Central Europe's refugee conundrum

Keleti Station, Budapest.

Everybody has seen footage of Budapest's Keleti (East) station this past week by now. The crowds of exhausted refugees [camped out around the station](#), the lines of dour-looking police stopping them get in — [or out](#), depending on the moment. An atmosphere morphing rapidly between fear, chaos, anger and desperation. Plenty, too, will have heard Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban describing the influx of 'Muslim' Middle Easterners as a [threat to the very foundations of 'Christian' European civilization](#). And in a frantic bid to stem the heathen hordes, they will have noted Orban's decision to [roll out an extensive new barbed wire fence](#) along the country's border with Serbia.

For anyone who knows Hungary as the invigorating, inviting country it is — and its inhabitants for the proud, resourceful and creative people they are — the spectacle of Orban's anti-humanitarian populist demagoguery being rolled out in response

to the migration crisis confronting Europe today — and yes Viktor it's about your country as well: not just Germany as you would have us believe — is, to say the least, sickening.

Two things are worth saying at this point, however. First the Hungarian Prime Minister is emphatically *not* speaking for or on behalf of all his fellow citizens. Quite the opposite. Little covered by international media, many ordinary Hungarians have helped set up the organization [Migration Aid,](#) which is currently doing an by all accounts sterling job of providing emergency assistance, advice and material help to the refugees camped out at Keleti station. Moreover, beyond ordinary humanitarian reflexes — of which ordinary Hungarians possess neither more nor less than others — there's little doubt that their reactions to these latest developments is informed by deep awareness of their country's none-too-distant history.

In a recent report from the Keleti station, for example, the BBC's Nick Thorpe notes that one woman said quietly to him, ["You should remember that many of us, Hungarians, were refugees too"](#). It turned out that she was from Romania's Hungarian minority, many of whom fled Romania in the 1980s to escape the appalling treatment meeted out to them by the communist regime of Nicolae Ceaucescu.

Equally, however, she could just as well have been thinking of relatives who were among the over 250,000 Hungarians who fled the country — and again, across the Austrian border — in November 1956 following the arrival of columns of Soviet tanks and the subseqent supression of the national [Revolution](#) that had begun the previous month.

Lastly, her mind could have been turning back to 1989, in particular the then communist government's decision to [dismantle Hungary's border fence with the GDR](#) (East Germany), thereby setting in motion a momentous series of events that held herald the beginning of the end of communist rule and

Soviet domination of central-eastern Europe.

1989: East Germans pouring across the Hungarian border into Austria. Votava

Whichever of these historical echoes we now turn to, however, they all speak to a simple proposition: Hungary's relationship to migration and refugees is a good deal more nuanced and complex than may appear to be the case.

The same consideration — albeit for historical reasons that differ from country to country — applies to other ex-communist states of the region. In the article reproduced below the former *Le Monde* Editor Natalie Nougayrède offers a succinct and well-informed analysis of the causes of Central-Eastern European reluctance to participate in the emerging European refugee burden-sharing exercise. I commend it to your attention!

Healing Europe's east-west

divide is central to a lasting refugee solution

[Natalie Nougayrède](#)

Why are central and east European countries so reluctant to take their fair share of refugees? You'd think their history would make them rather sympathetic towards those who flee war, persecution and dictatorship. At the start of the summer, I was in Bratislava when several thousand people took to the streets to demonstrate against migrant quotas and immigration generally.

Some banners read "Against the Islamisation of Europe", "This is our home", and "Slovakia is not Africa". Traffic was blocked and there were scuffles with the police. It was a dismal scene, especially for those of us who had witnessed, 25 years ago, the democratic transformation of eastern [Europe](#), with slogans such as "love and truth will prevail over hatred and lies". It is equally absurd if you consider that Slovakia has taken in just 200 refugees from Syria and insisted that all of those had to be Christian.

Of course, racism and xenophobia are not limited to Europe's eastern regions. France has the EU's largest far-right party. But from Poland to Bulgaria, a bloc seems to have formed against any generosity or openness on the migration issue. [Hungary](#) offers the worst spectacle, with its leader, Viktor Orban, raging about migrants being a threat to "European civilisation", equating them to terrorists and building a fence to keep them out. And it doesn't seem that Orban's talks in Brussels yesterday have made him shift gear. As EU leaders grapple with the magnitude of the ongoing refugee crisis, the east-west split within Europe is a factor that needs to be addressed.

Ten years after many eastern European countries joined the EU, a political and cultural gap divides the continent – and its scale may well have been underestimated. It's not new. Remember "old Europe" and "new Europe" from 2003, when Europe was starkly divided over invading Iraq: easterners sided with the US, while France and Germany opposed George W Bush's plans. Equally, over Ukraine east-west sensitivities have differed – one side being much more worried about Russian militaristic nationalism than the other.

And on the euro crisis, although much was said about a north-south divide, there was a strong eastern European push for stringent conditions to be laid on Greece. Countries like the Baltic states, that had undergone massive reforms in record time to gain their EU and euro credentials, often took harsher positions than Germany on Syriza.

Much has to do with how central and eastern Europeans have related to the EU from the outset. The reunification of Europe was seen as something that corrected the historic injustic of whole nations being abandoned by the west behind the iron curtain. An entrenched fear of Russia made them see the EU, along with Nato, as a security haven. Because the Soviet system had done so much to crush these nations, reasserting cultural and even linguistic identities was a survival instinct.

Nor were democratic traditions easy to revive, if they ever existed in the inter-war period. These countries were rightly entitled to join the club and made great efforts to get in, but they also retained specific historic memories and resented anything that smacked of cultural dilution. (I remember a prominent Polish politician saying, in the 1990s, that he dreamt of a "Europe of cathedrals".)

None of this excuses xenophobia. Nor should all east Europeans be equated to [Viktor Orban supporters](). As in western Europe, grassroots movements are sprouting up to show solidarity with

refugees. Hungary has a nationalistic, intolerant government but that is not necessarily the case elsewhere in central Europe. European coalition-building on the refugee issue is possible. After all, some form of unity was finally mustered on Greece, as on Ukraine.

The one thing obviously lacking is moral leadership. Vaclav Havel isn't around any more. He had the strength to saythat the expulsion of ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia after the second world war had been a national disgrace. The current picture must also be seen precisely in light of the legacy of that war. As [the historian Tony Judt](#) has described, mass killings and huge population transfers left central European states with more homogeneous populations. Later, there was nothing comparable to the immigration (mostly from former colonial possessions) that western European countries experienced in the 1960s and 70s.

So is there a way forward? Most Syrians fleeing their country don't particularly want to head to eastern and central Europe. But those countries must be brought on board for resettlement plans if a common EU policy on asylum is to be forged. Germany's role will be key to addressing the east-west gap. It's not just that these countries' economies have strong links with German industry.

Nor is it that central Europe has benefited so much from EU structural funds, and that now might be a good time to demonstrate a degree of reciprocity. It's that Merkel's political weight and strong moral stance are hard to ignore. Merkel's message is that being part of the European club isn't solely about economic reform, it is crucially also about transforming societies, adhering to humanist norms and acting together.

Europe is under severe geopolitical strain: in the east with the war in Ukraine and in the south with the fallout of Syrian conflict and strife in Africa. These issues are intertwined:

European action will only be credible and sustainable if solidarity is built on both fronts simultaneously. Getting public opinion in the east to show more sensitivity to refugees from the south is an essential part of the equation — just as westerners should pay more attention to how the Ukrainian crisis has reignited eastern fears.

Crucially, this also boils down to information. What people are told and how events are communicated will define perceptions and, more often than not, policymaking. The media scene in central and Eastern Europe has evolved in worrying ways: many post-1989 serious, democratically oriented media have been overtaken by sometimes obscure populist or Europhobic websites.

Take the demonstration in Bratislava: it was called for by a local online radio station relaying the views of ultranationalist Slovak groups with a strong grudge against anything to do with the EU and the west at large. One of its regular listeners told me about how he had come to mistrust western media and had switched to Russia Today. "At least", he explained confusingly, "I can read between the lines of their lies". Confronting the risk of European disintegration over the refugee crisis, as on other issues, is as much a battle for minds as it is a negotiation between governments.