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Is Eastern Europe Uniformly Anti-Immigrant? Not so fast.

Understanding immigration policy positions and policy change in Eastern Europe*

by Jan Rovny

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RÉSUMÉ

Alors que l'Union Européenne a fait face à un afflux de réfugiés sans précédent en 2015, quatre gouvernements d'Europe de l'Est ont rejeté la proposition de mise en place de quotas de réfugiés au sein de l'Union. Toutefois, à l'intérieur de ces pays, les positions diffèrent concernant la crise des migrants et l'immigration en général mais ces différences sont éclipsées par cette réponse uniforme à la réforme proposée. Ma recherche sur les divisions politiques propres à chacun de ces pays montre que ces différences sont liées au développement de différents partis politiques après la chute du communisme. À travers une analyse des causes de l'importance de l'immigration et des raisons expliquant les positionnements politiques des différents partis en Europe de l'Est sur ces questions, cette recherche démontre que l'adoption de politiques socialement libérales par un parti – qu'il soit de gauche ou de droite – dépend de sa relation au communisme fédéral, mais également du lien qu'il entretient avec le groupe ethnique national le plus important d'un point de vue électoral. Mon travail fait apparaître trois modèles politiques distincts en Europe de l'Est.

ABSTRACT

As the European Union struggled to address an unprecedented influx of refugees in 2015, four Eastern European governments rejected a proposal for European Union refugee quotas. Within each country, however, there are different views on the migrant crisis and immigration in general that are overshadowed by this uniform policy response. My research on the political divisions in each country explains that these differences are related to how political camps developed after communism. Through an analysis of the causes of immigration salience and the reasons behind immigration and integration policy positions of various parties in Eastern European countries, this research finds that which party – left or right – adopts more socially liberal policy positions depends on its relationships to communist federalism and the most politically notable ethnic group in the country. My work finds three distinct political patterns in Eastern Europe.

The European migrant crisis came to a head in 2015 with swells of displaced people from across the Middle East and North Africa entering the European Union member states. The path to Europe for many went through parts of Eastern Europe, drudging up for the first time in these states the issue of how to handle such an influx and how to shape immigration policy, more generally. The strong anti-immigrant rhetoric of national leadership from Budapest to Warsaw captured headlines and the initial uniform critique of a European Union proposal to impose refugee quotas[1] on its member states painted a

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[1] Alison Smale and Dan Bilefsky, "Quota Proposal Fails to Gain Traction as Germany Prepares for More Arrivals," in *New York Times* (12/09/2015) : http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/12/world/europe/europe-migrant-crisis.html?_r=1.

** L'auteur adhère à la charte de déontologie du LIEPP disponible en ligne et n'a déclaré aucun conflit d'intérêt potentiel.*

picture of an Eastern Europe unified by an anti-immigrant policy stance. These seemingly united viewpoints, however, mask the fact that there is significant policy differentiation among political parties at the country-level throughout the region. In fact, some Eastern European politicians are proponents of supporting the migrants[2] and voluntarily increasing acceptance of refugees[3] from conflict zones. Others oppose welcoming non-European refugees altogether, and would only accept migrants they deem easily assimilable.[4] So, what accounts for these varying stances? And how do attitudes towards immigration in Eastern Europe map onto existing political divisions?

Existing scholarship on Eastern European politics predicts that party competition in the region is determined by various past experiences with communism, pitting the old state-centric authoritarianism against a new liberal market economic system. As such, the region's experience with communism is thought to tie left-wing economics to social conservatism and the economic right to pro-democratic social liberalism.[5] Recent empirical evidence, however, exposes significant variance in party competition patterns across East European countries that are not accounted for by the dominant explanatory frameworks for party competition in the region – communist regime types and democratic transition experience.

My research supports the argument that party competition in Eastern Europe is determined by the interaction of two factors: a country's past experience with communist federalism and partisan responses to ethnic minorities. The argument follows in three steps: (1) Due to historical institutional determinants, politically notable ethnic minorities associate with specific political forces; (2) Given their interest in group rights, including citizenship, and their skepticism towards the repressive capacity of the (majority controlled) state, ethnic minorities hold liberal preferences[6]; (3) the liberal interests of ethnic minorities are consequently translated into the general socially liberal positions of the political actors affiliated with or tolerant of these minorities.[7] Following this argument, I theorize and show the conditions under which political parties throughout Eastern Europe adopt socially liberal versus conservative views, thereby demonstrating the role ethnicity plays in forming the underlying ideological structure of party competition.

Applying this argument to policy positions on the migrant crisis and immigration being taken throughout Eastern Europe reveals a more complex ideological structuring of politics than generally accepted. In some Eastern European countries, it is the left-wing that adopts socially liberal positions paving the way toward greater openness to immigration. In other countries, it is the right-wing that takes this position. The determining factor in all cases, as my research shows, is the party's past relationship to communist federalism and to the most politically notable ethnic group in the country. Thus, I find three distinct political patterns across Eastern Europe that underpin the divergent policy positions taken on immigration.

1.Patterns of left-right positions on immigration in Eastern Europe

1.1 Relation to Communist Federations – secession matters.

The first pattern emerges in Eastern European countries that began their transition to democracy by seceding from a communist federation such as the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia. These secessionist countries include Croatia, Estonia, Latvia and Slovenia. Breaking away from the communist federal center often led to the newly formed state harboring a significant number of ethnic nationals from the old federal center -- Russians or Serbs. Politically speaking, this federal diaspora tends to identify with the communist legacy, and subsequently with the Communist Party, its successors, or other left-wing parties. These left parties become either tacit supporters or the active representatives of the diaspora ethnic interest. Thus, in these cases, there is a departure from the expected party competition framework that would predict leftist parties to adopt ethno-national conservatism.

Over time, these left party affinities with ethnic minorities promote left-wing multiculturalism and the relationship between economic left-right placement on the political spectrum and immigration is similar to what is

[2] TOP 09: Pomozme potřebným, trvejme však na dodržování pravidel. http://www.top09.cz/proc-nas-volit/fakta-a-argumenty/top-09-pomozme-potrebnym-trvejme-vsak-na-dodrzovani-pravidel-18846.html.

[3] "Poland considers accepting higher number of immigrants," in *The Warsaw Voice* online, (10/09/2015) : http://www.warsawvoice.pl/WVpage/pages/article.php/32974/news.

[4] "Premier: Privital by, keby sa prestalo s moralizovanim na adresu V4," http://strana-smer.sk/premier-privital-keby-sa-prestalo-s-moralizovanim-na-adresu-v4.

[5] Rovny (2014), "Communism, Federalism, and Ethnic Minorities", p. 670. Kitschelt 1992 ; Marks, Hooghe, Nelson, and Edwards 2006 ; Vachudova qnd Hooghe 2009 ; Bustikova and Kitschelt 2009..

[6] Rovny (2014), "Communism, Federalism, and Ethnic Minorities", p. 670. "The sociocultural dimension combines preferences on noneconomic issues, juxtaposing traditional, paternalistic, authoritative, and nationalist views with egalitarian, liberal, and alternative outlooks; Kitschelt 1994; Marks et al. 2006. See Rovny 2014, Section 3. While ethnic minorities are not always liberal on all components of the sociocultural dimension, such as religious and moral issues, they tend to systematically favor liberal policies regarding group rights, citizenship, and law-and-order issues (see the discussion in the theoretical section of this article).".

[7] Rovny (2014), "Communism, Federalism, and Ethnic Minorities", p. 670.

found in Western Europe -- the left has more liberal views on immigration policies. In fact, in these countries the association between ethnic interests and the economic left is such that ethnic minorities frequently support and vote for the economic left-wing parties (see Figure 1). These subsequently support more liberal immigration and encourage multicultural approaches for integrating immigrants. In contrast, the economic right supports anti-immigrant policies and is predominantly assimilationist.[8]

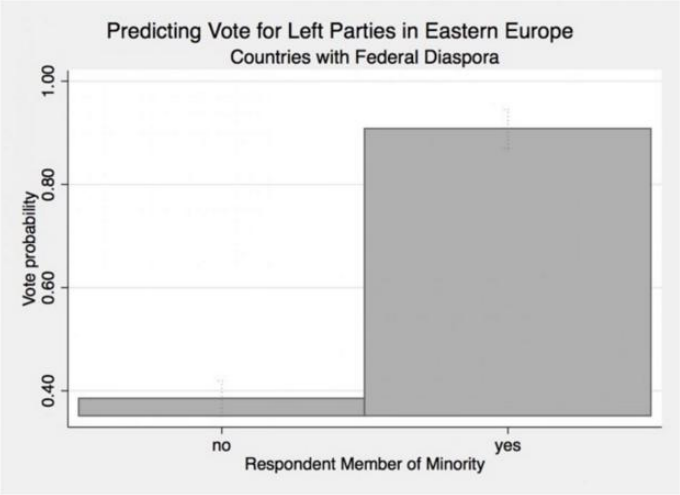
1.2 Presence of prominent Ethnic Minorities not from the old federal center.

Turning to countries that did not break away from a communist federal center, the second pattern occurs in countries that have dominant ethnic minorities not originating from an ex-federal center, such as Bulgaria, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia. Because the ethnic minorities in these countries are not tied to a former federal center, the left parties that have emerged since 1989 do not exhibit particular ethnic affinities. They are not prone to the same cultural openness characteristic of left economic parties in countries following the first pattern. In fact, these second pattern leftist parties either sideline ethnic issues, or mobilize national chauvinism to rejuvenate their left-wing ideology, which had been compromised by the fall of communism. Consequently, the left tends towards conservative views regarding all "others." In contrast, the opposition to communism in these countries supports market economic outlooks coupled with social liberalism, which in turn predisposes right-wing parties to be more sympathetic to the concerns of ethnic minorities.

As in the first case, these left-right positions inform the views of respective political parties towards immigrants and policy. As such, left-wing voters are prone to oppose immigration (see Figure 2), which is the opposite of what we find in Western Europe (see Figure 3) where the competition pattern is such that left-wing economics espouses social liberalism and those holding positions on the economic right hold socially conservative views.[9] And instead, it is the political right-wing that supports immigration and multiculturalism.

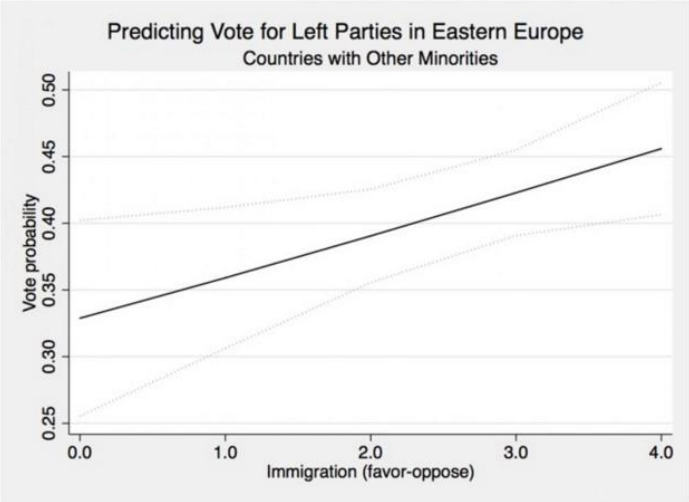
An additional observation from these initial two patterns is that in both country groups, ethnic minorities tend overall to be more open to immigration than the majority of the population, regardless of the country's relation to communist federalism (See Figure 4 on the next page). These findings emphasize the intimate ideological relationship between views on ethnic minority rights and immigration in Eastern Europe, which can then be understood as an indicator for policy positions.

Figure 1:



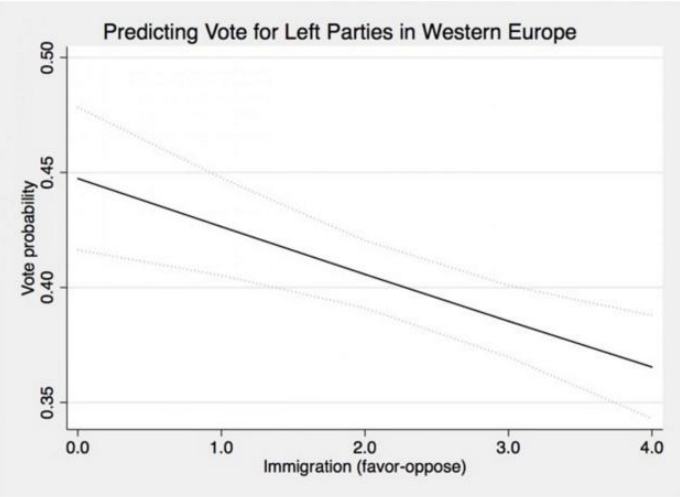
Predicting vote for left parties, European Election Study 2009. Prepared by author

Figure 2:



Predicting vote for left parties, European Election Study 2009. Prepared by author

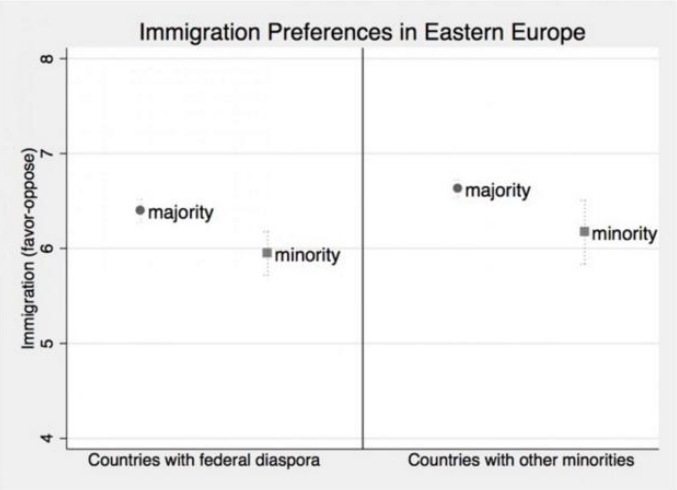
Figure 3:



Predicting vote for left parties, European Election Study 2009. Prepared by author

[8] Rovny (2014), "The other 'other': Party responses to immigration in eastern Europe", p. 647.
[9] Rovny (2014), "Communism, Federalism, and Ethnic Minorities", p. 672 : Van de Brug and van Spanje 2009.

Figure 4:



Immigration preferences, European Election Study 2009. Prepared by author.

1.3 Ethnic Homogeneity

The final pattern emerges in countries that are ethnically homogenous, and do not have any politically relevant ethnic minority groups. Subsequently, the structure of party competition in these countries is not significantly influenced by ethnic minority issues. This group includes Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic (which was a federal center). Research shows that what matters in these particular contexts is the extent to which the former communist party reformed in terms of party ideology and subsequent positions. Nonetheless, social liberalism, and, with it, the positions on immigration, are again rooted in views on nationalism and ethnic minorities. On the one hand, the Czech Republic is home to an intransigent Communist party that represents a left-wing rousable by ethnic nationalism aimed against the historical, but no longer present, German minority. Today, the party takes a negative stance on the refugee crisis devoid of any solidaristic language, rather proposing to take the European Commission to the Court of Justice.[10] On the other hand, Polish and Hungarian politics are defined by reformist post-communists who adopted liberal stances in the 1990s, only to be eclipsed by their nationalist right-wing opponents in the 2000s. Here, it is the conservative right that vocally opposes immigration, while the left (quietly) presents a more conciliatory stance. Furthermore, in Hungary, the right-wing led by Victor Orban draws much of its current political identity from its nationalistic support of extra-territorial Hungarian nationals. He and his political party have extensively opposed the acceptance of refugees, which resonates with the preferences of the right-wing supporters, while the supporters of the left-wing hold significantly more liberal views.[11] Interestingly, and in line with the general trends, the Hungarian minority party in Slovakia (Most-Hid) presents one of the most supportive positions towards migrants, pointing out that migration might bring benefits to the receiving countries.[12] The recent 2015 national election campaign in Poland extensively contested immigration policy, with the leader of the winning right-wing nationalist party playing up xenophobic sentiments.[13]

[10] Vojtěch Filip, Otázky Václava Moravce, *Česká Televize*. 13.9.2015.

[11] "Hungarians Fear of Migrants and Terrorism" in *Hungarian Spectrum* (18/12/2015) : http://hungarianspectrum.org/2015/12/18/hungarians-fear-of-migrants-and-terrorism/

[12] "MIGRÁCIA: Solidarita a zodpovednosť sa nevylučujú" *Most-Hid* official website: http://www.most-hid.sk/sk/migracia-solidarita-zodpovednost-sa-nevylucuju Consulted 14.9.2015

[13] Jan Cienski, "Migrants carry 'parasites and protozoa,' warns Polish opposition leader," in *Politico.eu* (14/10/15) http://www.politico.eu/article/migrants-asylum-poland-kaczynski-election/

2. Policy Outcomes Based on these Patterns

There are thus diverse views on immigration policy and the current migration flow in Eastern Europe. This variance is strongly related to views of ethnic minorities, and nationalism. The ongoing migration crisis has put the issue of immigration, which was hitherto only marginal in the political discourses in the region, into the spotlight. As such, the crisis has greatly heightened the salience of immigration and asylum policy, and made it a significant political topic. Simultaneously, the real or potential inflow of migrants of culturally different backgrounds has created a significant political opportunity for political entrepreneurs. While parts of Eastern Europe have witnessed a shift towards conservative and nationalist politics prior to the migration crisis (the continuing strength of Victor Orban's Fidesz party, and the waning support of the liberal government in Poland prior to the 2015 election), the migration crisis offered nationalist politicians a potent topic for mobilizing voters. Victor Orban, as well as Jaroslaw Kaczynski, have seized this opportunity.

In terms of specific policy changes related to the migration crisis, there are two factors to consider. First is the political color of the government, which determines the likelihood that the government adopts liberal or conservative stances on the migration issue, in line with the three political patterns discussed above. Second factor is whether or not the country lies on the Balkan migration route. Table 1 provides an overview of immigration policy changes implemented by eastern European governments in the fall of 2015. It considers the restriction of movement by imposing border controls, or the adjustment of legislation concerning migration. In addition, the table also presents the rhetoric of the government concerning migration, as this may differ from actual policy implementation.

The table highlights two key patterns. First, all countries on the Balkan migration route closed their borders, no matter their political

Table 1

Country	On Migration Route? (Yes, No)	Government in Fall 2015	Policy (border controls, adherence to EU regulations, no change)	Rhetoric (positive, negative, neutral)
Pattern I - Countries with Federal Diaspora				
Latvia	No	Conservative (right)	Adheres to EU regulations, but passes new law restricting the government's action on refugee intake	Negative
Estonia	No	Liberal/Conservative (right)	No change	Positive
Croatia	Yes	Liberal (left)*	Border controls imposed in response to controls in Hungary and later Slovenia	Positive
Slovenia	Yes	Liberal (centre/left)	Border controls imposed in response to controls in Hungary	Positive
Pattern II - Countries with Other Minorities				
Slovakia	No	Conservative (left)	Border controls introduced	Negative
Romania	No	Technical (liberal)	Adheres to EU regulations	Neutral
Lithuania	No	Liberal (centrist)	Adheres to EU regulations	Positive
Bulgaria	Yes (indirect)	Liberal (right)	No change	Negative
Pattern III - Homogeneous Countries				
Hungary	Yes	Conservative (right)	Strict border controls imposed	Negative
Poland	No	Conservative (right) (Nov. 2015)	Government change; no policy change	Negative
Czech Republic	No	Liberal/Conservative (centre)	No change	Negative

*An election occured in November 2015, however, the new government did not assume office until January 22, 2016.
Source: This table was created by the author and references can be provided upon request.

pattern or government color. However, liberal governments (such as the center-left government of Slovenia, or the left-liberal government of Croatia) continue to have a positive rhetoric towards migrants. The pattern of whether the left or the right presents positive or negative rhetoric is closely associated with the political patterns described above.

Second, the table demonstrates an association between the political pattern expected in a country, and which color of government enacts restrictive policy changes. For example, the technocratic liberal government of Romania and the centrist government of Lithuania amend national legislation so that it is in line with EU's regulations. On the contrary, and in line with theoretical expectations, the left-wing conservative government of Slovakia introduces border controls. In Latvia, it is the right-wing conservative government that enacts restrictive migration laws. In sum, the political patterns of Eastern Europe indicate the type of policy change that different colors of government are likely to follow.

In the long-run, the most obvious expectation concerning immigration policies in Eastern Europe is that, like in the west, these policies will be extensively contested by the competing liberal and conservative forces within each country. Who falls on which side of this divide will be dominantly determined by their long-standing views of ethnic minorities. Secondly, given the potent political opportunity offered by the migration crisis to the conservative camps, and the assertive use of this opportunity by some key actors, we should expect a significant rise of opposition to immigration on the part of the public, which will further strengthen the conservative side of the political divide.

Conclusion

The seemingly simple story of policy uniformity among Eastern European countries on the issue of immigration is now revealed as a much more complex aggregation of diverse political views based on attitudes towards ethnic minorities. In contexts where the left generally supports ethnic minorities due to its past affinity with the federal diaspora, these parties currently have more liberal immigration positions. Left parties who do not have this connection, however, are tending toward nationalist conservatism, particularly on the issue of immigration. And finally, in countries where there is no notable ethnic minority, positions on immigration hinge on whether or not the ex-communist party reformed. In these contexts, including the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, ideological principles about ethnic minorities now have a target group that was

previously absent in these relatively homogenous countries. Incoming immigrants and refugees have become the new "other." Subsequently, the real or potential influx of migrants in the context of the 2015 migration crisis has heightened the salience of the immigration issue. While all countries on the Balkan migration route imposed border controls, the general rhetorical, as well as policy response to the crisis, is importantly determined by the color of government and the political patterning of eastern European countries. As concerns over the migration remain, policy stances throughout Eastern Europe will continue to be driven by political views based on attitudes towards ethnic minorities ■

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