

# Back to the East?

## The East/West Immigration Gap from a (mainly) Czech Perspective

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Two recent crises have revealed the deep vulnerabilities and discrepancies of the European project as it stands in 2015. The drama of the Greek debt crisis has shown that the sovereign will of the people cannot defeat socially destructive economic and fiscal policies. The refugee/immigration crisis then opened divisions within the EU – more specifically, the old–new division between the West and the East. Different approaches to immigration saw the Eastern European discourse return to Western media and become the subject of discussion among many Central European liberals. What is really going on in this region (V4: Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland) and what is the truth behind these comfortable yet largely ignorant Western labels?

My argument focuses on two levels: the systemic and the local, concentrating mainly on the Czech case study. I argue that what we are dealing with in the region is a transformation model crisis that stems from the 2008 crisis, from internal/regional political contradictions and from deep structural inequalities, as well as the geopolitics of the European Union. In short, there is a much more complex story beyond the West–East strife over immigration policies.

### **Asymmetries of the EU Enlargement and the 2008 Crisis**

The EU accession of “Eastern Europe” was never an even and symmetrical process. The region was redefined as a kind of apprentice since it came out of the “darkness of communism” and had to learn how to live in a free world of democratic states. The accession processes continued to maintain the region’s semi-peripheral status. Consequently, the region was open to unlimited and unregulated globalisation at an economic, political and cultural level. Situated on the semi-periphery of the global system and the periphery of the EU, Central Europe became an uncritical norm-taker. The Eastern enlargement also – largely unnoticed – changed the character of the European Union, turning it into a postmodern version of an empire.

With the crisis of 2008, the localised crisis of transformation/neoliberal model was further exposed. The “return to Europe” narrative was, of course, false, but it expressed the local subaltern attitude towards Europe well, i.e. Europe is in the West and Europe *is* the West. To become “European”

meant to transform according to the accession norms (also designed in the West). However, there were two problems in this conception.

Firstly, the semi-peripheral status was not challenged but strengthened. This was in conflict with (naïve) expectations projected on the idea of a “return to Europe” at home. After 2008, it became clearer that the expected results of a “European dream” based on the idea of “catching up” were not going to come any time soon. Secondly, the imitative apprenticeship relation between the original EU and newcomers was a one way process. Indeed, the old member states did not need to learn anything from these newcomers. This made all talks of a “reunification of Europe” empty statements, not political fact based on a genuine dialog about what Europe is and what it means to be European in this diverse continent. The EU never embraced its diversity.

### **Transformation and Subsequent Impact**

The transformation model of embedded neoliberalism brought about relatively unknown social inequalities and discourses on criminalisation of poverty<sup>1</sup>, unemployment, egoistic self-interest and consumer-oriented democracy. It was the market which was celebrated as being the backbone of a new, democratic society of “free individuals”. As a result, democracy building was becoming intermingled with processes, the effects being largely counterproductive and socially destructive in relation to social capital and value systems.

Furthermore, the people in the region lost the political language that would allow them to address these issues. Any attempt to give them a name was seen through highly ideological lenses as some kind of “return to communism”. About two decades later, a powerful anti-Communist narrative colonised the public sphere. Anti-systemic or Leftist opinions were often marginalised and even semi-criminalised or stigmatised. The media were largely dominated by pro-establishment narratives. Of course, this is true on the general level. There are many nuances among Central European countries due to their national, historical, economic and structural differences. And indeed many of these problems could be traced back to before 1989: there was a strong path dependency hidden in the post-communist transformation.

The 2008 crisis had not just economic and thus social effects, it turned into a crisis of Western hegemony in terms of cultural ideology. With their ambiguous positions and identities, hegemonic models started to crumble from the margins. Hence, Putin’s Russia began to turn its back on Europe and the West around 2007, pronouncing its own autonomous (i.e. independent of the West) model. After 2010, Orbán’s Hungary essentially tried to take a similar direction with a new focus on

nationalism, nativism and national sovereignty. Populist anti-EU and anti-Western critique is now on the rise in Central Europe. None of these projects is entirely genuine: rather they represent an effort to disguise and redefine the problems and contradictions of post-communist transformation, as well as to overcome the stalemate which has been created.

### **Political Populism on the Rise**

The politics in a post-democracy became a matter of semantics, of dynamic changes and of reshaping the meanings of cultural symbols, notions and narratives communicated within the media/virtual sphere. Vulgarised populism represents a nuanced mixture of national traditionalism, or conservatism and Euroscepticism with overtones of “anti-politics” together with a strong superstructure of national myth. This is despite the fact that these countries do not share the political methods of Hungarian Orbánism and that their individual positions within the geopolitics of the EU are very different. What is very misunderstood in the West is that peripheral anti-Westernism/Euroscepticism is always a sign of a larger crisis of the centre. Unfortunately, Berlin, Brussels, Paris and Washington currently show no sign of acknowledging this simple fact.

Central European populism, or national populism, has its own political and cultural contexts. For example, Czech public debates are usually ideologically polarised and deeply axiological, and sometimes too emotional. This makes a search for moderate political compromises more difficult and leads towards political kitsch. Furthermore, it also distorts the thin line between political pragmatism and cynical Machiavellianism. Finally, this conceptualisation of the “Political” eventually radicalises the linguistic and semiotic elements of political argumentation.

### **Immigration as a Supranational Problem in National Contexts**

This local constellation of systemic qualities and contexts might be well observed in the regional versions of this summer’s immigration crisis. Due to their opposition to the EU quota system and open critique of European immigration policies, the V4 states earned the old-new label of “Eastern Europe”, with all its unconsidered Orientalist residua. In the opinion of many observers from the West, the reinvented Eastern Europe appeared to be “shamefully ungrateful” for 1989 and its values. However, Central Europeans’ more or less pronounced opposition to immigration must be seen not from a patronising perspective but by addressing the complex systemic inadequacies of the post-communist transformation, which is – by the way – today (hypocritically) showed as a positive and uncritically taken example for Ukraine after Majdan 2014. Staying with the more familiar Czech case,

what was most stunning about this rather gloomy debate was not so much its typically emotional and raw manner (with signs of media hysteria and obvious populist politicization, none of which is “typically Czech”); it was the fascinating mixture of imitation and emancipation.

This is because, once again staying with the more familiar Czech example, many of the anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim arguments were those transmitted and translated into the Czech context from Western Europe. The reason behind it is quite prosaic: the Czechs have no historical experience with non-European immigration or, for that matter, with Islam. In fact, and to put it bluntly, in 2015 Czech society is still largely white. Many Czechs cannot imagine the problem based on their experiences and thus have to borrow foreign experiences and reinterpret them at home. I think that this might be true for Central Europe as a region.

It is secondary or imitative xenophobia, based on foreign and inauthentic experiences and media based fragments of a more complex reality, which dominates the local debate. Moreover, considering liberal immigration policies and multiculturalism, Western Europe was offered as a negative example. Suddenly, many Czechs started openly and publicly announcing that the West’s examples were not worthy of being followed, and so they stopped. While the original “return to Europe” was based on the entirely positive vision of Western models, this has dramatically shifted. This is a typical semi-peripheral attempt to emancipate – even when it is a negative emancipation which is predestined to fail for its alliance with superficial populism.

There is undoubtedly a moral dimension associated with social values such as solidarity and humanity. Indeed, solidarity is a word taken from the Leftist dictionary and stands somewhat in contrast with the neoliberal concept of glorified individualism. No wonder it sounds so foreign now. Social values also have to be socially embedded and lived to remain valid social coordinates. The clash of expectations and ideals with a perceived reality and consequent disintegration of narratives of transformation created a space for cynicism and relativization. Finally, it must be acknowledged that there is a problem with inter-EU solidarity. The Greek crisis and tolerated offshorisation carried out in Cyprus and Luxembourg might be mentioned as two examples. Unfortunately, all appeals to “European values” begin to sound empty and even hypocritical in the context of systemic double standards and reckless grabbing that has resulted in the political alienation, growing distrust and passivity of the past 26 years. The old transformation narrative has not allowed these issues to be addressed in the usual open and democratic manner for nearly two decades. The continuous tabooing of the market system’s contradictions has now manifested itself in nearly total disorientation. What is left is political cynicism and in-group solidarity (i.e. us and them).

### **Regional Differences Matter**

Too often differences are seen as a question of values in the West-centric tradition of thinking. Central Europeans approach the immigration problem from a different historical perspective. Like all other Europeans, they share very diverse cultural traditions with strong Slavic, Germanic/Nordic and also Roman influences. Paradoxically, the local version of nationalism was historically based on the integral nationalism argument. Its key component is an ideal state of harmony between the state and an ethnically, culturally and linguistically homogenous nation. This kind of nationalism undoubtedly leans more towards ethnocracy than towards classical liberal democracy with an ethnically prudent civic identity.

The search for harmony has proven to be historically tragic, but its ethos still continues to shape national identity in Central Europe as many Central Europeans see cultural integrity as a value and they fear supposedly “inauthentic” and largely unknown cultures from outside (for example, Islam). The feeling of solidarity, or what is left of it, is still locally and ethnically based. The ethnocentric perspective on immigration is a key factor in defining immigration policies and, consequently, the future design of society at home, not on the European, supra-national level from *outside*. And, quite typically, the opposing opinions are very ethnocentric, too. They frequently see the problem of anti-immigrant moods as a problem of national character, national history and its mythology. They thus overlook the complex labyrinth of systemic dependencies and inequalities that have a hand in creating it.

Moreover, the problem also has a further dimension: discontinuity. Systemic discontinuity is relevant to the transformation from socialism towards capitalism that took place after 1989. But history suggests that independent statehood has not proven to be matter of fact in Central Europe. The self-perceived fragility, fear and insecurity that is embedded in a powerful national mythology play an important role too and can be easily exploited for populist ends. Of course, national mythology is not an objective view on the country’s own history, but it is still an influential strand of argument which is highly relevant here.

The specific internal constellation of Central Europe is only enhanced by systemic inequalities: Central Europe, as a European periphery, lacks the historical and culturally open experiences of colonial conquerors in the European metropolis. The postcolonial metropolis has been a destination of post-colonial immigration for many decades, starting from the early 1960s. This experience cannot be artificially grafted on as a part of a “civilising” European package. Likewise, the geopolitics of Central Europe limits a feeling of global responsibility within these countries because recently (as well as historically) they continue to play a more or less marginal role in global affairs. Power is not

shared equally and Central Europeans know this very well. The Europeanisation process could not become a never-ending process, a cultural and historical “lobotomy”<sup>ii</sup>, to a certain extent, of a newly integrated region. Central Europe brought with it its own historical experiences, burdens, cultures and problems, and made them a composite part of larger European affairs – for better or for worse.

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From a global perspective, nationalism allied with Eurosceptic populism is not on the rise only in Central Europe but in Europe in general. The problem of *the other* (i.e. an immigrant, Islam etc.) is one of its powerful political agendas and this is set to continue. A part of its success story is a continuous failure of the European Left to define emancipatory policies as well as the European project’s technocratic decision to embrace European diversity and to move towards a more democratic and organic organisation.

In sum, regional differences *do* matter. Any effort to redefine them as a simplistic matter of values is only worsening the problem and disabling open dialogue across Europe. What Central Europe does not need are condescending lectures from the West. What it needs is to face its own demons and find an innovative and positive pathway to the future. The former is, of course, not only a Czech or a Central European problem, but a pan-European one. So far it seems that the battlefield of this “war” over the future is being defined in terms of a *cultural war* by means of political populism. This is certainly not good news for anybody in Europe.

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<sup>i</sup> *As one's fault or shortcoming...the poor is blamed for his/her poverty. Sometimes ends in the jail as "a solution".*

<sup>ii</sup> *We all have to live with own past and culture despite these attempts...*