

Babiš and Orbán join efforts to counter immigration

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The prime ministers of the Czech Republic and Hungary, Andrej Babiš and Viktor Orbán, have held a series of parallel meetings over the past few days, above all to discuss the EU's migration policy. On 28 August, Babiš visited the prime ministers of Italy and Malta, while Orbán travelled to Milan to meet Italy's minister of internal affairs, the leader of the Northern League, Matteo Salvini. Three days later, Babiš and Orbán met in Budapest, and on 5 September the Babiš spoke in Berlin with the German chancellor, Angela Merkel. Babiš and Orbán consistently oppose the relocation of migrants in the EU. They want the European Union to give a clear message that the maritime migration route is closed and they appeal for aid to be offered to migrants in their countries of origin. Babiš sees a connection between the migration crisis and negotiating the new EU financial framework. He has criticised the draft proposed by the European Commission for excessively high expenses on EU administration, security and defence, and Frontex. In his opinion, the EU should allocate the 75 billion euros that can be saved on these expenses on resolving the migration crisis, for example through co-operation with North African countries (a solution similar to the EU-Turkey deal on the migrant crisis) and support for Africa modelled on the Marshall Plan. He insists that part of this amount should be allocated to southern EU member states which, in his opinion, are capable of improving the impermeability of the Schengen border on their own.

Commentary

- In the discussion on the migration crisis, Babiš and Orbán are making efforts to promote co-operation between Central European and Mediterranean countries. These countries differ in their attitude towards the idea of relocation but are equally opposed to the French concept of standardising asylum procedures in the EU. The prime ministers of the Czech Republic and Hungary intend to make migration the key topic of the campaign ahead of the election to the European Parliament scheduled for May next year. This is why Orbán strongly dissociates himself from Brussels, Germany, France and Spain claiming that these countries only want "to better manage migrations" and he cited the Visegrad Group – wanting to stop migration – as a model. This rhetoric helps Orbán take up the role of the leader of the European anti-migration camp who is followed by more and more politicians from other EU member states.
- Unlike Orbán, Babiš has been avoiding open confrontation with the French president Emmanuel Macron but, similarly to Orbán, he has employed migration as the main topic

of his European policy. Babiš's unrelenting declarations that he will not accept "a single migrant" into the Czech Republic are intended above all at strengthening his position in the country. According to the most recent survey (conducted in April), 68% of Czechs still view the refugee issue as a risk to state security. For this reason the prime minister is taking care of his image as a politician who protects the Czech Republic from outsiders and successfully defends national interests in the EU. This rhetoric is accompanied by increasing understanding in Prague for Budapest's policy – over the past few months Babiš has dissociated himself from criticising Hungary and has rejected suggestions that democracy is at risk there. Nevertheless, it is Germany that continues to be the key partner for the Czech Republic in the EU, and Babiš wants to develop close co-operation with it in the areas of the economy and infrastructure. Berlin and Prague differ in their approach towards the relocation of migrants but they would choose similar solutions for combating the causes of illegal migration.

- Along with the migration issue, Budapest and Prague are both firmly opposed to the proposal of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 presented by the European Commission. In its present version, the Czech Republic and Hungary are among those countries that may lose the greatest amount of money from the Cohesion Fund and the Common Agricultural Policy. However, they differ in accentuating certain issues in the budget negotiation process. Hungary above all wants an ambitious budget where an increase in expenses on border protection will be accompanied by maintaining adequate funds for cohesion and agricultural policy. Babiš, in turn, has suggested that cuts are possible in the budget and insists that member states should be offered the right to use the pool of EU funds allocated to them in a more flexible manner. His repeated criticism of Frontex over the past few days and his proposal to intensify support from the EU budget to southern countries that need to cope with the migration crisis are probably elements of building a coalition around these proposals.