

## Why Slovakia has become the focal point for opposition against EU refugee quotas

*Slovakia's Prime Minister, Robert Fico, defended his opposition to refugee quotas in a statement delivered to the European Parliament on 5 October. [Katarina Lezova](#) writes on the domestic debate over the refugee crisis within Slovakia. She notes that while the country's criticism of the quota system has generated controversy at the EU level; within Slovakia itself there is relative unity among political actors, with most opposing the principle of quotas and arguing that it stops short of tackling the real migration problem being faced by Europe.*



The objections made by Slovakia over the recent EU agreement on refugee quotas have generated a heated debate at the EU level. However, at the domestic political level in Slovakia there is a rather rare display of unity in terms of how the crisis has been perceived. Political parties are steadfastly refusing to accept the quota system, arguing that it doesn't solve the real migration problem that Europe is facing.

On 22 September, the EU's interior ministers approved a plan on redistributing over 120,000 refugees from Greece and Italy between the 28 EU members based on a quota system. Out of the 28 members, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Romania and Slovakia were against it and Finland abstained. Based on the plan, Slovakia would be required to take 802 refugees. Slovakia's position gained even more attention as gradually it became the only country to hold on to its opposition to the quota system when it was ratified on 23 September by the EU leaders in Brussels. Furthermore, it is likely that it will be the only EU country to sue the EU over the quota system.

For Slovakia, the first problem with the agreement lies in the fact that there was a lack of a common solution among EU members. The decision was reached by majority rather than by a consensus – which would be expected for a debate on a question that touches upon the national sovereignty of its member states and deals with such a sensitive issue.

The Slovak Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, Miroslav Lajčák, and Prime Minister Robert Fico stand united in their view that it was a decision based on power. Slovakia is a traditionally EU-oriented country, however, since it joined the EU in 2004 it has gradually become more confident in voicing its opinions if they are not in line with the majority of the EU. In the second half of 2016, Slovakia will take over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union and it can be expected that this will be one of the key issues that will remain on the agenda.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, refugees have no long term plans to stay in Slovakia and therefore putting the quota system in practice in Slovakia becomes a rather abstract concept. The ultimate objective is to go further to Germany, France or Sweden and for that reason, Slovakia is not an attractive destination, which makes the quota system ineffective.



As recently announced, the Slovak Government is going ahead with filing a lawsuit against the EU at the European

Court of Justice. It is using its right based on the EU constitution to appeal on the basis that it does not agree with the policy on migration imposed upon it. Prime Minister Fico confirmed that the decision about refugee quotas would not be implemented into its legislation because it would not work in practice. Slovakia has now under two months to file the case.

On 5 October Prime Minister Fico visited Strasbourg to explain the Slovak quota position to the [Party of the European Socialists](#) (PES), who had threatened that his party, [Smer-SD](#), will be suspended from PES if he doesn't fulfil three demands: not filing the lawsuit against the European Commission, publicly distancing himself from any hatred expressed against Muslims and Roma, and fulfilling democratic values and principles.

However, from Fico's public statements it is evident that it would be very unlikely for Slovakia to revert its decision and not go ahead with the lawsuit. The last time that Fico's party was suspended for two years from membership in the Party of European Socialists was after the parliamentary elections in 2006, as a response to building a coalition with the [Slovak National Party](#).

From a domestic politics point of view, unity over political issues is a rather rare occurrence in Slovakia, however both the coalition and opposition parties jointly refuse the quota system. The only difference of opinion is over the question of suing the EU, with the opposition parties [Christian Democratic Movement](#) (KDH), ethnic Hungarian [Most-Híd](#), and [Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party](#) (SDKU-DS) being against this course of action. On the other side, the Slovak President Andrej Kiska, although respecting the will of the Slovak Parliament and the Government in this question, has called for more understanding of EU solidarity.

The Slovak perspective on the crisis and opposition to the quota system is a principled stand. What is needed is a practical solution capable of tackling wider migration problems, which is an issue the EU will continue to face. By the time of the next EU summit on 15 October there will be more migrants in Europe. This crisis has tested the security of the southern outer border of the Schengen area and the EU needs to take control of it. The lack of a united migration policy and issues around quotas show that to solve the crisis different mechanisms will need to be adopted.

The search for European unity – or at least a more harmonised view over key policies – remains an important goal to aim for, both with regard to small and big states in the EU. The migration crisis has changed Europe and it will continue to have an impact on its future. The quota system, however, does not solve this problem.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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