs, for example, withdrew from the mechanism citing “aggravated security situation and the dysfunctionality of the whole system”.

Therefore, a more focused collective approach to future EU integration, which many new member states favour, with both penalties and incentives, may be needed to overcome divisions on migration. For example, enhanced security and defence cooperation within the EU may incentivise a better internal cohesion on extra-EU migration in the face of increasing external risks to Europe related to terrorism, Russia, instability in the MENA region and the US uncertainty on NATO. The progress in building stronger collective security, which is likely to be driven by the CEE countries, could be intertwined with clearer obligations and benefits for them in regard to migration handling, asylum policies, border management and counter-terrorism.