

## Europe: Solidarity! Why?

*Three decades ago, anti-communist dissidents claimed that Eastern Europe was much more serious about European values than the West. Today, Eastern Europeans are united as never before against demands to help refugees in the name of these values. |*

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A decade ago, the Hungarian philosopher and former dissident Gaspar Miklos Tamas observed that the Enlightenment, in which the idea of the [European Union](#) is intellectually rooted, demands universal citizenship. But universal citizenship requires one of two things to happen: Either poor and dysfunctional countries become places in which it is worthwhile to become a citizen, or Europe opens its borders to everybody. None of these two is going to happen soon if ever. Today the world is populated by many failed states nobody wants to be citizen of and Europe neither has the capacity nor its citizens-voters will ever allow keeping the borders open. So, the real debate in Europe is not should the European Union make its borders harder to cross, it is clear that it should, the split is on whether we should feel morally right doing it and how we should help best to the most vulnerable people in the world.

In 1981 when the researchers of the [University of Michigan](#) conducted the first world value survey they were surprised to find that nations' happiness was not determined by material well-being. Back then Nigerians were as happy as West Germans. But now, 35 years later, the situation has changed. According to the latest surveys in most of the places in the world people are as happy as their GDP will predict. What has happened meanwhile is that Nigerians got TV sets and the spread of Internet made it possible that young Africans or Afghans with one click of the mouse can see how Europeans live

and how do their schools and hospitals look like. Globalization made the world a village but this village lives in dictatorship- dictatorship of global comparisons. People do not compare their lives with the lives of their neighbors any more they compare themselves with the lives of most prosperous inhabitants of the planet.

In this connected world of ours migration is the new revolution – not the 20th century revolution of the masses, but the 21st century exit driven revolution performed by individuals and families and inspired not by the ideologues painted pictures of the future but by the [Google](#) map inspired photos of life on the other side of the border. It offers radical change now. In order to succeed, this new revolution does not require ideology, political movement or political leaders. So, we should not be surprised that for many of the wretched on earth crossing Europe Union's border is more attractive than any utopia. For a growing number of people the idea of change means to change your country, not your government.

The problem with migrants' revolution is that it has worrying capacity to inspire a counter-revolution in Europe.

The myriad acts of solidarity toward refugees fleeing war and persecution that we saw months ago are today overshadowed by their inverse: a raging anxiety that these same foreigners will compromise Europe's welfare model and historic culture and that they will destroy our liberal societies. Fear of Islam, terrorism, rising criminality and a general anxiety over the unfamiliar are at the core of Europe's moral panic. Europeans are overwhelmed not by those more than one million refugees that have asked for asylum but by the perspective of a future in which European Union's borders are constantly stormed by refugees or migrants.

Even before Cologne, the majority of Germans had started to doubt government's open door policy. Chancellor [Angela Merkel](#), who until recently was the symbol of the European Union's self-confidence and resilience, is now portrayed as a Gorbachev-like figure, noble but naïve, somebody whose — “We can do it” — policy has put Europe at risk.

The refugee crisis confronted the [EU](#) with the question of its borders and it signaled that the threatened majorities that have emerged as the major force in European politics fear and loath “world without borders” and they demand European Union with clearly defined and well-protected borders. The threatened majorities fear that foreigners are overtaking their countries and threatening their way of life and they are convinced that the current crisis is brought on them by a conspiracy between cosmopolitan-minded elites and tribal-minded immigrants.

In short, the refugee crisis is changing European politics and threatening the European project in a way that neither the financial crisis nor the conflict with Russia does.

If the financial crisis divided the EU on creditors and debtors, opening a gap between the North and the South, the refugee crisis re-opened the gap between East and the West. What we witness today is not what Brussels describes as a lack of solidarity, but a clash of solidarities: national, ethnic and religious solidarity chafing against our

obligations as human beings. In 1920s the number of refugees who came to Bulgaria, amounted to ¼ of its population. Then Bulgaria looked like Jordan and Lebanon today and Bulgarians are rightly proud that in very short time they succeeded to integrate these people. They did it because refugees were one of their own ethnic Bulgarians. But East Europeans will not agree that solidarity that they owe to their own folks they also owe to those others running from war and persecution. The refugee crisis made it clear that the European East views the very cosmopolitan values on which the European Union is based as a threat, while for many in the West it is this precisely the cosmopolitan values that are the core of the new European identity.

“I can comprehend only with difficulty,” German president [Joachim Gauck](#) confessed, “when precisely those nations whose citizens, once themselves politically oppressed and who experienced solidarity, in turn withdraw their solidarity for the oppressed.”

Three decades ago “Solidarity” was the symbol of Central Europe and dissident intellectuals claimed that the difference between the East and the West is that the East truly believes in the European Union while the West only belongs to it. So why is it that today Central Europeans have become so estranged from the fundamental values that underpin the European union and unwilling to show solidarity with the sufferings of the others now?

The scandal in East Europeans’ behavior as viewed from the West is not its readiness to build fences against refugees at the very places where walls were destroyed only 25 years ago, but the claim that “we do not owe anything to these people”. While in Germany almost 10 percent of the population took part in various voluntary activities aimed to help the asylum seekers in Eastern Europe, the public in Eastern Europe remains unmoved by the tragedy of the refugees, and leaders there have lambasted Brussels’s decision to redistribute refugees among European Union member states. Prime Minister [Robert Fico](#) of Slovakia asserts that his country would be ready to accept only Christians (there are no mosques in Slovakia- he argued, so Muslim have nothing to do in his country). The leader of the governing Law and Justice party in Poland Jaroslaw Kaczynski warned that accepting refugee is a health risk because they would bring unknown and dangerous diseases. Hungary’s Viktor Orban argues that European Union’s moral duty is not to help the refugees, but to guarantee the security of its own citizens. If in most of the West European countries the refugee crisis polarized societies putting advocates of open door policies against its critics, confronting those who open their houses to the refugees and those who are burning refugee camps, in Central and Eastern Europe, the crisis united the otherwise fragmented societies in their almost anonymous hostility towards the refugees. It is one of the few times in recent years when governments say what the overwhelming majority of people think. Why Germans were trying to make sense of East Europeans’ compassion deficit, East Europeans were puzzled why Germans who were not ready to pay for the Greeks are eager to help Syrians and Afghans.

The Central European refugee resentment looks odd if we take into account two aspects: firstly, that in most part of 20th century people in Central and Eastern Europe were busy either to emigrate or to take care of immigrants. Secondly, that at present there are simply no Syrian refugees in most of Central and East European countries. The

number of refugees who entered for example Slovakia in 2015 was 169 people and only 8 of them asked to stay.

The return of the East-West divide in Europe is not an accident or bad luck. It has its roots in history, demography and the twists of post-communist transition, while at the same time representing a Central European version of people's revolt against globalization.

History matters in Central and Eastern Europe and very often region's historical experience contradicts some of the promises of the globalization. Central Europe better than any other place in Europe is aware of both the advantages but also the dark sides of multiculturalism. East European states and nations came late in 19th century and nearly at once. While in the Western half of Europe it was the legacy of the colonial empires that shaped the encounters with the non-European world, Central European states were born of the disintegration of empires and the processes of ethnic cleansing that followed. While in the pre-war period Poland was a multicultural society where more than a third of the population was Germans, Ukrainians, or Jews, today Poland is one of the most ethnically homogeneous societies in the world with 98 percent of the population being ethnic Poles. For many of them the return to ethnic diversity is a return to the troubled times of the interwar period. The 19th century ethnic landscape of Western Europe was harmonious like a [Caspar David Friedrich](#) landscape, whereas the one of Central Europe was more like a Kokoschka one. And while European Union is founded on the French notion of the nation (where belonging is defined as loyalty to the institutions of the Republic) and the German notion of the state (powerful Länder and relatively weak federal center), Central European states were built on the German notion of the nation and the French idea of the state. Central Europe combines the admiration of the centralized and all-powerful state of the French with the idea that citizenship means common descent and shared culture, as adopted by the Germans.

In the view of French political scientist Jacques Rupnic, Central Europeans were particularly outraged by Germany's criticism directed against them in the course of the refugee crisis, because it was precisely from 19th century Germans that Central Europeans borrowed the idea of the nation as cultural unity.

But Central Europe's resentment against the refugees is rooted not only in its long history but also in the experiences of the post-communist transition. What came after Communism and liberal reforms was pervasive cynicism. Central Europe is a world champion in mistrust in institutions. Brecht is not in school curriculum any more but many East Europeans will be ready to subscribe that "For this world we live in/ None of us is bad enough." Faced with an influx of migrants and haunted by economic insecurity, many Eastern Europeans feel betrayed in their hope that joining the European Union would mean the beginning of prosperity and life without crises.

Being poorer than Western Europeans, they point out, how can anyone expect solidarity from us? We were promised tourists, not refugees. Tourist and refugee have become symbols of the two faces of globalization. Tourist is the globalization we like. Attracting tourists and rejecting migrants is the short summary of Eastern Europe's view of the desired world. The tourist is the benevolent foreigner. He comes, spends, smiles, admires and leaves. He makes us feel connected to the bigger world, without imposing its

problems on us. The refugee, who could have been yesterday's tourist, in contrast is the symbol of the threatening nature of globalization. He comes bringing with him all the misery and trouble of the bigger world. He is among us but he is not one of us, and on top is often critical to our culture.

Curiously, demographic panic is one of the least discussed factors shaping Eastern Europeans' behavior towards refugees. But it is a critical one. Nations and states have the habit of disappearing in recent history of Eastern and Central Europe. In the last 25 years a round 10 percent of Bulgarians have left the country in order to live and work abroad. According to United Nations projections, Bulgaria's population is expected to shrink by 27 percent till 2050. The alarm of "ethnic disappearance" could be felt in many of the small nations of Eastern Europe. For them the coming of the migrants signals their exit from history, and the popular argument that aging Europe needs migrants only strengthens the growing sense of existential melancholy. When you watch on television the scenes of elderly locals protesting the settling of refugees in their depopulated villages where no child was born in the last decades, your heart breaks for both sides — the refugees, but also the old, lonely people who have seen their worlds melt away. Is there going to be any one left to read Bulgarian poetry in 100 years? Communism-imposed secularism made central and east-Europeans very sensitive to the risk of destruction of their Christian identity. One does not need to be a believer today to be worried about the future of Christianity and its culture in Central and Eastern Europe today. It is also to be remembered that Central and Eastern Europe is the part of Europe that has probably the most complex relations with the Islam. There you have two types of countries. You have countries like Bulgaria, which has the biggest Muslim minority in Europe and is on the border with the Muslim world and you have countries like Slovakia, a country without a single mosque. For opposite reasons, both Bulgaria and Slovakia feel very nervous of the idea that most of the refugees are Muslims.

The failed integration of the Roma also contributes to Eastern Europe's compassion deficit. Eastern Europeans fear foreigners because they mistrust the capacity of their society and state to integrate the "others" already in their midst. In many of the East European countries Roma are not simply unemployed but unemployable because they drop out of school very early and they fail to acquire the skills needed for the 21st century job market. It was the failure of the Roma integration that makes East Europeans believe that their countries "cannot do it". And the fact that East Europeans and refugees coming from Asia or the Middle East quite often end up as their competitors on Western job market do not make East Europeans more open to the politics of integrating them. Citizens of the Western Balkan countries are probably the most powerful example of the collateral damage of the current crisis – according to the plan to deal with the growing influx of refugees entering Germany they are to be sent back home without hope that they can go back to the EU.

But at the end of the day, it is Central Europe's deeply rooted mistrust towards the cosmopolitan mindset that divides East and West. The current resentment against cosmopolitanism that in many aspects reminds us of the successes of the anti-cosmopolitan campaigns in Stalin dominated Europe, is well captured by the growing eagerness of the voters to support nativist political leaders whose major advantage is that they are not interested in the world, do not speak foreign languages, do not have

interest in foreign cultures and avoid visiting Brussels.

The attitude divide between Europe's West and East on the issues of diversity and migration strongly resembles the divide between the big cosmopolitan capital cities and the countryside within Western societies themselves, two worlds - deeply mistrustful to each other.

Writer Joseph Roth was spending most of the inter war years wondering around Europe and taking refuge in the lobbies of the big hotels because for him hotels were the last remnants of the old Habsburg empire, a post card from a gone world, a place he felt at home. Some of Central European intellectuals do share Roth's nostalgia for the cosmopolitan spirit of the empire, but ordinary citizens of Central Europe do not. They feel comfortable in their ethnic states and they deeply mistrust those whose hearts are in Paris or London, whose money is in New York or Cyprus and whose loyalty is towards Brussels. In Tony Judt's words, "from the outset eastern and "central" Europeans, whose identity consisted largely in a series of negatives- not Russian, not Orthodox, not Turkish, not German, not Hungarian and so forth- had provinciality forced upon them as an act of state making. Their elites were obliged to choose between cosmopolitan allegiance to an extraterritorial unit or idea- the Church, an empire, Communism, or, most recently "Europe"- or else the constricting horizon of nationalism and local interest". Being cosmopolitan and at the same time a "good Pole", "good Czech" or "good Bulgarian" is not in the cards. And it is this historically rooted suspicion towards anything cosmopolitan and the direct connection between communism and internationalism that is part of the explanation of Central Europe's sensitivities when it comes to the refugee crisis. In this respect the legacies of Nazism and Communism significantly differ. Germans' drive for cosmopolitanism was also their way to run away from the xenophobic legacy of Nazism, while it could be argued that Central Europe's anti-cosmopolitanism is partially rooted in the aversion to communism-imposed internationalism.

So, how important will the West-East divide in Europe caused by the responses to the refugee crisis be for the future of the European Union? Is it going to fade away in the way the division between Donald Rumsfeld's "old Europe" and "new Europe" faded away at the very moment Central Europeans turned against George W Bush's war in Iraq, or will it lead to the emergence of a two-tier European Union? Is European solidarity possible in the absence of solidarity with the most vulnerable people in the world?

Many in Central Europe today point to the hardening of anti-refugee sentiments in Western Europe arguing that Europe is not divided any more and that European unity is on one elections distance/elections that Chancellor Merkel will lose/. Now, when Germans have gotten disillusioned with the policy of open doors, the differences will be easily bridged. Many Central Europeans celebrate that change of mood in the west as a victory of East Europe's hard nose realism over the hypocritical moralism of the West. You can sense evil pleasure when reading Central Europeans commenting on the "jewelry law" consensually adopted by the Danish Parliament. According to it the government will confiscate any valuables of the refugees exceeding slightly more than 1000 euro. Is this West Europeans' compassion?

But the paradox of the refugee-crisis split in the EU is that the convergence of the anti-

immigrant sentiments will not bring Western Europe and Central Europe closer. It even separated them even further apart. Unlike “Germany for the Germans” or “Bulgaria for Bulgarians”, the slogan “Europe for Europeans” cannot fly politically. For many conservative Germans who oppose the direction in which German society is heading Romanians or Bulgarians are not less alien than the Syrians, while for the cosmopolitan minded Germans who embraced Chancellor Merkel’s culture of integration of the refugees, tribal-minded Central Europeans are perceived as the major obstacle for an open society European Union. In a sad way the split over refugees reconfirmed all the prejudices that East and West held against each other.

This crisis also demonstrates that European solidarity cannot be divorced from its Enlightenment roots. At the moment when East Europeans made the claim “we do not owe anything to the refugees”, many in the West realized that they owe nothing to Eastern Europe either.

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