

How the refugee issue is affecting the Baltic states

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As the refugee issue became more serious, the governments of the Baltic states initially voluntarily declared they would accept refugees (Lithuania agreed to accept 325 refugees, Estonia up to 200 and Latvia 250). However, the acceptance of additional quotas imposed by the European Commission turned out to be a problem. These were resisted strongest of all in Latvia – two of the three government coalition parties opposed a compromise on the European Commission's proposal, and this prevented the government from developing its political stance. Although the government of Lithuania, and then of Estonia and Latvia, ultimately decided to accept on a single occasion as part of EU solidarity additional quantities of refugees (Lithuania 780, Estonia 738 and Latvia 526), these countries do not want a permanent quota mechanism to be introduced. They also want to retain the ability to select the people they will accept in their countries.

Commentary

- Large national minority groups (Russian-speaking people and ethnic Poles) have not integrated with the rest of society in the Baltic states following independence. This has been a major political and social problem there. Nationalist circles in Estonia and Latvia claim that they already have 'immigrants' in their countries who have remained since the collapse of the USSR, and raise this as an argument against the quotas. The acceptance of new minority groups will reinforce nationalist tendencies and social tension. This is also a challenge to the policy adopted by these countries towards minorities; it has been criticised for its lack of success both at home and abroad. The government coalitions in Latvia and Estonia include nationalist groupings which fear that the influx of refugees, given the unfavourable demographic trends and the high levels of emigration from the Baltic states, and this may intensify the already existing social disintegration. This is making it difficult for political decisions concerning the refugee issue to be made.
- Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are in the group of those EU member states with the very lowest level of granting refugee status: last year Lithuania accepted 75 applications, Latvia 25 and Estonia 20 (the lowest number in the EU). The increased number of applications will pose a problem to the administration and delay the intake of refugees. The lack of welfare infrastructure, including above all accommodation, most of which are private property and are often leased half-legally, is also a problem. These countries also have no good educational offer for refugees that would make it easier for them to integrate. These aspects are leading to politicians from the Baltic states expecting the EU

to increase the financial support for non-EU countries to which refugees come in order to restrict their migration to Europe.

- Politicians from the Baltic states feared that if they refused to accept refugees, financial assistance from the EU would be restricted (on agriculture, and energy and infrastructural projects) as would support from Western allies improving the region's security (the participation of NATO member states in the Baltic Air Policing mission is voluntary). This pragmatic approach was best seen in the stance adopted by Lithuania, which was the quickest to pass the decision to accept refugees. The argument of possible political isolation was also raised in Estonia and Latvia. As an effect of this, it was recognised that if they continued their resistance, it would be unsuccessful, that the refugee quotas would be imposed by the EU on the Baltic states as well, but that their ability to lobby for their own interests in the future would be significantly reduced.

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