

Blog article

The Czech Prime Minister seeks to renew the old anti-migration strategy and misinformation campaigns in re-election bid.

Agathe Helluin

When the Czech Prime Minister addressed the Chamber of Deputies on 3 June, in light of a no-confidence vote that shook his government, Andrej Babiš revealed his strategy for overcoming his party's declining popularity, months before the legislative election.

In a country where 69% of the population refuses to welcome refugees from war zones, even temporarily (CVVM agency, April 2019), he has decided to reclaim an anti-migration rhetoric, a key element in his 2017 election win.

"I've said it a thousand times already, the Czech Republic is a sovereign state and we ourselves will decide who will work and live here. [...] I do not want a Muslim Europe."

By retrieving such a discourse, the Prime Minister intends to stand out from the Pirates party, his primary challenger in this election, which expresses more tolerance towards the plight of refugees, if not migrants.

However, the Prime Minister's current rhetoric is increasingly mired in populism and threatens the rule of law in the Czech Republic. Babiš has indeed spread lies about the Pirates' election programme, stating on Twitter that the party wants to "first map all the apartment units, tax those who have too many meters of space and then move somebody in with you. The best would be a migrant of some sort." Ivan Bartoš, chairman of the Pirates, later had to publicly refute this allegation and called on the Prime Minister to apologise.

"Naturally there is nothing of the sort in the Pirates' program, there never has been and there never will be, and Mr Babiš and his colleagues know that very well. It is unacceptable for the Prime Minister himself to act like a disinformant."

Second of all, this unveils Babiš' strategy to convince the population that a Pirates-led government, should they win, will bring a massive and uncontrolled wave of migration to the country. Yet, this disregards the EU's new Pact on Migration and Asylum presented on 23 September 2020. With the core objective of restoring confidence in the European institutions, this pact is described as a three-floor house that mainly focuses on keeping people in their countries, through partnership agreements, returns or border security. For example, it provides for the introduction of a more efficient and faster return system and procedures, such as compulsory screenings at external borders, to quickly decide whether to grant asylum or order the return of the migrant. And returns are to be carried out more effectively thanks to new partnerships with third countries.

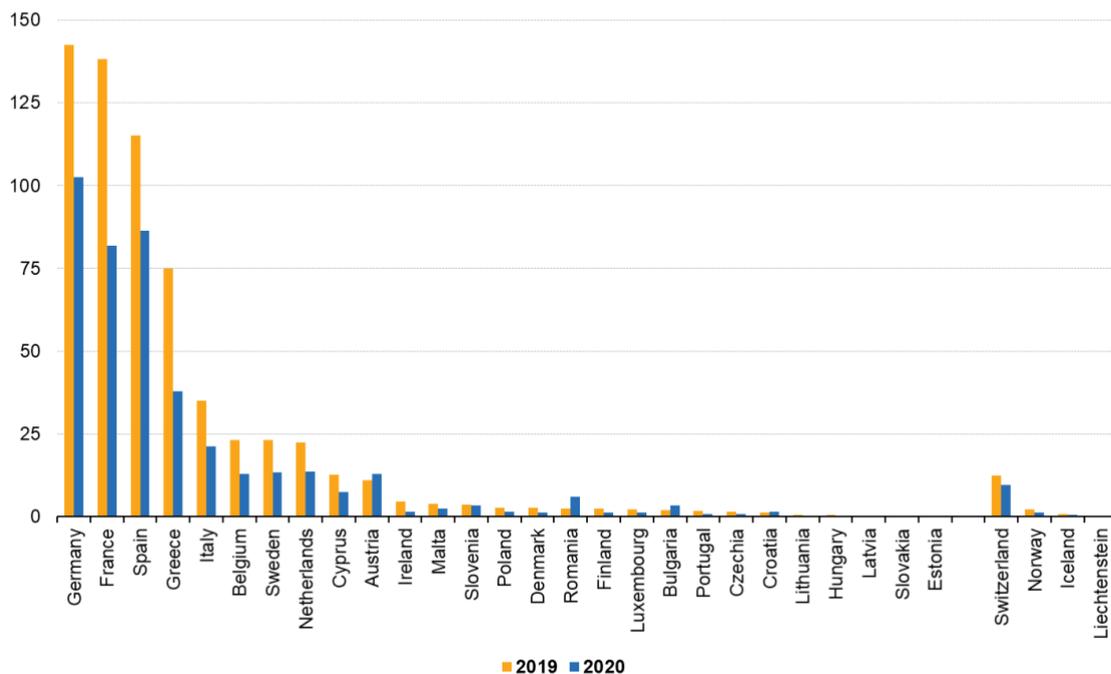
The pact also introduces the notion of flexible solidarity, as it puts an end to the fixed quotas system and instead encourages cooperation between Member states. Nations that do not wish to welcome migrants are therefore no longer forced to do so and can display their solidarity

towards other European states by sponsoring the return of migrants or by providing practical help and expertise to frontline countries.

With such a strong emphasis put on security and returns, the European Union will then demonstrate greater capacity to control and limit inflows in the event of future migratory waves, through a more resilient and effective common system.

Thus, resorting to anxiety-provoking anti-migration rhetoric seems unjustified, particularly in a country that is virtually untouched by ‘illegal immigration’. With around 1,500 asylum applications registered at the peak of the 2015-2016 migration wave, the Czech Republic ranks 21st (out of 27) among EU countries attracting the most non-European asylum seekers in 2019 ([Eurostat](#)).

Number of first-time asylum applicants (non-EU citizens), 2019 and 2020
 (thousands)



Source: Eurostat (online data code: migr_asyappctza)



Also, more than half of the country’s foreign population comes from Eastern Europe (Slovakia, Russia, Ukraine). Secondly, while Babiš endorses resentments towards Muslim migrants, who are seen as an urgent threat to the country’s stability and security, in comparison to other migrants, they solely make up for 0.2% of the total Czech population and 4% of its foreign population ([Pew Research Center, 2017](#)). Yet, in 2020, Ukrainians and Moldovans were, by far, the most numerous illegal stayers in the country (1,476 Ukrainians, 825 Moldovans, followed by 353 Vietnamese). In fact, according to a [2017 Harvard Study](#), the Czech Republic shows the highest level of intolerance and racial bias than any other European country. Paradoxically, [Czechs](#) simultaneously consider human rights amongst the most important issues in politics,

while simultaneously and without hesitation denying the fundamental human right to protection to people in need (p. 25).

Therefore, the arbitrariness embedded in this rhetoric is indicative of a strategy that uses citizens' unfounded fears and hatred to divert their attention from more urgent and compelling political issues while regaining popularity. The Prime Minister and his government are under heavy criticism that challenges their prospects of being re-elected. Harshly criticized for their handling of the health crisis; accused of fraud and corruption, the government had to overcome three no-confidence motions since its 2017 election.

In this regard, the migration debate is viewed as a convenient and effective way for Andrej Babiš to shift the attention from his political failings to migrants, even though the latter do not currently embody a pressing political issue in the Czech Republic.