

## **An Unexpected Impact of the Debate about Refugees in Slovak Republic**

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### **Abstract**

According to last socio-political events a growing distance between establishment ruling class and democratic basis has become a crucial trend in current Slovakia. Author goes back to 2015 as a triggering moment in the formation of general mistrust towards establishment. The so called “refugee crisis” is understood as a key element in the construction of the complex situation which escalate in 2016 to mass protest and social mobilization. Present paper introduces a quantitative overview on the situation for refugees and foreigners in Slovakia in 2015. The article begins locating the refugees’ debate in the Slovak sociocultural arena. Next, civil society views and main political postures towards refugees are analyzed. The concluding chapter considers demographic and cultural perspective discussing uncertain future trends in relation with current social change.

**Key words:** refugees, political discourse, migration crisis, NGOs, Slovak Republic

### **1. Introduction**

At the moment of writing this article Slovakia is experiencing a deep political crisis. Several corruptions cases connected to main political figures and the dramatic murder of a journalist - apparently motivated by his investigation on a mafia network reaching State structural areas - motivated a social mobilization articulating the growing distance between popular sectors and ruling actors. Current paper explores this trend back in the year 2015 as a key moment for understanding the rupture between the establishment and its democratic basis. In 2015 the so called “refugee crisis” became the main political debate in the Slovak local arena as it occurred in almost every single state of the European Union. Main figures of Slovak government openly refused any movement towards a constructive solution and defended the continuation of strict and restrictive migration

policies. Unexpectedly solidarity initiatives have found a strong support in their communities and a new positive discourse towards refugees has found a way in the public arena.

Expressing discontent towards establishment figures in mass protests and social mobilizations are paradoxically atypical ways of political performance in Slovakia. For example, the region mostly escape global uprising taken place in 2011 which was the object of study for main contemporary thinkers (Badiou and Elliot 2012; Žižek 2012). A common explanation for this lack of social action is the widespread perception of Central Europe as undergoing a rite of passage, as being between socialism and capitalism, between authoritarianism and democracy (Buchowski 1996). But the current migration events correspond with a new global reality and its social impact relates to new logics. Modern migration understood as a complex global phenomenon (Massey 2005) paradoxically is characterized by its transnational character (Wimmer and Schiller 2002). Migration interacts and may deeply transform local politics and social views (Janků 2006). Such is the case of the so called “refugee crisis” as it comprehends the tensions of mobilizing and immobilizing forcers in the limits of the nation-state and beyond (Kallius 2016). Following lines attempt to analyze the impact of global migration in the Slovak political arena as a key element of its current transformation.

First, the paper will introduce a quantitative overview on the situation for refugees and foreigners in Slovakia in 2015. Next the article locates the refugees’ debate in the Slovak sociocultural arena. Discussion continues with the analysis of civil society views and main political postures towards refugees. The concluding chapter considers demographic and cultural perspective discussing uncertain future trends in relation with current social change.

## **2. A quantitative overview on the situation for refugees and foreigners in Slovakia in 2015**

According to quantitative evidence Slovakia is not a target for refugees and the country is not willing to become one. Since its foundation in 1993, the Slovak Republic has granted asylum to 651 people from a number of 58,121 applications<sup>1</sup>.

Slovak Republic experienced an increasing number of applications and kept a moderate but growing number of asylums granted during its first decade of existence. In 2004, asylum trend reached its apex with a number of 11395 applications but the country granted asylum to only 15 people. After the apex experience in 2004 the trend shows a decreasing tendency and it has slowly stabilized at several hundred of application and around 10 to 15 asylum granted per year.

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic – Statistical overview of asylum a migration from 1993 to 2015 (<http://www.minv.sk/?statistiky-20>), 14.10.2015

According to the Ministry of interior in 2015 the number of applications keeps the decreasing trend with a number of 130 and asylum was granted only to 6 people.

Developments in recent months in Europe and the proximity of the refugee's route may change the pattern. Slovak government opposed to any imposition regarding to acceptance of a concrete number of refugees in their territory but European Union context will probably force the country to increase the number of asylum holders. As previous number of asylum granted were so low any change will probably be perceived as relevant or significant. Despite these considerations and according to the data from the first half of 2015, only 9 asylum applications were submitted related to Afghan nationality and no more than 9 corresponding to Syrians. What seems to be increasing is the number of Syrians coming from Hungary and crossing illegally the Slovak border, with a number of 118 in the first half of 2015. Also the number of placed persons at Police Detention Centers for Aliens has significantly increased from 164 persons in the first half of 2014 to 523 persons in the first half of 2015<sup>2</sup>.

Regarding the number of foreigners living in the country and according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Slovak Republic is clearly not a migration destination<sup>3</sup>. Migration through Slovak territory better responds to a transit country given its proximity to more attractive destinations and its relevant condition as a member of the European Union and part of the Schengen Area.

The rate of foreigners living in Slovakia is low. In 2014 foreigners make up 1.4 percent of population but we must also notice that this number was a 7.1% higher than the previous year. The trend is increasing but in moderated total numbers. It is also relevant that the majority of foreigners living in Slovak territory are coming from neighbouring countries sharing an East-Central European background and clearly not manifesting a relevant cultural distance. 39% of foreigners living in Slovakia belong to close countries such as Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Ukraine. Around 20% of foreigners living in the country are citizens of south-eastern European countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Russia and Serbia). A smaller group, less than the 8% of the total number of foreigners, is formed by migrants from Asian countries (Vietnam, China, Korean Republic and Thailand). Asian migrants were one of the few growing migrant groups in the past but this tendency has become

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<sup>2</sup> Presidium of the Police Force Bureau of Border and Alien Police – Statistical Overview of Legal and Illegal Migration in the Slovak Republic ([http://www.minv.sk/swift\\_data/source/policia/hranicna\\_a\\_cudzinecka\\_policia/rocnky/rok\\_2015/Semiannual\\_Statistical\\_Overview\\_of\\_Legal%20and\\_Illegal\\_Migration\\_in\\_the\\_Slovak\\_Republic\\_2015.pdf](http://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/policia/hranicna_a_cudzinecka_policia/rocnky/rok_2015/Semiannual_Statistical_Overview_of_Legal%20and_Illegal_Migration_in_the_Slovak_Republic_2015.pdf)), 14.10.2015

<sup>3</sup> International Organization for Migration – Slovak Republic (<http://www.iom.sk/sk/migracia/migracia-na-slovensku>), 14.10.2015. An English version is also available (<http://www.iom.sk/en/about-migration/migration-in-slovakia>) 14.10.2015

really moderate in the present. The IOM also stresses that at least two thirds of the foreigners living in Slovakia are citizens of the European Union. Most of the foreigners are living in urban areas such as Bratislava or Košice what means that migration is almost absent in rural areas. These considerations will be discussed below in trying to understand the negative perception of migrants in Slovak Republic.

### **3. Locating the refugees debate in the Slovak sociocultural arena**

Slovakia has a solid experience in emigration processes and a historical background related to planned immigration under State supervision. During previous political era immigration processes within affinity countries were organized by the State granting protection to refugees from war or as part of exchange and education programs (Baršova and Barša 2005; Drbohlav 2010). Widespread traditional conservative positions, the existence of an inward-looking and rural society and the predominance of a worldview often based in ethnocentric Catholicism transform encountering “others” into a problematic experience for Slovaks. The low rates of foreigners living in the country, their concentration in main urban areas and their cultural proximity establish an illusion of homogeneity. Such a perception is also reinforced by nationalistic discourses, which are not uncommon to most political parties. Slovak nationalist discourse builds its own identity in confrontation with several others: Hungarians; Roma; other Eastern European populations such as Russians or Ukrainians; and even Czechs. Especially in the case of Roma, the attitude of many Slovaks could be briefly resumed in terms of general xenophobia and racism.

Nationalistic discourses and xenophobic opinions are reinforced by a general sentiment of disappointment within the lack of achievements in the living conditions accomplished by joining the European Union. General labour conditions, rising inequalities between different groups, relative poverty standards together with an extremely unequal development of the different regions, consolidated a precarious mass that seems to be part of the public to whom politicians’ discourses are addressed. Some Slovaks found a response to their disappointment in extremist discourses pointing migrants as a direct cause of the weakness of current states providing social protection to labor forces in form of temporal certainties, social benefits or rising incomes.

Recent migration movements across Europe and the humanitarian crisis related to them did not affect Slovak territory in such a dramatic way it did for example in its close neighbor Hungary. Discussions about migration quotas among European Union states and the proximity of the migration route located the question on the focus of media and politicians’ discourses. Even when Slovakia is not part of this route we must emphasize that the main itinerary passes only a few kilometers from the Slovak border which is also remarkably close to the capital city. The corridor established for

refugees in order to cross the border of Hungary and Austria through the border localities of Hegyeshalom (HU) and Nickelsdorf (AT) is only thirty kilometers from Bratislava. A terrible incident also helped to fix the refugee topic on the Slovak public agenda. Globally publicized incident that cost the life of 70 migrants who suffocated in a freezing truck on an Austrian highway just a few kilometres from the border to Slovakia located the topic of current migration as a “Slovak issue”. The fact that the truck had Slovak labelling and advertisements created a strong symbolic image with a huge impact in Slovak public sphere. This geographical and symbolic proximity presented to population through the filter of sensationalist media generates an illusion that the migration crowds could enter at any moment in Slovak territory.

Negative perception of migration as a problem and a question of national security are common to the most part of the political spectrum. This position is shared and reinforced by certain media, although some coverage conveying more positive message also took place in some mainstream media. For example, daily SME tends to write in clear opposition to current government. In doing so, the topic of current migration was also used as a way to attack government’s decisions having a positive impact in the public representation of the problem. Also representatives of the state TV, during a live broadcasted roundtable debate, declared explicitly their rejection to any xenophobic discourse and clearly stated their empathy with refugees and expressed their support. But at the same time we observe a growing spiral of negative politicians’ declarations rich in xenophobic and intolerance arguments. Any other position is perceived as risking an enormous political cost. A clear exception is President Andrej Kiska’s discourse on September 7<sup>th</sup> calling political leaders and society in general to reconsider their extremist position on migration issues<sup>4</sup>. Recently, on October 7<sup>th</sup> Kiska criticized again governmental position towards migrants. The impact of such a call is not clear as main official government figures continues until today opposing any constructive solution together with other European Union members and demonstrations and public actions against refugees keep growing.

Among Slovak population initiatives of anti-islamisation, formed in part by previous existence extremist groups, have also arisen. Several marches and demonstrations have taken place in the capital city showing clear fascist symbols and other extremist motifs.

#### **4. A constructive view towards refugees: civil society and public engagement**

After 1989 civil society was transformed and adapted to the new political situation. Many NGOs and civil society actors depend now days of State or European Union funding. At the same time

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<sup>4</sup> Press release – Andrej Kiska President of the Slovak Republic – Attitude to refugees will define the heart and soul of Slovakia (<https://www.prezident.sk/en/article/vyhlasenie-prezidenta-kisku-k-teme-utecencov/>), 14.10.2015

they are forced to keep public acceptance in order to ensure successful results for their campaigns. A new civil society after 1989 has partially evolved to certain equilibrium between mainstream acceptance and dependency to State or European Union funding. In such a way, for a part of the Slovak civil society their agency possibilities are limited by the logic of European Union funding. On the other hand their interactions with home society require public acceptance and understanding of their actions in order to sustain a necessary support among civil society basis. The reality is that civil society has not a tradition distancing itself from State policies or mainstream media. Also the facts that the number of foreigners is so low and the number of asylum holders is almost non-existent do not impulse a real and solid response from part of civil society or even Academia. Even though on June 16<sup>th</sup> consortium of non-governmental organizations requested in a formal letter to Prime Minister Robert Fico for support European Migration Agenda and to protect the legal entry of asylum seekers into the country. On the other hand, there are some NGOs and research think tanks that are opposing the governmental policies, speaking against xenophobia and calling for respecting the EU quotas. But still the presence of NGO's involved in the refugee question is relatively moderate. For example Človek v Ohrození, one of the most relevant NGO in Czech and Slovak Republic, is taking part in different activities helping refugees. They are present in the field in Serbia and Croatia where they distribute humanitarian aid and actively collaborate with volunteers and local NGOs. They have also initiated a campaign fund but all their activities were attentively discreet keeping a safe distance from the public debate<sup>5</sup>.

A very different case is the one related to spontaneous public engagement and other informal initiatives helping refugees follow grass-root logic. Those initiatives have arisen mainly in urban areas and are organized through informal interaction under the potentiality of social networks – mainly through Facebook groups and events. Examples of such initiatives are several collection campaigns of clothes, hygienic materials and food, which makes a real help for refugees. These campaigns were carried out by people connected to an emerging culture in Bratislava of street festivals and public events, such as farmer markets or food festivities. Through their contacts and an already existent community of people involved in municipal initiatives they accomplished the very few public initiatives positive to refugees. These first steps of these campaigns lead to a network of volunteers transporting the aid to the places where it was needed. These events connected a very small part of the population with the migration reality, making a rupture with establishment's posture. Unexpectedly the initiatives have found a strong support in their communities and a new positive discourse has found a way in the public arena. A remarkable example of such an initiative is

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<sup>5</sup> Človek v ohrození – Pomáhame ľuďom na úteku (<http://www.clovekvohrozeni.sk/sk/spravy/aktualne/1573-clovek-v-ohrozeni-vyhlasuje-zbierku-na-pomoc-ludom-na-uteku>), 14.10.2015

the so called Výzva k ľudskosti (A Plea for Humanity)<sup>6</sup>. The initiative is putting together efforts - of previously unrelated people - collecting funds, material aid and clothes or offering their free time as volunteers. Almost 12000 people have already signed their call for a more human approach to current migration.

### 5. Approaching the refugees debate from the political arena

First, it is important to notice the lack of a previous discussion on migration issues as a hot topic in the political and public debate in Slovakia. The country was mainly involved in emigration processes which were not a productive topic for political debate neither for mainstream media. Long tradition of emigration is generally accepted by Slovaks who understand their peripheral position and are conscious about economic differences between their country and other Western countries. Temporal and discontinuous migration of Slovaks to Czech Republic, Austria, Germany or Great Britain is extremely common and long term migration to Canada or the United States of America is a reality for many Slovak families. But as was stated beyond, those processes do not have a repercussion on the public arena. The only debate closer to the confrontation with a multicultural reality in Slovakia has been for years the integration of Roma minority. In last decade, perhaps only the outward labor migration of Roma from Slovakia to United Kingdom or Canada was discussed as phenomenon in media and it was framed in interactions between Roma and non-Roma population. Slovakia was certainly not conceived as a destination country. This topic is perceived widely in very negative terms and it is not uncommon that politicians make use of xenophobic discourses as a populist strategy.

Last migration developments across European continent were perceived at the beginning as a foreign problem to Slovaks. Dramatic events on the sea did not generate special empathy in public opinion and questions about managing the increasing number of asylum seekers were perceived as a problem for those countries which are consider target countries. Slovakia is not a target for refugees, neither a potential transit area for them. But two facts located the topic on the public arena: a) The discussion on quotas for distributing asylum-seekers; b) the proximity of the migrant route close to the Slovak border.

There is, so to speak, a consensus across the entire political spectrum about the migration and refugee issues. In the parliamentary debate on June 25, all political parties expressed their disagreement with the European Commission policies adopting an extensive resolution through which they rejected the quota system. However, they expressed in the text their “deep concern and

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<sup>6</sup> Výzva k ľudskosti (<http://www.vyzvakludskosti.sk/>), 14.10.2015

regret over the tragic situation of migrants in the Mediterranean area". They also condemned the abuse of the migration topic to stir up tensions, racism and xenophobia and emphasized the need of solidarity with EU member states when solving the current situation and declared the "readiness of Slovakia to help solving this humanitarian crisis", insisting on the voluntary principle. The resolution was supported by 125 MPs (150 members). However, despite these official declarations about solidarity, the discussion and public statement of politicians in media continue to be even more xenophobic.

Opposition politicians also often expressed their disagreement with quotas, with Ján Figel', chair of the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), saying that Slovakia should provide cooperation and assistance within its asylum procedures capabilities, gradually accepting only refugees who qualify for asylum. The centre-right Most-Híd opposition party also does not consider quotas to be a solution and supports bilateral "negotiations" with refugees' countries of origin. Self-declared right-liberal Solidarity and Responsibility (SaS) agreed that the issue of mandatory quotas for refugee relocation should be taken to the European Union General Court as announce by Robert Fico, from social democratic Smer-SD and currently heading the government.

The Slovak government entered the European arena as one of the biggest opponents to mandatory quotas first and to any solidarity plan with migrants later on. In the national arena the European Union search for solutions to the humanitarian tragedy was introduced as an imposition threatening Slovak sovereignty. In several moments main figures of Slovak government openly refused any movement towards a constructive solution and defended the continuation of strict and restrictive migration policies. Their declarations could be easily described as xenophobic and disrespectful with other member states. Politicians' comments and argumentations in journals and newspapers were on the limits of hate speech creating an environment of disagreement and stress in sectors of society positive to refugees and encouraging xenophobic paranoia in other sectors of society. Negative stereotypes and racist prejudices about different cultures became part of the official discourse together with a probable voluntary unawareness of the differences between forced and economic migration, asylum seekers or the rejection to recognize the cultural diversity among migrants. The understanding of this period of humanitarian crisis was blurred by the promotion of an image of fear among population transforming refugees in an imaginary monster threatening Slovak values and culture. Refugees were not only perceived as a hazard for Slovak culture, understood in terms of Catholic homogeneity, but also as a destabilizing factor for national economy. The religious argument was shamefully manifested by the government intention to exclusively accept Christian refugees from Syria because "there are no mosques in Slovakia." Economic argument proved to be a solid narrative in a country that understood itself as having clear economic limitations. The fear to a



potential deterioration of labor conditions merged with other anti-migration discourses. Both arguments obtained important support in precarious masses and soon public demonstrations and marches against Islam and refugees arose in public spaces. Media played an ambiguous role in this debate. Media plurality and potential diverse perspectives are in the Slovak arena mostly related to political affinities. Those affinities established the approaches to refugees following a utilitarian logic. Some media channels talk in favour of refugees just as a consequence of their continuous opposition to Fico's government. It is remarkable the already mentioned President's discourses calling for more rational and humanitarian postures and trying to take the discourse of migration out of the local political game. Also it is important to notice efforts from Academia members to deconstruct migration myths and misunderstandings through blogs, articles in newspapers and endless discussions in social networks.

The fear to the proximity of the migration route came to its apex when the Slovak government – based on a bilateral agreement signed in July 2015 with the Austrian ministry of Interior - agreed to temporarily house in the town of Gabčíkovo near the Hungarian border around 500 refugees in a location near the Hungarian border, Gabčíkovo. Affected refugees were extremely disappointed and not willing to go to an unfriendly country. Light incidents expressing refugees discomfort occurred generating a disproportionate reaction by Slovak authorities. A referendum took place in the locality of Gabčíkovo showing the opposition of the 97 percent of the votes against the replacement of refugees to their town. Once again a march against “Islamisation” took place the following days with at least thousand protesters. Populist and far-right, fascist Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (People's Party Our Slovakia)<sup>7</sup> promotes such protests and probably consolidates through them its basis in preparation to coming elections. Utilitarian use of the current migration situation is a key question for all political parties in a period previous to elections. So far, most of them are taking a negative position towards migration. Over this time near 350 refugees have been already accommodated in Gabčíkovo and as radio coverage recently has pointed out, the fear of the local inhabitants has been dispersed as refugees did not cause any change in locals daily routine.

## 6. Conclusions: demographic and cultural perspectives, present and future uncertainties

Current demographic trends in Slovakia are not completely different from those in other European countries showing a potential problem for their economic stability as their populations are growing older. This is a well-known argument in favour of migration. Migrants, who are mostly in “productive age”, are often presented as a solution for population ageing. Arguments in favour of

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<sup>7</sup> Relatively new party which leader Marian Kotleba recently was elected Governor of self-governing Banská Bystrica region.

migration have emerged pointing out to the sustainability of social security systems and labour market on the inflow of human capital from abroad. The problem is if such argumentation could transform migration into a social benefit in a country in which government is clearly opposing any immigration pattern and its public space is constantly splashed by xenophobic actions and violent discourses against non-clearly-ethnic Slovaks. For a real consideration of a positive demographic change in Slovakia as a consequence of a growing migration trend, structural integration policies should become more flexible and welcoming. So far migration policies have been focused on restrictive controls before and after migrants' arrival. At the same time the low numbers of asylum applications open questions about how do these procedures are taking into practices and where is the origin of such a low numbers. Are refugees just not willing to get to Slovakia or practice difficult their applications? In a similar way society should also transform itself building a minimal tolerant environment to be able to consider the real possibility that any foreigner will stay in the country and not try to move forward to more attractive locations.

Integration policies in Slovakia consider certain facilities for high qualified migrants, and for those having particularly needed professions. These facilities are understood in special residence permits and in a more agile procedure for its application. This fact could suppose an opportunity for some of the migrants coming these days to Europe and a great benefit for the country.

The majoritarian imposition of a homogenous public space could be challenged in a positive way by the existence of a bigger number of migrants. Obviously clear risks are also connected to this idea<sup>8</sup>. The wrong perception that Slovakia is a country for Slovaks could only be healthily put under question with a multicultural reality *de facto*. A positive outcome of such an experience could have a positive impact in relations and power position of minorities and other ethnical populations living in Slovakia. Acceptance of European Union solidarity principles towards refugees and a slightly different understanding of the own Slovak past, acknowledging the important role of migration in their culture and their own migrant and even refugee backgrounds, could be an interesting vaccination against already emerging intolerance in the country.

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