

THE MIGRATION SCARE IN HUNGARY

HOW FEAR WAS BUILT AND KEPT ALIVE

“They resemble an army more than they do asylum-seekers”

Said Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary in 2015, in an interview given to the state-owned Kossuth Rádió.

At the time, Europe was shaken by the 2015 refugee and migrant crisis. States struggled to respond to the sudden influx of hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers, with some, such as Angela Merkel’s Germany, adopting a more open-door approach, while others opted for restrictive responses. However, few reactions within the European Union proved as controversial as Hungary’s. Despite being largely a transit country rather than a final destination, Hungary adopted one of the harshest stances on migration, alongside a rhetoric that was widely perceived at the time as extreme within the European context.

From Crisis to Political Strategy

Under the conservative Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian government presented migration not as a humanitarian challenge, but as an **existential threat** to national security, the country’s Christian values, and European identity. Political speeches, government campaigns, and media narratives increasingly associated migrants with terrorism, crime, and economic insecurity.



Migrants in front of the barrier at the border with Hungary near the village of Horgos, Serbia, in 2015.

Photograph: Marko Djurica/Reuters

This framing was most visibly symbolized by the construction of a **border fence** along Hungary’s southern frontier, commonly referred to as “the wall”, which functioned not only as a security measure, but also as a powerful political symbol of sovereignty and control.

This article argues that migration was transformed from a temporary crisis into a long-term domestic political issue, deliberately mobilised through rhetoric, visual propaganda, and institutionalised fear to reshape public opinion and consolidate political power.

The 2015 Anti-Immigration Campaign

In response to the events of 2015, the Hungarian government launched a coordinated anti-immigration campaign, framing increased migration flows as a form of external invasion rather than a humanitarian movement.

The National Consultation

A central element of this campaign was the National Consultation on Immigration and Terrorism, launched in the spring of 2015. The questionnaire, accompanied by a government booklet (see Figure 1), was sent to millions of Hungarian households, and explicitly **linked immigration to terrorism**, crime, and economic insecurity. Its questions were widely criticised, with the UNHCR asking Hungary to change its rhetoric, for their leading and biased wording, repeatedly suggesting that migrants endangered jobs, public safety, and national sovereignty. Despite low participation, the government presented the results as evidence of overwhelming popular support for stricter migration policies. These figures were subsequently used to legitimise hardline measures, including the opposition to the EU's relocation quota.

Billboards and the Dissemination of Fear

Beyond the consultation, fear was disseminated through an extensive billboard campaign (see Figure 2) that transformed Hungary's public space. Blue government posters appeared across cities, villages, and highways, carrying messages such as



Figure 1: A page from the booklet passed out by the Hungarian government. The title on the left side reads, “The forcible relocation endangers our culture and traditions.” On the right side it says, “Several hundred ‘no-go’ areas in Europe’s big cities.”

Photograph: Human Rights Watch

“Did you know that Brussels wants to settle a city’s worth of illegal immigrants in Hungary?”; “Did you know that since the beginning of the immigration crisis the harassment of women has risen sharply in Europe?”, and many others.

Across platforms, repeated images of crowds, disorder, and confrontation framed migration as a permanent public danger, with migrants portrayed as an uncontrollable mass associated with terrorism, criminality, and cultural threat.

This process resembles a **“moral panic”**, when political actors amplify a perceived threat, define a clear enemy to justify exceptional measures.

In this process, migrants were “othered”, cast as incompatible with Hungarian society.

The Border Fence

The construction of fear did not remain at the level of discourse. This fear was materialised through the construction of a border fence along Hungary’s southern frontier later in 2015. While officially justified as a security measure, the fence also functioned as a powerful political symbol. It visually confirmed the narrative of invasion and reinforced the idea that Hungary was under siege. In parallel, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán increasingly described Hungary as the one standing up for Europe, positioning the country against migration and against what he argued were the European Union’s own failings.



Figure 2: Collection of the governmental billboard campaign
Photograph: AFP, MTI, Telex

Media Control and Visual Politics

While the 2015 anti-immigration campaign marked the initial construction of fear, it was sustained over time through the control of media narratives.

State and pro-government media played a central role in reinforcing the government's messaging on migration by portraying it as a security threat and ensuring that an **"atmosphere of fear"** persisted in Hungarian society.

Public broadcasters and outlets aligned with the government. They overwhelmingly focused on crime, terrorism, and border violence in their coverage of migration. Reports frequently emphasized clashes at the border, alleged criminal acts involving migrants, and links between asylum seekers and terrorism, while humanitarian perspectives and migrant voices were largely ignored. Investigations and testimonies later revealed that journalists in state media faced direct pressure to frame migration negatively, with editorial lines closely aligned with government messaging. In some cases, Hungarian media outlets **incorrectly reported** violent incidents abroad, such as a van attack in Münster, as acts of Islamist terrorism, even when this was later proven false.

The government's messaging was reinforced on online spaces, particularly on social media platforms.



Government-sponsored ads used the imagery of invasion, showing large crowds at the border, confrontations with the police, and generalised chaos. Dramatic headlines were circulating repeatedly and were reaching even broader audiences than traditional news outlets could.

Beyond media outlets and digital platforms, **public space** itself was used for political communication. Billboards and posters flooded the streetscape. More striking interventions were also put in place, such as projections or visuals near major transit hubs (see Figure 3). The aim was to keep the messaging constantly visible and unavoidable in everyday life.

This process illustrates how media saturation amplified moral panic. By repeatedly highlighting danger and excluding any alternative perspectives, the government's communication strategy reinforced a single dominant narrative on migration and the threat it poses.

Broadcast on Hungarian public television (M1) during coverage of the 2016 referendum on EU migration quotas. The on-screen headline reads: *"Migrants would start heading toward Hungary if the referendum is favorable to them"*

Photograph: 24.hu



Figure 3: Picture of a government-funded projection of a mosque at the Keleti train station in Budapest, 2025.

The projection includes the playing of the call to prayer, and the message above that reads: *"One wrong choice, and this is where we will end up"*

Photograph: Telex

Migration as a Domestic Political Tool

The continued focus on migration in Hungary cannot be understood only in terms of border control or security concerns. Rather, migration has come to serve as a domestic political tool, used repeatedly to influence public debate, strengthen political authority, and shape ideas about national identity.

Electurally, migration has proven to be a powerful mobilising issue. By framing itself as the only force capable of protecting the nation from external threats, the governing party has put migration at the center of the political debate. The narrative creates a clear line between “us” and “them,” and bolsters voter support by creating a sense of shared danger and the need to defend the nation (see Figure 4). In this context, migration functions less as a policy issue than as a mechanism of political mobilisation.



Figure 4: Social media ad that reads: “Today we live in safety. But one wrong choice, and this is where we will end up”.

Post by the Alapjogokért Központ, a state-funded NGO

At the same time, anti-migration campaigns reinforce narratives of national sovereignty against foreign intervention. Government rhetoric consistently contrasts a sovereign Hungary with a weak or **hostile European Union**, portraying Brussels as imposing unwanted migration policies on unwilling nations (see the governmental ad on the “*Soros Plan*”). This framing elevates the government’s role as defender of national autonomy while presenting compliance with international norms as a threat to self-determination.

Migration discourse also serves to deflect attention from domestic economic or political challenges, sidelining complex issues such as inequality, corruption, or social policy issues with a simplified narrative centred on external danger. By keeping public attention on migration, the government shifts the focus away from criticism of domestic issues.

Finally, this strategy relies on the construction of both **external and internal enemies**. Migrants are presented as the visible threat, while NGOs, journalists, and figures such as George Soros are depicted as collaborators in a broader “pro-migration” agenda (see the governmental ad about “*Brussel’s Plan*” and Figure 5).



Figure 5: “They would break down the border together” Campaign billboard of the governing Fidesz party for the 2018 elections depicting opposition leaders with Hungarian billionaire George Soros.

Photograph: Telex

Through this discourse, political opposition and civil society are no longer treated as legitimate actors, but as enemies of the nation, reinforcing polarisation and normalising extraordinary political responses. As an example, in a speech delivered on March 15, Hungary’s national day, Orbán described an alleged conspiracy seeking to impose immigration on the country:

“We will dismantle the financial machinery that used corrupt dollars to buy politicians, judges, journalists, pseudo-civil organizations, and political activists.

We will dismantle this entire shadow army. They are the modern-day traitors of our nation, the favorites of Brussels, who, against their own homeland and for money, push the cart of the empire.”

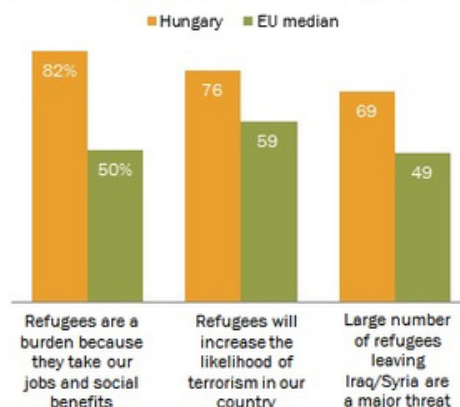
Public Opinion and Consequences

Over the past decade, public attitudes toward migration in Hungary have shifted markedly. By 2017, 93% of Hungarians reported negative attitudes toward immigration from outside the EU, placing Hungary among the **most migration-skeptical** societies in Europe. These attitudes did not emerge from a single cause, but developed alongside the government's sustained anti-migration campaigns.

The link between political messaging and public opinion is better seen as reinforcing existing views rather than directly causing them. Government communication consistently emphasised links between migration, terrorism, crime, and cultural threat, while pushing other interpretations to the margins. Over time, this pattern helped to shape the boundaries of public debate.

The longer-term result has been the gradual normalisation of exclusionary views, which has reduced the space available for humanitarian, legal, and more pluralistic perspectives.

Hungarians, more than other Europeans, feel threatened, burdened by refugees



Note: EU median based on 10 European countries, including Hungary.

Survey on the perception of refugees
Source: Spring 2016 Global Attitudes
Survey, Pew Research Center

Conclusion: Lessons from Hungary

The Hungarian case demonstrates how migration can shift from a temporary social issue to a constant political threat. Through coordinated rhetoric, widespread visual messaging, media control, and symbolic measures such as the border fence, the government successfully embedded fear-based narratives into everyday political life. Migration was reframed as a permanent danger.

Hungary therefore provides a clear example of how fear can be politicised.

Rather than simply responding to public opinion, political communication played an active role in shaping it, narrowing the range of acceptable debate and normalising exclusionary attitudes. Importantly, this process continued even as migration flows declined, suggesting that the strength of the narrative did not depend on measurable realities but on its political usefulness.

These dynamics raise broader questions for democratic debate beyond Hungary. When fear becomes a tool of governance and public space is filled with one-sided political messaging, the conditions for pluralism and informed discussion are weakened. Although Hungary represents an extreme case, similar patterns can be observed across Europe, where migration is increasingly framed as a cultural and security threat rather than as a social or humanitarian issue.

Lóránt Noble, Master's student in International Relations at the University of Bordeaux and Galatasaray University.