

Slovakia: Migration Trends and Political Dynamics

By Martin Dubéci¹

Slovakia has had an unusual experience with the current migration crisis, with almost no irregular migrant ever setting foot in the country. Several factors in particular have defined Slovakia’s relationship with the migration crisis, including the now-finished *election campaign*, the *lack of historical engagement in the country with migration and Islam* in general, and a *public sector inadequately prepared* to cope with the strategic and practical challenges arising from the situation.

Following the parliamentary elections, Slovakia entered a new phase in its domestic debate regarding migration. The new coalition government, which includes both the previously ruling SMER party and the more moderate Most-Hid party, has essentially ended the practice of using the issue as a political ploy. As Slovakia prepares to take on the role of EU presidency (July 2016 – December 2016), the country is also coming under increasing pressure to contribute constructively to discussions on this issue. Slovak participation in voluntary resettlement under the EU-Turkey agreement is now an option, with the first 20 people for resettlement planned in the coming weeks, according to government sources,² and another 200 planned before the end of 2017.

I. Migration in numbers

Slovakia has recently received only a *miniscule number of asylum seekers* on its soil. Historically, however, this has not always been the case. Following the outbreak of military conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, asylum claims peaked at ten thousand a year. This was due to the fact that one of the primary migration routes - through Russia and Ukraine - was not obstructed by any military conflicts. Interestingly, the high number of asylum seekers did not stir up significant media or political attention at that time.

Year	No. Asylum applications	Asylums granted	Asylums denied	Additional protection granted	Additional protection denied	Unfinished proceedings	Citizenship granted ³
2011	491	12	186	91	47	270	7
2012	732	32	334	104	153	383	0
2013	441	15	124	34	49	352	7
2014	331	14	197	99	41	163	12
2015	330	8	124	41	24	148	5
2016	21	150	15	2	3	12	0

Table 1: Asylum process outcomes (2011-2016)⁴. Full statistics at the end.

Even while the number of applications has varied significantly, the number of applications approved for international protection and citizenship has remained consistently low. In fact, even in the peak years over the past decade, only 104 additional protection and 18 citizenship applications were approved. This reflects the *general consensus supporting a very strict migration policy among both political parties and the public* (see Table 1).

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² Slovakia promises a ‘sustainable’ EU migration policy, <http://www.politico.eu/article/slovakia-promises-a-sustainable-eu-migration-policy-refugee-crisis/>

³ Data includes only citizenship decisions regarding asylum applicants, not citizenship acquired by other means.

⁴ Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, <http://www.minv.sk/?statistiky-20>

II. *Migration politics: four periods of engagement*

Slovakia did not have any substantive public discussion about migration until the beginning of the summer in 2015, the moment when the situation on the Balkan route and in Budapest escalated. Following these well-publicized crises, the tone of the discourse remained particularly reactive to other major events on the European scene, including for example the debate over quotas and the terrorist attacks in Paris.

We can identify four distinct phases in the public debate:

- 1) From the beginning of the summer until the tragedy in Parndorf, where 71 suffocated in a lorry near the Slovak border.
- 2) From late August to the Paris attacks – defined by notable attempts to create a more welcoming atmosphere towards refugees in the Slovak public. The process was particularly driven by the efforts of civil society.
- 3) The third period, which might be called the “hot” phase, occurred in the months leading up to the parliamentary elections (between November and March) and was dominated by populist rhetoric.
- 4) Following the elections, we are now experiencing a fourth phase, a period marked by efforts from political leadership to de-escalate the issue and push it outside the realm of societal and party politics.

III. *Migration politics in the midst of elections*

The March 5th elections, and the campaign preceding it, were the primary driving forces shaping public discourse on migration. This was, in fact, not the first time that populist topics had taken center stage in pre-election debates.⁵ Yet again, political actors, seeking an appealing campaign issue that could displace concerns about unsolved structural problems, were able to push the issue of migration to the top of the agenda.⁶

While the issue was especially salient with the Slovak public, in general, there was a wide *consensus* among almost all political parties *on rejecting European proposals for mandatory resettlement and relocation*. It was thought that the EU’s response should be focused on solving the root causes of the crisis and providing stronger border protection. What varied was the rhetoric and the use of *ethnicized populist* arguments. This consensus was also the basis of the parliamentary resolution on the migration crisis that rejected the European proposals in June 2015, passing without a single vote against.⁷ The opposition on this issue was rather represented by civil society, cultural elites, and the President of the country.

Party positions on migration

1. Campaigning and governing

SMER, the sole governing party before the March 2016 elections, was torn between the at times *competing needs to campaign and govern responsibly*, especially with respect to its relationship with its European partners. At first, in the spring of 2015, the party sought to avoid the issue all together, thereby leaving it at the level of bureaucratic politics. Beginning with the backlash - first local and then national - towards a temporary resettlement of approximately 500 Syrian refugees from Austria to a Slovak village (designed to be on a temporary basis while the asylum applications were being processed in Austria) though, the party began to take an openly *rejectionist* position, built on concerns regarding *Islamic terrorism*. The Prime Minister began to make international headlines with statements that included “we do not have mosques in Slovakia, so they cannot integrate”⁸ or “there will be no Muslim community in Slovakia”⁹. “Protecting Slovakia” became the main slogan of the governing party’s campaign and

⁵ In 2002 SMER campaigned on Roma issues, including the “Irresponsible rise of the Roma population”. In 2010, the dual citizenship of Slovak Hungarians took center ground. In the last presidential elections, the leader of SMER Robert Fico accused his opponent, and current president, Mr. Kiska of being a member of the Church of Scientology.

⁶ “Refugees as the main social problem”, <http://www.webnoviny.sk/slovensko/clanok/995382-najvacsim-spolocenskym-problemom-pre-slovakov-su-utecenci/>.

⁷ Resolution of the National Council of the Slovak Republic “on the migration challenges that the EU is currently facing”, <http://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=zakony/cpt&ZakZborID=13&CisObdobia=6&ID=1628>.

⁸ Slovak PM: ‘It’s impossible to integrate Muslims’, <http://www.euractiv.com/section/central-europe/news/slovak-pm-it-s-impossible-to-integrate-muslims/>

⁹ Slovak election: PM Fico sees Muslim ‘threat’, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35718831>

remained so until March 2016.¹⁰ After the elections though, this **ethnicized and populist language disappeared from SMER rhetoric**. The party is currently not employing this issue in its communication at all and addressing the issue politically has been deferred to civil servants.

2. Firm rejection

A wide array of political parties sought to take even firmer positions against migration. The liberal party **SaS**, and especially its Eurosceptic leader and MEP Richard Sulik, became the poster child of the anti-migration stance of the V4 thanks to his frequent appearances on German and Austrian television. The nationalist **SNS** party, populist **We are family - Boris Kolar** - and far-right **LS-NS** also took uncompromising views on this issue. The **absolute rejection** of refugees in Slovakia, whether coming from national decisions or through a European scheme, was underpinned by **normative claims about the Muslim religion and culture**. Following the elections, SNS stopped incorporating this issue in its communication. The other parties, all in opposition now, still occasionally talk about migration and probably will use the issue again more broadly, if there is any policy development on the government side.

3. Soft rejection

Siet', **KDH** and **OLaNO-NOVA**, given their more moderate character and/or Christian background, devised positions oriented more toward the political middle ground. While still rejecting the implementation of any European proposals, the parties employed softer language, refrained from populist arguments against refugees, and worked to offset their rejection of the European proposals by **advocating for the voluntary relocation of Christian communities**.

4. Moderate positions

Most-Hid, a small party with a strong Hungarian minority element, was *the only parliamentary party that generally advocated for a common European approach* - although even they opposed the notion of a mandatory relocation programme - and openly rejected populist discourses, which they identified as fear mongering attempts.

A similar position was held by the non-partisan **President Andrej Kiska**, who spoke repeatedly in favor of a more constructive approach to refugees and migrants on several occasions.

Regardless of the positions that the parties took, there was generally minimal internal debate or public dissent among party membership.

IV. Government position and policies

From the perspective of governance, the policy of the Slovak government reflected the wider public discourse on the issue and was particularly reactive to outside events and forces. The government, in other words, was not especially proactive in seeking to outline its own policy. In light of the aforementioned constraints, the Fico government's position before March 2016 included several core components: **rejection of any mandatory European redistribution mechanism, strong border protection, and the prioritization of solutions aimed at addressing the root causes of migration**.

From the outset of 2015, the government steered a path designed to stay out of the migration crisis debate both at the national and EU level, apart from vocally rejecting any mandatory relocation schemes. As a gesture to its European counterparts, the Minister of Interior agreed to provide temporary housing to approximately 500 asylum seekers with ongoing applications in Austria. They were to be placed in Gabčíkovo, a small town in the south of Slovakia. The Ministry, in attempting to keep a low profile on the issue, *did not communicate sufficiently with the local community*, ultimately leading to a municipal referendum that rejected the project. Nevertheless, the project continued owing to the fact that the referendum had no legal force. The asylum seekers arrived in Gabčíkovo in the summer in 2015 and as of today rotating groups of applicants are still accommodated there.

The aftershock of this decision would be felt in the winter though when the government rather chaotically pulled away from its promise to the Catholic Church to support the integration of Iraqi Christians in a cluster of villages near Nitra around the

¹⁰ 'We protect Slovakia', <http://www.politico.eu/article/slovakia-fico-migrants-refugees-asylum-crisis-smer-election/>

beginning of their stay. They were instead sent to transfer facilities in Eastern Slovakia, where they remained for a few weeks, before they were ultimately moved to the locations where they were initially supposed to stay.¹¹ **Ethnicized and security arguments** were used again. And the government followed up on its promise to challenge the EU in court regarding the mandatory relocation scheme. The file was submitted a day before Hungary did the same, making the countries **the only two member states to bring this issue before the ECJ**.

The anti-refugee pressure and rhetoric were not the only factors influencing the decisions of the country's leadership. The government also came under pressure to act following the death of 71 migrants in Austria - near the Slovak border - in August 2015 (further elaborated above). Members of the government met with representatives of civil society and established an ongoing **consulting and implementation mechanism** - a working group on the government's response to the crisis. The consortium consisted of senior civil servants led by the deputy-minister of foreign affairs and representatives of civil society. The government also agreed to **earmark five hundred thousand euros for immediate humanitarian assistance** through Slovak NGOs, funding that was later distributed to support humanitarian assistance and integration projects. In the 2016 budget, the government created a **twenty million euros "reserve" for migration** related issues. The money will be used for Slovak contributions to IGOs and development funds or police force deployments on the Schengen border. It is yet to be seen whether the budget allocations are legitimate new funding provisions or just the result of creative accounting gimmicks and the repackaging of projects that would have been implemented under a different label anyway.

The consulting mechanism was the first serious attempt to create a dialogue between the government and civil society and make progress in solving several migration related issues. It is meeting on a monthly basis at the state-secretary or director-general level. The main issues of discussion and progress have included the coordination between government and civil society with respect to their humanitarian capacities, both home and abroad, and most importantly **the creation of a comprehensive integration package for new arrivals and budgetary appropriations to fund them**.

Given the lack of significant experience with migration in the past, the Slovak government has relied on **ad-hoc mechanisms** (e.g. using European funds [EIF]) for contracting Slovak NGOs to carry out **integration and social work** with successful asylum applicants. The fragility of this mechanism was demonstrated in autumn of 2015, when due to EU project management issues, the Ministry of Interior ceased funding any integration projects within this framework.

Another problem plaguing Slovakia's engagement with the issue is the fact that **there is no comprehensive package of policies - related to everything from healthcare to employment support - that clearly specifies the responsibility of different government offices**. This has led to further confusion within the government with respect to the division of responsibilities, both financially and logistically. These problems have underlined the general **lack of an administrative capacity** in Slovakia to deal with migration in an effective manner.

In the autumn of 2015, work on such a package began at the civil service level, with the understanding that the new incoming government would be able to provide the final input on the form and implementation of the plan, including any legislative changes. Acknowledgment of the necessity for a "common European solution that will respect certain national traits and limits" in the new government manifesto can be deemed a step forward.

V. The role of civil society

As already noted before, the primary opposition to the dominant anti-refugee discourse was voiced by civil society. The parts of Slovak civil society dealing with the issue of migration can be divided into several categories:

- Humanitarian NGOs (such as People in peril or Manga) that run their operations in the Balkans,
- Social work NGOs, such as the Slovak Catholic Charity, that are contracted by the government to work on the integration of successful asylum claimants,
- Policy and advocacy oriented NGOs such as the Human Rights League,
- Unorganized and spontaneous volunteers or campaigns.

¹¹ Iraqi Christians will not be sent to villages, but will stay in government facilities, <https://dennikn.sk/313804/iracki-krestania-nepojdu-do-dedin-mesiace-budu-statnych-zariadeniach/> (in Slovak).

Generally, until the end of 2015, there was little communication between these clusters although the evolving crisis and the opening of dialogue with the government have created pressures to change that.

With the government slow to react to the developing crisis, civil society took initiative. First, an alliance of advocacy NGOs released an *open letter calling on the government to respond* to the rising number of deaths in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, a number of humanitarian NGOs intensified their own operations on the migration route. And a particularly interesting development was the emergence of spontaneous activity from self-organized and non-institutionalized volunteers who were active especially in Serbia, Croatia, and Hungary. They participated in the “**Who will help?**” campaign, which worked to both improve coordination between volunteers willing to provide accommodation within their homes and organize fundraising events on domestic soil.

The general population became more involved with this issue after the Parndorf tragedy. A spontaneous “**Plea for Humanity**” campaign, for example, attracted support from major celebrities, athletes, corporations and the President. Moreover, thousands of signatories expressed support within a few days. The government opened up a dialogue with the campaign, which led to the aforementioned working group and an emergency support fund for NGO activities financed by the government. Five hundred thousand euros was distributed to projects related to supporting humanitarian assistance abroad and capacity and awareness building in Slovakia. A similar amount of money is planned for distribution for the same purpose in 2016 through Slovak official development assistance (ODA). As of today, *the main policy goal of the NGO community is the creation of a mandatory relocation scheme, while providing general support to efforts to create legal paths for migration to Europe.*

The **Catholic Church**, a major denomination in Slovakia, has also taken a pro-refugee position, in accordance with the Vatican, although only cautiously at first. The Church supported a voluntary relocation scheme for 149 Iraqi Christians and offered its resources and premises to house even more refugees. So far the Church has not had an opportunity to follow up on this offer.

The migration crisis has probably led to the *largest mobilization of civil society since the 1998 elections*, a time when the country's democratic future was at stake. In particular, the system of non-institutionalized volunteers who organized their activities through non-traditional means (e.g. social media) sent a message¹² to Europe and tried to highlight a different face of the region. The cooperation between Christian and secular-liberal organizations and individuals can be also considered as evidence of the growth of civil society and social capital, which should try to provide a counterweight to a politics currently strongly captivated by populist policies, as there are not many alternatives left.

The **media** played a two-fold role during this period. The majority of the mainstream media echoed the rhetoric arising out of the political discourse. The narrative of migration waves, security concerns and Islam was reproduced without any significant critical evaluation. The public broadcaster RTVS, which covered the humanitarian crisis with correspondents on the ground and evaluated some of the claims asserted by politicians, took a more critical approach. Broadsheet dailies SME and N projected an even more “activist” position with highly compassionate coverage and strong pro-refugee opinion pieces centered on the human suffering and responsibility to assist. RTVS, SME, and N also publicly and explicitly supported the aforementioned “Plea for Humanity” campaign.

VI. What lies ahead

The migration discourse has calmed down following the turbulent and polarizing pre-election months and the decreased flow of migrants across the Balkan route. As marginalization in the European policy-making community is seemingly no longer convenient, cautious moves to the mainstream can be expected. *The challenge is to manage this transition in an environment that was previously torn apart by inflammatory rhetoric.* Simultaneously, the government and civil society sector *need to develop and improve their often-neglected capacities in the area of integration, humanitarian assistance, and state-society cooperation, in the event that the migration “crisis” becomes permanent.*

¹² Volunteers defy hostile leaders to welcome refugees to Europe, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/9/5/volunteers-defy-hostile-leaders-to-welcome-refugees-to-europe.html>.

From a broader perspective, the Slovak approach towards migration is an indicator of the *strategic positioning of a nation* that ten years ago was one of the most euro-optimistic in the region. In ten years, support for the EU slipped from 70 percent¹³ to around 40 percent¹⁴. The way that the political class and civil society manages this issue could also influence how other issues with European overtones are addressed and may shape the willingness of the Slovak public to not only reap the benefits of EU membership, but also bear the “costs”.

The recent Slovak engagement with the migration crisis was largely driven by major events of the political cycle and political elites who employed the topic to secure short-term gains and sideline complex unaddressed structural problems. In terms of contributing constructively to the issue, this was hindered by both a general reluctance to advance a progressive position on the issue and the capacity weakness of the government, which was unprepared to deal with migration and integration in a comprehensive manner. Following the elections, with a new coalition government and calmer situation on the continent, there is **a window of opportunity for progress**. This can be done only if the government uses this breathing room to enact real change in Slovak integration and migration policy, which has currently not been adequately developed. *The EU presidency, with its agenda being largely dominated by the migration issue at the EU level, could provide a strong impulse though for Bratislava to improve on this domestic record, while also making these moves more acceptable to a skeptical public.* However, every opportunity to gain political capital might be used by the opposition, comprised of strongly anti-migration, even extremist parties. The situation, in other words, is less toxic, but still fragile.

Appendix: Data

Table 2. Asylum process outcomes. Source: Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, <http://www.minv.sk/?statistiky-20>

Year	No. Asylum applications	Asylums granted	Asylums denied	Additional protection granted	Additional protection denied	Unfinished proceedings	% Unfinished	Citizenship granted ¹⁵
2016	21	150	15	2	3	12	57%	0
2015	330	8	124	41	24	148	45%	5
2014	331	14	197	99	41	163	49%	12
2013	441	15	124	34	49	352	80%	7
2012	732	32	334	104	153	383	52%	0
2011	491	12	186	91	47	270	55%	7
2010	541	15	180	57	101	361	67%	3
2009	822	14	330	98	165	460	56%	1
2008	909	22	416	66	273	457	50%	4
2007	2642	14	1177	82	646	1693	64%	18
2006	2849	8	861			1940	68%	5
2005	3549	25	827			2930	83%	2
2004	11395	15	1592			11782	103%	20
2003	10358	11	531			10656	103%	42
2002	9743	20	309			8053	83%	59
2001	8151	18	130			6154	75%	11
2000	1556	11	123			1366	88%	0
1999	1320	26	176			1034	78%	2
1998	506	53	36			224	44%	22
1997	645	69	84			539	84%	14
1996	415	72	62			193	47%	4

¹³ Eurobarometer 69, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb69/eb69_sk_exe.pdf.

¹⁴ Eurobarometer 82, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb82/eb82_fact_sk_en.pdf.

¹⁵ Data includes only citizenship decisions regarding asylum applicants, not citizenship acquired by other means.

Graph 1. Asylum process outcomes. Source: Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, <http://www.minv.sk/?statistiky-20>

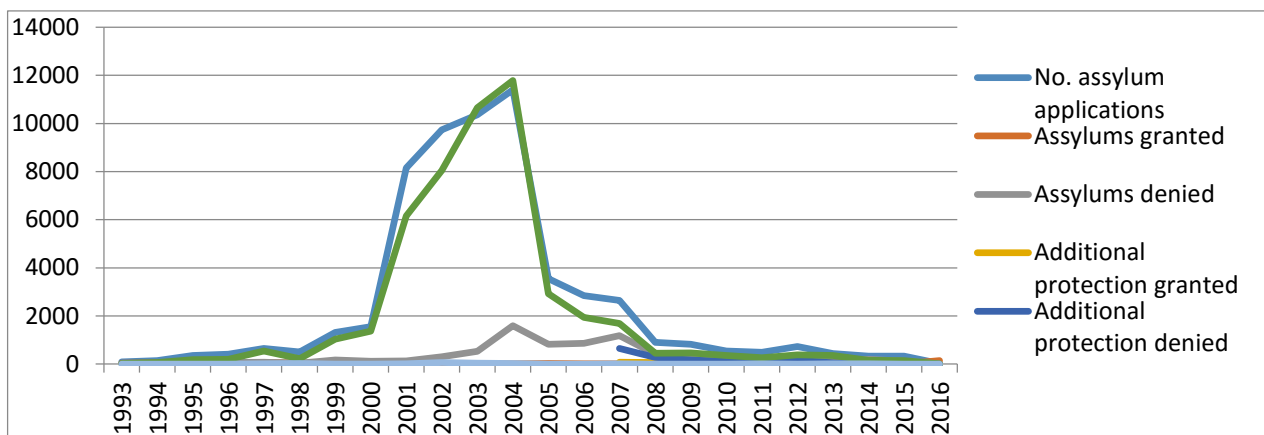


Table 3. Main countries of citizenship and birth of the foreign / foreign-born population in Slovakia. Source: Eurostat

Citizens of	(thousand)	(%)	Born in	(thousand)	(%)
Czech Republic	11,4	19,3	Czech Republic	88,2	50,4
Hungary	8,1	13,8	Hungary	17,3	9,9
Poland	5,1	8,6	Ukraine	9,9	5,6
Romania	4,9	8,4	Romania	8,1	4,6
Germany	3,6	6	Poland	6,7	3,8
Other	26	43,9	Other	44,8	25,6

Table 4. Country of origin: Asylum applicants Slovakia, only top countries included. Source: Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, <http://www.minv.sk/?statistiky-20>

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Afghanistan	42	67	72	51	76	75	90	109	93
Syria	6	38	7	10	4	10	5	18	40
Vietnam	63	58	41	56	32	22	10	7	25
Ukraine	32	36	32	13	20	8	7	14	24
Somalia	3	9	0	13	23	78	222	57	19
Georgia	210	134	119	98	63	62	62	34	14
India	704	619	88	57	44	24	14	13	12
Pakistan	182	650	109	168	34	15	16	18	9
Eritrea	0	0	0	0	0	0	29	29	8
Mongolia	2	1	0	1	0	1	1	5	8
DRC	1	2	1	2	0	7	26	6	7
Russia	464	307	100	72	66	38	13	15	7
Iraq	206	131	42	13	9	8	4	8	6
Bangladesh	182	108	36	15	6	8	8	2	5
Palestine	56	27	2	8	6	2	8	5	5
Sudan	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	8	5
Libya	1	1	0	1	0	1	1	3	4
Algeria	2	3	2	1	10	8	17	4	3
Iran	5	2	5	10	12	13	3	9	3
Cameroun	0	4	0	0	0	1	10	4	3
Moldavia	385	208	113	73	42	41	31	5	3
Kazakhstan	4	2	0	1	0	0	2	0	2
Congo	1	0	2	0	3	0	40	3	2
Nigeria	13	10	3	9	6	3	0	3	2

Graph 2. Immigrants per 1,000 inhabitants, 2014. Source: Eurostat.

