

## EUROPE

# Eastern Europe Is Resisting Aid for Refugees

By RICK LYMAN SEPT. 12, 2015

WARSAW — Even though the former Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe have been asked to accept just a fraction of the refugees that Germany and other nations are taking, their fierce resistance now stands as the main impediment to a unified European response to the crisis.

Poland's new president, Andrzej Duda, has complained about “dictates” from the European Union to accept migrants flowing onto the Continent from the Middle East and Africa.

Slovakia's prime minister, Robert Fico, says his country will accept only Christian refugees as it would be “false solidarity” to force Muslims to settle in a country without a single mosque. Viktor Orban, Hungary's hard-line prime minister, calls the influx a “rebellion by illegal migrants” and pledges a new crackdown this week.

The discord has further unsettled a union already shaky from struggles over the euro and the Greek financial crisis and now facing a historic influx of people attracted by Europe's relative peace and prosperity.

When representatives of the European Union nations meet on Monday to take up a proposal for allocating refugees among them, Central and Eastern European nations are likely to be the most vocal opponents. Their stance — reflecting a mix of powerful far-right movements, nationalism, racial and religious prejudices as well as economic arguments that they are less able to afford to take in outsiders than their wealthier neighbors — is the latest evidence of the stubborn cultural and political divides that persist between East and West.

When joining the European Union — as the former Communist countries have done since 2004 — nations are asked to pledge support to a raft of so-called European values, including open markets, transparent government, respect for an independent media, open borders, cultural diversity, protection of minorities and a rejection of xenophobia.

But the reality is that the former Communist states have proved sluggish in actually absorbing many of these values and practicing them. Oligarchs, cronyism and endemic corruption remain a part of daily life in many of the countries, freedom of the press is in decline while rising nationalism and populist political movements have stirred anti-immigrant tensions.

“People must remember that Poland has been transitioning from communism for only 25 years,” Lech Walesa, who led that country’s independence movement, said in an interview. “Our salaries and houses are still smaller than those in the West. Many people here don’t believe that they have anything to share with migrants. Especially that they see that migrants are often well-dressed, sometimes better than many Poles.”

Few migrants, in fact, are particularly interested in settling in Eastern Europe, preferring to head to Germany or Scandinavia, where social welfare benefits are higher, employment opportunities greater and immigrant communities better established. In that sense, migrants are aligned with leaders in Eastern and Central European capitals, who frequently argue that the 28-member bloc should focus first on securing its borders and figuring out a way to end the war in Syria before talking about mandatory quotas for accepting refugees.

But as often as not, the political discourse in these countries has quickly moved toward a wariness of accepting racial and religious diversity.

“This refugee flow has outraged the right wing,” said Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch. “If you scratch the surface, why are they so upset? It’s not about jobs or the ability to manage them or social welfare. What it is really about is that they are Muslim.”

Unlike countries in Western Europe, which have long histories of accepting immigrants from diverse cultures, the former Communist states tend to be highly homogeneous. Poland, for instance, is 98 percent white and 94 percent Catholic.

“And the countries that have very little diversity are some of the most virulently against refugees,” said Andrew Stroehlein, European media director for Human Rights Watch.

Even mainstream political leaders eager for closer ties to Brussels, the European Union’s headquarters, feel pressure to appeal to this growing nationalist wave.

“By toughening up their rhetoric and showing a strong hand toward the Roma minority, facing down the E.U. and refusing a common solution to the refugee crisis, they are trying to outbid the far right and keep the traditional political parties in power,” said Zuzana Kusá, a senior research fellow at the Institute for Sociology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.

There is also widespread disappointment with the pace of economic change since communism’s fall, and a sense that the countries are too poor to offer substantial support to immigrants.

“There is a long history of victimization in our region,” said Csaba Szaló, a professor of sociology at Masaryk University in Brno. “We are the ones who have always been victims of injustice, the ones who have suffered. And now there is somebody trying to grab that status. People find it very difficult to accept that somebody might suffer more than us.”

While rising xenophobia is playing a role, there are other factors behind the East-West divide, said Marcin Zaborowski, executive vice president at the Center for European Policy Analysis and head of its Warsaw office.

“The primary reason for this difference in attitude is that we come from a region where the tradition of accepting culturally different refugees is very weak,” he said. “And now there is this wave of refugees from another continent that has no precedent, so people don’t know what to think.”

Most of the countries, like Poland, have “no proper infrastructure in place to deal with such cultural assimilation” and little appetite to spend precious resources building one, Mr. Zaborowski said.

As for the region’s seeming indifference to the migrants’ plight, that is partly because unlike France, Britain and Germany, the former Communist states have no history of colonialism, he said.

“The attitude is: We didn’t meddle in these countries that are now sending the refugees, like other nations did, and so we have no sense of guilt about our obligation to deal with them,” Mr. Zaborowski said.

And all of these attitudes blend together into a common aversion to being told what to do by Brussels.

In Hungary, Mr. Orban has taken a particularly uncompromising approach, demanding more help from Brussels in dealing with the tens of thousands who continue to enter his country while insisting that Hungary is under no obligation to endanger its traditional Christian values by accepting large numbers of Muslims.

On Tuesday, a new raft of refugee laws go into effect that will allow the Hungarian government to build new “transit zones” at the border where arrivals would have their asylum requests quickly reviewed — eight days, plus three more for an appeal, a pace that refugee advocates believe violates European Union due process rules.

But Hungary is not the only country that has taken a hard line or seen anti-immigrant protests.

Anti-immigrant marches have become a regular occurrence in Slovakia and some other nations.

In Estonia, the northernmost Baltic nation, which has a population of just 1.3 million, an agreement to accept fewer than 200 refugees over the next two years was enough to set off protests. Right-wing bikers demonstrated outside the country’s only refugee relocation facility in July, and earlier this month it was burned to the ground.

Officials in Latvia said they would continue to resist mandatory requirements that they accept a set number of refugees while the parties in the ruling coalition appear unable to agree on whether to require a parliamentary vote on the issue.

“It would be very wrong and sad if this matter threatened the government,” said President Raimonds Vejonis.

Lithuanian officials said they were open to discussing the acceptance of more refugees, but only on a voluntary basis, and would continue to oppose a

“permanent mechanism” that would allocate future refugees.

Bulgaria had agreed to accept 500 refugees, but under a new formula unveiled last week, it could be asked to take up to 2,000.

Talking by phone while driving from an economic conference in southern Poland, Robert Biedron, the mayor of the city of Slupsk, said he was ashamed of the reaction of many to the plight of the migrants. “There is always conflict around the world and people need help,” Mr. Biedron said. “Perhaps, someday again, the Polish people might need help. Do we want to hear, ‘Oh, Poles are a danger to society, you are different, you are not of our culture.’ ”

Already, he said, he has blocked many former friends on Facebook — “even well-educated people, who I thought were my friends” — over anti-immigrant comments they have posted.

“Here I am, driving on a road that was built with European Union money,” Mr. Biedron said. “It was built with money taken from taxpayers in Italy and Germany and France. Now we refuse to do our part? I am really ashamed.”

Mr. Walesa said he intended to do his part. Reacting to a call from Pope Francis that Catholics take in a refugee family, Mr. Walesa said he wanted to do just that, if he can talk his wife into it.

“She is reluctant,” he said. “She had to single-handedly raise our children and she’s exhausted. So I would have to be the one responsible for taking care of the migrants.”

Reporting was contributed by Hana de Goeij from Prague, Joanna Berendt from Warsaw, Richard Martyn-Hemphill from Vilnius, Lithuania, Boryana Dzhambazova from Sofia, Bulgaria, and Miroslava Germanova from Bratislava, Slovakia.

Get news and analysis from Europe and around the world delivered to your inbox every day with the Today’s Headlines: European Morning newsletter. [Sign up here.](#)