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Good and bad migrants in Hungary. The populist story and the reality in Hungarian migration policy

Abstract

After the 2014 elections, the governing coalition of Hungary put migration-related issues on the political agenda as the main theme to regain its domestic legitimacy. One major means for this was the securitisation of the migration discourse by strong binary

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oppositions and the southern state border, a distinguished place in Hungarian identity through constructing a fence and bolstering its othering function. It faced rejection all over Europe but then garnered some supporters, mostly in post-socialist Europe and among populist parties of Western Europe. The anti-migration stance caused significant communication success and legitimised its pioneer, the Hungarian government.

The authors aim to evaluate the political and social impacts of the migration crisis in Hungary through the perspective of the Hungarian domestic political and economic interests and examine the special characteristics of Hungarian populism. Moreover, focus on a new conceptual approach that examines the government's attitude towards migrants dividing them into good and bad groups.

Keywords: Hungary, populism, European politics, migration crisis, migration

*Introduction*²

Hundreds of thousands of Asian and African refugees crossed Hungary's border in 2015 and 2016 (Messing & Ságvári, 2019; Glied & Pap, 2016). As a response, the Hungarian cabinet opted to securitise the migration issue and erected an "anti-migration" fence to the country's southern border, moreover, established a system of regulations that effectively blocked uncontrolled and irregular migration to the country (Bajomi-Lázár, 2019; Kitanics & Hegedűs, 2021; Éberhardt, 2021). The right-wing government noticed very quickly that the populist anti-migration communication – that contained diverse elements to convince Hungarian voters – was overwhelmingly successful not only in Hungary but in the recently democratised Central European states and the countries of the Balkans, awaiting the accession to the European Union, therefore, it could be used to achieve domestic political goals (Szalai & Göbl, 2015; Juhász et. al., 2015; Glied, 2020).

Before the migration crisis the Hungarian society as well as the political elite in general had very little information on migration itself. The very issue of migration was not part of the political agenda until 2015, because there have been no significant immigrant communities in the country, and two-thirds of the earlier immigrants (in the 1990s and 2000s) were ethnic Hungarians from the neighbouring states. The Hungarian state and society have been assimilating the arrivals pretty successfully due to its complicated language and traditions that helped to preserve the homogeneous nature of Hungarian society. Basically that means that despite various religions, minorities and ethnicities which live together in the country, there are no extraordinary tension and strife among different nationalities or ethnicities, except for the Roma minority who are also considered Hungarians and not immigrants.

That is why it was quite strange for the Hungarian society to hear the government's narrative between 2015 and 2016 which basically made public opinions sound hysterical (the migrants not respecting local traditions and culture, taking Hungarians' jobs).

² The manuscript was finalised in March 2022, the parts related to Ukraine were added later.

On the one hand, the official communication called the (illegal) migrants dangerous elements who would like to conquer Hungary and Europe. On the other hand, there were migrants who were regarded as useful. This inconsistent narrative of the government was reflected in various measures. For instance, people from outside the EU could purchase a Hungarian residence or settlement permission for money (residence bonds) and only 0.3% of applicants did not receive the permission to purchase the bond due to different reasons.

The government anti-migration narrative radically changed due to the Ukrainian–Russian war in 2022. In the days following the outbreak of the war, the Hungarian government did not take an official position on this issue, but emphasised the importance of helping the refugees. Government has perceived the public mood well as the surveys demonstrated that four-fifths of the respondents (79%) believed that refugees from Ukraine should be accepted by Hungary without restrictions (Kyriazi, 2022, p. 7). According to estimates more than 1.8 million Ukrainian refugees arrived in Hungary since February 2022, however, not more than 25,000 of them applied for asylum and more than 120,000 have applied for temporary residence permits (UNHCR, 2022).

Conceptual framework

In our paper we seek to answer the question of how and in what form the Hungarian government (FIDESZ-KDNP³) has been using the "migration narrative" to achieve its domestic policy goals and to shape its political agenda. Our next research question is how the government differentiates between migrants, and what are the basic, general factors of acceptance. Furthermore, we are trying to uncover how the government's ideas spread beyond the borders of Hungary. In order to answer these questions, we analysed contemporary domestic discourses on migration (official and non-official as well), focusing on political speeches and political communication in general as well as other government moves (legislation, institution-building, etc.). Additionally, where applicable, we used media discourses to support our argument.

We argue that each element of the debate on mass migration was built on the concepts of *threat* and *security*, *invasion* and *protection* (Williams, 2003), nevertheless our paper brings a new aspect to the debate that makes a distinction between two types of migrants in the Hungarian context. Furthermore, we examine how domestic politics were influenced between 2015 and 2017 by the government's communication, which eventually spread, contributing to an anti-immigration sentiment across Europe and strengthening governing parties' arguments across Hungary, the Central European countries and even some parts of the European Union. Since these narratives utterly dominated the public discourse, the reality and the explanation of reality designed by the government disguised other measures that might have called into question the credibility of the government's policy.

³ FIDESZ is the largest, currently governing party of Hungary with a nationalist centre-right ideology. KDNP is the smaller Christian Democratic party, which takes part in the governing coalition.

We also argue that – in both communication and policy practice – the government has polarised political communication on migration to the extreme in order to force domestic policy actors to take a stand by controlling public discourse and the political agenda. In this rhetorical context, there are only *good* (useful) and *bad* (undesirable, dangerous) migrants. This approach fits into the general political logic of the Hungarian government and its binary opposition approach to both foreign and domestic policy, where an actor is either friend or foe, with no position in between. This perspective was used to justify political changes and political discourse in Hungary, moreover, it made any meaningful political debate impossible (Sata & Karolewski, 2019). This structuralist concept, present in the public discourses on a daily basis, also fuels ethno-nationalism and xenophobia, utilised by the government in the political mobilisation for the support of its continuous confronting policies (against: its political opposition, EU agencies, civil society organisations (CSOs), liberal institutions like CEU⁴ or SZFE⁵, or individuals like American–Hungarian businessman and philanthropist George Soros). In migration policy, one of these binary oppositions is the well-known nationals vs. immigrants distinction, which is extensively used in media communication (see, e.g. “blue billboard campaign” where slogans like “If you come to Hungary you have to obey our laws” or “If you come to Hungary you can’t take Hungarians’ jobs” etc. in Hungarian were used to strengthen the in-group/out-group sentiments among the citizens) (Glied, 2020). However, due to various reasons (demography, economics, values, etc.) the government set up a second binary contrast, this time within the group of migrants, resulting in the sub-groups of good and bad migrants, desirable and undesirable ones. Basically, this attitude shows the inconsistency of the government’s narrative: there are migrant categories, however, this can be changed as a result of an unpredicted event. The question of what these categories are arises. The migrants are divided into groups of those who are of some use, namely:

1. Belong with “us”, (e.g. persecuted Christians, people with Hungarian ancestry, etc. – ethnic- or religion-based community), where the “benefit” is to demonstrate that Hungary is a country of solidarity and inclusion, however, only for those who belong;
2. Help (e.g. the Hungarian contingent in Afghanistan), where the “benefit” comes from the gesture (a very small and special group in itself, but with high visibility domestically);
3. Pay (e.g. businessmen, students, those who buy settlement bonds), where the “benefit” is purely financial;
4. Work (e.g. guest workers), where the “benefit” is in the functioning of the economy and meeting the needs of investors.

All migrants arriving at the country for other reasons are considered “bad”, especially those from Muslim countries in Asia, the MENA region and the rest of Africa, with different civilisational backgrounds and lack of resources. We also argue that distinguishing among migrant groups based on their usefulness (resource wise – rich/poor), their civilisational (European/non-European) and religious backgrounds

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(Christian/Muslim) builds heavily upon popular geographical and geopolitical imaginations (Said, 1978; Dittmer & Bos, 2019) existing in the society and fuelled by the government's communication that stated, among others, that the European Christian values are in danger, and "all the terrorists are migrants" (Kaminski, 2015). During the migration crisis the government's narrative started to nuance the division mentioning legal and illegal migrants. In the first case, the term referred to those migrants who "knocked on the door of Hungary politely", in the other case those "who came without invitation and wanted to kick the door on us" (About Hungary, 2022). Positioning the clash with the unwanted groups right to the southern border of the country (instead of allowing migrants into the territory of the state) also has its imaginary fundamentals, as this is the direction where Hungary historically faced the most important invaders (Ottomans), and defending the southern border is deeply embedded in Hungarian national identity (Pap & Reményi, 2017).

Populism in Hungary

After 2010, Hungarian government began to use essential elements of populist political rhetoric in its communication (Glied, 2020). A cornerstone of populism, the threat and – as an effective reaction to the migration challenges affected the European Union and especially Hungary – security/defence relation has begun to dominate public discourse after 2015. To back up the success of the phenomenon of populism in Hungary, it is important to mention that government communication has strongly built on the sharp disparities in civilisation and religion that characterised the arrivals from the Middle East, Africa, or Asian Muslim states, but disregarded these differences altogether in the case of migrants settled into Hungary by the government through various mechanisms (refugee conventions, residence bonds – the good migrants).

Populism has become one of the most common and trending terms of political science in the 21st century and Hungary was one of the first countries in Europe where it (re)appeared and has been utilised deliberately as a purely political tool. In our case populism can be called a political strategy narrowed down to a consequential series of tactical steps which degrade the interactions of the political community to an arena of political communication. It has no other purpose than creating a virtual reality as an alternative to mainstream politics which gives a voice to disillusioned, lost, offended, angry and vengeful people (Müller, 2018, p. 9). Essentially, frustrated people are prone to blaming others for their fate and the current state of affairs (Fieschi & Heywood, 2004). This statement resonates with Pope Francis's opinion from 2017 in which he blends populism with the xenophobic sentiment increasing due to the migrant crisis after 2015 and the acts of terrorism committed all over Europe, saying "the *crisis* usually leads to fear and panic" (Magyar Kurir, 2017). It is very likely that with the political reality of the 21st century, we have to say that populism is nothing else but a bunch of reactions to actual or putative events, articulated in a simple and instinctive way, without any actual substance, aiming to polarise the public opinion and gain political advantage (Canovan, 1999). According to Brubaker (2017a)

the Hungarian government did nothing else but utilised the unprecedented situation and used the populism as a political practice (situated political innovation).

Migration crisis induced moral panic (Cohen, 2011) which is a well-known phenomenon in sociology. Cross and Ma (2015) phrased the moral panic phenomenon as an overreaction to a critical situation which can bring destabilisation and the end of the common European project (Metz, 2017). The conflicts which occurred in relation to the migration crisis affected the liberal and democratic fundamental human rights (Boswell, 2000).

The discourse of the European leaders was quite sentimental focusing on the European values and solidarity (Radu, 2016). On the other hand, the Eastern European politicians were concentrating on the danger which was not their invention, only in the sense that they brought this aspect of migration to the fore. The phenomenon can be divided into two parts. According to the civilisationist national populist concept – that has become popular for radical anti-immigration political forces in Western Europe – Muslim migration is a threat and European Christian identity must be preserved. New elements have been added to the discussion by leading Central European political forces. After 2010, Hungarian government has already begun to attack liberalism, which has plunged Europe into crisis and was unable to cope with increasing migration pressures. Later, other governments joined the debate stand by Budapest (Brubaker, 2017b). According to the official government narrative, mass migration jeopardises the European lifestyle especially its security, living standards and culture.

This is clearly the case of *securitising* the international migration topic as Szalai and Góbl (2015) argue in their work. While addressing the policies of the government, they emphasise that by securitising it the topic is elevated to higher level of socio-political importance thus opposing it by potential desecuritising actors becomes more difficult. Securitisation helped the government successfully divert discourses from any unfavourable issues. Therefore, we also agree with Szalai and Góbl's statement that the issue of securitising is merely for domestic political goals. Migration has not posed such a real threat to any segments of Hungarian society which would explain the necessity of such security measures taken by the government.

The essential element of the discourse on migration was that Central European population needs to be protected from the effects of a flood of migrants from other religions and cultures. After 2015, populism manifested itself in gradually increasing anti-migration and anti-EU/Brussels slogans like: "If you come to Hungary you have to respect our culture"; "Hungarians said no to migration"; "Respect for Hungarians"; "We will not become a colony"; "Don't let Soros have the last laugh!". These slogans and buzzwords have been present on posters, billboards, television, radio spots, and on the Internet. In this context, invasion and mass migration pose a tangible threat to society. Therefore, the promise of protection made by the government serves to fulfil the basic need of regular people for security. It resounds especially well in Hungary as it also emphasises the importance of preventive action, thus legitimising the political steps of the *proactive political actors*. The appropriation of the definition of the actors involved in the migration process as well as the creation and shaping of one's own narrative is also part of the discourse, but building all elements around the concepts of *threat* and *security* (McDonald, 2008; Balzacq, 2011).

Three elements can be considered common characteristics in populist phenomenon. Populism always refers to the people and justifies its actions by appealing to and identifying with the people, it is rooted in anti-elite feelings, and furthermore, it considers people a homogeneous group without internal differences (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 322). All these key elements could be observed in Hungarian political publicity. The empty populism theory identifies as a systematic failure of Hungarian politics itself, referring the Prime Minister Orbán's famous quotation that *governance is the art of ruling the moment*. From this perspective, all tools and rhetoric turns that can help to control the public opinion and political agenda are allowed and accepted. According to this approach, politics is driven by the logic of short-term popularity-hunting through effective media communication. This method is grounded in the most instinctive human feelings like fear, uncertainty, despair, envy, disillusionment and revenge (Csigó & Merkovity, 2016, p. 304).

Fighting "violent" migrants and uncontrolled migration influx cover actual issues with a "greater" challenge, ranking higher in the hierarchy of interests. This can be represented as an international conflict, the action of another country, people or group, their "attack" or malice, or the appearance of a group different from the culture or religion of the specific community: the *Other*. Hungarian populism obviously builds on the centuries-long desires of Hungarian people, namely, the idea of rebellion against oppression, freedom and independence as well as the historical aspects of constant scapegoating. It prefers to refer to the post-communist period (1989–1990) as an untold, unfathomable topic, the lack of self-reflection and social debate, furthermore, the effects of external (foreign) influence and reinterpretation of its impacts (Ágh, 2019). In the 20th century, Hungarian society went through several revolutions, regime changes and historical shocks (defeat in both world wars, massive territorial losses, Holocaust, deportations, German and Soviet occupation, retaliations, communism/socialism). Each of these also meant an ideological turn, resulting in deep historical wounds and grievances. There was no opportunity to discuss the traumas, the lack of confrontation created taboos that still – together with complex political issues – represent deep political, cultural fault lines for both society and the political elite (Csepeli & Örkény, 1996; Fekete, 2020). According to Eric Kaufmann (2018), the explanation why populists are more successful in Central Europe is utterly clear: ethnic change is the danger; crisis is the ignition point and immigration is the reason. If historical traumas, national grievances, and losses are also considered, the "big picture" comes together. Eastern European generations born after the Second World War did not have any direct experience with immigration, unlike Western Europeans. From here, it is only a matter of effective political communication in order to explain this to the Hungarians in such a way that Hungary's security and sovereignty are in danger.

When extremist, nationalist political forces come into power, they use the entire state to achieve their goals. Prejudices and stigmatisation of other religions impregnate Hungarian history up until the present days. While tolerance towards others and peaceful coexistence between "Us" and "Them" work more or less, different types of crises, as history has clearly shown, can bring certain forms of xenophobia to the surface. These forms are determined by the cultural traditions and historical experiences of given societies, and they also leave a mark on the political thinking of the community

(Glied, 2020). If a government pursues an effective inclusion (and assimilation) policy, potential differences can blur, then arise again and be the part of public debates from time to time but thus avoid a serious social crisis. Where those extremist political elements are in power and strive to regain their position, retain their power, in extreme cases, intensifying xenophobia and igniting certain social groups against each other could lead to serious social conflicts and even violence (Nyíri, 2003).

The background of the Hungarian immigration policy

Campaign on migration crisis

For understanding the situation that emerged in 2015, examining the entire phenomenon's background might be beneficial. Undoubtedly, migration and the management thereof have become major talking points of Hungarian politics for several reasons. Firstly, natural reproduction has seen negative change in Hungary since the early 1980s, an unfavourable tendency considering the long-term sustainability of social systems.⁶ Simultaneously, the influx of ethnic Hungarians from the neighbouring countries has started to increase, contributing to political tensions since the 2000s. In 2011, the simplified naturalisation system was introduced, and ethnic Hungarians were fast-tracked to citizenship. However, Hungarian society has never considered ethnic Hungarians from the neighbouring countries as migrants, but as members of the nation torn apart from the kin-state violently through political events. Furthermore, the size of non-European migrant communities in Hungary – and their economic and political significance – has been low, compared to other states west of the former Iron Curtain, and in some cases the size of these communities is even shrinking (e.g. the Chinese) (Péti et. al., 2021). Despite such a limited significance, migration became a decisive topic of Hungarian public and political discourses for years. The Hungarian government has consciously, step by step, developed a world of explanations in which the mass migration of people from different cultures and religions, represented in government narratives as ones not knowing or not respecting European values, was called the most critical challenge that Europe faced. At the same time, they criticised Brussels' slowness and ineffective migration policy as well as the inclusive attitude of the Willkommenskultur, claiming that it would lead to very deep social conflicts and finally the destruction of European culture. Furthermore, they criticised not only the EU, but also NGOs that help migrants and promote an open society, highlighting that multiculturalism failed, hence it was time to take part in law-and-order views instead of integration. Government communication has gradually radicalised its position on migration and migrants since spring 2015. Political campaigns were launched and were advertised on billboards, television, radio, the Internet and as a result, the attitudes of the majority of the Hungarian society became markedly anti-immigration over a few years (Glied & Pap, 2016).

⁶ In 2017, the population of Hungary was below ten million. At its peak in 1981, it was 10.7 million.

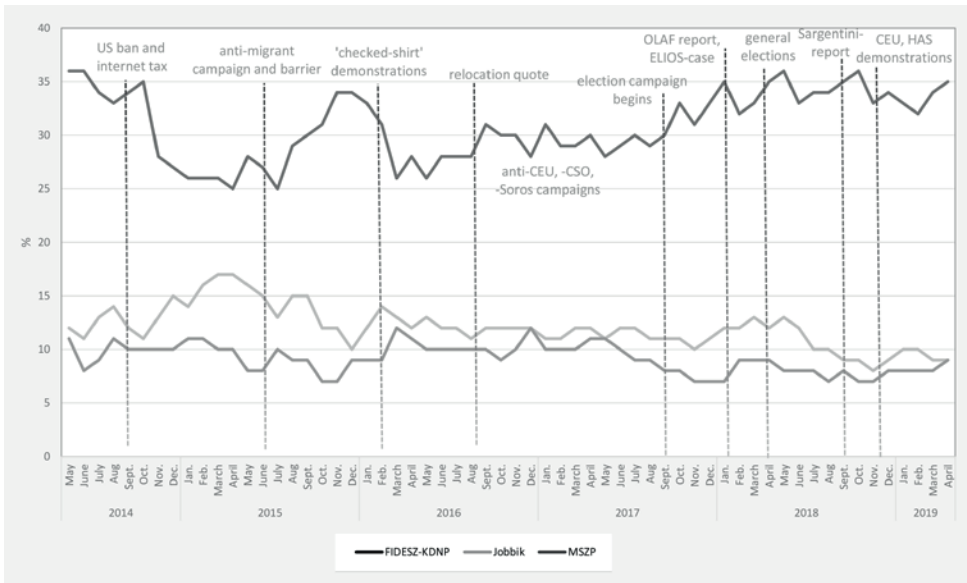


Figure 1. Popular support for Hungarian political parties from 2014 to 2018

Source: Based on Dull & Szémann, 2017 and data from Közvéleménykutatók.hu (2022)

The governing right-wing party alliance won both the 2010 and 2014 elections with a two-thirds majority, while the 2018 elections with simple majority. The opposition was divided into small and weak parties. With three consecutive wins and two super-majorities the government gained unprecedented powers in post-1989 Hungary. Shortly after the elections in 2014, the popularity of governing parties started to decline. However, the migration crisis in 2015 offered a new chance for the government coalition to regain popularity (Győri, 2015). The presumed and actual impacts of the refugee and migration crises in Hungary served to strengthen popular support for the governing parties as social support for the government became closely tied to the issues of migration. FIDESZ-KDNP had significant popular support when public discourse was ruled by the issue of migration (Fig 1.). The constantly renewing campaigns (billboard campaigns, quota referendum, anti-Soros campaign) (Fig 2.) thematised public discourse along the issues of migration and popular support soared, as reflected in the polls. However, when other topics came to the agenda, popular support fell sharply. News of corruption and the state of education in the country reigned in public discourse, disrupting the migration narrative, and resulting in a significant decline in public support for FIDESZ-KDNP and anti-government protests in Budapest.

The government has communicated domestically and internationally the threat of (Muslim) migration from the MENA region to Europe, with a very clear geographical approach, and a subsequently increased terror threat. However, basically a greater number of Muslim immigrants were settling in Hungary from different Arab countries,



Figure 2. Did you know campaign from 2016. It reads: “*Did you know? One and half million illegal immigrants arrived at Europe. Referendum 2 October 2016.*”

Source: 24.hu, 2016, last accessed: March 3, 2021

Turkey, Central and Southern Asia in the 1970s and 1980s. Thousands arrived from Kosovo and Bosnia throughout the Yugoslav wars as well. The Muslim minority is still not significant in Hungary even if the number of the university students following Islam has been increasing recently.

Nevertheless, Hungarian political culture showed some phenomena that are considered unique in Europe. The far-right and radical nationalists do not follow anti-Muslim sentiments as their Western European fellows, however, they demonstrate very radical anti-Semitic and anti-Gypsy xenophobia. Although only a negligible minority of the population has an immigrant background in Hungary, the anti-migration campaign invoking terrorism and Muslim immigration has been extremely successful from a political point of view⁷. FIDESZ was able to achieve its goals without increasing violence in the country – Muslim leaders in Hungary reported “only” verbal violence – and government measures prevented any unwanted migrant groups in the country (Mudde, 2015).

What characterised this type of communication from a geographical approach? Its spatial and cultural duality, building heavily on binary oppositions. Government

⁷ Foreign minister Péter Szijjártó is deeply integrated in domestic political communication as well. This is apparent for example in the phone campaign of November 2017 which encouraged people to participate in a mail-in consultation regarding George Soros. The foreign minister explained to Hungarian voters why it was important to participate, mentioning 900 supposed no-go zones in Europe, clearly targeted at anyone but the international community.

narratives intentionally simplified the issue to a Christian–Muslim, Europe–non-Europe (Middle East/Africa), European culture–non-European culture, civilisation–terrorism discourse (and keep doing so) (miniszterelnok.hu, 2022). What is more, some liberal, international/global actors, west of Hungary, move the chains behind the curtains. This divides the world into three parts in the narrative (Szalai & Göbl, 2015):

1. the *West* as orchestrating the migration,
2. the *East* as the source of unwanted migrants, and
3. *Us*, as the victims of the process.

Another important thread in Hungary’s migration policy, as we stated above, is its selectiveness based on the perceived value of different migrant groups, as it distinguishes potential migrants based on the benefits they can provide for the state and the elites in power. Thus, we can speak of a group of wanted, or good migrants, the government supports and encourages to enter the country and another group whose arrival it continuously hinders.

The Russian attack on Ukraine (February 24, 2022) challenged the Hungarian asylum system almost immediately (Duszczuk et. al., 2023). The Hungarian state provided free accommodation, food, medical assistance, and financial aid to the refugees from Ukraine, furthermore, civil organisations also contributed to the care of the refugees. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán visited the Hungarian-Ukrainian border to personally supervise the care of refugees arriving from Transcarpathia in Ukraine. The Hungarian government’s narrative has changed radically within a few days. While since 2015, the communication phrase to stop irregular and illegal migration dominated the public discourse, in relation to Ukraine, aid and acceptance immediately took over. The government’s communication apparatus attempted to switch to the new narrative, i.e., it divided the migrants into a “non-European, non-Christian dollop who departed from the Middle East, Afghanistan, Iran or Africa” and into “the Christian refugees fleeing the bloody war from Ukraine, who come from the same cultural domain as the European peoples”. Nevertheless, the Hungarian government’s ambivalent attitude towards EU aid to Ukraine – Hungary vetoed EU financial aid for Ukraine in December 2022 – and Russia fundamentally undermined V4 cooperation and isolated Hungary within the EU from diplomatic aspect as well. Distinction between two types of migrants was perfectly visible in 2022, when the government did not want to hide its opinion anymore, according to which there are good (welcome) and bad (*personae non gratae*) arrivals.

The “good” migrants

In the case of those migrants who are considered desirable for Hungary authors of this essay found public and reliable data on the number of migrants and foreign workers (Hungarian Central Statistical Office) until 2019. Supporting the world’s *persecuted Christians* is a unique theme in Hungarian immigration policy. In 2016, the government established the Deputy State Secretariat for the Aid of Persecuted Christians to ensure that Budapest becomes a major centre of this issue. Among other initiatives, a scholarship programme was also announced for Christian youth suffering from

persecution, supporting their study in Hungary. About EUR 3 million was allocated for the operation of the state secretariat in 2017, and from September, 72 young Christian students (mostly from the Middle East) commenced their studies as Hungarian state scholarship beneficiaries, which was followed by around 100 additional students per year (Government Decision no. 1829/2016. (XII. 23.)). At the end of 2021, approximately 300 students received the scholarship. This group differs greatly from other migrant groups welcomed by the government as – according to official communication – their favourable acceptance is based upon moral values. As the protector of Christian values, the Hungarian government promotes the message that common roots and commitment to preserving culture/civilisation is of utmost priority (kormany.hu, 2020).

Immigrants with ethnic Hungarian origin from neighbouring countries form a similar group, where ethnicity creates the sense of belonging. With the simplified naturalisation process the government encourages the immigration of people with Hungarian ancestry. However, as we pointed out above, the overwhelming majority of Hungarian citizens does not perceive the members of this group as immigrants (although technically they are), but parts of the Hungarian nation.

In the case of other “good” migrant groups, financial revenue seems to be the most important aspect. To support the financial sustainability of higher education, Hungary’s government makes serious efforts to attract *foreign students*, regardless of their cultural background. This initiative is mostly economic: according to statistics from the Education Office, the number of Hungarian students in higher education has decreased by almost a third in 10 years from 424,161 students in the 2005–2006 school year to 287,018 in 2016–2017 (oktatas.hu, 2017). In order to balance the decreasing number of Hungarian students by increasing the proportion of foreign students, the government provides incentives to both Hungarian higher education institutions and future students. Through tuition fees and the use of various services, foreign students greatly contribute to the economy of university towns (eduline.hu, 2017).

The Hungarian government set its higher education strategy to ensure that 15% of students studying in Hungary are foreign by 2024 (kormany.hu, 2017a). Based on data from the Education Office, the number of foreign students studying in Hungarian institutions increased sharply over the last five years: in the 2012–2013 school year 20,694 foreign nationals were admitted compared to more than 36,000, or 16.5% in the 2019–2020 school year (eduline.hu, 2019).

In the framework of the *Stipendium Hungaricum* scholarship programme, which is for financing the studies of foreigners in Hungary from the state budget, almost 4,000 students studied in the 2017–2018 school year (TKA.hu, 2017a). According to the data published on the webpage of Study in Hungary the current (2020–2021) number of scholarship holders is over 10,000 (TKA.hu, 2022). Most students arrived from Jordan, Syria, Mongolia, Pakistan, and Azerbaijan, remote places, which are culturally separate from Hungary (TKA.hu, 2017b). From a geographical standpoint, it is just the opposite of what the official narrative of the Government on migration communicates.

To facilitate the residence of migrants holding the appropriate capital the sale of *residence bonds* was launched in 2013. The system required the purchase of a 300,000 euro bond and provided residence permits to customers and their family members once

cleared by the national security screening. Subject to heated domestic political debates, the program was shut down in 2017. JOBBIK for a better Hungary, the largest opposition party accused the operators of the system of corruption, primarily due to lack of transparency, and its opposition to any kind of migration to Hungary. Before the system ended, the Minister of Interior announced that through the purchase of bonds, 3,649 residence permits and 6,655 residence permits to family members were issued, as well as 4,794 settlement permits, and 8,951 settlement permits for family members. The overwhelming majority of participants was Chinese, followed by Russians and buyers from the Middle East (parlament.hu, 2017).

To counter the increasing lack of workforce, the government has supported intermediating (primarily Ukrainian and Serbian) *foreign workers* to Hungary. Pursuant to a legislative amendment in July 2016 (Act XXXIX), there is an option to authorise the Hungarian employment of foreign nationals in an expedited procedure. Furthermore, in the case of certain job types with a workforce shortage, citizens from countries outside the EU can be employed without a permit, which applies mostly to Serbians and Ukrainians. Since 2016, a Hungarian campaign in major Ukrainian cities has been promoting employment in Hungary (Czinkóczi, 2017).

Migration driven for employment purposes, supported by the state, serves to strengthen the efficient operation of the economy endangered by a lack of workforce. In the first quarter of 2017, there were 43,000 unoccupied job positions in the private sector, according to the official figures of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH), a historic peak. According to professional organisations, the actual number of unoccupied jobs is several times higher (Hornýák, 2017). As a consequence, the number of foreign workers rose from 67,000 in 2018 and less than 23,000 in 2017 to approximately 88,000 in 2019 (nfsz.hu, 2021).

Combining the numbers above (excluding ethnic Hungarians) results in an approximate number of 150,000 people or 1.5% of total population for good migrants, welcomed or even helped by the government to arrive to the country despite its anti-immigrant rhetoric.

The “bad” migrants

As opposed to the group we referred to as “good” migrants above, all other groups, namely, those who cannot contribute to the economy or do not share the same cultural values can be considered “bad” migrants. Since 2015, the government has rejected the acceptance of migrants and refugees from the MENA region. Large-scale communication campaigns, new law enforcement policies, the construction of the border fence, and the rejection of the quota allocation system (aimed to place 1,294 persons in Hungary for asylum) aim to facilitate the accomplishment of domestic political goals and better position of the ruling political party competing with other parties. In the government’s opinion, the group of refugees does not possess significant resources and its individuals become *personae non gratae*. According to the cynic logics of interest-based, populist politics, it is their rejection and its communication value which renders them useful.

Based on KSH data, 177,000 asylum requests were submitted in Hungary in 2015, with about 500 accepted. In 2016, the number of requests fell below 29,500, with less than 500 accepted. In 2017, there were 3,397 (1,216 accepted), in 2018, further 671 asylum requests were submitted combined and 367 were accepted (nepszava.hu, 2021).

While the Hungarian government tolerates, explicitly encourages and even uses its resources to support “good” migrants, it securitises the mass, “irregular” migration claiming the migrants/refugees affected not only being “useless” but dangerous “Others” from different cultures, geographical regions, and religious groups, posing a threat, but at least financial burden to the Hungarian society. Therefore “bad” migrants are used by the communication of the Hungarian government as important but unorthodox resources: they are the scapegoats, the arrival (invasion in government narratives) of which has to be stopped, a task only the government is able to carry out against global conspiracies. The result, as we have shown earlier and discussed in the next section, has been convincing so far from an opportunistic, cynical political stance.

Hungarian government’s changing position in European migration policy

The policies implemented in reaction to the 2015 crisis mark a dramatic change in Hungarian political thinking and public opinion. Although the government argued that the policies were implemented due to economic and security considerations, these policies had no predecessor in Hungarian migration policy history, and it seems the explanation may lie in a factor external to the literal migration-related phenomena. Orbán and FIDESZ systematically built their policies on reactions to the crises and tensions of multicultural co-existence in Europe. The government was so efficient that even the representatives of (anti-immigration) political forces in Western Europe and the Visegrad Four (V4) countries have adopted certain rhetorical elements and arguments (Glied & Zamecki, 2021).

The 2015 terrorist attack on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris was the first case of the Hungarian PM making anti-immigration statements: *Economic immigration is a bad thing in Europe, it must not be considered like anything beneficial, it only brings trouble and danger to European people, and therefore immigration has to be stopped, this is the Hungarian position* (Kiss, 2016).

After the Bataclan massacre in Paris in November 2015, the Hungarian government intensified this communication, stating that the link between immigration and terrorism is undisputed since all terrorists are migrants. Moreover, the West is at war with Islamists in the Middle East, so the enemies sent warriors among the arriving migrants. If we allow millions of people into Europe without identifying them, the danger of terror will increase. Therefore, external borders must be secured, the Schengen Zone must be protected, and no other alternative will suffice (Kaminski, 2015).

Starting spring 2015, the Hungarian government began criticising the immigration and integration policies of the EU, particularly those regarding economic migrants, declaring that the EU had failed at adequate regulation. In addition, the Hungarian

government rejected the “compulsory relocation quota” imposed after the European Commission announced a refugee emergency, stating that European solidarity requires each Member State to take part in managing the refugee crisis through accepting refugees in their countries.

The quota faced serious resistance – PM Orbán explicitly called it madness – and the heads of state and government of the EU admitted that the real solution would be to end the Syrian and Libyan civil wars. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini negotiated with the UN Security Council on the possible destruction of human trafficking boats while the largest wave of migrants arrived to the Balkans as well as western and northern European countries, through Hungary from Greece. Budapest reacted by announcing the construction of a 175-kilometre fence on the border with Serbia, leading to heated debate within the EU.

As Pap and Reményi (2017) pointed out, the security fence on the southern border is not merely an instrument to halt migration. It has been a constant element of government communication. All media coverage revolved around the fence: its construction, usefulness, efficiency, etc. In the government narratives this is the geographical location where Hungary faces migration, a historically sensitive part of the country, a direction (South) from which invaders (with special reference to the Ottoman Empire which brought the fall of the Hungarian Kingdom in the 16th century) reached the country from time to time. The government in its narratives even “fights” the “invaders” here (see what is called Battle of Rösztke) as the Hungarian Kingdom did it with the Ottomans. Hungarian public knowledge is well established about the Ottoman occupation of Hungary, self-sacrificing war heroes, martyrs, and civil sufferings from the hands of Muslim invaders interlace Hungarian identity (from books to school curricula, from nursery rhymes to movies, etc.). To build a narrative on this familiar knowledge, and interpret migrants as Muslim invaders from the south, from Asia, using tropes referring to historical eras and popular geopolitical imaginations of lands with different cultures helped the government to influence the public much easier.

Orbán even declared Hungary the bulwark of Europe (defensive function of Hungary) and himself the captain of a border fortress.⁸ In September 2015, Orbán attended the meeting of the state legislature group of the German conservative CSU party in the Banz Abbey in Bavaria and argued that: *Because of the European Union and the Schengen Agreement the borders of Bavaria can currently be protected at the external border of the Schengen Area, which is currently the southern border of Hungary* (Pap & Glied, 2017).

This militaristic and securitised narrative about the invaders, fences and battles along the southern border, besides its rootedness in Hungarian public knowledge and identity, creates also an image of the potent government, which does not only talks but acts as well. In domestic communication of the government both aspects are important in directing the course of discourses. Not surprisingly the Hungarian government faced intense criticism regarding its migrant policies from various humanitarian organisations and NGO’s.

⁸ Border fortress captains are a distinct, important protagonists of Hungarian memory owing to the heroic resistance of fortress soldiers of the Ottoman-Hungarian (Habsburg) frontier in the 16–17th century against the Ottoman forces superior in number.

In its July 2016 report, Amnesty International appealed to the European Commission to review atrocities and possible unlawful acts made against migrants, declaring a humanitarian crisis that demanded real assistance to refugees rather than criminalisation (menedek.hu, 2017). Hungarian-born billionaire, George Soros suggested that migrants be accepted and integrated, a symbolic antithesis to the Hungarian government and Orbán in particular. The Hungarian government struck back, declaring Soros and his related organisations (Open Society Foundation, Central European University) an enemy and opponent of the nation. In addition, authorities started investigating several NGOs financed from abroad, including Társaság a Szabadságjogokért (Hungarian Civil Liberties Union), Amnesty International and Magyar Helsinki Bizottság (Hungarian Helsinki Committee). In late 2016, Orbán announced that 2017 *was going to be about displacing Soros and the powers he symbolises* (kormany.hu, 2017b).

However, the war against Soros, the NGOs, and CEU has not remained domestic but instead garnered international attention, raising the question of Hungary's state of democracy. The Hungarian government has emphasised that this is only a dispute with a billionaire speculator and its international liberal allies. A perfect storyline for a populist government that completely dominated the public discourse while the opposition and pro-NGO organisations protested, but without serious result, they basically observed the manoeuvres of the government. In the case of the Ukrainian–Russian war the Hungarian government's ambivalent attitude towards Russia and Russian aggression, the constant hesitation and reluctant behaviour regarding the EU-imposed sanctions and help for Ukraine definitely increased the tension within the V4 countries and drastically changed the progressive cooperation of this Central European political block. Until the Hungarian narrative sounded like Hungary did nothing else, only attempted to pursue a “realpolitik” in relation to Russia, V4 states treated Hungary as a traitor and an unreliable “friend”. It showed the seriousness of the situation that President of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic Pekarová Adamová called Hungary “trojan horse of Russia” in November 2022 (Sybera, 2022). It is worth adding that the Hungarian situation is infinitely vulnerable, because Hungarian energy supply is heavily dependent on Russian energy imports.

Conclusions

Hungary maintains no comprehensive migration policy, for FIDESZ and Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán, the number one priority related to migration is improving and sustaining their domestic political position, while secondary objective is to improve the financial situation of the country through the support of “good” migrants, therefore, migrants and refugees are not the mere subjects of the policy but means of the government's aims. To achieve this, they have established an efficient communication system which conveys the same message to reach goals. Therefore, when the Hungarian foreign minister makes statements about migration anywhere in the world, it can be assumed to be spoken directly to domestic voters. The government's propositions to EU bodies about migration are submitted by a country without practically mass migration. A country that erected a security fence alongside

its southern border to halt uncontrolled migration waves, furthermore, would prefer a selective immigration policy which would benefit the EU also. According to the incumbent Hungarian government, migration decisions should remain within the competence of the Member States, and therefore, rejects any proposal that would raise this to the Community level. Meanwhile proposals are radical, almost impossible to implement, and clearly only serve to communicate to the domestic audience and newly appearing supporters in Western and Southern Europe. In addition, neither Hungary nor any of the V4 countries have significant Muslim communities, so the campaigns like the Hungarian ones can result in significant political profit without major political risk. This is an issue that almost everyone is interested in, but almost no domestic groups are affected directly, and no losers are left behind.

The spatialisation of the discourse helps the government to deliver its messages to everyday citizens easier and efficiently. The binary opposition logic of distinguishing between good and bad migrants, Christians and Muslims, Europeans and non-Europeans, etc. serves this well. The southern border and its securitisation also support that. Anti-Brussels and pro-Central European attitudes, the contraposition of western (old) and eastern (new) Member States also fall under this logic.

The fact that there was some European reception of the Hungarian communication campaign serving domestic political interests shows the marketability of the message. Governing forces in the V4 countries understood this and applied very similar rhetoric concerning illegal migrants and uncontrolled immigration in their societies, opposing migrants from other civilisations and religions, at the same time, a distinction was made between “good” (welcomed) and “bad” (denied) migrants. As anti-migration sentiments also flourished, benefiting centrist as well as extremist parties in the West, Hungary, and Viktor Orbán have become a “beacon” for the anti-immigration right-wing political parties and movements.

The Russian invasion in Ukraine drastically changed the narratives not only on migration but on Russia and foreign policy aims also. The EU has gradually imposed sanctions on Russia and attempted to help Ukraine with money and weapons. The Hungarian government’s standpoint might have been characterised by hesitation. On the one hand, Hungary has voted all the sanctions packages, on the other hand, it always wanted to express a minority report about the possible effectiveness of the sanctions against Russia. Hungary was becoming increasingly isolated in the EU and among its regional allies, the V4 countries, for its more pro-Russian position in Putin’s war in Ukraine and blocking the EU’s initiatives to punish Moscow for its aggression and help Ukraine. It is also clear that the gap between foreign policy stances is very deep, and only the end of the war could bring about change.

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