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<http://www.latimes.com/nation/sns-bc-eu--europe-politics-of-migration-20160927-story.html>

**Central Europe sees anti-immigration fervor, no migrants.**

ether, Hungary and the Czech Republic took in just around 1,000 asylum-seekers last year. Still, rallying cries against migration have dominated the debates ahead of upcoming ballots in the two Central European countries.

Along with Poland and Slovakia, they have also become the most vocal critics of the EU's plan to share refugees according to a quota system.

The influx of migrants into Europe has also upended the political order in many countries in Western Europe, which received more than 1 million asylum-seekers last year, yet analysts say it's not surprising that opposition to newcomers is at its highest in the mainly homogenous societies in Central and Eastern Europe.

"Migration is the issue because politically it works and it's not surprising that it works where there are no migrants," says Csaba Toth, strategic director of the Republikon Institute think tank. "It may even be easier without migrants because if people met migrants too often it's not certain that they would be able to hate them in the same manner."

Hungary is holding a government-sponsored referendum on Oct. 2, seeking political support for the rejection of any future, mandatory EU quotas to accept refugees and Prime Minister [Viktor Orban](http://www.latimes.com/topic/politics-government/government/viktor-orban-PEPLT00008089-topic.html" \o "Viktor Orban)'s government has expressed no qualms in its reasons for rejecting the mainly Islamic newcomers: It wants to preserve Hungary's Christian identity and its relatively homogenous culture and population.

"Hungary does not need this kind of intercultural mass migration that is happening at our border," said government spokesman Zoltan Kovacs. "We don't want those kinds of migrants, for obvious reasons." Only 1.5 percent of Hungary's population of 9.8 million is foreign born and most of them are people who moved here from areas in Romania and Slovakia which were part of Hungary until World War I.

So far, the most noticeable counter-campaign to the government has been run by the satiric Two-Tailed Dog Party, which claims on one of its posters that the average Hungarian sees more UFOs in his or her lifetime than migrants.

While 400,000 migrants passed through Hungary last year on their way to Western Europe, so far this year the country has taken in only 331 people, proportionally very similar to the 545 asylum seekers recognized in 2015, according the Eurostat, the EU's statistical office. Fences built last September on the borders with Serbia and Croatia and tougher laws against migrants entering the country irregularly have also practically stopped the migrant flow coming north through the Balkans.

Migration has also been a main theme ahead of regional and parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic on Oct. 7-8.

There, some of the new parties competing in the elections make their positions clear already in their names. For example, the group "No to Illegal Immigration - Money to Our People Instead" gathers four fringe parties with 281 candidates — one more than the total number of refugees who applied for asylum there in the second quarter of the year.

Meanwhile, the new conservative government in Poland has reneged on a promise made in 2015 by the earlier centrist government to accept some 10,000 refugees from Syria and Eritrea. It pointed to terrorist attacks in France and Belgium and said its primary task was to ensure the security of the Polish people. While it says it has received over 800,000 Ukrainians fleeing the conflict with Russia, Eurostat said only 695 people were granted asylum last year and 740 in 2014.

The reasons for the popularity of the anti-migrant stance in countries with few migrants and refugees include politics, history and education, analysts say, while centuries of domination by the Ottoman Turks and Austria's Habsburgs have also left their mark on Hungarians' psyche.

"Most people have no direct experience of living together with migrants, but we learn in school that foreign powers brought oppression," says Attila Tibor Nagy of the Center for Fair Political Analysis. "The government is building on people's fears, the facts learned in school and anti-foreigner sentiments."

Hungary hopes that if the Oct. 2 referendum backs the government's position, it will lead to similar efforts in other countries and put an end to any mandatory EU quotas.

"We will get a very powerful weapon for Hungary to clearly veto the quota on every front," Antal Rogan, Orban's Cabinet chief, said on state television. "If the Hungarian referendum is strong, Brussels' plans will hit a mine because opposition to the use of mandatory quotas will strengthen in many EU countries, encouraged by the Hungarian example."

There are already signs anti-immigration sentiments are growing across the continent. In Germany, which has taken in the largest number of migrants in the past year, Chancellor[Angela Merkel](http://www.latimes.com/topic/politics-government/government/angela-merkel-PEPLT007499-topic.html)'s Christian Democratic Union and the center-left Social Democrats lost votes in recent regional elections to the anti-immigration Alternative for Germany. And in the Netherlands, which received 60,000 asylum seekers last year, anti-Islam lawmaker Geert Wilders' Freedom Party is narrowly behind Prime Minister [Mark Rutte](http://www.latimes.com/topic/politics-government/government/mark-rutte-PEPLT00008100-topic.html)'s Liberal Party in recent polls and could emerge as the largest party in parliamentary elections due in March.

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