'No migration, no gender, no war'[1]: Contradictions and paradox in Hungarian migration discourse

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Abstract
The Hungarian Government's long-standing politicisation of migration has recently become more complex. Two factors are particularly important here. First, following Russia's war on Ukraine, over 60,000 refugees have arrived in Hungary seeking temporary protection. Second, Hungary's FDI-based growth model and the country's integration into global value-chains has exposed serious labour shortages. Hungary's prime minister recently indicated the need for 500,000 new workers in the next two years. New government legislation now allows 'third country' nationals residence in Hungary as 'guestworkers' under strict conditions. More than 100,000 foreign workers are now in employment. The article explores contradictions between politicised anti-migrant discourse, the arrival of Ukrainian refugees and the introduction of guestworkers into the Hungarian labour market. It draws on qualitative data analysis including political speeches, social media postings and visual images. The article concludes by suggesting that Hungary can be understood as currently caught in a paradox between national economic imperatives on one hand and domestic political and public demands for the preservation of national identity on the other.

Keywords: Hungary, migration, refugees, guestworkers, economy, populism, nationalism

Introduction

Hungary's Fidesz party prime minister, Viktor Orbán, in power since 2010,[2] has successfully politicised migration and used migration discourse to attract political support not only within Hungary but more widely. Hungary's discursive landscape of migration is complex and contradictory and its topology is shaped by external and internal events. The dominant Hungarian migration narrative, beginning in 2015 (Boda & Rakovics 2022: 67; Messing & Ságvári 2020), relies on an orchestrated antipathy towards 'stranger-foreigners' (other than tourists, essential to the Hungarian economy) who come to Hungary ('illegally'). Though clearly having political utility the real or imagined presence of strangers arriving as a consequence of *migration* is an appropriate allegory for the uncertainties and anxieties associated with modernity (Bauman 2010: 157–162).

Since 2015, Hungarian state-funded broadcast media, public space billboards and social media posters have targeted refugees and asylum seekers, pejoratively defined as *migránsok,*

[1] This was sloganised in Orbán's presentation at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest, May 2023 (Orbán 2023a).

[2] Fidesz governs in coalition with KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party), winning 135 seats out of 199 in the 2022 Parliament (of which 18 are from KDNP).

who allegedly threaten Hungarian culture and economy despite their actual presence in Hungary being negligible. Orbán has remained fixated on immigration, dramatically complaining in a 2023 interview that the outcome of an EU heads of state and government summit means Brussels would build 'tens of thousands of migrant ghettoes in Hungary. We won't let it! I am fighting hand and foot against it' (Magyar Nemzet 2023). The EU's 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum has received similar hostility. However, Hungary's geo-political and economic circumstances have shifted migration discourse from simple resistance to something more complex. At least two factors are important here. First, refugees seeking protection from Russia's war in neighbouring Ukraine arrived in Hungary. Second, Hungary's foreign direct investment (FDI) economic growth model and consequent industrial expansion (HIPA 2024) has created labour shortages. Hungarian legislation now formalises a new category of 'guestworker' which permits 'third-country-nationals' (i.e. those from outside of the EU) to gain residence in Hungary for up to three years under strict conditions (Miniszterelnökség 2023). Some of Hungary's opposition parties oppose this, citing concerns about guestworkers undercutting wage rates and arguing that domestic labour should be employed instead. Nevertheless, a relatively rapid admittance of guestworkers (*vendégmunkások*) from outside the EU has occurred. This aspect of migration policy is a key instrument of economic development but, as we will see, has led to political dilemmas for the government.

Ukrainian refugees' and guestworkers' presence in Hungary has problematised simple binaries of citizen/migrant. Seemingly contradictory positions co-exist, sometimes converging but distinguishing between politically framed 'worthy' and 'unworthy' migrant identities (Herman & Chomsky 2008: 37). The 'unworthy' framing, especially by media, of refugees from sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East has been opportunistically deployed to secure electoral advantage but a shift towards 'worthiness' emerged when refugees began arriving from Ukraine in 2022. The subsequent arrival of 'third country' guestworkers rendered this binary framing more uncertain in the popular imagination. Are guestworkers migrants, temporary residents, some unknown ambiguous category? Are they worthy or unworthy? We analyse Fidesz's shifting discourses of migration and migrants in the period from 2015 and explore tensions in these migrant identities constructed juridically and in policy terms as *partial subjects* (Sassen 2008: 293). We also consider whether Fidesz's anti-migrant discourse might be more elastic than first appears, depending on the status of the particular migrants and broader social-economic and political factors.

In the article, we unpack some of the complexities in Hungary's current situation and identify the possible consequences for domestic and European politics. We draw on data from various media sources, identifying strands of Fidesz discourse which shape a performative and dramatic narrative drawing on historic, popular and cultural references and entangling actors, audiences and institutions. The first section of the article offers a contextual overview of Hungary's populist-nationalism and its migration politics. We go on to define our methodological assumptions and data collection. We identify the construction of a migration crisis and then trace subsequent shifts in migration discourse in Hungary. Finally, we identify the effects of this for Hungarian and European politics. We suggest that Hungary's situation reflects broader currents as populist-nationalist regimes confront local and global economic challenges, complexities in types and flows of migration and their consequences and potential for drawing down political capital. We note contradictions that politicians have to face. By teasing out these entanglements we contribute to a broader scholarship examining how these contradictions are played out through migration policy in populist-nationalist states. The article also contributes to the literature on populist politicisation of migration in the context of guestworker programmes. The insights provided by an exploration of this in a post-communist state and the consequences of transition from state-capitalism[3] to the 'world market' also highlight limits within the existing literature in this area and, we suggest, renders this open to further exploration.

Hungarian populist-nationalism and migration politics

Some analysts regard populism as 'thin ideology', ideologically 'weightless' (Stanley 2008) and predominantly a form of performative political practice. However, politics is always located somewhere between form and content, strategy and ideology. In Hungary a relatively clear and 'thick' ideological corpus grounds Fidesz politics. Challenging the political left, foregrounding the nation-state as the source of security and solidarity, building a bourgeois national capitalism, unifying central Europe's Hungarian diaspora and establishing a conservative regional geopolitical solidarity have continuously sustained the Fidesz national project (Schöpflin 2013; Kovács 2024). Orbán's political and policy ambitions extend beyond

[3] Following 1989's regime-change, Hungary's IMF membership, its integration in international financial networks, its exposure to foreign markets, investment and joint ventures ensured that the domestic financial elite was open to 'FDI-led industrialisation' (Drahakoupil 2008: 180), setting Hungary on an externally-oriented economic path in which FDI (and its consequences) remain paramount. This places Hungary in a paradoxical situation of semi-peripheral dependency whilst also advancing its claims to 'sovereignty'.

Hungary and Viktor Orbán has assiduously networked across Europe's far-right. His so-called 'sovereigntist' position has supported the formation of a new trans-EU right-wing Parliamentary group 'Patriots for Europe' (*Hazafiak Európáért*). This is based on ontologically 'white' ethno-*nations* forming a similar European ethno-*region,* encompassing (contested) European values and forming what has been referred to as an 'undemocratic organisation of illiberal states' (Hoeksma 2024: 4). This envisages the EU as an illiberal and supposedly Christian ethno-regional entity, a new imagined community which challenges a hitherto broadly liberal-constitutional-democratic space (Scheppele 2019).[4] The ethno-*nation* and ethno-*region* work in parallel, with important implications for European politics. Migration discourse, relying on mythologised national identities, is central to these developments. Critics have referred to Fidesz's Hungary as a 'prebendalist' state (Szelényi 2015), a 'post-communist mafia state' (Magyar: 2016) and a 'kleptocracy' (Tóth & Hajdu 2018). These analyses variously allude to a 'political capitalism' in which those close to power attain exclusive access to economic opportunities that offer huge financial returns through the sale of public assets, massive state spending in the private sector and tax breaks (Riley & Brenner 2022: 6).

Populist-nationalist politics is always concerned with acquiring and keeping power under the guise of purifying the supposedly elite-corrupted social and political space of the 'nation', construed in Hungary as a primarily *ethnic* entity and the source of Fidesz's preoccupation with migration. Iterations of an enduring Hungarian *Christian* nationalism, powerful in the inter-war years, resurfaced in the middle 2000s. Appealing especially to conservative voters the authority of the sacred nation, reverence for (always imagined) tradition and a mythologised and ethnicised national history is deployed politically to legitimate the present and future.[5] Orbán's own authority is set in a charismatic relationship with his 'people' (Körösényi 2018), channelled through his exclusionary (and therefore simultaneously *inclusive*) politics and his capacity to represent these in simple terms. Orbán is self-styled

[4] Fidesz's links with American far-right anti-immigration groups (GPAHE 2024, Rivera 2024) indicate its involvement in wider transnational relationships.

[5] Despite Orbán's representations of 'traditional' Hungary as ethnically pure (*Magyar*), its history shows a very different picture. Hungary was historically multi-ethnic comprising Jews, Muslims Christians and non-Christians in the medieval period (Berend 2001), and Magyar, Germanic, Jewish, Slavic and other populations co-existing into the twentieth century. Following the Treaty of Trianon in 1919 when Hungary lost 2/3 of its territory and the deportation of some half-million Hungarian Jews in 1944 it became less diverse. Hungary's present population includes about 10% Roma, a long-standing Chinese community of some 40,000 in Budapest and smaller communities from neighbouring countries. This includes transnational identities, especially prominent in some of Hungary's Olympic and other sports teams.

protector of Hungarian *and* European Christian cultures.[6] When 'we draw the boundaries of our identity, we mark out Christian culture as the source of our pride' (Orbán 2017). For Orbán, 'Christian democracy', conterminous with 'illiberal democracy', necessitates strict anti-immigration policies to protect Hungarian *and* European culture (Orbán 2015a; 2018a), whilst also flouting EU and wider international law.

Hungary's 2004 EU accession required adherence to the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which provides for EU protection of those subject to persecution or harm in their countries of origin. However, during the last decade Hungary failed to uphold its own and EU asylum laws, emphasising migration as predominantly a security problem (Nagy 2017). Hungary rejected the so-called 'quota system' of the EU Justice and Home Affairs Council to distribute 120,000 refugees seeking international protection among the member states (Szalai & Gőbl 2015: 21). Hungary was asked to accommodate 1,294 refugees but argued that the system was legally dubious (Varju & Czina 2016) and, asserting a link between migration and terrorism, claimed that immigration represented a dangerous threat to European security as well as to European and Hungarian culture. Refusing to accept applicants requiring international protection, Hungary was referred to the Court of Justice of the European Union and was eventually judged to have breached its obligations under European law (CJEU 2020). In response to the Court's support of the refugee relocation programme, Foreign Minister Szijjártó was quoted as saying 'Politics has raped European law' (Bajer 2017). Asylum procedures have been largely suspended in Hungary since 2020, the CJEU ruling in 2023 that current procedures once again breach EU law (ECRE 2023). In June 2024 this resulted in the CJEU levelling substantial fines on Hungary until compliance with earlier rulings is secured (Barrett 2024).

From the outset, Hungary's primary policy response to cross-border mobilities was set within a framework of 'securitisation' discourse (Juhász 2020), despite an existing inward flow of migrant workers and an emergent paradox between market and rights discourses. Securitising actors articulate audiences, contexts and power (Balzacq, Leonard & Ruzicka 2015), securitisation invariably tending to centrifugal expansion as a permanent technology of government as in Hungary (Agamben 2005). Typically, powerful political actors (Orbán for example) represent threats (refugees/migrants) and their consequences to the lives of key audiences (Hungarian voters' and the nation's security). This potentiates non-

[6] For Orbán 'Christian' values are synonymous with 'European' values, yet other than comprising a dominant 'liberalism', the latter remain contested. Orbán's claims to a Christian position have been widely critised as opportunist 'political Christianity'.

discursive/discursive interventions ostensibly designed to mitigate danger. In Hungary, Fidesz has argued that intensified national border-making security practices and apparatus are the only solutions to the current crisis. The 500-kilometre steel and barbed wire fence on Hungary's southern border defines an 'inside' and 'outside', the 'us' and the 'them' and materialises Hungary's protective Christian presence on European terrain (Kitanics & Hegedüs 2021).

Crises do not just happen but are brought into existence discursively. State supporting (and *supported*) media are key sites for assembling crises and creating public awareness. The Fidesz *media juggernaut* (Krekó & Enyedi 2018) configures state, national, regional and online media, institutionally empowered by the Central European Press and Media Foundation, KESMA.[7] Government-supporting media have continuously disseminated discourse through on and offline sites, forming a distinctive symbolic imaginary that reflects Fidesz politics and through which a migration crisis has become part of popular discourse.

However, Hungary exists in no privileged space outside of wider social and economic forces. Global integration of markets for goods, services and capital inevitably leads to increased population flows across borders in the form of emigration and immigration as it has in Hungary since 2015. Hollifield's concept of the 'migration state' (2004) offers a way of thinking about the dilemmas that states face in managing migration and the economic, political and social trade-offs which migration entails. These states, Hollifield argues, are caught in an ideological bind centred around economic development whilst simultaneously seeking to uphold territoriality and control borders whilst maintaining the rights of local citizens. Hollifield's argument is that liberal states are caught in a paradox between economic logics of markets and global trade and logics of sovereignty and rights. Critiques of this approach centre on Hollifield's emphasis on specifically high capacity 'liberal' states, a concentration on immigration (thus, the 'immigration state' may be more accurate) whilst ignoring emigration and referring solely to economic migration (Adamson & Tsourapas 2020). There is considerable literature exploring the role and function of migration states in Western liberal economies and more recent work has started to examine 'outward' migratory states in the Global South and elsewhere (Adamson, Chung & Hollifield 2024). However, little attention has been given to the utility of the migration state concept in post-communist states such as Hungary. Despite Orbán's declaration that Hungary is an 'illiberal' state (Orbán 2014) Hungary is seemingly caught in the essentially *liberal* paradox by virtue of its EU membership. This

[7] Fidesz-supporting media operates under the imprimatur of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (KESMA), some 400 media outlets subject neither to competition policy nor independent scrutiny.

emerges in its reliance on FDI and the increasing need for labour from external third-country sources on one hand, and politicised domestic demands focused on sovereignty, closure and the preservation of national identity on the other. Pragmatically, Hungary's migration policy and its practices have to take account of cross-border movement of people in both non-economic and economic forms, refugees or asylum seekers *and* guestworkers. Therefore, we consider the extent to which Hungary is caught between contradictory logics of global trade and markets and logics of sovereignty and rights.

Methodology and data

We draw on data covering the period after 2015, notionally the start of the migration crisis in Hungary. Data were collected as part of a broader interest in political discourse in Hungary (Bradford & Cullen 2021; Bradford & Cullen 2022). Following Hall, we define discourse as 'a group of statements which provide a language . . . a way of representing . . . a particular kind of knowledge' (Hall 1992: 291). In political settings, these representations become valorised through continuous media distribution and online circulation and recirculation. Our analysis focuses on texts/discourses, their relationships with other texts/discourses and the institutional, political and historical contexts in which they are embedded and from which they emerge in political practices (Wodak 2015: 75). We adopt a version of critical discourse analysis that emphasises the performativity of language and symbols in the realisation of political power. We draw on a range of texts, acknowledging the significance of sometimes spectacular *visual* texts and symbols in public space and online platforms. These examples of 'visual populism' distribute representations of populist themes. Their interplay with textual and audio sources across older and newer forms of media provide insights into political practices (Szebeni & Salojärvi 2022) that configure threats to Hungary from migration. In Hungary, Fidesz continuously invokes a national past textually and visually (in billboards and social media posts) seeking to create collective identifications and political allegiances. Since 2015, print, broadcast, film, social media, texts and images displayed in material and virtual public space have constructed a media landscape on which migration and migrants have become prominent in the construction of crisis.

The Hungarian media environment exemplifies a hybridity in which new and older media forms (social media platforms, broadcast and print media, billboards and street advertising pillars) are configured and reconfigured in the continuous communication of political messaging (Chadwick 2017). These are combined with Hungary's mainstreamed

'hyper-partisan (media) outlets . . . (including) major legacy news brands' that have strengthened Hungary's illiberal public sphere (Stetka & Mihelj 2024: 37). Fidesz's robust online media presence on Facebook, Instagram and Tik-Tok saturates the media landscape.

Methodologically, we understand political crisis as a 'performative drama' (Turner 1988) creating that which it claims to resolve, shaped by key actors around a discursive 'corpus' which is developed and deployed according to political circumstances. Diverse actors are involved in constructing the drama: politicians, journalists, broadcasters and 'influencers' (*publicisták*) who undertake the 'dirty work' of politics, often expressing ideas that politicians are unable to voice openly yet from which they draw political capital. The temporality of the current drama stresses either a present or future reality, often spatialised in relation to vulnerable borders. Both temporal and spatial dimensions are constantly made evident in Hungary's migration crisis ('migrants on the border and many more on the way'). Though external events created the conditions in which crisis might develop, diverse social and cultural components (law, borders, identities, fear, media, shifting populations, etc.) facilitated the construction of a substantive crisis by the government and its agents: politicians, experts, media, influencers and so on. Of course, it is *migrants* themselves who are identified as the main, yet generally invisible, 'bad actors'. Hungary's migration crisis remains potent and constantly troubled relations with the EU are an empowering element in this crisis. In that sense, crisis is a vital *internal* aspect of authoritarian populism's rationale enabling politicians like Orbán to identify dangerous 'others' (migrants, Brussels, Washington, George Soros[8]) against whom, as representatives of 'the people', they can offer security and resolution (Moffit 2015: 210; Sata 2024).

Our data are necessarily context-specific, and limited, but they have value in developing exemplars necessary in the process of generalisation to other settings and in understanding those settings (Flyvbjerg 2001: 73–74), for example where other illiberal populist-nationalist politics dominate. However, our claims are inevitably modest and require development through further research.

Constructing a crisis in the migration state: 'Unworthy' and 'worthy' migrants

Most Hungarians have little direct experience of inward migration. Hungary is primarily an *emigration* state and many Hungarians left for western European destinations in 1956 and after

[8] Hungarian-born George Soros, liberal, Jewish financier-philanthropist has long been demonised by Fidesz as an enemy of Hungary because of his 'globalism' in which 'open borders' and migration are promoted.

EU accession. Immigration discourse emerged opportunistically in 2015 (Bajomi-Lázár 2019) and refreshed Fidesz's then weakening political position, creating what one analyst describes as 'an entirely new wave of forms of virulent hate, racist discourse and xenophobic neo-nationalist rhetoric' (Kürti 2020: 63). In a letter to Hungarian citizens in April 2015, Orbán conflated migration with terrorism, defining refugees as an economic and security threat: '[they] cross our borders illegally, and while they present themselves as asylum-seekers, in fact they are coming to enjoy our welfare systems and the employment opportunities our countries have to offer' (Orbán 2015b), setting the scene for subsequent discourse on migration. Throughout 2015, people displaced by war, climate emergency, poverty and inequality in sub-Saharan and North Africa and the Middle East arrived on Europe's external borders. Entitled to protection in Hungary under the Hungarian Constitution (*Magyarország Alaptörvénye*) and EU law, many reached Hungary's southern border aiming to transit westwards. This quickly became defined by the government as a 'migration crisis'. A constitutional authorisation was used to declare 'a nationwide crisis situation due to mass migration' (Magyar Közlöny 2016), since renewed 15 times.[9] This 'state of exception' facilitated divergence from EU provisions on asylum. Most significantly, however, it added to the continuing sense of crisis orchestrated around migration sustained by deploying representations of cultural destruction, exploitation of public services and risks to labour market security. In 2015, bill-board posters appeared alluding to migration as an economic threat.

Picture 1

Image 1, 'If you come to Hungary, you can't take Hungarians' jobs!' Picture 1's Hungarian text, plainly aimed at a domestic audience rather than refugees, is especially ironic in the current context of recruitment of guestworkers for the Hungarian labour market. In May 2016, Orbán's internal security adviser, György Bakondi, revealed on prime-time state television the apparently apocalyptic scale of the crisis as an imagined future 'migration pressure is not decreasing . . . according to estimates, just in the sub-Saharan region 30-35 million people may leave for Europe hoping for a better life' (Haszán 2016). Such headlines have continuously emerged from government-supporting media sources, perhaps most salient during the run-up to elections. Throughout the 2018 and 2022 parliamentary elections migration discourse was

[9] Despite prevailing 'anti-migrant' views, rights and civil activists attempted to support and assist refugees who had arrived in Hungary during this period, see for example European Commission (2019).

central to Fidesz's campaigning. Negative tropes of *economic* migrants masquerading as refugees, seeking 'a better life' exploiting or abusing others' benevolence – welfare systems, for example – or as *terrorists* disguised as refugees, were continually disseminated. Image 2 is an example.

Picture 2

Image 2's messaging seems plain. The poster apparently shows an endless line of 'migrants', all male and seemingly dystopian figures massing somewhere on the border and flooding into Hungary, threatening security and society.[10] Its power in dramatising Bakondi's predictions is clear.

The simple moral binary underlying the migration crisis between unworthy 'migrants' and 'the people' was challenged in the later stages of the 2022 parliamentary election by the arrival of refugees from Russia's war in Ukraine. This necessitated partial and selective re-working of extant anti-*migrant* scripts to create genuine *refugee* identities, victims of circumstances beyond their control and, thus, 'worthy'. The war initiated a rapid mid-campaign 'discursive switch' altering Fidesz's earlier hot-nationalist hostility to refugees (as *migrants*) by adding a parallel virtuous response to Ukrainians redrawn as *refugees* and framed by universal solidarity and welcome.[11] Fidesz's narrative emphasised refuge and hospitality for 'Ukrainians as white, Christian, European refugees' (Pepinsky, Reiff & Szabo 2024). Contrasting with the paucity of 2015 provision for refugees on the southern border, 'welcome hubs' offering advice, food, shelter and possible accommodation were established principally by civil society organisations and churches, rather than the state (Bernát 2020) on the Hungary-Ukraine border and at railway stations. Hungary's response was represented by Fidesz as demonstrating solidarity and collective (Christian) kinship and constituted a radical shift in representations of refugees. However, there is an important caveat here. The discursive switch related solely to *white* Ukrainian refugees. Hungarian-speaking Roma refugees from Kárpártalja (the part of Ukraine closest to Hungary), some of whom were dual Ukrainian-Hungarian citizens, reportedly suffered discrimination in Hungary and were treated simply as

[10] The image is not Hungarian but taken from a Slovenian photograph originally used in Nigel Farage's Ukip campaign during the 2016 British EU referendum.

[11] The situation was complicated by 157,000 ethnic Hungarian Ukrainian citizens (some with Hungarian citizenship and eligible to vote in Hungarian elections) living in western Ukraine's Transcarpathia, Hungarian territory prior to 1920 and still considered by some Hungarians to be part of Hungary.

'Roma' rather than as refugees (Romaversitas Alapítvány 2022; Hungarian Helsinki Committee 2023). Reports recently emerged of hundreds of Roma refugee families (many dual Ukrainian-Hungarian citizens) being liable to eviction from subsidised accommodation in Hungary because of a change in government regulations applying to 'protected status' (Magyar Helsinki Bizottság 2024). This is ironic given government commitments to 'family-friendly' policies and the desire to support Hungarians beyond the borders. It would be difficult to see these refugees as being regarded as anything other than *unworthy*.

We offer two contrasting visual examples of migrant identities in Images 3 and 4 posted on Orbán's Facebook feed in January and March 2022, prior to the April 2022 election. These demonstrate the positional shift and cleavage between unworthy and worthy refugees, moving from the identity of *migrant* to *refugee* and their divergent connotations.

Picture 3

Image 3 relies on a long-standing trope effectively mobilised by Fidesz since 2015. In the foreground, the migration crisis is represented by and embodied in the central figure of *migrant* Jihadi insurgent: young, male, masked, trouble, national threat. In the background, smoke billows and masked men lurk amidst the chaos, eerily reminiscent of images of war-damaged Ukraine. Apparently designed to heighten fear and legitimise exclusion the text reads 'The Migrants must be stopped!' The image's cinematic quality represents a 'spectacularisation' of imputed failures (in this instance EU migration policy) that underlie and facilitate the continuous construction of crisis (Moffitt 2014: 190) as well as marking young Muslims as 'useful enemies' (Malcolm 2019). Five weeks later, images of migrant insurgence were supplanted by a different but parallel narrative (perhaps reflecting a different cinematic genre) of welcome for worthy refugees, involving a compassionate and personally-involved Orbán. In Image 4, for example, his head slightly bowed as if in supplication, Orbán clasps the right hand of, we assume, a young white Ukrainian mother as she holds her baby bundled up against the cold. Orbán is represented as the gentle patriarch and national leader welcoming and protecting women and children far from home.

Picture 4

Such images dramatically distinguish between worthy and unworthy identities, creating a performative narrativisation of the migration crisis. Although unworthy Muslim *migrants* must be stopped, worthy (white Christian) Ukrainian *refugees* can be welcomed but responses to Ukrainian Roma refugees are less positive. These contrasting representations were disseminated simultaneously. Both seemingly reflected iterations of 'Hungarian values', entailing compassion for some *refugees* (white Ukrainians) whilst reviling others (Syrians, Afghans or Roma) as *migrants*, necessitating either compulsory exclusion (Image 3) or voluntary inclusion (Image 4). By September 2024, some 5.6 million refugees had left Ukraine with about 3.5 million border crossings into Hungary. Most refugees transited westwards, although 62,456 Ukrainians were registered for Temporary Protection in Hungary (UNHCR 2024). Despite some reports that state support for refugees from Ukraine was limited, as well as numbers of Ukrainians under temporary protection being low for the region, images of worthy refugees (and of Hungarian benevolence) were positively represented on the Hungarian Government's outward-facing *About Hungary* web portal.

The narrative of immigration and refugees (qua *migrants*) threatening Hungarian identity and culture continued. The migrant was constructed as social contagion endangering the purity of nation and, apparently, the Hungarian 'race', Orbán having pronounced in summer 2022 that 'the West' is 'the world of mixed races', but Hungarians 'don't want to become a mixed race' (Orbán 2022d).[12] Orbán's identity politics ignores Hungary's history (see footnote 5, above) and, indeed, the contemporary presence of Hungarian Roma and others. This theme persisted into 2023 with new and disquieting descriptive terms emerging. Tamás Deutsch, Fidesz member of the European Parliament, referred to 'migrant-pampering' policies (*migránssimogató politika*) in the EU's New Pact on Migration and Asylum (Deutsch 2023). Similarly, the notion of the 'migrant ghetto' (migránsgettó) was coined by Fidesz politicians to describe the consequences of EU policies for Hungary.[13] This term informed a question in another National Consultation in Hungary distributed to citizens in late 2023, stating that EU migration policy would 'create migrant ghettos in Hungary. What do you think about this?'

[12] Zsuzsa Hegedűs, former long-term Orbán adviser, referred to this speech as 'a pure Nazi text . . . worthy of Goebbels' (Bajer 2022). Somewhat perversely, the speech also ignores Orbán's celebration of Hungary's central Asian roots and the mythologised history of Hungarian Turanism (Ablonczy 2021). These, of course, raise further questions about white Hungarian-ness, purity and homogeneity.

[13] On one reading, the term ghetto has unfortunate historic resonance recalling the second world war Jewish ghettos in Hungary and elsewhere.

Responses to the question appeared in one of a series of billboard posters just prior to the 2024 EU parliamentary elections, claiming rejection by 99%.

Picture 5

The Consultation received 1.5 million responses from a possible 8 million. Image 5's text claims '99% say no to migrant ghettos, we don't dance to Brussels' tune!'

Fidesz's position on migration and migrants in the period from 2015 was dominated by relentless negative depictions of migrants moderated slightly by the presence of refugees from Ukraine in 2022. Reflecting 'official' discourse, most available data suggest that Hungarians reject inward migration as threatening and dangerous, especially from Muslim countries (Messing & Ságvári 2019; Simonovits 2020). However, these representations have been further complicated by media coverage of guestworkers' arrival in Hungary.

Guestworkers in the Hungarian migration state

Labour market factors (and associated geopolitics) are powerful determinants of migration policy in Hungary as elsewhere, sometimes overriding political risks. In a 2023 speech, Orbán asserted that the economy will require 500,000 new workers in the next two years as a consequence of FDI, some coming from what he describes as 'internal reserves' or ethnic Hungarians from neighbouring states.[14] However 'the Hungarian economy must provide jobs first and foremost to Hungarians . . . If we bring in foreign workers for our convenience . . . then – just like the West – we'll be undermining our own lives in a cultural sense . . . This cannot be allowed!' (Orbán 2023b). Orbán's statement highlights a disconnect between populist-nationalist rhetoric and Hungary's demographic and economic circumstances (Waterbury 2022). It underlines a contradiction between labour market needs and the desire for an ethnically homogenous society, essentially the 'liberal paradox' referred to earlier.

Long-term demographic trends in Hungary (a falling birth rate and emigration of skilled and unskilled workers, especially well-educated young people) have created discrepancies between labour market needs and extant skills (Hárs 2019; Eurostat 2024; OECD 2024). FDI

[14] The Hungarian Roma, some 10% of Hungary's total population has a substantially lower employment rate than non-Roma. Perhaps this group is included in Orbán's category of 'internal reserves'? Inclusion would need development in skills and knowledge acquisition, training and support infrastructures (transport, accommodation, etc.) requiring substantial state investment (Csurgó 2024).

combined with extensive state subsidies underpins Hungary's economic growth model (Bruszt & Vukov 2024: 852) and shapes its dependent integration into global value-chains. Hungary provides production facilities (and cheap labour) for German and other transnational companies. For example, Bosch, Audi, Mercedes, BMW, Opel, Suzuki and Daimler all have well-established Hungarian assembly plants.

There is a longer history of migrant labour coming to Hungary, a consequence of geographies of uneven development, Hungary's place in the EU division of labour and beyond, and the mobilities of ethnic Hungarians from neighbouring countries (see for example, Janko et al. 2024). Perhaps because these earlier migrants were white, they largely went unnoticed. However, established patterns of inward labour migration have recently shifted as Hungary loses its regional wage advantage, and labour shortages have been filled by foreign workers from beyond the Hungarian diaspora, neighbouring countries and the EU. Hungarian Government labour market data shows that in 2023 the number of workers from Ukraine and Romania decreased by about 4,000, whilst worker numbers from the Philippines, Vietnam, Kyrgyzstan and India increased by about 10,000. The Ministry of National Economy State Secretary is reported in 2023 as saying there were then some 120,000 foreign workers in Hungary (KSH 2023; Szabó 2023) mainly employed in unskilled work, although the workers themselves may be skilled or highly skilled. As a percentage of the Hungarian labour force these numbers are low, yet ironically, their political significance in Hungary has been considerable.

EU policies on climate neutrality and electromobility have created opportunities for Hungary to become part of the European EV lithium battery value-chain (Győrffy 2024a). Orbán has claimed that Hungary will rapidly become the world's third largest battery producer (Orbán 2022). At the end of 2022 there were 29 new companies with Hungarian plants in the battery value-chain, either in operation or confirmed. The production value of Hungarian 'batteries and accumulators' was the second highest in Europe in 2020, at 1846 million Euros (Czirfusz 2023). Attracting Asian FDI, especially from China, is incorporated in Hungary's controversial 'Eastern opening' (Mészáros 2022) and the so-called 'prudent global connectivity' policy which Orbán's political director describes as extending Hungary's historic and mythologised identity as a 'bridge' between East and West (Orbán B. 2023). One analysis called this a form of *political marketing* (Song & Li 2024), foreign policy supporting populism. The economic benefit of these developments to Hungary is contested. These plants will require non-Hungarian labour so the benefits for the domstic labour market are unclear. However, the

'China connection' can be represented by the government as symbolising national development and progress, huge factories and complex industrial developments reflecting Orbán's will to power, and incidentally demonstrating that there is 'life outside the EU'. However, the focus on low-wage manufacturing offers little technological spillover through research and development activity (Gerőcs 2021: 177) and potentially serious environmental consequences have been identified from these plants' activities (Győrffy 2024b). There are clear business advantages for Eastern companies: cheap labour, low corporate tax benefits, state subsidies, strong employer rights, protection from EU-imposed tariffs and access to Western European markets, while Hungary's positive political statements challenging Western China-discourse may create a 'political receptivity' (Szunomár et al. 2024: 293) attractive to China.

Guestworker programmes offer a partial solution in negotiating the paradoxes of the 'immigration state' as these programmes permit a restricted number of temporary migrants to service key industries without commitments in terms of citizenship rights.[15] Ruhs and Martin (2008) explore a spectrum of guestworker rights, acknowledging how the relative numbers of migrant workers within a state and the state's financial and political context shapes rights afforded to guestworkers. Put simply, states' guestworker programmes are predicated on a relationship between 'numbers' and 'rights'. For example, high income states (such as Sweden) with comparatively low numbers of migrants offer relatively extensive employment and civil rights. States with comparatively high numbers of migrants (such as Dubai in the UAE) offer limited rights. Hungary's situation complicates this spectrum by affording limited rights to relatively small numbers of guestworkers.

Recently, the so-called 'Debrecen-Nyíregyháza-Miskolc Triangle' in Eastern Hungary has attracted substantial FDI and state subsidies, aiming to create what Orbán has identified as Hungary's most developed economic zone. Guestworkers are currently employed in Debrecen constructing new factories and have been domiciled in smaller outlying towns. Media reports of tensions have emerged representing the 'labour market/pure nation' contradiction expressed through the views of local residents and politicians. A range of opinions exist, some reflecting Fidesz anti-migrant discourse while others are less judgemental. However, concerns about 'security', property prices, the presence of guestworkers discouraging tourism and depressing local wages have been clearly expressed in press reports throughout this region. We offer two

[15] In contrast, reports that Russian and Belorussian citizens are now allowed to work in Hungary using the so-called 'national card' have appeared, with few of the restrictions applying to existing guestworkers, see for example, Dahl (2024).

examples from Hajdúszoboszló, a rural spa resort of some 24,000 people near Debrecen where guestworkers have been accommodated since 2022. Hajdúszoboszló is politically Fidesz-supporting and mirrors events in other parts of the Triangle.

Our first example refers to Hajdúszoboszló residents' increasing anxieties in 2023 about the town becoming a de-facto dormitory for guestworkers employed in Debrecen. Independent national and local media published feature articles and vox-pop videos circulated through online news and social media, contributing to the drama around the arrival and presence of guestworkers. One example, a video broadcast on independent news portal '444', presented by *Jobbik* opposition party politician, György László Lukács, contributed to the sense of crisis that has characterised migration discourse in Hungary.[16] The video showed hazmat-suited non-European construction workers alighting company transport in the centre of Hajdúszoboszló after their shift. Lukács graphically described 'chaotic scenes' with 'cheap Asian migrant workers . . . this is what it looks like when large numbers of migrant workers [Lukács uses the more negative term *migránsmunkások* rather than guestworkers] pour into Hajdúszoboszló . . . and take Hungarians' jobs' (Alfahír 2023). However, it is difficult to align what is presented in the video with Lukács' narrative. What we see is workers leaving their (six) buses and quietly dispersing. No 'chaotic scenes' with workers 'pouring' into Hajdúszoboszló were apparent in the video but Lukács' political agenda (guestworkers undermining Hungarian wages and the alleged loss of Hungarian jobs) apparently necessitates such description and, perhaps unwittingly, contributes to the crisis developed since 2015 by Fidesz.

In our second example from 2023, then Hajdúszoboszló mayor, Gyula Czeglédi expressed similar fears about the local economy, suggesting on social media that guestworkers could damage the town's tourist industry and, at one point, threatening (later withdrawing this) to expose anyone renting accommodation to guestworkers. Czeglédi's Facebook account and that of other municipal representatives was alive with debate about the detrimental impact on Hajdúszoboszló of workers being domiciled in the town, with an appeal to accommodation owners not to 'give in to financial temptation' (Kálmán 2023). However, one hotel owner responded with 'I welcome all paying guests, be they Hungarian, Ukrainian or Chinese, and I am very happy about any industrial development in the area!' (Czeglédi 2023). Different interests clearly prompt different responses, and Fidesz charges of *Brussels* aiming to establish

[16] Jobbik (now 'Jobbik-Konszervatívok') has a history of neo-Nazi, anti-Roma and antisemitic activity but now positions itself as a national conservative party.

'migrant ghettos' in Hungary are, ironically, somewhat undermined by local entrepreneurs establishing de facto workers' hostels in dormitory towns. As we see, the paradox between economics and sovereignty plays out locally as well as nationally.

Social media's distribution logic enables 'direct' communication between populist politicians (and others) and 'the people' whilst also offering an immediate means of non-elite participation in constructing, distributing and re-distributing discourse. Facebook offers virtual space for citizens to engage in political debate and activity, creating some political agency within the hybridised media environment (Chadwick 2017: 55) where citizens speak back to dominant political discourse. For example, one Facebook account, *Szoboszlón Hallottam* ('I heard it in Hajdúszoboszló'), ostensibly with some 18,000 members, was particularly active in carrying discussions on migration and the presence of guestworkers in the town, echoing some of Czeglédi's fears. Postings were subsequently included in articles on national independent platforms from which we draw. *Szoboszlón Hallottam* posts included localised arguments about sovereignty, conveyed using emotive and dehumanising vocabularies.

> [with guestworkers here] daily conflict was on the cards. Sexual violence, aggressive behaviour, forcing their culture on us, thefts, robberies and even fatalities.
>
> These [guestworkers] will easily kill people. Unfortunately I know them well.
>
> Children and women will be at risk. It's true that [these guestworkers] are used to goats but there are few goats here.
>
> Whoever supports and permits the dilution of their country's ethnic composition is stupid! . . . As well as guest workers depressing the already low wages of Hungarian workers!!!!
>
> There will only be trouble if you take your slant-eyed grandchild to kindergarten.
>
> Why don't we organise a meeting where citizens . . . run together? Don't start to fear a few bad, smelly dirty Bedouins [disparaging term for guestworkers] in our own beloved country and our own city.
>
> We must launch the cleansing fire project. (Makói 2023)

Baseless social media allegations of guestworkers being involved in street violence, rape and even murder in Hajdúszoboszló also emerged (Iván-Nagy & Bozzay 2023) and reflected the potential of social media-based rumour in extending a sense of crisis, reproducing fear and anxiety and shaping popular discourse. Despite this racist narrative, some local resentment was also articulated with a sense of betrayal by the government. As one post put it, 'the problem is not with the Bedouins . . . but with the government [which] fights against migration but only

in words . . . [and] . . . legalizes migration with settlement bonds and guestworkers'[17] (Kálmán 2023). Those who posted sometimes echoed Orbán's declaration that 'Not a single migrant should be allowed into Hungary' (Orbán 2018b), contrasting this with the arrival of notionally *government* sponsored guestworkers in the Triangle,[18] implying political hypocrisy. These posts clearly mirror anti-migrant discourse and embody the domestic pressures that form part of the paradox at the heart of the liberal migration state. They show how significant these social media platforms can be in contextualising events, disseminating and developing political discourse, but also creating spaces in which political elites (in this case who claim to act on behalf of 'the people') can be challenged. Social media clearly structures the popular imagination, in this instance constituting imagined guestworkers as a prolific source of anxiety. Though it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the influence of *Szoboszlón Hallottam,* its content was instrumental in drawing attention to events in Hajdúszoboszló which were followed by articles in the non-Fidesz national media. The disconnect between populist-nationalist anti-migrant rhetoric and Fidesz's attempts to develop a globally flexible investment-oriented growth model is plain in the examples above.

Discussion and conclusions

This article has explored the shifting political use of migration discourse (and migration) in Hungary since 2015. Methodologically, we regard Hungary's politicisation of migration as a processual decade-long continuing social and political drama in which crisis is constructed and managed as a focus for populist-nationalist politics. Indeed, Orbán and Fidesz are, arguably, dependent on an unrelenting sense of crisis. This has been facilitated by Hungary's hybrid media, a system of representation that is a vital resource in trying to establish political hegemony. Hybridity's capacity to create and transmit political messages through 'old' media forms *and* 'new' media's ability to circulate, recirculate and reconfigure discourse online as well as to attract popular participation in creating online content (for example, via Facebook or Tik-Tok) constitutes a formidable potential in forming or shaping public knowledge. As we have shown, social media platforms enable apparently direct communication with diverse sections of 'the people' who, it is claimed, are ignored by elite media. Fidesz supporters' use

[17] This refers to Hungary's policy of allowing foreign citizens and their families to purchase long-term and renewable resident status by investing 250,000 Euros in the country. Perhaps this can best be understood as a neoliberal commodification of *partial* citizenship, and nothing to do with citizenship as constituted in political belonging.

[18] Employment of guestworkers is undertaken by recruitment agencies, some close to Fidesz associates despite them having been critical of FDI and immigration into the EU (Átlátszó 2023).

of social media in activating and valorising emotion, inciting and inflaming resentment realises that potential as we have seen in the example of Hajdúszoboszló. Matters of 'policy' are invariably absent. These media technologies, practices and genres attempt to politicise by saturating the national consciousness with messages of extant and future crisis. Regular National Consultations add to this. As we have shown, the deployment of expert knowledge in creating crisis narratives and providing epistemological weight is also important in creating fear of migration.

Throughout the paper we have shown some of Fidesz's attempts at 'bordering', boundary practises that differentiate between 'authentic' Hungarian history, culture, people and *others* by flattening Hungary's syncretic past. Migratory patterns and movements have led to the media re-appearance of different and diverse identities and cultures in Hungary. Migration and migrants (almost always *imagined* as in most of Hungary there are few) disrupt the Fidesz symbolic order mythologised in tradition: nation, church and family discourses. Migration has worked effectively for the last decade, restoring historical anxieties about the 'death of nation', partially a consequence of Trianon (Bibó 1946: 130–150).[19] Fidesz's ideas of purification, division and separation practices constitute political attempts to strategically systematise modernity's 'inherently untidy experience' (Douglas 1966: 5) not only in relation to migration but to sexuality too. We do not suggest any bifurcation between tradition and modernity here, rather that elements of both are inevitably set in collision. All cultures encounter anomalous others (often as 'strangers') produced by their classificatory norms and practices and face the task of resolving the ambiguity that surrounds strangers. Orbán's political work has aimed at establishing symbolic and material boundaries both discursively and non-discursively through border security systems and apparatuses, often by exaggerating difference (Hungarians 'don't want to become a mixed race'). Given Fidesz's seemingly *absolute* celebration of an imagined and homogenising 'tradition' (and in Orbán's terms a pure [not 'mixed'] Hungarian race' whose 'whiteness' is, presumably, a marker of tradition) it is difficult to see how refugees/asylum-seekers/migrants/ can be understood as other than *polluting*. Hungary's introduction of a further categoric anomaly – guestworkers – as neither 'ordinary' migrants nor indigenous workers, poses further challenges to the symbolic order. Yet, perhaps curiously,

[19] Fear of national death emerged in Hungary's 2024 EU election. As leader of the nation, Orbán's election appeal to voters was framed as the choice between placing a vote for Fidesz or 'death for Ukraine' (Orbán, 2024).

Fidesz and its influencers remain focused on inciting fear and resentment, seemingly effectively as our data from Hajdúszoboszló suggest. Various solutions emerge, *temporally* through limited-term visa arrangements and *spatially* by ensuring that guestworkers are domiciled to distinguish between the 'emplaced' local population and the 'placeless' others.

Crisis is inherent in these politics. The political *fabulization* (Turner 1988: 40) of disparate elements and narratives (as images, texts and digital objects) used as 'signalling devices' to create spectacular and dramatic crisis is important in securing the attention of voters and citizens by politicising the symbolic domain (Osborne 2021: 187). We have seen this, for example, in the use of political posters in Hungarian public space. The choice of crisis is important, especially its historical and ontological status, its popular relevance and resonance (migration, gender and war are all relevant). Fidesz and its adherents have been able to deploy a broad migration discourse which identifies a series of *others*: refugees/asylum-seekers/migrants/guestworkers, and a network of institutional actors against which Fidesz and Hungary are positioned. Arguably, given Hungary's FDI growth model and its increasing dependency on migrant labour, this might be understood as acting against Fidesz's own interests. However, as we have shown, Fidesz's migration discourse has shifted slightly from a clear binary position to 'migrant' identities coexisting, often uncomfortably. The war in Ukraine especially, though not altering fundamental antipathies towards migration, has necessitated more complex (and ambiguous) policy positions. The new juridical and policy legitimation of guestworker status is part of this.

Key questions remain. How much is Hungary caught in a liberal dichotomy between logics of the market and logics of sovereignty? Our data suggest that the paradox is significant, yet the contradiction (partially self-inflicted) between 'Not a single migrant should be allowed into Hungary' and the active recruitment of guestworkers is, at least publicly, ignored by Fidesz politicians. Perhaps guestworkers will be understood (and legitimised as in recent legislation) as a category different from 'ordinary' *migránsok.* Our data suggest otherwise. Perhaps there is an assumption that juridical, temporal and spatial restrictions will mediate domestic pressures while demonstrable economic progress deriving from investments will ease any tensions. Alternatively, perhaps the collateral damage of social resentment and division is considered an acceptable consequence. Some data from Hajdúszoboszló suggest that these are risky strategies. Politicians' obsession with migration (apparently vital to successful election strategies) arguably runs counter to the needs of Hungary's economy as well as failing to acknowledge Hungarians' own mobility into western Europe and, of course, the significance

of emigrant remittances for the domestic economy (KSH 2024). The impact of extensive politicisation of migration will likely continue to strengthen Hungarians' views of migration.

As a semi-peripheral post-communist state, Hungary's EU membership and its expected adherence to EU law tends to suggest that it should be regarded as a liberal state, even though Orbán rejects this, claiming Hungary's 'illiberal' status. Indeed, there is an extensive literature arguing that Hungary's liberal and democratic credentials have been eroded in the last decade. Whether these claims significantly or entirely differentiate Hungary from other EU states in terms of cross-border mobilities is a matter of further debate. However, the current Hungarian guestworker programme is driven by economic rationale and in that sense the paradox identified by Hollifield is certainly evident. However, there are aspects of Fidesz politics which shift it from Hollifield's liberal migration state category and which reflect non-economic factors. Attempts to unify the extra-territorial Hungarian diaspora, for example, including using Ukrainian-Hungarian labour in Hungary, might be seen as instances of migration being exploited for nationalist rather than, or as well as, economic motives. Attempts have also been made to reintegrate emigrant Hungarians, a form of 'ethnic return' aimed at recapitalising the nation (Adamson & Tsourapas, op cit; Lados & Hegedűs, 2019).

Overall, as we have shown, the politicisation of migration in Hungary is in itself an expression of nationalist inclinations that emanate from, inter alia, a history of occupation, external threat and territorial dismemberment which have become mythologised to form a coherent whole. In that sense, Hungary represents something of a hybrid form that incorporates shifting elements of liberal, neoliberal and nationalising inclinations, the significance of these being shaped through time and space. We have teased out some of the complexities within a broad class of refugees and asylum seekers and, secondly, guestworkers. As categories of 'alienage', contrasting with citizenship, both express substantial differences in relation to their rights and recognition within broader Fidesz policy, yet both highlight Hungary's inherent tensions as an illiberal migration state. The Hungarian context provides an important and interesting counterpoint to existing scholarship on guestworker programmes. Further analysis of its politics and practices in this respect are necessary. These will have to be considered in the context of strengthening relationships between illiberal politicians and parties in Europe and globally. An important example is Orbán's involvement in 'Patriots for Europe', already significant within the EU in the context of the rising profile of right-wing illiberal parties across Europe. In this respect, Hungary has been something of a 'pedagogic text', offering a model for others that has been followed elsewhere. How Hungary deals with the paradoxes outlined

here has potential to provide further guidance in shaping politics more widely. This potentially offers further insights into migration policy tensions that remain under explored within other Central European states.

As we have noted, ideological work in Hungary over the last decade has emboldened political and domestic demands for what is understood as sovereignty, effectively creating an anti-migrant popular consensus sufficient to support Fidesz's continuing political dominance. We have suggested that discursive and symbolic work are ubiquitous in Hungarian politics. However, as Gramsci has pointed out (Hoare & Nowell Smith,1971: 161) consent in the form of continuing hegemony rests on a real material and economic base, ideology being necessary but insufficient to sustain hegemony. Whether the paradox(es) outlined in this article can be resolved is likely to be contingent on wider circumstances not least within the economy.

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