Focus on Hungary: Refugees, Asylum and Migration

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During the Fidesz party congress at the end of 2015, Viktor Orbán stated the following: “Today the European spirit and its people believe in superficial and secondary things: in human rights, progress, openness, new kinds of family and tolerance. These are nice things, but are in fact only secondary, because they are merely derivative. Yes, Europe today believes in secondary things, but does not believe in the source of those things. It does not believe in Christianity, it does not believe in common sense, it does not believe in military virtues, and it does not believe in national pride.”

All this was articulated by the head of government in connection with the so-called ‘refugee crisis’, but the scope of the statement is not limited to that. It is just another announcement for, according to Viktor Orbán’s own definition, building an ‘illiberal democracy’ which renders basic human rights secondary to the interests of the ‘national community’ as constructed by the wishes of those in power. Today the human rights of refugees and asylum seekers are the ones questioned in the name of illiberal thoughts, but tomorrow it could be those of another group. The illiberal understanding of ‘democracy’ always refers to the opinions and beliefs of the majority taking precedence over those of the minority.

The ‘refugee crisis’ poses major challenges to the EU and its citizens. It is clear that solutions based on solidarity and responsibility sharing must be developed and implemented on the EU level in order to face these challenges. At the same time it is important to analyse the responses by governments and state officials because they tell us a lot about the state of the EU.

The example of Hungary is extreme in many ways. We have not yet seen such a systemic, ideological, and programmatic attempt to close the EU’s external borders by building a fence in order to keep refugees out, to deny basic European values, including human rights, and to refuse to fulfil humanitarian obligations. On the other hand, Orbán’s approach and the Hungarian way of handling the ‘refugee crisis’ have unfortunately become a model in other EU Member States.

In view of these developments, the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung commissioned a study by Political Capital in order to provide the reader with important background information, facts and data. The authors of the study analyse the Orbán Government’s rhetoric and policy measures with regard to refugee, asylum and migration issues. They describe the historical context, supply valuable data, and ask in what way the Government has influenced public discourse. The study shows how democratic opposition parties, the far-right, and civil society actors have responded to the Government’s anti-refugee policies. The authors also discuss the question how the ‘refugee crisis’ has affected regional cooperation.

We would like to express our gratitude to the publication’s authors and copy editors for their efforts and commitment. We hope the publication will contribute to future critical debate on refugee, asylum and migration policies in Hungary and the EU.

Budapest and Prague, December 2015

Péter Krekó
Director
Political Capital

Eva van de Rakt
Director
Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Prague office

Summary

Looking at the refugee crisis from Hungary, it can be seen to have two dimensions: one involving domestic politics and one involving international politics. This paper examines these two mutually-connected levels in the context of political risks that pose a threat to European integration.

At the domestic political level, the Orbán Government, which was on the defensive at the end of 2014 and in early 2015, has regained political initiative by essentially promising “zero admission” to asylum seekers and increased protection for both the Hungarian and EU external borders due to increased arrival rates. Nagging corruption cases, governance failures, and conflicts within the governing party have been relegated to the back burner of the Hungarian public discourse, and since spring the political agenda has essentially been dominated by the refugee and migration issue. With respect to refugees and migration, those right-wing media which are owned by Lajos Simicska, Orbán’s erstwhile ally turned enemy, have now lined up behind the Government despite their harsh criticism of the Cabinet following the row between the two men. This position is also shared by Hungarian society generally, which – as in other Eastern European countries – is essentially hostile to both migrants and refugees.

Due to this widespread thinking, many opposition parties and media that criticize the Government are now cautious when it comes to openly criticising its refugee and migration policy. In fact, the Government’s radical rhetoric leaves even the far-right Jobbik little room for manoeuvre. The Government is not facing strong criticism except from some opinion-makers, smaller parties, and civil society organizations that are doing a great deal to help refugees. Moreover, there are no signs of any politically-mature, alternative ideas on this issue able to attract any significant support. This cannot just be explained by Hungarian society’s seemingly inexorable xenophobic attitude; instead, this is the result of a well-planned, manipulative propaganda campaign at times verging on inciting public hysteria, such as the Orbán cabinet’s springtime “national consultation”, i.e., its letters with anti-immigrant messages sent to each household, and its billboard campaign launched in the early summer. Both measures increased xenophobia in a country with hardly any actual immigrant presence. Most people in Hungary have no experience living with foreigners and fears fed by lack of information about them are easily reinforced.

This is more than a communications coup for the Government. The political environment as a whole has shifted, benefitting the governing side; returning to the proven strategy he has applied since 2002, Orbán has again managed to divide the political arena into ‘pro-national’ and ‘anti-national’ (or ‘allies’, ‘traitors’). In his view, all those attacking the Government belong in the latter category. Moreover, the Government has managed to flex its muscle at the domestic and international level alike: It has presented itself at both levels as “problem-solver” while simultaneously rejecting cooperation within the European Union. The Government managed to achieve this by first, aggravating the refugee reception problem, then found it important to sustain tension around the issue, and finally managed the refugee crisis at a slow pace. This is demonstrated by the fact that the Government had information early in 2015 about increased refugee numbers, but concrete steps such as revamping asylum procedures or increasing immigration agency staff levels were not taken until summer. Constructing the border fence was seen by Orbán as a perfect solution both at a symbolic and a practical level, but that was started only when summer was almost over.

As of this writing, the public’s perception of the Orbán cabinet has improved in Hungary. According to surveys, support for Fidesz has increased substantially by 4.5 % compared to early summer, and the Prime Minister’s popularity has increased even more. Concurrently, support for Jobbik and other opposition parties has stagnated. It has to be stressed that Fidesz has acquired new sympathizers not at Jobbik’s expense, but among those who were previously unable to choose a party (i.e., presumably former Fidesz voters returning). However, one-fifth of Fidesz voters would cast their ballots for Jobbik as a second option. In the future, the far-right Jobbik will have a better chance to attract sympathizers away from Fidesz than the other way around.

All these signals demonstrate that the Government is not facing the thinking of European citizens on the issue of immigration.” 1


In other words, the Hungarian government calculates that in the wake of the refugee crisis, voices opposing immigration will become louder, and anti-immigration, far-right populist parties will gain ascendancy. It has to be said that most such parties are supported by Russia and bent on destabilizing the European Union. The Government also believes current developments may even improve the Hungarian Prime Minister’s international standing.

Current trends suggest that the Hungarian Government’s expectations are not without foundation. Following the recent economic crisis and the current refugee crisis, European integration is facing its biggest challenge to date. There is the impression that the European Union lacks the tools to resolve the refugee crisis, and the conflict within the European Union has reached an unprecedented level between those countries that accept and those that reject a European refugee and migration policy based on solidarity. The Member States’ behaviour has caused this paralysis in many instances. Indecisive, nationalistic governments are pointing the finger at the EU and failing to cooperate with one another while their national agencies push the refugees from one country to the next. In short, the EU cannot solve the refugee crisis unless the Member States grant it the power to do so, which means less power would remain in their own hands. Those Member States that reject granting such power and reject political union are, paradoxically, those criticizing the EU’s response to the crisis, i.e., they are holding the EU accountable for issues they would like to be handling themselves, issues for which they have consistently refused to grant the European community the necessary powers.

Situations like these can easily inflame culturally-based conflicts. It is evident that past stereotypical thinking is not simply returning, but is rising to the political level. Related to this phenomenon (and clearly not only to this) we have seen radical right-wing forces resurfacing over the past few years in many European countries (e.g., Greece, France, Sweden and Hungary), and these parties also build on prejudice. In short, it is not simply that cultural aversion is on the rise against non-European (predominantly Muslim) immigrants, but also that cultural differences between culturally EU Member States are intensifying, a potentially explosive situation, especially for the post-socialist Visegrad countries.
Disclaimer

Since this study does not intend to give more space to or propagate extreme and/or illegal views and websites, the authors have decided upon a certain referencing principle regarding far-right websites and materials used in the analysis. Links are only provided to expert analyses, databases and mainstream press articles. Contents on the official website of Jobbik are also referred to by links since the party is represented in the Hungarian Parliament. All other far-right, extreme or illegal contents and sites mentioned or quoted in the study are referred to by the name and date of the source in the text. The exact references, with screenshots for the latter sources, are stored in a separate document at the authoring institute, Political Capital Kft., and may be requested for academic use.

Facts and trends

Migration trends

Hungary cannot be considered a country into which non-Hungarians immigrate. With the exception of a relatively large Chinese diaspora, most immigrants settling in the country since the regime change have been ethnic Hungarians from neighbouring countries, mainly from Romania, Slovakia, Serbia and Ukraine (see below for data).

The refugee crisis

From the start of 2015, through several campaigns, the Orbán cabinet has created the impression that Hungary’s place in global migration patterns has fundamentally shifted. The terms used in Government communications (‘immigrant’ and ‘migrant’), have sent the message that Hungary, as a ‘destination country’, must now face a migrant ‘wave’ coming from outside Europe. However, this is far from reality; migrations follow massive, historically-developed patterns, and this fact has not been changed by recent events. Hungary has not become a ‘destination country’ for migrants coming from outside Europe, primarily due to its geographic position.

Eurostat data show that the refugee crisis has brought about major change in one area in Hungary: The number of submitted asylum applications. Hungary is now the first in Europe for asylum applications per 100,000 citizens.

Indeed, Hungary has never experienced a refugee flow on the scale seen in 2015. To illustrate the magnitude, one should consider that between 1990 and 2014 the number of refugees travelling through Hungary never matched the number produced by Hungary alone after 1956. In this context, the shift seen in 2015 is momentous indeed. Moreover, compared to previous years, both the number of asylum seekers from outside Europe and their arrival rates have increased considerably, which is also creating a new situation.

Table 1: Number of asylum seekers arriving in Hungary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source: Office of Immigration and Nationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-IX, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of registered asylum seekers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-European</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of European asylum seekers as a percentage of all asylum seekers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of non-European asylum seekers as a percentage of all asylum seekers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, it is also true that these asylum seekers submitted applications in Hungary only for formal reasons and, almost without exception, then all moved on to Western Europe, Germany being their primary destination. In the early 1990s during the Balkan wars there were more genuine asylum seekers in Hungary staying for an extended period (tens of thousands of people). In 2015 only a few thousand asylum seekers have remained in Hungary despite almost 180,000 registering. According to Hungarian Helsinki Committee figures, by the end of the year the number of those staying in the country has dropped to 900-1,000; approximately 450-500 are being subjected to detention, while immigration procedures are already underway for the other 450-500 people.

A radical increase in asylum seeker numbers does not mean that, compared to previous years, significantly more applicants have received refugee status. In fact, by year-end it had become virtually impossible to receive asylum protection in Hungary due to new restrictions. Compared to the previous year, the approval rate is around 2%; typically, 98% are dropped, indicating that the asylum seekers leave Hungary before a decision can be handed down in their cases.

It is unknown how many people may have travelled through the country during 2015 without having been registered. While the Government denies it, this must have been a large number even compared to international standards. During 2015 there have been major shifts with respect to asylum seekers’ countries of origin. In the first two months of the year, migrants from Kosovo were in the majority, but starting in the spring the number arriving from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan increased dramatically.

All this is important because, in the first half of 2015, Orbán cabinet officials claimed that most arrivals to Hungary were not escaping war and thus qualified as ‘economic migrants’. By mid-year, this argument had become untenable: from then on, the Hungarian Government reasoned that before reaching Hungary the asylum seekers had passed through safe countries, i.e., they should not be considered refugees for that reason. By year-end, following the Paris terror attack, such discussions disappeared from public discourse and terrorism became increasingly conflated with the refugees. Looking at the year as a whole, the data show that most refugees arriving in Hungary came from two countries, Afghanistan and Syria.

Concerning the dynamics, the Kosovars arriving in the first two months of 2015 presented the first major challenge for the Hungarian authorities. Subsequently, illegal border crossings decreased until the summer; in June the numbers started to rise again and those coming from war zones became the majority, peaking in September and early October, and eventually subsidizing at the end of October after the fence closed the southern border with Croatia and Serbia. The table below, however, clearly shows that this Government measure and those preceding it had no effect on the migration process. In fact, the fence along the Croatian border was completed. The abrupt opening for an extended period (tens of thousands of people). In 2015 only a few thousand asylum seekers have remained in Hungary despite almost 180,000 registering. According to Hungarian Helsinki Committee figures, by the end of the year the number of those staying in the country has dropped to 900-1,000; approximately 450-500 are being subjected to detention, while immigration procedures are already underway for the other 450-500 people.

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end to the flow clearly shows that Hungary never was a ‘destination’. Had it been one, the border closing would never have been so effective. The move only worked because it was possible for the refugees to plan routes that avoided the country altogether.

That Hungary is not a ‘destination country’ is also well-illustrated by additional data. With respect to legal immigration, in 2015 there were no significant developments compared to previous years. Less than 200,000 people resided in Hungary with permission from the Immigration Authority; 3,000 have refugee status. In other words, neither number indicates a major shift compared to the previous years.

In respect to foreign nationals residing in Hungary, the National Statistical Office (KSH) data published in early 2015 are still considered valid: 1.5% of the population falls into that category, of whom 70% are European, many resettled Hungarian-minority citizens coming from neighbouring countries.

Based on the latest census, aside from foreign citizens and accounting for all those who have acquired Hungarian citizenship in the meantime, there were 392,000 foreign-born persons settled in Hungary for more than three months in 2011, and this number has not significantly increased since. It is also important to note that this group includes many people who arrived before 1989 and ethnic Hungarians arriving from across the borders.

In other words, Hungary has not become a ‘host country’ during the current refugee crisis. In fact it could never have become one, because it has simply functioned as a way station along an established migration route leading to Western Europe. With respect to longer-term trends, Hungary’s appeal as a ‘destination country’ is actually declining. In the 1990s the migration balance was clearly positive: At that time there was intense immigration primarily involving ethnic Hungarians coming from just

**Governmental Measures**

**Illegal Border Crossing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governmental measures: Political Capital. Illegal border crossings</th>
<th>Source: Police.hu</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of status</th>
<th>As of November 30, 2015</th>
<th>As of November 30, 2016</th>
<th>Change</th>
<th>Change in %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immigration Permit</td>
<td>5,632</td>
<td>5,992</td>
<td>-360</td>
<td>-6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent Residence Permit**</td>
<td>3,026</td>
<td>2,739</td>
<td>-287</td>
<td>-9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence Permit</td>
<td>38,731</td>
<td>44,993</td>
<td>6,262</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Residence Permit</td>
<td>406</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>-159</td>
<td>-39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration Certificate</td>
<td>18,849</td>
<td>15,549</td>
<td>-3,300</td>
<td>-17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent Residence Card</td>
<td>18,849</td>
<td>15,549</td>
<td>-3,300</td>
<td>-17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence Card for Third Country National Member of a Hungarian Citizen</td>
<td>5,212</td>
<td>4,022</td>
<td>-1,190</td>
<td>-23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence Card for Third Country National Family Member of an EEA Citizen</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>-113</td>
<td>-20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ec Permanent Residence Permit</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Settlement Permit</td>
<td>6,614</td>
<td>10,096</td>
<td>3,482</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporary Settlement Permit</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>200%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holding an ID card as Refugee*</td>
<td>1,642</td>
<td>1,763</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holding an ID card as Subsidiary Protected Person*</td>
<td>1,052</td>
<td>1,253</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons authorized to stay**</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>-99</td>
<td>-46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTAL**

| | 183,168 | 202,324 | 19,156 | 10% |

*Data from the Central Office for Administrative and Electronic Public Services (as of June 30).
**As of June 30.

Fidesz starts collecting signatures against quota (Nov. 4)

Parliament debate on economic migration (Feb. 20)

National Consultation on Immigration and Terrorism (Apr. 24)

Billboard campaign (Jun. 4)

Parliamentary vote on safe third countries (Jun. 30)

Parliamentary vote on stricter refugee laws (Jul. 6)

New refugee camp announced (Jul. 29)

New laws take effect (Aug. 1)

Transit zones in Budapest announced (Aug. 5)

Staff recruitment at Migration Authority (Aug. 24)

Parliamentary vote on safe third countries (Aug. 28)

Serbian border sealed (Sep. 15)

Refugees clash with police at Röszke (Sep. 16)

Construction of the fence along the Croatian border starts (Sep. 18)

Croatian border sealed (Oct. 16)

Fidesz starts collecting signatures against quota (Nov. 4)
across the border, and emigration either stagnated or increased (albeit temporarily). Since the mid-2000s, based on the SEEMIG project and mirror statistics, the migration balance is becoming increasingly negative, due in part to a drop/stagnation in immigration and in part to higher emigration. 1 With respect to global migration, the biggest problem facing the country is not immigration but a steady rise in emigration. In early 2013 at least 350,000 Hungarian citizens were living abroad worldwide who had left Hungary between 1989 and 2012. 2 Today, Hungarian citizens living abroad are estimated at 500,000 minimum. This indicates that with respect to migration, Hungary is engaged in unequal trading. Immigrants are far from replacing emigrants indicates that with respect to migration, Hungary is engaged in unequal trading. Immigrants are far from replacing emigrants. In early 2013 at least 350,000 Hungarian citizens were living abroad worldwide who had left Hungary between 1989 and 2012. 2 Today, Hungarian citizens living abroad are estimated at 500,000 minimum. This indicates that with respect to migration, Hungary is engaged in unequal trading. Immigrants are far from replacing emigrants. In early 2013 at least 350,000 Hungarian citizens were living abroad worldwide who had left Hungary between 1989 and 2012. 2 Today, Hungarian citizens living abroad are estimated at 500,000 minimum. This indicates that with respect to migration, Hungary is engaged in unequal trading. Immigrants are far from replacing emigrants.

2. The Machiavellian nature of the Orbán cabinet’s campaigns, their far-right style, and their extremist messages were made possible among other factors by the fact that Hungary actually has no immigrants in significant numbers. Consequently, Hungarian society has no realistic picture of immigrants and no first-hand experience with them, and the government did not have to face punishment by immigrant voters. Furthermore, the Orbán cabinet had no difficulty declaring war on “political correctness” due to Hungary’s weak political culture. Because the immigrant population is insignificant, the Government does not have to count on the risks of re-election that immigrant voters might pose.

3. Within global migration patterns, various European countries are attached to distinct, historically evolved subsystems. Within these, in genuine “destination countries” there are migration networks that these successively arriving can join. In some places these networks are based on the country’s colonial past (e.g., France), in others on a well-established guest worker system (e.g., Germany) and in others they are based on seaborne refugee routes, which are better-established than land routes. Hungary is unique in this respect, so the Orbán cabinet could come up with measures (e.g., border closing) that would have worked with less effectiveness in other places.

4. Due to Hungary’s unique position, the Orbán cabinet’s refugee and migration policy has become relevant in the international arena as well. The Hungarian Government was right to point out that, for a long time, EU officials paid exclusive attention to Italy and Greece receiving refugees through maritime routes and ignored that Hungary was also exposed to severe pressure from those using land routes. This has been acknowledged by the EU and core country leaders and, as a result, the European Commission recommended in late September that Hungary also receive preferential treatment along with Greece and Italy such that it would not be required to admit anyone and that other Member States would take in 54,000 refugees currently in Hungary.

However, also due to its unique position, and despite its preferential status in the EU, the Hungarian Government rejected the EU’s mandatory refugee redistribution quota system. In a country where 98 % of immigration procedures are dropped because the applicant leaves the country, easing other Member States’ burdens through the quota system offered Hungary few lasting benefits. This also explains why Hungary (which, along with the other Eastern European countries, was not severely affected by the refugee crisis) rejected the quota system.

The effect of the refugee crisis on political attitudes and preferences related to migration

Migration patterns and politics mutually interact, and this was also the case with the 2015 refugee crisis. In Hungary the public discourse interpreting the refugee crisis was strongly shaped by politics, especially by targeted Government campaigns. Below we shall study five aspects of these shifting political attitudes and preferences related to migration: (1) public perception, (2) xenophobia, (3) policymaking, (4) party politics and (5) the political system.

Public perception

Increasingly, migration is seen as a major challenge throughout Europe. According to the May 2015 Eurobarometer survey, it is already considered on average the most important topic in Europe, while in 2014 it was only in fourth place (behind economic issues). Respondents considered immigration an urgent issue in only four EU Member States previously, but by now the topic has moved to the top in 20 Member States. Compared to the European average, there has been an even more significant shift in Hungary. While in 2013 only 3 % said immigration is among the top three challenges facing Europe, today that number has reached 65 %.
Main challenges facing the EU and its Member States
(in percent, maximum three answers were possible)
Source: European Parliament

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Main challenges facing the EU and its Member States

DEREX scores – Hungary
Source: Political Capital

Moreover, this dramatic shift in Hungary took place over a short time. According to Eurobarometer figures published in May 2015, 13% of the respondents considered unemployment to be the most urgent problem in Hungary, and only 13% placed immigration as among the top three most important problems. However, in the fall that number had already jumped to 65%, and with respect to terrorism as a problem, the corresponding figure in Hungary increased from 5% to 29%, while traditionally important economic and social issues did not show a similar shift.

This shows that in Hungary the biggest change with respect to public attitudes on immigration occurred at the level of perception. No doubt the Hungarian Government’s summer anti-immigrant campaign, the rising refugee numbers, and asylum seeker visibility all played a major role in this shift.

Xenophobia
According to all domestic and international studies, strong prejudice against minority groups is a significant trend in the Hungarian population. One major lesson from the systematic studies conducted since the regime change is that Hungarians are very intolerant (in line with other Central and Eastern European countries). This is closely tied to a strong sense of existential threat. In general, human beings do not tolerate groups perceived as threat. Accordingly, it was a foregone conclusion that a campaign built on anti-immigrant sentiment would gain relatively wide support in Hungary.

The refugee crisis has transformed the nature of xenophobia in Hungary as follows: general fear and distrust of the unknown have been replaced by a specific enemy image: the asylum seeker.

This tangible enemy image has become associated with even more specific fears, i.e., the threat of terrorism and crime.

In the past, distrust has been aimed at future potential arrivals, but by now xenophobia has a present, tangible focus.
Xenophobia and prejudice guided by fear are socially under-standable phenomena, especially in Hungary, where the population has scant experience of immigration. Citizens can hardly be blamed for having developed negative social attitudes on this issue; responsibility rests primarily with the politicians exploiting the current situation.

Looking at short-term data, according to a recent research report by the Hungarian polling institute Tárki, the level of xenophobia in Hungary has dropped significantly since spring 2015. While in their April survey xenophobia was at 46 per cent (reaching an all-time high), by July it decreased to 39 per cent, and by October a further significant decrease occurred (to 36 per cent, or 2013 levels). Since the same decreasing trend characterizes xenophobes, the period between April and October 2015 accounts for a significant increase in the proportion of “thinkers” in Hungary. Party preferences play an important role in both xenophobic and xenophile attitudes. Among xenophobes, Jobbik voters are heavily overrepresented, while Fidesz voters are moderately overrepresented, and MSZP voters are underrepresented.

It is also very important that latent xenophobes are also proportionately high. They are “thinkers,” but when asked about certain groups, they rejected seven of the eight groups mentioned (Hungarians from Ukraine, Syrians, Afghans, Pakistanis, Somalis, Albanians from Kosovo, and a fictional group, the Pirezians). If we add them to the open xenophobes, the cumulative xenophobia is 51 per cent in the total population. Public opinion poll outcomes may be significantly influenced by the way the questions are posed. This is well-illustrated by looking at short-term data, according to a July survey by nézőpont looking at domestic studies, according to a July survey by nézőpont.

Policymaking

At the level of policymaking there are major differences in Europe between Eastern and Western European countries. Western European countries are divided when it comes to managing the refugee crisis. In many places, large blocs have emerged in public opinion criticizing governments’ activities. Measures are seen as too soft or too harsh, including measures taken by the Hungarian Government. The EU’s Eastern Member States take a more unified stance against receiving refugees and against certain solutions proposed by the European Commission.

In Hungary support for binding quotas came to 47 per cent, the ninth-lowest figure. Of the 53 per cent opposed to binding quotas, only 45 per cent can be considered firmly opposed, as close to 8 when were unable to take a clear position. This shows that a majority of the Hungarian public is rather divided on the issue and is not categorically opposed to the quota system (at least this was the case at the end of September). Public opinion poll outcomes may be significantly influenced by the way the questions are posed. This is well-illustrated by a poll conducted by a Hungarian think tank with close relations to the government, Századvég, in early November, where – in contrast to the European Parliament survey presented above – a single question was used to assess public opinion (“Do you tend to agree or disagree with a plan to distribute migrants arriving in the European Union based on a mandatory quota system?”). Close to two-thirds (65 per cent) tended to disagree, while those in agreement were significantly fewer (30 per cent). In short, in the two studies the support rates for quotas show a significant gap, i.e., 47 per cent support in the first study and 30 per cent support in the second study. Following the events in Paris, fear over migrants is expected to increase in Hungary, i.e., support for the quota system in the country is expected to decline further.

Hungary does not stand out among Eastern European countries and the Hungarian public is even somewhat less vehement than other Eastern Europeans in rejecting EU recommendations. In other words, in this context the Hungarian Government is more hostile to the solutions proposed by the European Commission than the Hungarian public is. With its fall anti-quota campaign, the Government was not simply trying to benefit from an already-existing opposition, but apparently wished to use the public take an even more defiant position on this issue. Looking at domestic studies, according to a July survey by the government-friendly Századvég, 86 per cent of those defining themselves as right-wingers, 32 per cent of self-defined left-wingers and 53 per cent of self-defined centrists supported the fence along the Hungarian–Serbian border. According to a survey conducted in late September 2015 asking about the planned fence construction along the Croatian border, 66 per cent supported the plan (86 per cent on the right, 39 per cent on the left and 63 per cent in the middle). According to a survey published on 24 September 2015 by Nézőpont (another Hungarian think tank close to the Government), 87 per cent were opposed to illegal immigration, 55 per cent supported the border fence, and 28 per cent supported the EU’s quota system. According to an Ipsos survey, between June-July and September 2015 there was a slight increase in the perception that migrants pose a threat to Hungary and thus should not be allowed to enter the country (from 64 per cent to 67 per cent); 53 per cent believe the current arrivals are motivated by war and 28 per cent think that economic and financial considerations are more dominant motivations for the arrivals, with the latter position enjoying a majority only in the Jobbik camp.
When it comes to the migration issue, should more or less decision-making take place at a European level? (In per cent)

Source: European Parliament Eurobarometer

Support for Fidesz-KDNP, Jobbik and MSZP (in percent, among all adults)

Source: iPSOS

Party politics

Experience in Europe in over the past 40 to 50 years shows that governments have all but no influence on migration patterns, be they driven by refugees or labour migrants. Consequently, more politicians see an excellent opportunity to exploit the problems accompanying increased arrivals in order to reap short-term political gains for themselves. Since the 1970s, parties opposing all immigration have emerged in all European countries. While their agenda has mostly been adopted by mainstream political parties, the problems accompanying increased arrivals have not dissipated by any appreciable measure. Tightening immigration regulations over the decades has proven ineffective and there is no evidence that, on their own, the European nation-states can regulate global migration patterns at all, so political competition with the anti-immigration parties continually demands ever-tighter, ever more visible controls. Among other measures, governments prefer to pass the buck to the EU system. The short-term objective is to occupy a popular position while not actually managing these issues that may hurt the party’s interests.

However, from the party politics perspective, current developments point beyond competition with Jobbik and involve a broader objective. Viktor Orbán and his party have a well-tested strategy of dividing the political arena into the ‘pro-national’ and ‘anti-national’ fields and insist on treating all issues along this fault line. Anyone questioning a position taken by Fidesz is automatically considered a ‘foreign agent’. By the end of 2014, domestic party politics had turned its back on this fault line that had been so convenient for Fidesz; it became less and less credible that the Orbán government could be defined as ‘pro-foreigner’.

The political system

Viewed from the political establishment’s perspective, the refugee crisis and its fallout clearly pose a challenge for European liberal democracies. With increasing numbers of arrivals, protection for minorities, minority opinions, and unconditional reception for refugees, which creates additional systemic problems. While keeping EU considerations, security policy, and tactical considerations in mind, governments can decide to admit and resettle refugees, which then often runs into opposition at the local political level. Even though we cannot talk about extremist parties breaking through nationally or at European level, such trends are perceptible at the local or regional level.8

The political initiative, and to eliminate from public discourse all other political communities controlling the majority. The Orbán cabinet, bent on building an illiberal state, openly states (and the Hungarian Prime Minister takes every opportunity to emphasize) that the “European elite has failed” because, by his logic, most European governments have come into conflict with the populist majority on this issue.

In some countries the conflict between the agenda represented by the central government and local policymakers’ agendas creates additional systemic problems. While keeping EU considerations, security policy, and tactical considerations in mind, governments can decide to admit and resettle refugees, which then often runs into opposition at the local political level. Even though we cannot talk about extremist parties breaking through nationally or at European level, such trends are perceptible at the local or regional level.8
Politics

Discursive framework

While in traditional countries based on immigration (primarily the United States, Canada and Australia) widely-accepted migration narratives have positive connotations, as exemplified by myths such as ‘the American dream’ or ‘rags to riches’ stories, in Europe, and especially in Eastern Europe (including Hungary), the term ‘migration’ is more often associated with threats, losses and enemy images that, understandably, generate negative perceptions. In essence, the Hungarian tradition lacks a positive migration story. This is based on a Hungarian migration narrative where public thinking is defined by the stages and trends briefly described above, comprising a large emigration at the end of the 19th century and early 20th century, the forced emigrations following both World Wars, the emigration following 1956, and then both emigration and immigration after 1990.

Threats: Hungarian thinking about migration has been shaped by the migration-images and immigrant-images that, over the past two decades, have led to widespread prejudice against immigrants across Europe, where interpreting migration as a threat and subsequently tightening refugee and immigration regulations have become legitimate political demands.

Losses: Essentially, Hungarian public thinking has shaped the Hungarian migration narrative around the concept of loss. Emigrant Nobel laureates of Hungarian descent, those forcibly resettled following the First World War, political refugees emigrating after 1956, and the current trend of young people leaving the country are all seen as losses. When ethnic Hungarians departing neighbouring countries and resettling in Hungary, this is not seen as a gain, but as completing the slow process of abandoning what were formerly Hungarian territories and is therefore also seen in terms of ‘loss’. 

Failures: Hungarian public thinking tends to define both emigrants and immigrants as unsuccessful, marginalised individuals. This negative attitude is not shaken by stories of successful Hungarians abroad, as their success abroad is seen as proof of failure in Hungary, which explains why they left the country in the first place.

Enemy images: Finally, we should mention the discursive framework most conducive for stoking prejudices. After 1990, no immigrant group arriving in Hungary could avoid ‘enemy’ labelling, not even Hungarians arriving from neighbouring countries who, despite their Hungarian ethnic background, were regularly referred to as nothing but ‘Romanians’ or ‘Yugoslavs’. However, this attitude has even older and deeper roots in public discourse. It is sufficient to refer to the classic anti-Semitic ‘enemy’ concept in the current far-right rhetoric, which blames mainly Galician Jews immigrating to Hungary in the 19th century for the tragedies befalling Hungary throughout its history. In another peculiar migration-narrative based in part on this concept, in its rhetoric the Hungarian far right prefers to establish a correlation between migration and the pervasive, adverse consequences of globalization. For the most part, the far right views immigrants as the enemy but not the arch-enemy; immigrants in general are described as stooges of (Jewish) groups controlling the coun-
try’s political and economic life. Through a deliberate strategy to inculcate the country with migrants, these groups are said to have conspired to break the “Hungarian nation’s spirit” and to ‘dilute’ its population.1

All this and the Hungarian population’s xenophobia, which is extreme even by international comparison, are explained in part by the fact that, as shown by a 2011 Hungarian Helsinki Commit-
tee survey, the Hungarian media paints immigrants in a negative light. In most cases, the local media cover foreigners in the crime section, describing migrants and refugees essentially as crimina-

tals posing a national security threat. On the other hand, ‘human interest’ stories about migrants, their successful integration, or their difficulties are regularly ignored.2

Short historical background

Within the discursive framework described above, migration as a political issue first emerged in the Hungarian public discourse in the early 2000s, initially in connection with local interpre-

1 SEE MiG is a strategic project funded by the European Union’s South-East Europe Programme aiming to better understand and address long-term migratory, human capital and demographic processes of South-East Europe, as well as their effects on labour markets, national and regional economies. The main goal of the project is to empower public administra-
tions to develop and implement policies and strategies by using enhanced analysis and empirical evidence.  
lisi-migracion-rendszerben/.  
expubs_opinion/archives/eb/eb83/eb83_first_e.pdf.  
6 Xenophobes are respondents who would let in no refugees, while xenophiles would accept all refugees. Thinkers are those who select the item: ‘it 
cikk_137008_gyulai.pdf.  
cikk_137008_gyulai.pdf.
The refugee crisis

During the 2015 public discourse in Hungary was dominated by the refugee crisis. The topic was politically used by the Govern- ment, the governing party Fidesz, and the far-right party Jobbik to capitalize on xenophobic, anti-immigration sentiments. The authorities responsible for asylum seekers (e.g., the Office of Immigration and Nationality), and for ethnic and religious minorities (e.g., the Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights) made xenophobic or hate-inciting statements during the period in question, but statements by leading government officials and politicians pushed the political discourse in a more xenophobic, radical direction.

Government

The Government intended to frame migration and refugees as a topic in the context of debates on terrorism, high immigrant numbers, and processing the arrivals. The opposition and civil society groups could not offer any resistance to the schedule for these debates, which was dictated by the Govern- ment and the governing parties. The Government achieved this result by launching three wide-reaching campaigns: The national consultation in the spring, during which a letter was sent to every household including a manipulative questionnaire, a billboard campaign during the summer, and the campaign opposing the EU quota system at year-end. Besides that, the Government's viewpoint became the predominant one in both privately-owned and public broadcast media outlets.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his right-wing populist party, Fidesz, initiated this radicalizing course in January 2015. When referring to asylum-seekers coming to Hungary, Government officials and Fidesz politicians deliberately, consistently used the terms "subsistence immigrants", "economic immigrants" and "illeg- al immigrants", suggesting that all these people had left their homelands for economic reasons and were only pretending to be refugees. Fidesz politicians made no distinction between people coming from war zones potentially deserving asylum status and people who do not come from crisis areas whose chance to receive asylum status is, therefore, rather low. The Government had politi- cal motives for doing this, as Political Capital presented in many previous surveys that it could stabilize its electoral support and regain momentum in domestic politics by setting the tone, stealing the topic from Jobbik, and presenting the Hungarian population with a 'com- mon enemy' against which the Government was taking a deter- mined stance in order to 'defend the nation.' In order to domi- nate the public discourse, the Government aimed at splitting the political spectrum into two conflicting camps: Those who serve the Hungarian interests and those who would, through accepting any refugees in Hungary, and those who support immi-gration and therefore 'betray Hungarian interests.' Moreover, see significantly-sized minorities with different cultural char- acteristics and backgrounds among us. We want to keep Hun- gary as Hungary. 28,29 The very next day, Antal Rogán, leader of Fidesz’s parliamentary group, made anti-Muslim and anti-immi- grant statements, saying that Muslim communities are already "demonizing" the internal order of "Christian" countries in West- ern Europe and that it is not in Hungary’s interest to accept 'eco- nomic migrants' with traditions completely different from Hun- garian ones. 30

At the initiative of Fidesz, the Parliament held a debate on the refugee crisis on 20 February. During the debate, Fidesz MP Mészáros, entitled "Hungary does not need subsistence immigrants", Fidesz MPs used harsh anti-immigrant argumentation that included the mobility of migrants and processing the arrivals: They used coarse terms to describe the refugees and to demonize them. Fidesz lawmakers asserted that immigrants pretending to be refugees were exploiting international law, spreading diseases, committing cultural crimes (as they had allegedly set the streets on fire in Sweden), and committing theft and violent crimes. 31 Following this harsh rhetoric, the Government turned to action and launched the so-called "National Consultation on Immigration and Terrorism" in April 2015. 32 According to the Government, the consultation (a questionnaire with 12 questions sent by post to every citizen over 18, more than eight million questionnaires total) aimed at designing stricter rules on immi- gration. 33 The letter accompanying the questionnaire, signed by PM Orbán, labels asylum seekers "economic migrants" and says that "economic migrants cross the border illegally pretend- ing to be refugees, while in reality they seek social allowances and jobs". 34 According to the PM, increasing 'economic migrant' numbers pose a new threat to Hungary that "we need to stop." Since Brussels has failed in handling immigration, Hungary has to follow its own way. (…) We will not let economic migrants endanger Hungarian people’s jobs and livelihoods," the letter reads. After this biased introduction, citizens were asked to answer questions and to return the questionnaire to the Govern- ment. The questions and consultation pretended to be a survey, but in reality most questions were preceded by a statement echoing the Govern- ment's anti-immigration rhetoric and PM Orbán's statements in the letter (e.g., Question 3: "According to some, immigration, which is badly handled by Brussels, is connected with expanding terrorism. Do you agree with this opinion?", Question 12: "Do you agree with the Hungarian Government that support is needed for refugees and asylum-seekers who come to Hungary? Do you agree with the Hungarian government on immigration and civil society groups could not offer any resistance to the questionnaire’s content was "unacceptable" because it fed hatred and xenophobic sentiments. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee objected to this practice in a letter addressed to the public broadcast media chairpersons in June. According to the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, the public broadcast media were scapegoating refugees and presenting them as obnoxious, scary people who are harming Hungary. Besides the Government’s anti-immigration campaign, which was suitable for stimulating xenophobic views and anti-Muslim
situations, sentiment-inducing statements against either ethnic or government officials, or more explicitly against government officials or authorities during the time period in question. However, Government officials often used Roma integration as an excuse for xenophobic attacks. Mosolygoi, a former Fidesz MP, told the press that Hungarian governmental and opposition politicians all too often used the fact that they pay smugglers, which is very expensive, and do not arrive by plane. In his view, if those people who pretend to be refugees had honest intentions and really sought political asylum, they would come in a straightforward way (e.g., by plane) because they would be sure to be granted asylum status. Therefore, those who pay smugglers thousands of Euros know very well that they are not entitled to receive asylum status. According to another explanation, the refugees coming to Hungary were not political refugees but ‘subsistence immigrants’ because they had crossed through many safe countries (e.g., Greece, Serbia) before they entered Hungary and their lives had not been endangered in those countries.

In their communications tailored to the international audience, leading state and Government officials underlined Hungary’s commitment and duty to protect political asylum seekers and those being persecuted in their home countries. At the same time, however, they claimed that this right would not apply to ‘economic migrants’. After stating that Hungary provides protection for political refugees, President of Hungary and former Fidesz politician János Ader claimed in early June while on a visit to Italy that those who come to Europe only for economic reasons should return home. The Speaker of the Hungarian Parliament at the second Summit of Speakers of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean in May that Hungary felt obliged to help those who are persecuted. However, according to him, one should not confuse this issue with the fact that an unprecedented ‘illegal migration’ had been going on for years from countries where people were just unsatisfied with their economic prospects. During the summer, lawmakers from the governing parties started to speak frequently about asylum seekers becoming more prominent. However, there has been no deviation from this communi- cation strategy.

A slight difference, however, could be observed in early June, when Human Resources Minister Zoltán Balog, a former Calvinist pastor, expressed his disagreement with the billboard campaign launched in June. During a lecture in London, Mr Balog admitted that the government had not been able to accept any more ‘economic migrants’ because integrating 800,000 Roma already posed a huge burden for the country. Mayor Béla Lacsó (Fidesz) of Accsett, who is Roman, called Mr Trócsányi’s statement unacceptable. In his view, Mr Trócsányi’s statement did not express the Government’s commitment towards Roma integration. By dismissing this sentiment-inducing statements by suggesting that, due to funds spent on Roma integration, the country was unable to cope with other challenges and finance other aims. Opposition parties (except Jobbik) called on Mr Trócsányi to resign. In response to these calls, the minister said he outright rejects the outrageous and baseless accusations against him by the opposition parties. Trócsányi said that caring for the Roma population was a priority and a moral obligation. He also said that he was proud that Hungary had adopted the European Union’s Roma Strategy during its EU presidency. 26

Due to the government’s harsh anti-immigration campaign, which has been happening in phases all year, and because the Government and Fidesz politicians have deliberately made strong statements against asylum-seekers by government representatives or leading ruling party members have been made against xenophobia or radical nationalism during that same period. On the contrary, for the domestic political reasons presented in the previous chapter, the ruling party and the Government have taken a radical position regarding the refugee crisis, and all their actions and statements are aimed at demonstrating their determination and vigilance in immigration. Therefore, Government officials and leading Fidesz politicians have uniformly and almost without exception used harsh rhetoric against refugees and asylum seekers. However, in his view, the public broadcaster preferred to ask to appear in connection with immigration issues even though his main expertise is war and conflict and he had never been involved in immigration issues before. No organisation or expert was ever featured in connection and the billboard campaign. The party called the billboard campaign disrespectful and shameful and distanced itself from it. However, some experts have been linked to the Government’s anti-immigrant rhetoric. Schiffer accused the Government of inciting xenophobic hatred in order to gain an advantage over Jobbik. 34

Regarding the national consultation, MSZP claimed that the questionnaire was an undercover xenophobic campaign against refugees. According to them, the campaign incited hatred and, therefore, was degrading to every decent and honest Hungarian. The new party of the former socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, Democratic Coalition, claimed Fidesz had created tensions and scarecrows through the consultation and the billboard campaign. The party called the billboard campaign disrespectful and shameful and distanced itself from it, saying that Fidesz does not represent the country’s diversity and that Hungary was strong when it accepted foreigners. The party Equitás (Together) called the campaign xenophobic and accused Fidesz and the Government of inciting hatred. 35

NGOs

Besides opposition parties, human rights NGOs, social groups and movements also raised their voices against the Government’s policies more aggressively than the opposition parties’ reactions were. One day before the parliamentary debate on immigration, six NGOs dealing with topics related to immigration published an open letter address- ing Parliament. The letter, signed by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, the Menedék (Asylum) Hungarian Association for Migrants, the Migrant Solidarity Group, the Artemisszió foundation, the Cordelia Foundation and Terre des Hommes, aimed at protesting the Government’s refugee and migration policy. The organizations condemned the Government’s rhetoric labeling asylum seekers ‘subsistence immigrants’. As the signata- ries explained, most asylum seekers had been forced to leave their home countries. The organizations argued that even if immigration procedures would eventually prove that some new seeking asylum were not actually entitled to such status, the stigmatization and scapegoating of people in need is still unfair, inhuman, socially harmful, and poisons xenophobia.

Hungary’s spoilt political party, the Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party (Mágyar Két�힘한 Kutyapár, MKKP) protested
against the Government's billboard campaign in a unique way. Together with the political blog site Vastagbőr (Thick Skin), on 8 June MKKP announced it was organizing a “counter-campaign” to mock the Government’s anti-immigration propaganda and offer resistant information to xenophobia. Although MKKP and Vastagbőr originally intended to raise only 3 million Forints (around 9,500 Euros) for this effort, within about a week 33 million Forints (around 105,000 Euros) had been donated by individuals. Instead of the 50 billboards that were originally planned by MKKP and Vastagbőr, altogether 900 billboards appeared on the streets in two phases, with the first starting on 1 July. While the Government’s billboards only displayed three different messages, the MKKP and Vastagbőr billboards offered 10 different messages.

Many of the additional materials related to the Government (e.g., the billboards that were posted in PM Orbán s home village did this), while others referred to unpopular Government measures (e.g., retail stores being required to close on Sundays, or the Paks nuclear power plant extension). Many ironi- cally emphasized emigration from Hungary (e.g., “Feel free to come to Hungary, we already work in England”) and many contained anti-xenophobic messages (e.g., “immigrants do not work and take our jobs”), or the Hungarian legal definition of refugees, etc.38

Vastagbőr billboards offered 10 different messages. Many referred to corruption scandals related to the Government’s propaganda incited hatred and, besides being illegally emphasized emigration from Hungary (e.g., “feel free to come to Hungary, we already work in England”) and many contained anti-xenophobic messages (e.g., “immigrants do not work and take our jobs”), or the Hungarian legal definition of refugees, etc.38

Among their many critical comments, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee also condemned PM Orbán’s announcement that he would close the refugee camp in Debrecen, accusing the PM of inciting xenophobia for his own personal political interests.39

The far right

Regarding the erupting refugee crisis, Jobbik’s position has been similar to Fidesz’s: the far-right party has been talking about “economic immigrants”, not asylum seekers, threatening the “perishing of Christian Europe”, and identifying refu- gees with criminals and terrorists. Therefore, Jobbik has been insisting on taking a harsh stance against refugees by closing the borders, deploying the army, creating a separate border patrol, turning the open refugee camps into closed facilities, and speeding up asylum procedures. A month before the Gov- ernment’s consultation on immigration and terrorism started, Jobbik launched a petition campaign to re-establish the border patrol and opposing state expenditures on refugees. In the first half of 2015 the movement did not undertake any major activi- ties against refugees, only turning to refugees as an issue from May on, even though Mr Toroczkai, an iconic figure of the Hun- garian far-right scene, is Mayor of Ásotthalom (on the border of the village did this), while others referred to unpopular Government measures (e.g., retail stores being required to close on Sundays, or the Paks nuclear power plant extension). Many ironi- cally emphasized emigration from Hungary (e.g., “Feel free to come to Hungary, we already work in England”) and many contained anti-xenophobic messages (e.g., “immigrants do not work and take our jobs”), or the Hungarian legal definition of refugees, etc.38

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Table 4 – Specific pro-Russian propaganda sites (the core group managed by the joint editorial board is in boldface)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site Name</th>
<th>Topik</th>
<th>Liked</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tíidó</td>
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<tr>
<td>KárpáthVör</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>14,729</td>
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<td>South Front Hu</td>
<td>War in Ukraine</td>
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<tr>
<td>HiDiF</td>
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<td>General</td>
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<td>300.000-en a NATO Ellen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Szentád Magyarország Pótlása</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>55</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Migration and asylum in far-right Kremlin-friendly propaganda

Since the Crimean crisis erupted, the Russian Government has created a robust propaganda machine in the Eastern European region, including Hungary. The Kremlin has abandoned centralized propaganda distribution focused exclusively on traditional media. Instead, this Russian-language media in which were previously Voice of Russia publications46 has been replaced by a dozen, mostly anonymous,47 pro-Russian Facebook pages in the Hungarian language that have emerged over the past 2 to 24 months. Focusing on social media offers advantages such as eliminating the need to maintain expensive editorial offices and regularly report on global developments. Social networking sites can adjust to promote needs with more flexibility, can focus on priority topics without time limitations, are not required to separate facts from opinion and, in fact, may broadcast pure propaganda without revealing its characteristics. These new tools (e.g., the South Front Hu site covering the war in Ukraine, the Eurasian League of Nations (EurasiaKacal) or “300,000 against NATO”) sites such as “KárpáthVör”, “HiDiF” and “Orientalista” follow the more acceptable “news-agency” format. Aside from what a close look at their contents reveals, there are other signs indicating that these media are under Moscow’s control. For one thing, in many cases the sites often sample each other’s content. For another, on 23 September 2015 several sites dealing with Russian topics (see the boldfaced sites in Table 4) set up a joint editorial board.48 Index.hu investigative reporter András Dezső found out about hidőr.hu, which is behind the HiDiF Net Facebook page; this portal, formerly established by the neo-Nazi Hungarian National Frontline group, has presumably been operated by the Russian Secret Service since 2014.49

The “HiDiF Net”, “KárpáthVör” and “Orientalista” propaganda sites primarily focus on asylum and migration issues and the Ukrainian battlefield. On these sites, the refugee arrivals in Europe are increasingly tied to Russian propaganda supporting Bashar al-Asad, the Syrian President.

Two features greatly contribute to this pro-Kremlin propaganda’s success when it comes to disseminating ‘information’ about the refugee arrivals into the Hungarian public discourse.

First, the sheer number and variety of media reports on this issue allows for false reports to be conflated with genuine ones, disordering media consumers who are already confused by the fast-moving news. Second, the pro-Russian sites attack the EU’s approach to the situation by pointing to the Member States’ often inconsistent, mutually-contradictory domestic and foreign policies decisions and communications blunders.

The pro-Kremlin propaganda depicts an unstoppable ‘migra- tion onslaught’ that not only poses a terrorism threat to Europe, but its very urgency demands firm border defence and enforce- ment measures. A central message is that the European Union has failed, with its inaction, to prevent the ‘migration onslaught’ but has also contributed to the current crisis developing as it has.

By creating a new political narrative, pro-Kremlin propaganda exaggerate the impact the refugees are having, and describes them in terms of ‘terrorism’, or as an unstoppable ‘flow of people’ to which some countries react by adopting security policy measures, government measures that make this massive migration appear to be fraught with danger. For instance, “HiDiF” presents the ‘migra- tion wave’ and various attempts to stop it as a cause of terrorism. In connection with Spanish Government measures preventing an Islamist terrorist attack planned in Madrid, the portal mentions European youth fighting in the Middle East who have ‘started to return to Europe with the current wave of refugees’.

The relationship between pro-Kremlin propaganda and Hun- garian political actors

When it comes to this issue, the pro-Russian websites primarily follow the governing Fidesz party’s agenda and play little atten- tion to Jobbik in this context. Jobbik has only been mentioned in connection with its law enforcement calling for the “deployment of the military” along the southern border50 and a domestic ‘civil defence force’ to resolve the crisis.51

For instance, on one occasion “HiDiF” reported on “major- ity’s objection to migration in reference to a regular Friday morn- ing interview given by Prime Minister Orbán. “KárpáthVör” reported on the border fence construction along the Hungarian-Serbian border,52 the Hungarian Government’s dissident stance in the EU rejecting mandatory refugee redistribution quotas,53 and the “rightful” denial of political asylum to persons arriving from “safe countries” (as defined by the Hungarian Parliament).54

Like the Government communications, stigmatizing organi- zations assisting refugees is also a staple item in the pro-Kremlin propaganda. “HiDiF” described a alleged Human Rights Watch report on the Röszke refugee camp as an attempt to thwart the Hungarian government: “All this points beyond the individual
refugees' conditions. International criticism like this may tip the political debate in Hungary. … The goal is for making sure that refugees receive sufficient medication and food. The objective is to help the party supporting a United States of Europe to gain political support by helping refugees who were described as 'liberal extremists' preventing effective action against this strong criticism of the European Union puts the Hungarian Government and the pro-Kremlin propaganda on the same footing. This can be grasped most clearly in the false juxtaposition of nation-state interests with European interests on the same footing. this can be grasped most clearly in the false juxtaposition of nation-state interests with European interests on the same footing. This can be grasped most clearly in the false juxtaposition of nation-state interests with European interests on the same footing. This can be grasped most clearly in the false juxtaposition of nation-state interests with European interests.

Conspiracy theories

The purest pro-Assad, pro-Iran and pro-Russian position is represented by "Orantista", although the website's editorial pieces are essentially indistinguishable from a wide variety of conspiracy theories. As the site would have it, the Western intervention against Assad is just another 'colour revolution' devised by the CIA, a scenario that is intended to include Iran, Iraq, Libya, Syria and Ukraine, not to mention meddling in Russia and Hungary. A key contributor to the site, Dr. Balsas Mihályi (Sheikh Abdel Rahman), a Muslim convert and founder of the Hungarian Muslim Community, claims that Western action against Syria is actually an 'Israel-American' attack aimed at Syria and Iran: "Since Israel cannot take action against Iran on its own, for years it has tried to drag Obama into an anti-Israel offensive. (…) Should the inquisitors, presented as the public as Syrian resistance fighters, get the upper hand, the last secular Arab state will disappear in the Middle East. (…) In reality, this meat grinder may turn into an anti-Saudi secular force, perhaps powerful enough. By creating this Obama would not risk any American or Israeli lives." 4

While attending an international Islamic conference in Iran on 7-9 January 2015, Dr Mihályi described the 7 January attack against Charlie Hebdo in Paris as a premeditated provocation by Israel and the USA. 5 Aside from working for "Orantista", Dr Mihályi is a coordinating editor at the site ilepelezo.eu and Editor-in-Chief of the "Közélet Kelele Jelente" web portal. That website was an organizer of and participant in the pro-Assad rally held on 31 August 2013 in front of the Russian Embassy in Budapest promoting "Western intervention in Syria." 6 In addition, Mihályi is a regular contributor to Jobbik's anti-Semitic weekly, "Barikád," and has also posted on a "Hungária Televízió" interview with Dr Bchara Joul, the president of the forum for Syria Association in Hungary, who claims that the refugees are being "dumped" on Europe by the US Embassy in Moscow. He also directed a question to the US Embassy in Budapest protesting "Western intervention in Syria." 7 In addition, Mihályi is a regular contributor to Jobbik's anti-Semitic weekly, "Barikád." 8 "Orantista" has also posted a "Hungária Televízió" interview with Dr Bchara Jouil, the president of the forum for Syria Association in Hungary, who claims that the refugees are being "dumped" on Europe by the US Embassy in Moscow. He also directed a question to the US Embassy in Budapest protesting "Western intervention in Syria." 9

"Orantista" was among the first websites to organize a pro-Russian rally to coincide with the 17 February 2015 visit by President Putin to Budapest. The website was established in 2013 by a 35-year-old journalist, István Kassab Adonis Habib, Jobbik's 19th District representative, a Hungarian Guard member, and the party's former Vice-Chair. Kassab is also considered one of the party's leaders by the Hungarian government (and who in the past has presented himself as an advisor at the Iranian Embassy) and who also is a key figure in shaping Jobbik's Middle Eastern policies. The rally was also joined by the Free Nation Association, led by Cizio T. Elsasser, also a former Jobbik politician. After the online news service index.hu revealed that the organizers had also invited Albert Szabó (a notorious far-right leader in the 1990s) to attend, the event was taken over by the anonymous "We stand by Russia." 10 More recently, the pro-Russian leftist "Organisation of Hungarian Youth Standing for Collectivism" (MKSZ) announced a "Rally in support of the Russian intervention in Syria" held on 10 October 2015 in front of the Russian Embassy in Budapest. 11 The event promoted by the "We stand by Russia" website was such a resounding success that it was later also reported on by Russia 24 television. 12

On the whole, this pro-Russian propaganda about refugees serves the Kremlin's anti-European objectives: — The refugee crisis dividers the Member States and diverts attention away from the Ukrainian-Russian war. Moreover, because of the Russian intervention in Syria, Russia is being presented as a potentially stabilizing force. This may help to rapprochement between the EU and Russia and sanctions on Russia being eased. — Supporting the CEE region's separatist ambitions helps Russia further open a rift between the EU centre and the EU periphery, i.e., promoting the EU's destabilization and 'disintegration'. — The positions taken by far-right media organizations may help the Member States where Russia wishes to interfere to adopt more nationalist policies, and may strengthen extremist voices in Europe in order to gain support for Russia's policies in the Crimean peninsula.


Global migration requires long-term public policy decisions; government thinking in four-year election cycles are rarely able to make such decisions. In this respect, there are risks due to the fact that, except for a parliamentary draft resolution approved in 2004, there has been unable to develop a long-term migration strategy since the regime change. This lack has not been remedied by accelerated mandatory migration legislation being adopted (due primarily to EU legal harmonization). As long as the government has not comprehensively addressed the serious law enforcement problems as well, especially with migration and refugee policy. In this context, Hungary has been censured repeatedly by the international community.

Ministry of Justice and Law Enforcement and this has created the need for it to be consistent with EU standards forced repeated amendments to its naturalization and asylum claims in Hungary.

The third phase, running through 2004, involved preparatory activities for Hungary. This phase lasted through 1997 until the first comprehensive refugee regulations were enacted. The third phase, running through 2004, involved preparing Hungary’s accession to the European Union. In that period, Hungary gradually became incorporated into global migration frameworks. As the European level, besides not having a comprehensive strategy, there are serious law enforcement problems as well, especially with migration and refugee policy.

According to the Hungarian Helsinki committee, the new procedure was submitted to Hungarian refugee law at the end of 2014. The draft went through only one parliamentary reading and was adopted by the Parliament to speed up asylum application procedures and, most importantly, to stop the flow of asylum seekers from the countries of the European Union who are not considered safe. In an announcement, which “surprised and shocked” Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić, the Hungarian government is entitled to issue a decree with a national list of countries that are considered safe by the Hungarian authorities for all asylum seekers. The regulation aims to make it easier to expel immigrants. According to the new procedure, those asylum seekers who crossed a country considered safe by the Hungarian authorities in the last ten years, will not have to be considered in their asylum procedure. According to a release from the Interior Ministry on 23 June, the Hungarian government announced that it would indefinitely suspend the Dublin III regulations, which require asylum seekers to be processed in the first EU country to which an asylum seeker arrives. According to a European Commission spokesperson, Hungary cannot meet the criteria set by the European Commission. This was for technical reasons. The Hungarian government justified the decision with the statement that “the boat is full.”

How is this decision relevant to the international protection. By then, however, the time it takes to receive training. After spending six months at the Bicske Integration Centre, many refugees leave without sufficient Hungarian language skills or detailed knowledge about employment conditions. Since there is no planned Government policy for migrant integration, the service gap is filled by under-funded, project-based NGOs such as Artemisz, which offers, e.g., language training, career counselling, and opportunities for immigrants in Budapest to obtain a Hungarian secondary school diploma.

Even though the first thing the governing party Fidesz asked the Government in January to do was to tighten the laws on refugees, only one law regarding refugees (Act LXXI of 2007 on Asylum) was amended by the Hungarian Parliament within the first half of 2015. That vote did not take place until 30 June and the law took effect on 1 August. According to the modified law, the government is entitled to issue a decree with a national list of countries that are considered safe by the Hungarian authorities for all asylum seekers. The regulation aims to make it easier to expel immigrants. According to the new law, those asylum seekers who crossed a country considered safe by the Hungarian authorities in the last ten years, will not have to be considered in their asylum procedure. According to a release from the Interior Ministry on 23 June, the Hungarian government announced that it would indefinitely suspend the Dublin III regulations, which require asylum seekers to be processed in the first EU country to which an asylum seeker arrives.

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Asylum Policy amendments in 2015

In line with European Union legislative changes, the Hungarian Interior Ministry had already prepared a draft amendment to the Hungarian refugee law at the end of 2014. The draft went beyond the original EU goal (accelerating asylum application procedures) and included further measures to tighten the rules. According to the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, the new procedure would have lacked essential safeguards that applicants had previously been granted, and therefore the new rules would breach UN regulations on refugees. The plan to issue a national safe countries list had already been included in that draft. A few weeks after PM Orbán’s first anti-immigration statements in early January, Fidesz Vice-Chair Lajos Kósa called for the Parliament to speed up asylum application procedures and, therefore, to provide the legal basis on which to issue the national safe countries list. The Fidesz-KDNP parliamentary group also proposed various possible legislative measures to tighten refugee procedures and, in order to stop the flow of asylum-seeking illegal asylum laws to gain entry to the country, as stated by Antal Rogán, the Fidesz parliamentary group’s chair, in February. Mr. Rogán said that some proposed measures that were going to cause conflicts with Brussels because Brussels backs immigration.

The group proposed delaying “illegal immigrants” during the asylum application procedure and immediately expelling them once in order to stop the flow of asylum-seeking asylum seekers. The group was not received by Minister Szijjártó, who had called a press conference with two commissioners of the Ministry of Justice and Law Enforcement and this has created the need for it to be consistent with EU standards forced repeated amendments to its naturalization and asylum claims in Hungary.

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Discriminatory practices against asylum seekers

Reception centres in Hungary were clearly overburdened during the first half of 2015. As of 30 June, twice as many people stayed in reception centres as had ever been planned for. Therefore, officials continually extended the centres’ capacity by adding tents and container housing. Asylum seekers were also accommodated in sports halls.1 The situation in the reception centres was criticised by the Council of Europe’s anti-racism commission, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (Ecri), in a report published on 9 June. The report describes bad circumstances, hygienic problems, coarse treatment and insufficient legal assistance in the detention centres. According to Ecri, 22 per cent of asylum seekers are limited in their personal freedom. The report claims that families with small children are also accommodated in closed reception facilities, and that the decision as to which facility someone will be accommodated was handed out to refugees in the Hungarian language.

At the end of June several police raids took place in Budapest against an anonymous source who was passing through the capital. According to Ecri, 22 per cent of asylum seekers are limited in their personal freedom. The report claims that families with small children are also accommodated in closed reception facilities, and that the decision as to which facility someone will be accommodated was handed out to refugees in the Hungarian language. 2

However, reports by the police have contradicted such claims. A piece published on the Hungarian Police force’s official website states that police officers were talking to people in a language they know. 3

Regarding discrimination against immigrants, only a few cases were publicized in the first half of 2015. A citizen from Szojød in southern Hungary reported in June on a case where a police car rushed at high speed with sirens blaring towards asylum seekers who had just crossed the border. After the car stopped, the police jumped out of it, laughing. 4 A similar picture was painted by a report describing an undercover journalist’s personal experience after joining asylum seekers and undergoing immigration procedures in Hungary. The report described police and immigration officers behaving in contradictory ways. According to the journalist, officers ridiculed the asylum seekers by speaking to them in tough language but were otherwise helpful and fair toward them. 5

However, reports by the police have contradicted such claims. A piece published on the Hungarian Police force’s official website states that police officers were talking to people in a language they know. 6

After investigating the situation at one detention centre in January 2015, Hungarian Commissioner for Fundamental Rights László Székely reported serious breaches of law and the detainees’ fundamental human rights (e.g., constant surveillance and escort by armed guards, overcrowded rooms despite there being enough free space available at the facility, medical mistreatment, female detainees being body-searched by male guards, etc.). 7 Clear signs proving that the authorities were overburdened are also reflected in the media reports about the documents and information materials asylum seekers received from the authorities at the preliminary reception centres on the border. Maps that merely showed country borders, train schedules, route descriptions and documents stating that an application had been filed by the asylum seeker and appointing the reception centre where the applicant would be accommodated were handed out to refugees in the Hungarian language only. However, the Interior Ministry stated in response to a media enquiry that the Office of Immigration and Nationality provides information for asylum seekers either in their native language or in a language that they speak and understand. The ministry further explained that “asylum seekers, after being registered, receive verbal information and information materials, including the train schedule and two kinds of maps, both in English and Hungarian (or in a language that they know).” 8


6 Id. note 92.

7 The vote on further amendments to migration laws took place on 6 July. All amendments took effect on 1 August.


The European refugee crisis has spawned a new expression: After the 'Brexit' and 'Grexit' terms referring to the potential exits of Great Britain and Greece from the EU, there is now 'Vrexit', referring to the Visegrad states' potential exit now that they have developed a unified V4 position on the refugee relocation scheme. According to sources in Brussels, Orban and Fico have exchanged jocular remarks on how successfully the V4 managed to distance themselves from Europe's open-arm refugee and migration policy, led by Germany. Orban's consistently anti-asylum seeker, anti-immigrant, anti-refugee and pro-authoritarian stance has come to fruition and Fidesz has managed to increase its support base, while Fico pursues a similar strategy in the run-up to the 2016 elections in Slovakia. At first blush it appears that V4 consensus in the European arena has never been so strong. However, it is also patently clear that the current crisis may crack the EU's foundations along several points: V4 opposition to the mandatory quota system has led to a situation where, at the 29 November EU-Turkey summit, Germany discussed mandatory redistribution separately with the Benelux states, Austria, Finland and Sweden, establishing a coalition of the willing on this issue. The 13 November Paris terror attack definitely represents a psychological watershed for how this issue has been dealt with at both the EU-institutions and Member State level (although disintegration was already evident when Schengen was de facto suspended for the Syrian refugee crisis). It is not that easy to collect one million signatures in seven Member States, not to mention that even if the drive were successful, EU institutions would not automatically be obligated to pass legislation on it, i.e., in all likelihood, the initiative will amount to nothing more than a symbolic political gesture. However, there is a real danger if the Visegrad states were to see their ability to influence decisions diminished because of their conduct on this issue. This is particularly true for Poland, a key player due to its regional weight and strong economy, where, with its constructive attitude, the centre-right Civic Platform formed previously acted as a counterweight to the Orbán model. Thanks to Civic Platform policies, today Donald Tusk is the European Council President, one of the most influential positions in the European Union. Slovakia, too, with its liberal government and its constructive EU attitude, has managed to distance itself from Europe's open-arm refugee and migration policy.
The Visegrad Group (hereinafter the “Visegrad Four” or simply “V4”) is an association of four Central European countries: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. See www.visegradgroup.eu for more information.


Cabinet Office. “The Commission’s pre-screening process, 11 were withdrawn and, in 16 cases, not enough signatures were collected. While the body has dealt with three initialites, it made no concrete proposals regarding them.” http://www.168ora.hu/itthon/quaestor-inkabb-beszeljunk-halalbuntetesrol-135529.html.

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The authors of this study analyse the Hungarian Government’s rhetoric and policy measures with regard to refugee, asylum and migration issues. They describe the historical context, supply valuable data, and ask in what way the Government has influenced public discourse. The study shows how democratic opposition parties, the far-right, and civil society actors have responded to the Government’s anti-refugee policies. The authors also discuss the question how the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ has affected regional cooperation.