

Piotr Ikonowicz

CV: lawyer, social-political activist and a journalist. Member of Polish Parliament between 1993 and 2001. Especially involved in issues concerning protection from poverty and housing policy. Founder and volunteer of the Social Justice Legal Office, an NGO providing legal aid and conducting social interventions on behalf of people threatened with evictions. Chairman of the political party - Social Justice Movement.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piotr_Ikonowicz

Why is Poland so reluctant to help refugees?

The so-called refugees' crisis doesn't concern such relatively poor EU countries as Poland. The reason is very simple. People who have lived through a hell of a civil war, who have risked their lives in tiny boats on the Mediterranean Sea to reach the promised land of Europe, have no wish to be finally sent to Poland or Hungary where there is no real welfare state, but there is a lot of xenophobia and racism. No wonder that when the local people together with their priest in a community in Western Poland prepared themselves to welcome and install several dozens of refugees from Syria, they expected in vain, since the Syrians have crossed the nearby German border and fled to Germany. Poland has officially accepted to receive as many as 7000 refugees. It amounts to 1% of foreign tourists who each year visit Cracow. The big fuss made in the media, and in the electoral and political debate has nothing to do with real inconveniences which might cause such a small group of people coming from war affected areas.

The political parties in Poland seek to unite people against refugees. The more they can scare them, accusing victims of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism who just fled from ISIS, of terrorism, the more political support they can get. Those who choose not to participate in these hatred campaigns, are tactically silent. When it was announced that the refugees in Poland will receive welfare benefits which dramatically exceeded those on which the Polish poor can count on, there was an outrage. But it only shows how backward state Poland has become recently, since most of the poor people in our country remain unassisted. In Germany as well as in other Western democracies, people didn't make great fuss about the benefits given to migrants because their own poor still are beneficiaries of some welfare state policies.

At the beginning of the crisis most of the Polish public opinion was in favour of helping people who have run for their lives from the war affected areas. Only political and media campaigns aimed at scaring people, made the opponents of receiving refugees a majority.

The tendency to blame foreigners for unsolved social, economic and political problems is universal. Just as George Orwell has described it, the authorities always need scapegoats, external enemies to maintain their power over the people. Even if like in the Polish case, the danger was only potential, since the refugees are yet to come.

On the other hand Poland has already received 100 000 Muslim people from Chechnya and nothing happened. We are for most of them a transit country to richer and more socially oriented states.

Some people in Poland say: we can't be blamed for the current situation which caused mass migration because Poland had no colonies. Let's the post colonial countries pay the full price. But they miss one essential point. Poland has participated eagerly in the US war machine, taking part in the aggressions against Iraq and Afghanistan. We have participated in the destabilization of the whole region and can't say „that isn't our fault”.

Poland is a country of migrants. Not refugees, but economic migrants. About 2 mn Poles have escaped poverty, unemployment and poor housing conditions seeking a better life mostly in the UK. They take full advantage of the West European welfare and healthcare systems. Why then not to show some solidarity when it is our turn?

Poland's religious and ethnic homogeneity is one factor behind the opposition to assisting refugees. Just 0.1 percent of the country's population consists of foreigners, the smallest percentage in the European Union. Poland also has the heaviest concentration of Catholics in the world with 94 percent of Poles identifying with the religion. The cultural and religious factor is playing a growing role. This is a said consequence of Huntington's „war of

civilizations" idea. The most venomous concept since Mein Kampf. The refugees are a pretext to challenge the multicultural pattern of modern Europe based on tolerance, dialogue and integration. This is in the very interest of the industrial-military complex to prove that islamic and Christian cultures are incompatible to convince us the West should win the war or perish.

Those who protest against the number of migrants entering Poland argue that Poland has done enough helping their brothers Ukrainians who also had to leave their country because of the civil war and misery.

Anyway we have to keep in mind that for most refugees arriving in Poland, it is only a stop on the way to wealthier and more welcoming European Union members. And it is unimaginable that people be brought to Poland in closed wagons against their will, like during the II World War.