

GENESIS OF FEAR

THE CASE OF SLOVENIA

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In January 2017, Slovenia's Parliament approved amendments to the country's Aliens Act, proposed by its centre-left government, effectively allowing the border to be closed not just to migrants but also to refugees seeking protection. Despite drawing significant international criticism and raising questions regarding a potential breach of international conventions, the move was met with popular approval. So how can we account for the perception among Slovenia's general population that migrants pose a threat?

Slovenia experienced the first influx of refugees across the Balkan route in September 2015. People were glued to their TV screens and social media, observing the first 3600 migrants enter the country.

In the following weeks and months, almost half a million people entered Slovenia. Most subsequently left, yet the images of masses of desperate people crossing the country were haunting. It was an organisational challenge, it was a security challenge, and it was a humanitarian challenge. By early 2016, it had ceased, but in a few months it had changed the people of this country. It fundamentally changed civil society, local communities and, last but not least, politicians, political parties, the political mood, and the country as such.

EXPERIENCE FROM THE 1990s

This was not the first time Slovenia and Slovenians faced a significant influx of refugees. War in the former Yugoslavia, especially in Bosnia

and Herzegovina, ravaged the region in the 1990s. In December 1991, there were around 23 000 refugees from Croatia, most of which had left by the end of 1995. 1993 saw around 70 000 people from Bosnia seek refuge in Slovenia. Most of them were Muslim and almost all of them – more than 90% – were women, children, and the elderly. They stayed for several years. Shelters were set up, schools were organised at first, but eventually the children were transferred to the public school system. There were of course some sporadic nationalistic outbursts, but nothing truly major.

Nevertheless, it would be counter-productive to compare this national experience with the current migration flows. The refugees who came in the 1990s were seen by most Slovenians as our brethren. Many families had at least some relatives, friends, or acquaintances in the republics devastated by the Yugoslav war. Slovenians knew we were lucky to get away with a 10-day war for independence when we broke away from Yugoslavia. It was a struggle we, on some level, shared with the people coming to us for help and shelter. Make no mistake, even back in the 1990s, Slovenia was fundamentally conservative when it came to foreigners and national, racial, or religious minorities. But until very recently, other national (from outside the region) and racial minorities have been virtually non-existent. And Slovenian society had its other outcasts – the members of the LGBT community and,

most of all, the Roma. For years, the Roma ranked top in surveys asking people whom they would least like to have as neighbours. Fast forward to 2015.

IT WAS BOUND TO HAPPEN

With Hungary closing its border first with Serbia and then with Croatia, refugees had nowhere else to go. One of the initial problems in the second wave (October 2015) was the scattered way in which Croatia let the refugees try and cross the border. Instead of bringing them to designated crossings, where suitable infrastructure was set up, they would let thousands of them leave the trains and try to cross the border by foot virtually anywhere. This led to chaos. While people tried to cross ice cold rivers, the bureaucratic process of registration was slowed and it caused many to get stuck between borders in the cold and rain. After the initial complications, the organisation of transport to the Austrian border and care for the people was organised relatively well. The authorities managed this difficult situation well from an organisational standpoint. The police were doing their best, many of them showing immense humanity and compassion. Around 4500 people joined organisations such as Slovenska Filantropija and Red Cross as volunteers in refugee camps, whilst others organised collections of food, clothing, blankets, and other necessary supplies. There was a huge expression of solidarity and empathy.

But there was also another side to the story. From the very beginning, some started openly advocating that Slovenia should follow Hungary's lead; right-wing politicians were eager to praise Orbán's strategy of closing the borders, opposing the quota system, sometimes even demanding 'they' be sent back. Initially this did not dominate public sentiment, but it certainly took root and, within a few months, started to spread like wildfire.

SLIDING AWAY FROM EUROPEAN VALUES

And there was fear. Fear grew amongst rural populations, most of whom had never seen a foreigner of a different skin colour or from another culture and religion, in person. The fear also grew amongst the urban population, fuelled mostly by right-wing ideology. But the parade of fear was headed by the Slovenian authorities themselves. In order to "protect the population, to provide security, and law and order", the Slovenian parliament adopted an annex to the Defence Act, giving the army special powers to intervene on the borders "if necessary".

This government-driven fear stemmed from the following prospects: the possibility that Austria would start sealing off its border, that Croatia would once again break the agreement on an orderly transfer of refugees, that Slovenia would be left out of the 'mini Schengen' that

was being discussed at that time, and that the right-wing would use the momentum to secure majority popular support. All of these were real threats. But because of this the centre-left government chartered a course of no return, slowly but surely sliding away from basic principles of human rights, as well as away from the core European values and principles.

IT'S NOT A FENCE, IT'S A TECHNICAL BARRIER

In November 2015, the Slovenian authorities began to build a wire fence along the border with Croatia, or 'technical barriers' as they were dubbed by the government to make it sound more humane (as if a barbed wire fence designed to keep people out could ever be humane). The fence was erected along the Schengen border. The government used the fear of Slovenia becoming a pocket filled with migrants, propagated by most politicians across the political spectrum, and by security experts, as one of the main arguments. Often it was pointed out that only in this way would Slovenia be able to provide orderly support and help for the migrants, because they would have no other way than to come to the official points of entry to the country.

There was some resistance to the fence from civil society, but not even remotely enough to make the authorities rethink their actions. Society at large started to reflect on what was

going on after the initial shock. It was clear this was not going to end overnight and nobody – either at the European or national levels – had a viable plan. The Balkan route started closing. You could almost hear the unbearable sound of fortress Europe’s doors – or better fences and walls – slamming shut. The tacit consent of the majority as they lowered their heads, keeping quiet and allowing the government do whatever it would take to keep “them” out, was almost palpable. Not all of my fellow citizens felt this way, but many did.

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LACK OF AN EXPLANATORY NARRATIVE

It bears noting that the role of the major mainstream media outlets was rather exemplary. Considering the circumstances, no major news outlet systematically contributed to anti-migrant sentiment, mostly simply doing their job in reporting the situation. There were occasional slip-ups, but insignificant compared to those in other European countries. A different story played out on social media and small right-wing platforms. The fear and nervousness spread. Hate, unfortunately, did as well.

But the main problem was a lack of a relevant explanatory narrative from the government. It was quick to explain what it was doing and why, what it would do next and why, all in the name of protecting law and order: “our people and our country, the basic principles of our state”. But there was no long-term plan. We lacked moral leadership, we lacked a vocal plan about what we as a country would stand for, what side of history we wanted to be on. Of course, the prime minister, the president, and others reiterated that Slovenia would take care of refugees, that we would remain humane, and that we would implement international commitments, but they were simultaneously building the fence and continuously fuelling the fear of Slovenia becoming ‘a pocket’. Discourse about fundamental values and principles started and stopped with “protection and security”; of Slovenia and Slovenians, not of the refugees.

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And then New Year's Eve happened. Cologne. It was as though all hell broke loose. Proponents of the politics of fear got what they had been waiting for, their chance to say 'I told you so'. If public opinion in Germany shifted after Cologne, in Slovenia public opinion was just strengthened in its perception that "we must protect ourselves". Fake news and outbursts of pure hatred, intolerance, racism, and nationalism swept through social media.

In February 2016, as the issue turned from the mass of migrants travelling through Slovenia to the issue of housing for asylum seekers, the fear campaigns began to spill over from social media onto the streets. Protests were held in Šenčur, Vrhnika, Logatec, and Lenart, and later in other places being considered for the temporary housing. People rallied in their thousands to express their unwillingness to accept the asylum seekers.

THE MIRAGE OF A THREAT

I am not claiming that our current government created this situation on purpose, far from it, but through its communication with the public, the rhetoric of a threat to security undeniably contributed to this collective state of mind. Of course, there was an influence of right-wing parties' even more extreme rhetoric and proposals, but they are currently in the opposition. The government, branding itself as centre-left, under the leadership of a party that goes by the name of the Modern Centre Party, did not prevent this situation, did not choose a different narrative, did not use all the tools at its disposal to prevent fear, insecurity, and intolerance towards migrants from spreading, not even amongst their own electorate. And from the perspective of effective political power, I point the finger of blame at them. Not that there is a lack of blame and guilt to go around. There are, of course, many other contributing sociological factors, such as a lack of education about tolerance and the 'make sure you take care of yourself first, everybody is just looking out

for themselves anyway' state of mind. Despite this, the government is in a position of power, to lead, to set an example, and when necessary to enforce. Not just security, but tolerance as well. Instead, the Slovenian government, intentionally or not, has instilled fear.

In sum, Slovenia has a very different genesis of the fear towards migrants than other countries, such as France. We never had substantial African or Arab minorities. Not even now. The fear stems precisely from this lack of experience; it is a fear of the unknown. The fear of the mirage of a threat.



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