

# **Hungary as an 'Immigrant Country' in the 21st century? Conflicts between the Hungarian Political and Social Discourse and the Actual Data of Migration and Immigration to Hungary**

**Vanda Bessenyei (University of Szeged)**

## **Abstract:**

The 2015 refugee crisis posed a new challenge for the European Union. As for Hungary, the impact of the crisis was immediate and continues to be felt. In domestic Hungarian political discourse the crisis was widely interpreted to mean that unless immediate measures are taken Hungary is destined to become an 'immigrant country.' This paper is intended to show that the frightening prospect of an invasion by foreign migrants was at odds with actual data. In fact, the real crisis facing Hungary today is not one of uncontrolled inward migration but rather how long the country can maintain its current anti-migration policies at a time of decreasing population and the consequent loss of manpower. This paper focuses on the inconsistencies between the government's interpretation of the 2015 refugee crisis and actual data.

**Key words:** migration, refugee crisis, public media, Hungarian government, Hungarian society

## **Introduction**

Since the refugee crisis of 2015, Hungarians live with the fear that their national identity is threatened by refugees. Failure to differentiate between the words 'migrant' and 'refugee' in public discourse is one reason for the confusion within society. Public media and several governmental campaigns have fostered a frightening scenario in which Hungary becomes an 'immigrant country' where there will be no place for Hungarians. And although the actual data show that Hungary is not seen by refugees as a destination country, many Hungarians live in fear not only of refugees but of immigrants as well. While Hungarians harbor such unrealistic images, in reality, population decline and emigration to Western countries for work leave a huge gap in the Hungarian labor market. In other words, the attitude of society toward refugees and migrants, and the government's migration policies are at odds with reality. In this paper, I would like to explain how the above situation emerged. First, however, we will need to examine Hungary's current demographics. After that we will

analyze how the public media and government-friendly news outlets covered the refugee crisis and how their reporting influenced society. Finally, I will present the actual data, and examine why, in spite of available factual information, most Hungarians continue to see their home as an 'immigrant country'.

## **Hungary's current demographic situation and its impact on the labour market**

Although the world's population is growing by the second, more and more countries face a demographic crunch due to population aging and decline. Hungary is one of the countries that has to deal with a demographic crisis.

The population of Hungary has been in a state of constant decline since the 1980s. Moreover, the pace of decrease has intensified in the past several years. Three main factors influence the decline of the population: the number of births and deaths, immigration, and migration. In Hungary the number of live births decreases every year, while mortality rates remain high. In 2004 Hungary joined to the European Union in which the free movement of labor is a legal right. However, since 2010 and 2011 the number of Hungarians who left to work in other EU member countries has increased rapidly.<sup>1</sup> Even though the inflow of ethnic Hungarians from neighboring countries has served to reduce the negative consequences of labor migration to the West, the inflow has not eliminated it completely. Aside from the above-mentioned reasons, there are other influencing factors as well, which, in the case of Hungary, are closely connected to twentieth century historical events. Forming the background to the decline in Hungary's population, which became permanent in the 1980s, are the casualties of two world wars, the consequence of the 1956 uprising (when more than 200,000 people left the country), losses between 1960 and 1990 (when approximately 190,000 people were deprived of their citizenship), and, most recently, changes in attitudes toward marriage and having children.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to the question of migration and immigration in Hungarian history, Hungary was a country of emigration from the late 1800s (the primary destination country being the United States of America). This trend lasted until World War I. After the Treaty of Trianon, during the interwar period, and subsequently in World War II, Hungary itself

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<sup>1</sup> Hárs, Ágnes „Elvándorlás, bevándorlás és a magyar munkaerőpiac, Jelenségek, hatások, lehetőségek”, *Társadalmi R riport*, Társi Zrt., Budapest, 2016. p. 243.

<sup>2</sup> Tóth, Pál Péter, *Népességfogyás - Vándorlás*, Lucidus Kiadó (Kisebbségkutatási Könyvek), Budapest, 2014. p. 66.

became a destination country: most of the arrivals were ethnic Hungarians from neighbouring countries affected by changes in Hungary's national borders. After World War II, Hungary once again became a country of emigration. Reasons for the reverse in population flow include the expulsion of ethnic Germans after 1945, and the 'exodus' of Hungarians in the wake of the abortive uprising of 1956, and illegal emigration during the 1970s and 1980s. In the years subsequent to the fall of the communist regime, however, more and more people arrived in the country (mostly as refugees fleeing from war-torn Balkan countries).<sup>3</sup> Between 1988 and 1995, more than 130,000 people from former Yugoslavia and post-revolution Romania sought asylum in Hungary.<sup>4</sup> This period can be considered to have been the peak of the trend toward population inflow because fewer and fewer refugees arrived in Hungary after 1995.

While it is true that a significant number of people entered Hungary after 1989, few obtained Hungarian citizenship and the vast majority returned to their home countries after the situation normalized there. (I have chosen not to refer to economic migrants, who also arrived in Hungary during this time, however, in less significant numbers). Therefore, as already stated, population decline was not offset by inward migration even when the number of arrivals was high.

Declining birth rates, increasing mortality rates, migration and immigration all combine to form a negative picture of Hungary's current demographics and all impact the labor market negatively. With the growing scale of migration to EU member countries, the main question is who will fill the vacancies in offices and factories. Right now it seems that nobody; the labor shortage is more serious in Hungary than at any time in the past twenty years.

### **The 2015 'migration crisis' and the Hungarian mass media**

In 2015 not only Hungary but all EU countries faced a refugee crisis. Thousands of people arrived at the borders of Greece, Italy and the Balkan countries from war-torn regions of the Middle East. Located on the route from the Balkans to the heart of Europe, Hungary's position came to have critical importance.

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<sup>3</sup> Dövényi, Zoltán, „A Magyarországot érintő nemzetközi vándorlás területi jellemzői”, Tóth, Pál Péter (edit.) *Bevándorlás Magyarországra*, Lucidus Kiadó (Kisebbségkutatási könyvek), 2006. pp. 123 – 124.

<sup>4</sup> Z. Dövényi, „A Magyarországot érintő nemzetközi vándorlás területi jellemzői”, Tóth, Pál Péter (edit.) *Bevándorlás Magyarországra*, p. 125.

Social discourse quickly picked up the issue since it was widely publicised in the media: all of Hungary's newspapers provided massive coverage of the crisis; television channels owned by the public media reported on it in every newsfeed; it was the leading news item on all major radio stations. As can be seen, a huge amount of information reached the Hungarian population from a variety of sources. Unfortunately, not all information about the refugees was truthful.

According to news reports in the public media, the refugees arriving at the borders were not asylum-seekers in need of protection but 'economic immigrants' coming to Hungary to live and work. Also, public media broadcasts suggested that, due to the high numbers of these so-called 'economic immigrants', if they chose to settle in Hungary they would slowly displace Hungarians from their workplaces. Most articles and reports produced by the public media handled the issue as a danger from which the government had to 'save' the country.

Not only the public media, but also official statements by government representatives drove home the same message, namely that Hungary was going to be an 'immigrant country' unless further measures were taken. In the summer of 2015 the government launched a coordinated campaign targeting the 'immigrants'. Slogans of the following variety appeared on billboards throughout the country: '*We do not want illegal immigrants!*', '*If you come to Hungary, you have to respect our culture!*', '*If you come to Hungary you cannot take the jobs of the Hungarians!*', '*If you come to Hungary, you must obey our laws!*') Television and radio announcements urged Hungarians to stop the inflow of 'immigrants' in order to save their homeland. The government argued that the 'economic immigrants' posed a threat to Hungary's Christian cultural heritage, to the employment security of Hungarian workers, and finally to society as a whole, but especially to Hungarian women.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the majority of Hungarians viewed the arrival of the refugees with alarm. They sensed imminent danger and they tended to regard the refugees as a 'barbarian threat' to Christian Europe. The terms 'migrant', 'immigrant', 'economic migrant' prevailed in social discourse, as well as the idea of Hungary becoming a destination country and as a result an 'immigrant country'.

Although one can state that the refugee crisis ended (or, rather that it ended in the form that it had existed in 2015), the majority of Hungarians continue to see the issue in the above terms. One thing for certain, Hungarians have become highly intolerant of anyone who might be an 'immigrant'.

## **The real data of the refugee crisis**

The reality of the refugee crisis, however, differed significantly from the version of events reported by the public media and disseminated through government campaigns.

Firstly, both news reports and official statements used the term 'refugee' as a synonym for 'migrant' and 'immigrant', although it was clear that refugees did not wish to remain in Hungary to work but merely hoped to be able to pass through the country to other destinations. By using the above terms interchangeably the media and the government blurred the distinction between refugee and migrant in the mind of the public.

However, they did not miscalculate the high number of refugees. As discussed above, the last time Hungary had to cope with a large number of refugee arrivals was in 1989, 1990 and 1991 in the wake of the collapse of the Communist regime. In 1991, more than 50,000 persons sought refuge in the country<sup>5</sup> mostly as a result of the outbreak of war in neighboring Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, since then, Hungary has not had to deal with refugees in such large numbers until the 2015 crisis.

The number of political asylum seekers had begun to increase starting in 2013. In that year about 20,000 refugees arrived in Hungary. By 2014 arrivals surpassed 40,000. In 2015, however, the numbers reached more than 150,000.

The above figures do not include people detained by the police during illegal border crossings, which were increasing in frequency. On 23 September, 2015, police apprehended 10,146 refugees for attempting to cross into Hungary illegally. By the end of October the border was closed and heavily patrolled. Subsequently a fence was erected. Illegal border crossings increased again in February, 2016, but never reached levels seen in October, 2015.<sup>6</sup> As Hungarian authorities found it impossible to register every refugee arrival, how many people arrived and left Hungary unregistered cannot be known.

Although many thousands of asylum applications were submitted to the Hungarian authorities in 2015, Hungary did not become a destination country. Most of the people who arrived did not stay long; their asylum applications were only a formality, and most of them left Hungary by the end of 2015. Thus, processing of most asylum applications was

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<sup>5</sup> Juhász, Attila – Molnár, Csaba, „Magyarország sajátos helyzete az európai menekültválságban”, *Társadalmi R riport*, Társi Zrt., Budapest, 2016. p. 264.

<sup>6</sup> A. Juhász – Cs. Molnár: „Magyarország sajátos helyzete az európai menekültválságban”, p. 264.

suspended, and as a result, the petitioners left the country.<sup>7</sup> As the data of the Helsinki Committee show, even in 2016 only 1,489 refugees remained in Hungary.<sup>8</sup>

### **Public opinion in the light of the data of the refugee crisis**

Most Hungarian and international researchers agree that Hungarian society is prejudiced against different minority groups including 'illegal migrants'. However, it is not a new phenomenon, and certainly not the consequence of the refugee crisis alone, although the crisis can be said to have exacerbated negative feelings.

The rate of openly stated xenophobia within Hungarian society increased between the fall of the Communist regime and 2014. However, there have been fluctuations throughout the years (for example between 1996 and 2001), however overall the current high rate of openly stated xenophobia can not be denied.<sup>9</sup> The significant rise in the rate in the year of the crisis can be linked clearly to fear of the refugees and migrants who arrived in the country.

Whereas in 2013 only 7% of Hungarians saw migration as the biggest threat to the EU, two years later that ratio had risen to 68%.<sup>10</sup> After the terror attacks in Paris in November 2015, people started to see the refugees not only as a threat to Hungarian workplaces, but also as terrorists. Then again the public media supported this theory by running reports about conflicts in different refugee camps.

Other questions regarding the priority to be given to refugee policy have elicited similar answers: in 2014, Hungarian people said migration was only the fourth biggest challenge the EU had to address. However, a year later, in the year of the crisis, Hungarians put the migration issue at the top of the EU's list. In that same year, the number two problem for the EU according to Hungarians was terrorism.<sup>11</sup>

Hungarians gave much the same answers when asked about their own country's policy priorities: a significantly low percentage of respondents (2 to 3%) believed one year before the refugee crisis that migration was one of the two biggest problems in Hungary. This number had risen to 34% by the end of 2015.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A. Juhász – Cs. Molnár: „Magyarország sajátos helyzete az európai menekültválságban”, p. 266.

<sup>8</sup> A. Juhász – Cs. Molnár: „Magyarország sajátos helyzete az európai menekültválságban”, p. 265.

<sup>9</sup> Simonotvits, Bori: „Nemzeti identitás, kisebbségek és társadalmi konfliktusok A magyar társadalom attitűdjeinek alakulása 1992 és 2014 között”, *Társadalmi Riport*, Társki Zrt., Budapest, 2014. p. 413.

<sup>10</sup> A. Juhász – Cs. Molnár: „Magyarország sajátos helyzete az európai menekültválságban”, p. 271.

<sup>11</sup> A. Juhász – Cs. Molnár: „Magyarország sajátos helyzete az európai menekültválságban”, p. 272

<sup>12</sup> A. Juhász – Cs. Molnár: „Magyarország sajátos helyzete az európai menekültválságban”, p. 272

Even though Hungarian society tends to be prejudiced, according to the research of the Hungarian Social Research Institute (Társadalomkutatási Intézet Zrt.), this attitude heightened in a way that had not been witnessed before.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, prejudice surfaced in a very short period of time, which is also significant.

Following the events of 2015, Hungarian people still believed that migration was a threat to their country. A Pew Research Center poll (taken in the spring of 2016) indicated that a large percentage of respondents, 69%, continued to consider 'migrants' (refugees) a risk to Hungary.<sup>14</sup> The Hungarian responses are in marked contrast to opinions expressed by citizens of the refugees' destination countries. For example, in the Netherlands, only 36% of the population considered refugees as a danger to the country in 2016. The ratios in Germany and Sweden stood at 31% and 24%, respectively.<sup>15</sup>

However, considering the data mentioned above, anti-refugee prejudice neither was nor is grounded in reality. Although the exact statistical data on the movements of refugees were published in 2016 or in the last months of 2015, it was already well known at the time that the refugees who had crossed into Hungary had left the country within a short period of time. At the same time, it was evident that Hungarians could be easily influenced by the scaremongering of the mass media to disregard these facts. Results of research containing factual information about the refugee crisis reached fewer people than the alarmist reports carried by the public media.

Furthermore, public attitudes toward refugees as well as real migrants remains unchanged to the present day.

It may be stated that the campaigns to evoke fear and a hostile atmosphere were successful. Most citizens who obtained their information from the public media accepted the negative images of migrants projected in broadcasts and news reports. However, it should be mentioned that significant civil society movements also sprang up, for example to help refugees transit across Hungary or to ease their struggles with Hungarian bureaucracy. The work of these volunteer groups was in sharp contrast with government-induced calls for Hungarians to defend their country from migrants. Although, the role of these NGOs in the crisis was contrary to government policy, it would be a mistake to assume that the civil

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<sup>13</sup> A. Juhász – Cs. Molnár: „Magyarország sajátos helyzete az európai menekültválságban”, p. 273.

<sup>14</sup> A. Juhász – Cs. Molnár: „Magyarország sajátos helyzete az európai menekültválságban”, p. 273

<sup>15</sup> Simonovits Bori - Szeitl Blanka, „Menekültekkel és migrációs politikával kapcsolatos attitűdök Magyarországon és nemzetközi összehasonlításban”, *Társadalmi Riport*, Társi Zrt., Budapest, 2016. p. 428.

society volunteers had been mobilized by or had close ties with the political opposition. Most volunteers helped the refugees for purely humanitarian reasons.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper, my main focus was to present the discrepancy between the political and social discourse and actual data of the 2015 migration crisis. I examined first the political aspect of this topic and then I presented data based on factual information. But I also considered it important to show how Hungarian public opinion was influenced by the government's interpretation of the crisis in the mass media which carried reports that were factually incorrect.

As can be seen from the departure of all but a few refugees by the end of 2015, Hungary did not become an 'immigrant country'. But because of prejudice in Hungarian society, which was strengthened by the media and the government's campaigns, people are afraid to accept either refugees or immigrants.

This should be seen as a serious issue. The attitude of the Hungarian government, the mass media and most of the citizenry towards migrants in 2015 (and subsequent years) has put the country in a new, unfavorable light in the theatre of global politics. As a consequence, new challenges have emerged and new disputes erupted not just internationally but within Hungary's borders about the current method of governing the country.

However, the events should be viewed from a wider perspective. The policies adopted and attitudes encouraged by the government during the 2015 refugee crisis remain significant today. Thus, the 'solution' that Hungary chose to cope with the refugee crisis (not to let any in) still affects other aspects of Hungarian society.

The government's anti-migrant policies, however, are likely to have serious consequences when Hungary's current demographic situation is taken into consideration. This, after all is a time when the country's most productive human resources are leaving to seek work elsewhere.

With the attitudes that evolved during the crisis, a future Hungarian government will have difficulty accepting real migrants, having argued that foreign workers will deprive

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<sup>16</sup> Bernát, Anikó-Kertész, Anna-Tóth, Fruzsina Márta, „A segítségnyújtás evolúciója és a szolidaritás új formái a migrációs válság idején, Új önkéntes és régi civil szervezetekl 2015-ben”, *Társadalmi Ríport*, Táarki Zrt., Budapest, 2016. p. 288.



Hungarians of their jobs, or worse, that they are terrorists. In this way, however, the question arises who will fill the shortage in the labour market.

For Hungary the continuation of its present migration policies is certain to have severe consequences in the labor market, and eventually in the economy in general.

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