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**THE POLICY OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC ON REFUGEES
A MANIFESTATION OF EUROSKEPTICISM OR NATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY¹**

**LA POLÍTICA DE LA REPÚBLICA CHECA SOBRE LOS REFUGIADOS
UNA MANIFESTACIÓN DE EUROESCEPTICISMO O DE RESPONSABILIDAD NACIONAL**

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present the policy of the Czech Republic to migrants from the Near East and North Africa, seeking an answer of the question whether this policy is a manifestation of euroscepticism or national responsibility. The study is based on materials from Czech and Bulgarian media, revealing the position of the government in Prague on the issue of migrants, which differs from that of Brussels - they are against the introduction of quotas for refugees. The article states that this policy is shared by all countries of the Visegrad Group - Poland, Hungary and Slovakia. According to the four countries, prioritize of the common European policy on the issue should be the removal the root causes of the refugee crisis – primarily the termination of the war in Syria. It is concluded that the policy of the Czech Republic appears to be reasonable in view national interests and can be defined as a national responsibility.

Keyword

Refugees – Migrants – Visegrad group – Balkans migration route

Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es dar a conocer la política de la República Checa hacia los migrantes procedentes de Oriente Medio y Norte de África, en busca de una respuesta a la cuestión de si esta política es una manifestación de escepticismo o responsabilidad nacional. El estudio se basa en medios de información y comunicación checos y búlgaros, que revelan la posición del Gobierno de Praga en respeto de los migrantes, que es distinta de la de Bruselas -están en contra de la introducción de cuotas para los refugiados. El artículo afirma que esta política es compartida por otros países del Grupo de Visegrad -Polonia, Hungría y Eslovaquia, y los cuatro países están de acuerdo que prioridad a la política europea común sobre la cuestión, debería ser eliminar las causas fundamentales por la crisis con refugiados y en el primer lugar terminar la guerra en Siria. Se concluyó que la política de la República Checa es razonable en vista de los intereses nacionales y se puede definir como una responsabilidad nacional.

Palabras Claves

Refugiados – Migrantes – Grupo de Visegrad – Ruta migratoria de los Balcenes

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Exacerbating the migration problem over the last 2-3 years has been the cause for contradictions in the EU regarding the policy that the Member States have to follow. While the countries of Western and Northern Europe are willing to accept the migrants, those of Central Europe are trying to keep them out, as the most complicated situation is the one with Greece and Bulgaria, which, being an EU external border, should control the migratory flow towards the inner part of the continent.

The problem becomes complicated due to the fact that among the refugees from the war in Syria Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians and North Africans have moved to Europe and according to the Geneva Convention they cannot be granted a refugees status from 1951.²

Over the last years the Czech governors have been repeatedly described as Eurosceptics.³ Their position concerning the way they treat migrants also differs from that of Brussels. They are against the adoption of quotas for refugees, although the country is not subject to strong migratory pressure.⁴ In this case, however, it can hardly be talked about euroscepticism. The center-left government of Bohuslav Sobotka in practice expresses the public opinion.

Several reasons can be given regarding the refusal of the Czech Republic to let migrants enter its territory. First what stands out is *the confrontation between the restrictions imposed by the common European rules and the national interests of the country.*

According to the Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka the policy on granting asylum should be authority only of the national governments. He states that historically it is practice of his country to allow refugees to enter the country voluntarily according to the rules of the Schengen Union and on the basis of the Czech national legislation and emphasizes the intention that this practice shall be maintained in the future.⁵ B. Sobotka says that the construction of refugee camps in Europe cannot be a solution to the humanitarian crisis in the war-ruined countries. In his opinion the Czech Republic cannot afford to accept more refugees both for *financial reasons* and for the occupancy of the limited to 700 seats capacity of the temporary refugee camps.⁶

² Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. <http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.html> (available on 10.02.2016).

³ As a great Eurosceptic is known the Czech president Vaclav Klaus (2003-2013), who last ratified the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 and categorically denied his country to introduce the common European currency despite being eligible for this.

⁴ In 2015 the Czech Republic granted asylum to 71 foreigners. 3315 illegal migrants have been detained in the country. By January 19, 2016 in refugee centres there were 98 people, mostly from Iraq, Afghanistan and Ukraine. According to the plans of the European Commission the Czech Republic has to accept 2691 refugees from Greece and Italy. – The Czech Republic is ready to close its border for migrants. 21st Jan, 2016. http://europa.actualno.com/chehija-s-gotovnost-da-zatvori-granicata-si-za-migranti-news_519590.html (available on 28.02.2016).

⁵ Sobotka: Česko může přijmout stovky migrantů, ale dobrovolně. Echo24.cz, 24. června 2015. <http://echo24.cz/a/wPZfF/sobotka-cesko-muze-prijmout-stovky-migrantu-ale-dobrovolne> (available on 02.02.2016).

⁶ Heinlein, St. The Fear of Czechs from the foreign. 09.01.2015. <http://www.dw.com/bg/%D1%81%D1%82%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%85%D1%8A%D1%82-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%85%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%BE%D1%82-%D1%87%D1%83%D0%B6%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE/a-18181366> (available on 10.02.2016).

Although the Prime Minister stresses on the financial reason to justify his government's reluctance to accept migrants, it is unlikely that a major reason for refusing is problems with accommodation and food for the refugees, as it comes to accepting relatively few people. Unlike Spain, Italy or Poland, the Czech Republic has no external for the EU border. Moreover, most migrants use the country as a stopover on their way to Germany or Scandinavia. In this regard the Minister of Interior Milan Hovanets says: "The Czech Republic is indeed an island. Therefore, some insist on accepting refugees and integrate them into our society. No one could have expected that I, as a Minister of Interior, could welcome a mass influx of foreigners."⁷

The Czech authorities insist on improving the protection of the southern border of the Schengen area, as well as complying with the rules for the registration of migrants. In the summer of 2015 they expressed their intention to start talks with the North African countries to provide accommodation for those who have wanted to arrive in Europe, as the procedures for asylum seeking shall be carried out outside the EU borders. According to the Minister of Interior Hovanets if the security situation in Libya does not allow such places to be established, it should be necessary to negotiate with Tunisia or Egypt and Europe should have a policy on returning migrants. Bohuslav Sobotka says that by 2017 the Czech Republic can accept 1500 refugees.⁸

Another reason for Prague to refuse to support Brussels regarding the migrant policy is *the danger of terrorists of the Islamic State entering in the country together with refugees*. Both the government and the opposition have warned that the influx of migrants from Islamic countries poses serious threats to the Czech Republic. In case there are terrorists or fighters of the Islamic State among them, then a danger to the internal security of the country exists. This concern is completely justified and unfortunately confirmed by the terrorist attacks in Paris on 17th November, 2015. In order to provide better protection the Czech Government intends to increase the police force by about 4,000 officers for several years, but also to increase the numerical strength of the army by several thousand people.⁹

The media come across opinions that Czechs are not willing to accept migrants because *they are afraid of foreign cultures*. The proponents of this opinion explain that fear with the relatively homogeneous nation and the typical for the Eastern Europeans lack of experience and contacts with foreigners.¹⁰

Actually the Czech nation is comparatively homogeneous in predominantly Catholic religion, due to which it has spiritually always belonged to the West and over the long historical periods has not confronted with different cultures. Even during the Hussite wars (XV c.) and the religious ones (XVI and XVII c.) the clashes were between various currents of the Western Christianity.

After the fall of state socialism, but because of the relatively smooth transition to a market economy, the Czech Republic attracted a large number of immigrants especially

⁷ Heinlein, St. The Fear of Czechs...

⁸ Vláda má migranty pod kontrolou, ujišťoval Sobotka sněmovnu. 09.07.2015.
<http://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/Vlada-ma-migranty-pod-kontrolou-ujistoval-Sobotka-snemovnu-383352> (available on 10.02.2016).

⁹ Vláda má migranty..., Op.cit.

¹⁰ Heinlein, St. The Fear of Czechs...

after its accession to the EU in 2004.¹¹ Although the largest number belongs to the Ukrainians, the second largest one with a residence permit in the country belongs to the Vietnamese¹². While the citizens of Ukraine are Europeans, Slavs and Orthodox Christians who do not differ significantly from the local population linguistically and culturally, the Vietnamese are carriers of completely different language and traditions. This shows that the Czech society does not live isolated from contact with foreign cultures and the integration of foreigners from countries outside the EU is government policy – it has been adopted a special Concept of the integration of foreigners, which is regularly updated and procedures for its implementation are annually adopted.¹³

Therefore it cannot be explicitly argued that the Czechs are afraid of foreign cultures. They are worried more by the migrants' reasons, most of whom not only profess Islam (including radical one) but come from areas where no hostilities have broken out, they have no documents and have aggressive behavior, and they are not willing to comply with local laws.

"These concerns are at the heart of the policy of the Czech government against setting quotas for migrants, which is perceived by the other countries of the Visegrád countries - Poland, Hungary and Slovakia. After the meeting held in Prague on 4th September, 2015 the leaders of the four countries came out with a joint statement to "preserve the voluntary nature of the EU measures" concerning migrants and that "any proposal leading to introducing mandatory and permanent quotas would be unacceptable."¹⁴ They also confirmed their position at their meeting on 21st September, which took place on the eve of the extraordinary EU summit, scheduled for 23rd September. The policy of the Visegrád countries is seen as a blow to the common European policy and is a sign of disunity of the EU.

The President Miloš Zeman has supported the steady position of the Czech governors. In October 2015 he once again urgently called for tightening policy for allowing refugees to enter Europe. The Czech head of state claims that migrants will not change their cultural views just because they are granted asylum in the EU: "In the EU the refugees from Islamic countries in the Middle East and North Africa will not respect and comply with the laws of Christian Europe. They will comply with the law of Sharia, the unfaithful women to be killed with stones and thieves' hands to be cut. We will be deprived of female beauty.

¹¹ By 31st Dec, 2015 the total number of foreigners with permission to reside in the Czech Republic was 467 562, as the permanent residents were 261 553 and the temporary ones - 209 009. - Cizinci s povoleným pobytem. Informativní přehledy cizinců se zaevidovaným přechodným či trvalým pobytem na území České republiky. Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky. <http://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/cizinci-s-povolenym-pobytem.aspx?q=Y2hudW09Mg%3d%3d> (available on 28.02.2016).

¹² By the end of January 2016 the number of the Ukrainians with a residence permit in the Czech Republic is 77 931, and of the Vietnamese – 47 271 - Cizinci s povoleným pobytem..., Op. cit.

¹³ Aktualizovaná „Koncepce integrace cizinců - Ve vzájemném respektu“a Postup při realizaci aktualizované Koncepce integrace cizinců v roce 2016. <http://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/integrace.aspx> (available on 28.02.2016). On the website www.cizinci.cz there are informational materials in 6 languages available to foreign nationals, supporting socio-cultural orientation in the society. The internet portal www.mezikulturnidialog.cz is an open platform for activities in the field of culture and education, aiming at the intercultural dialogue.

¹⁴ Gotev, G. Visegrád countries trigger crisis ahead of EU refugee summit. 22.09.2015. <http://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/visegrad-countries-trigger-crisis-ahead-of-eu-refugee-summit/> (available on 28.02.2016).

Women will walk with clothes that cover them from head to toe, including the face", Zeman said in his speech.¹⁵

At a meeting with the president in the mid-December, 2015 the state leaders shared the opinion that in order to solve the migrant crisis, combined with the strict protection of the external borders of the European Union, it has been necessary to eliminate its causes in the countries from which it originated. It is ineffective efforts to be focused primarily on the redistribution of asylum seekers between the Member States. Primary consideration has to be given to the political solution of the Syrian conflict and the fight against the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations because the main wave of migration influx is from Syria and Iraq. According to the Czech statesmen the West can defeat the Islamic State only if it has allies among the moderate Muslims and Muslim countries.¹⁶

At the beginning of 2016 with the deepening of the migrant problem the policy of the Czech authorities has intensified. The Prime Minister Sobotka categorically has stated that the Czech Republic is ready to close its borders to migrants if migration wave begins to threaten the national security. According to him each EU Member State alone cannot cope with the growing problem of illegal immigration from the Middle East and North Africa. He has rejected the suggestions that the mass migration to the EU is a planned action. In his opinion "migrants are not an organized army" but he has pointed out that Europe is facing the biggest migration crisis after the World War II.

Sobotka calls for distinguishing between refugees fleeing their homes due to the war in Syria and Iraq and the so-called economic migrants who want to take advantage of the social system of Western Europe. "We have to help those who actually need, but not to violate our own security," the Prime Minister says. "Those who seek asylum have to comply with the laws and regulations," he definitely added. Rejecting the plans to adopt permanent mechanisms for the distribution of refugees between EU Member States he calls for greater protection of the borders of the Schengen area. From his point of view the key role in resolving the migration crisis belongs to Turkey.¹⁷

Meanwhile the Czech President Miloš Zeman stated that NATO has to take part in the border protection. He calls for limiting the number of refugees that the Czech Republic has to adopt according to the quota system of the European Commission. "I would not dramatize taking three Syrian families with sick children. I do not dramatize tens of thousands of Iraqi Christians persecuted by Muslims either, but I say clearly: "Enough. That is all", Zeman said.¹⁸

The persistent position of the Czech Republic regarding the migrants issue and the inability of the EU to deal with the situation underlie the search for a new decision by the authorities in Prague. On 15th February, 2016 three days before the European Union summit on Migration, the country hosted an extraordinary meeting of the Visegrád Group concerning

¹⁵ Czech President: Muslim refugees will be obey to Sharia even if they are in Europe. 16.10.2015. <http://kanal3.bg/news/world/europe/17603-Prezidentat-na-Chehiya:-Myusyulmanskite-bedzanci-shte-se-podchinyavat-na-shariata-dori-i-da-sa-v-Evropa> (available on 18.02.2016).

¹⁶ Musíme chránit hranice Evropy před migranty, shodli se politici. 17.12.2015. http://www.cemimba.cz/?utm_source=seznam&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=SKLIK+-+Obsahova+kampan+SM+%28Text%29&utm_content=Media+a+online+zpravodajstvi (available on 18.02.2016).

¹⁷ The Czech Republic is ready...

¹⁸ The Czech Republic is ready...

the refugees. On its eve the Prime Minister Sobotka warned that if the agreement on controlling the borderline between Greece and Turkey did not come into force, the countries of the Visegrád Group would focus on other countries such as Bulgaria and Macedonia, which would be financed by them to take measures to improve the border security.¹⁹

According to him, the real solution is not in closing the borders because it could lead to new conflicts. “The Balkans are the only part that has not yet been integrated and the memories of the wars there are very fresh”²⁰, he said. The Prime Minister has emphasized that preserving the Schengen area is of the interest to all countries and despite strengthening border control no one would like it to be destroyed.

At the meeting in Prague, where the Prime Minister of Bulgaria Boyko Borisov and President of Macedonia Gjorge Ivanov were also invited, the countries of the Visegrád Four adopted a joint declaration on migration, which stated that for resolving the migration crisis problem it would be of great importance to seek common solutions aimed at tackling the root causes of this migration pressure, including an end to the war in Syria. Given the complexity of this challenge the prime ministers of the countries of the Visegrád Group called for the most efficient use of all available resources of the European Union, NATO or, where appropriate, at bilateral level to support the managing of migration flows, including its humanitarian aspects and to improve the protection of the external borders. Namely, strengthening the protection of the external borders of the EU has to be the key priority in order not to repeat the scenario of 2015. According to leaders of the Visegrád Group, if decisive practical measures in this direction are not taken quickly to stop the migration flow, the situation risks spiralling out of control. Such a development would risk the European integration and would especially jeopardize Schengen and the principle of free movement. The prime ministers determine as extremely important the progress in two areas: 1) the rapid adoption of the Council's position on the "European Border and Coast Guard" under the Dutch Presidency (from 1st January to 30th June, 2016), based on the principle of the right balance between EU rights and the sovereign rights of the Member States; 2) rapid and reliable results from the implementation of the EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan. In this respect the role of Turkey regarding stopping the migration flows and fight against human trafficking is crucial.²¹

The leaders of the Visegrád Group countries take the view that efforts have to be made to disrupt the organized criminal groups involved in human trafficking, as well as to cooperate closely between the border and the intelligence services of the different countries.

The prime ministers of the four countries are holding one and the same that the role of the Hellenic Republic remains central to management of migration flows in the Balkan region.²²

¹⁹ An extraordinary meeting in the Czech Republic concerning the refugees. Bulgaria and Macedonia. The leaders of the Visegrád Four will discuss a better option for protecting the Schengen area. 26.01.2016. <http://www.vesti.bg/temi-v-razvitie/tema-bezhancite-ot-siriia/izvynredna-sreshta-za-bezhancite-6049017> (available on 16.02.2016).

²⁰ The Czech Republic: The Balkans are non-integrated, we have to help Bulgaria and Macedonia regarding the refugees. 01.02.2016. http://society.actualno.com/chehija-balkanite-sa-neintegrirani-trjabva-da-pomognem-na-bylgarija-i-makedonija-s-bejancite-news_521405.html (available on 18.02.2016).

²¹ Joint Statement on Migration. <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-statement-on> (available on 18.02.2016).

²² Joint Statement...

The joint declaration has made it clear that the Czech governors take an active stance and concern very seriously the migrants issue, although their country is not directly affected by it. At the EU-Turkey summit, held on 7th March 7, 2016, the Czech Prime Minister supported the return of economic migrants from Greece to Turkey and the closure of the Balkan route for illegal migration.²³

Although the proposal for closing the Balkan route for migrants has dropped out of the draft for the final declaration (at the suggestion of Chancellor A. Merkel), Serbia, Slovenia and Croatia close their borders for passing illegal migrants and thus virtually block the Balkan route to Western and Northern Europe. The situation is likely to lead to divert migrant flows to other countries (such as Bulgaria, Hungary and even Albania), which would make the problem more complicated. Hope for its effective resolution is reposed in the next EU summit, scheduled for 17-18 March 2016.

The Czech governing policy on refugees in many cases diverges from that of Brussels. They disagree mainly with quota principle of distribution of the migrants, as well as with the increase in the financial aid for Turkey in order not to let them enter the European countries. It should be noted, however, that the authorities in Prague seek rational solution to the crisis, stressing that the primary task should be the cessation of the war in Syria. They understand clearly that deepening the crisis will inevitably affect their country.

Having in mind the frequent recent cases of aggression and the participation in mass riots of migrants in lots of major cities in Europe, the policy of the Czech Republic appears to be reasonable with a view to national interests and can be defined as a national responsibility.

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²³ Summit EU-Turecko se komplikuje, Ankara hodlá předložit nové návrhy. 07.03.2016. <http://zahranicni.eurozpravy.cz/eu/147801-summit-eu-turecko-se-komplikuje-ankara-hodla-predlozit-nove-navrhy/> (available on 10.03.2016). At the EU-Turkey summit the EU leaders adopted the proposals of Ankara according to which Turkey would take back all new illegal migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands as the expenses shall be covered by the EU. Moreover, for each Syrian citizen who Turkey takes back from the Greek islands, another Syrian citizen, arrived in Turkey would be displaced to the EU according to the established quotas. If it keeps the migratory flows, Ankara would receive 6 mln. Euros in aid and elimination of Schengen visas before the end of June 2016, as well as acceleration of the negotiations for its accession to the EU. There would also be 700 000,00 Euros in aid for Greece.

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