

Behind the scenes of plan B: the migration crisis seen from the perspective of the Visegrad Group

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The Visegrad Group's Prague summit on 15 February was another initiative aimed at coordinating the standpoints assumed by Central European countries in the EU's discussion concerning the migration crisis. One of the strategic goals of the V4 is to maintain a functioning Schengen Area. The Visegrad Group leaders believe that this is impossible unless control of the EU's external borders is regained. During the meeting, the prime ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland, along with the president of Macedonia and the prime minister of Bulgaria, declared support for the EU's moves aimed at slowing down the influx of migrants to the EU via the Balkans. They also appealed to the EU to prepare a 'backup plan' aimed at reducing the permeability of the Macedonian and Bulgarian borders with Greece which would be launched if attempts to stop uncontrolled migration from Turkey to the EU turn out to be unsuccessful. Although Slovakia and Hungary strongly criticised Athens before the summit, the final declaration emphasises the need for all EU member states (including Greece) and transit countries to co-operate in order to resolve the migration crisis. The Central European leaders emphasised that the Visegrad Group's backup plan was complementary to the EU's recent efforts to control the wave of migration. The V4's stance was also presented this way with the intention to dispel the mainly German and Greek fears that the Visegrad Group would develop a separate plan, uncoordinated with the rest of the EU, to stop the wave of migration in the Balkans. However, even though it has been put more mildly, the V4's demands can still be used to put pressure on Greece to accelerate the construction of hotspots and to regain control of the Schengen Area's external border. The V4 countries have spoken once again against the introduction of the automatic mechanism for relocating refugees.

The Visegrad Group's plan B – strengthening the border in the Balkans

the Visegrad Group's joint efforts to deal with the migration crisis – which the Balkan states have also been engaged in – have been underway since last summer. The V4 argues that Europe should focus on dealing with the sources of the migration crisis, i.e. above all ending the civil war in Syria, and not creating migrant distribution mechanisms. While continuing their resistance to relocation quotas, the Central European leaders are appealing for a complete implementation of the arrangements which were adopted by the Council of the European Union last year concerning reducing the porousness of the EU's external borders, building hotspots and intensifying work on creating a European Border and Coast Guard service (provided that the competences of the EU and its individual member states remain

in balance). The Visegrad Group also fully supports a rapid implementation of the EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan. Its leaders have argued on many occasions over the past few weeks that the EU cannot assume that these solutions will work and will be sufficient to stop a migration wave comparable to that of 2015 (at present, around 2,000 migrants are crossing the Greek-Macedonian border daily).

The concept of creating a so-called 'backup border', i.e. the EU's support for Macedonia in strengthening the protection of the Macedonian-Greek border in order to limit the flow of migrants from Greece via the Balkans to Western Europe, was formulated in January by the Slovenian prime minister, Miro Cerar. The Macedonian government have been appealing to the EU for help since the beginning of the migration crisis. Officers from the EU's agency Frontex were sent to the Macedonian-Greek border towards the end of last year, and Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary each sent a police squad consisting of dozens of officers to Macedonia in the following few months. Poland has also promised to do this. The issues of migration control on the Balkan route and helping Macedonia to protect its border with Greece were developed during the meeting which the V4 ministers of the interior held with their counterparts from Slovenia, Serbia and Macedonia in January. As noted in the ministers' joint declaration, the V4's actions are complementary to those taken by other EU member states and Operation Poseidon Rapid Intervention 2015 coordinated by Frontex in which Polish personnel also take part.

The national backgrounds

The V4's joint declaration was a compromise of the stances represented by the individual countries – even though they generally agree in their perception of the migration crisis, they all have a different domestic situation. The most hard line standpoint in the migration crisis in the region is presented by the prime ministers of Slovakia and Hungary. In the case of Robert Fico this is linked to a campaign ahead of parliamentary election (scheduled for 6 March), in which Smer-SD, the political party he is the leader of, is presenting itself as a force 'protecting Slovakia' not only from migrants (they pass through Slovakia) but also from "the EU's irresponsible policy." His government has contested the decision of the Council of the EU of 22 September concerning the relocation of refugees based on quotas to the Court of Justice of the European Union (Hungary also made the same move soon thereafter). Fico has announced that as long as he rules the country, he will not allow a 'compact Muslim community' to be formed in Slovakia.

Prime Minister Viktor Orban's firm stance on the migration crisis has helped the governing party Fidesz to overcome a public support crisis. Orban has presented the migration wave and attempts to force Hungary to accept refugees as part of the relocation mechanism as the greatest challenge Hungary is to face this year. The government is preparing to adopt tougher anti-terrorist legislation, stressing that this threat has increased since the arrival of the migrants. Hungary is sceptical about EU-Turkey agreements and wants a 'second line of defence' to be formed on the Macedonian-Greek border. By promoting solutions aimed at stopping the flow of migrants from Greece to the Western Balkans, Hungary is attempting to improve relations with its neighbours (Croatia, Romania, Serbia and Slovenia) which have been impaired since the country's southern border was closed last year.

The Czech government is also trying to minimise the number of migrants to be accepted and firmly opposes quotas imposed from above and the permanent migrant relocation mechanism Germany continues to push for. However, at the same time, Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka has been trying to present his point of view in such a way as to minimise tension between Prague and Berlin. The Czech Republic launched the so-called 'strategic dialogue' with Germany last year (a constant intensification of co-operation between ministries, also on migration issues), and wants to present itself to its Western partners as a responsible state with a sense of solidarity. For this reason, Prague, despite having voted against the imposition of the quotas during the session of the Council of the EU on 22 September, has launched the procedure of the relocation of 30 refugees from hotspots in Italy and Greece.

The European context

The backup plan being pushed for by the V4, and the suggestions formulated by the Slovak and Hungarian prime ministers to exclude Greece from the Schengen Area are in line with Austria's policy. In turn, the Visegrad Group's resistance to the quotas matches the standpoint presented by the French prime minister. The abandonment of the German concept for resolving the refugee crisis is the common denominator of all these voices. This is contributing to a gradual isolation of Germany's standpoint in the European debate. Berlin has made efforts to counteract this, one example of which was the *démarche* presented by the German embassies to the governments of the V4 states ahead of the summit on 15 February. Germany has announced that it rejects any solutions envisaging unilateral decisions and the isolation of other EU member states. At the same time, Berlin is trying to convince a group of countries (including Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, Sweden and Austria) to accept voluntary quotas of Syrian refugees from Turkey (representatives of this group of countries will meet with the Turkish prime minister on 18 February in Brussels). At the same time, Germany wants a reinforcement of the EU's internal borders, which will involve additional random border checks carried out in consultation with neighbouring countries. Chancellor Angela Merkel's actions have been supported by Deputy Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel and Minister of Foreign Affairs Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who have sent a letter to the Social Democratic heads of state and ministers in Europe (including to the Czech and Slovak prime ministers), containing, for example, their opposition to Greece being excluded from the Schengen Area. The level of confidence Germans have in the Greek government, and thus in the correctness of Chancellor Merkel's migration policy, has begun to fall. Manfred Weber (CSU), the head of the European People's Party in the European Parliament, is among those who, over the past few weeks, have been appealing for Greece to be excluded from the Schengen Area. On 15 February, this appeal was reiterated by the Economic Council of the CDU (an organisation of influential conservative entrepreneurs and Christian Democrat politicians).

Possible developments

As announced by the Visegrad Group, 'plan B' would be put into operation if no major progress is made in the implementation of German proposals by the next European Council in March 2016. This deadline is important not only because of the expected increase in

migration pressure with the arrival of spring – but also because of elections to local parliaments in three federal states (Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt). Since the actions to resolve the migration crisis Chancellor Merkel has been pushing through have brought no effects, support has been falling for the CDU, and the anti-immigrant party AfD is gaining popularity.

The V4 summit has proven that the governments of the Visegrad Group countries will continue to coordinate their stances on the migration crisis. They will promote community solutions, which is not necessarily equivalent to supporting Berlin's standpoint. The quotas and the permanent migrant relocation mechanism will remain the main point of dispute between the V4 and Germany. The proposal to devise a backup plan formulated by the Visegrad Group plus Bulgaria and Macedonia, undermining the reliability of Greece and Turkey, despite objections from Germany, may prove to be a useful instrument (also for Berlin) that will mobilise Athens to accelerate work on the creation of hotspots and regaining control over the Schengen Area's external borders.

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