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Czechia's perfect storm

Czechs show massive solidarity towards Ukrainian refugees. But the government's response could fuel a conflict between locals and newcomers

Like almost all European countries, Czechia is currently a destination for refugees from Ukraine. In the course of the first month of the war, their number in this small country of only 10 million inhabitants rose to an estimated 300,000 people, most of whom were women and children.

This means that the country is among those who have taken in the most refugees per capita. The situation is almost comparable to Poland that faces the highest burden in Europe. The number of people arriving is now proportionally higher than the number that far more stable and prosperous Germany took in after 2015 – while back then it didn't take place in just one month, but in the course of almost one year.

When taking into account countries such as Ukraine's immediate neighbour, the Republic of Moldova, the extent and speed of this increase are unparalleled and pose enormous challenges, above all to the hard-hit Central and Eastern European countries. Even before the successive crises of the last few years, these countries already struggled with ensuring political stability and economic prosperity.

Czech solidarity at its best

At present, it remains unclear as to what extent the refugees will seek long-term prospects in Czechia and the other eastern neighbouring states. The geographic and linguistic proximity as well as the larger Ukrainian minorities already living in the country would seem to encourage a longer stay.

At the same time, it is also possible that, like many people from Syria a few years earlier, they will consider the countries of Central Eastern Europe to be unattractive. This is particularly true now with open borders to Western European nations. This is where people from third countries prefer to settle, but they are usually difficult to reach. However,

the eventual outcome of this situation will hardly ease the current burden on Central and Eastern Europe.

Already during the last crisis, there were reasons for the rejection of the refugees that went beyond the then dominant narrative of 'xenophobia on the part of societies that had been closed until recently'.

In the first few weeks, Czechs showed overwhelming solidarity towards the refugees. The vast majority of people spoke out in favour of assisting them and taking them in. Record amounts of money have already been donated: more than one billion Czech crowns, the equivalent of around €40 million. People offered shelter and other necessary help, including volunteer work, without which hardly anything would have been possible in the first days before the state gradually took over responsibility.

The legacy of the transition

But one crucial issue remains to be examined: why – at least up until now – is the situation so different from the Syrian refugee crisis. The geographic and cultural proximity of Ukraine certainly plays a role; but so does the still very vivid memory of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, when tanks destroyed the burgeoning democratic socialism of the Prague Spring and an occupation began that lasted two decades.

Already during the last crisis, however, there were reasons for the rejection of the refugees that went beyond the then dominant narrative of 'xenophobia on the part of societies that had been closed until recently'. At its core was a mistrust of public institutions to be able to handle such a challenge. Perhaps surprisingly, the underlying factors are not so much to be found in the period before 1989, but rather a result of the subsequent shock therapy that came after the transition to the capitalist market economy. At that time, the states were not in a position to protect their own populations from the often violent transition. On the contrary, they even accelerated it themselves.

For example, the ongoing precariousness in the region was made out as a potential cause. This gave rise to a feeling of continuing to be in the position of someone seeking help – and therefore not being able to generously help others. Many of these causes have since been identified in East Germany, and they also apply to other post-communist countries.

Unfortunately, the initial situation and the accompanying fragility of social stability and lack of resilience hasn't drastically changed in the

meantime – and if it has, then it is far more likely to be worse because of the pandemic and the state's failure to respond adequately (for instance, Czechia has the most Covid-related deaths per capita in the world). And so the solidarity towards refugees is already beginning to show strains: the notion that those arriving are being helped at the expense of the locals is beginning to be heard more widely.

Czech hardship

The situation is all the more dangerous because Czechia was already facing a difficult situation before this sudden emergency. Prior to the pandemic, only one out of two Czechs received a living wage, nearly one in ten was indebted for life, and one quarter of households had less than €400 in savings. This has only gotten worse since. In addition, energy prices have been spiking since last autumn, extreme inflation since the spring has now reached a record-breaking 13 per cent, and most recently there has been a dramatic increase in fuel prices.

It all fits perfectly into the government's ideological framework: help is to be given only to those most in need.

With a neoliberal government, which has been in office since the beginning of the year and has proclaimed austerity policy as its central political guideline – despite the widespread belief that such a policy is obsolete – as well as the current refugee crisis, a perfect storm is brewing in Czechia.

The government is making efforts to care for the new arrivals. However, given the comparatively weak public institutions and their financial resources, which were further cut back at the beginning of the year, these efforts are clearly reaching their limits. Moreover, the government has so far done little to alleviate the hardships of the local population, who can only dream of a package of measures like the one that was recently adopted by the German government to mitigate the crisis.

Instead, the Czech government is advising its citizens to drive less. This is certainly not wrong in itself; however, as a stand-alone measure, it seems to be sheer mockery for those who urgently need a car in their everyday life. Otherwise, people are directed to social benefits, whose requirements are scrutinised so thoroughly that in the end hardly anyone qualifies for them. It all fits perfectly into the government's ideological framework: help is to be given only to those most in need. In the end, there are hardly any funds available because under no circumstances are taxes to be increased or new debts incurred. It is therefore unlikely that quick, effective and comprehensive measures that will be taken to help the lower and middle classes.

The political impasse

In this context, the Czech government is heading for a political impasse. Immediately after last autumn's parliamentary elections, after which it came to power, some analysts raised the alarm as to just how much explosive potential the new political situation actually holds. The danger lies in blindly celebrating that the former prime minister, populist, and oligarch Andrej Babiš has been ousted.

After the elections, Babiš became the leader of the opposition, and besides him, only right-wing extremists sit on the benches, while the Social Democrats lost their place in parliament for the first time in the post-Communist era. Even in the case of minor social crises, a conflict where the extremists and populists would profit from the social blindness of the neoliberal government was inevitable.

Now we are witnessing the beginnings of this very conflict. Andrej Babiš is becoming louder and more self-confident with his claims that the government is helping only the refugees. As the locals are being left alone by the government to deal with the dramatically worsening social situation, this argument is gaining ground and could bring Babiš – and in the worst case the even more radical populists and extremists – a significant following.

The absence of left-wing force in parliament and in the media will now be particularly felt. It remains to be seen to what extent the Social Democrats, who fighting for their political survival, will succeed in entering the conflict and steering it in other directions.



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