



**Desperate Search for the lost popularity
Governmental campaign against refugees and migrants in Hungary**

Attila Juhász and Péter Krekó, Political Capital Institute

Background Information

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Budapest

May 2015

As the Hungarian government is losing support while Jobbik is on the rise as its most important challenger, Viktor Orbán is trying to halt the popularity of the far-right party by putting two of Jobbik's favourite issues on the political agenda: anti-immigrationism and death penalty. These efforts are rather signs of weakness than strength in the sense that they are showing the desperate fight of the government against popularity loss. While we expect that this radicalisation of Fidesz's rhetoric will be unsuccessful in raising the popularity of the governmental party, these issues will help Jobbik legitimise its political stance and get closer to the mainstream of politics. While raising the issue of death penalty is only empty talk without policy consequences, the "national consultation" (non-representative push poll) of the government against "economic migrants" and refugees in Hungary can result in the restriction of the already extremely rigorous regulations over immigration.

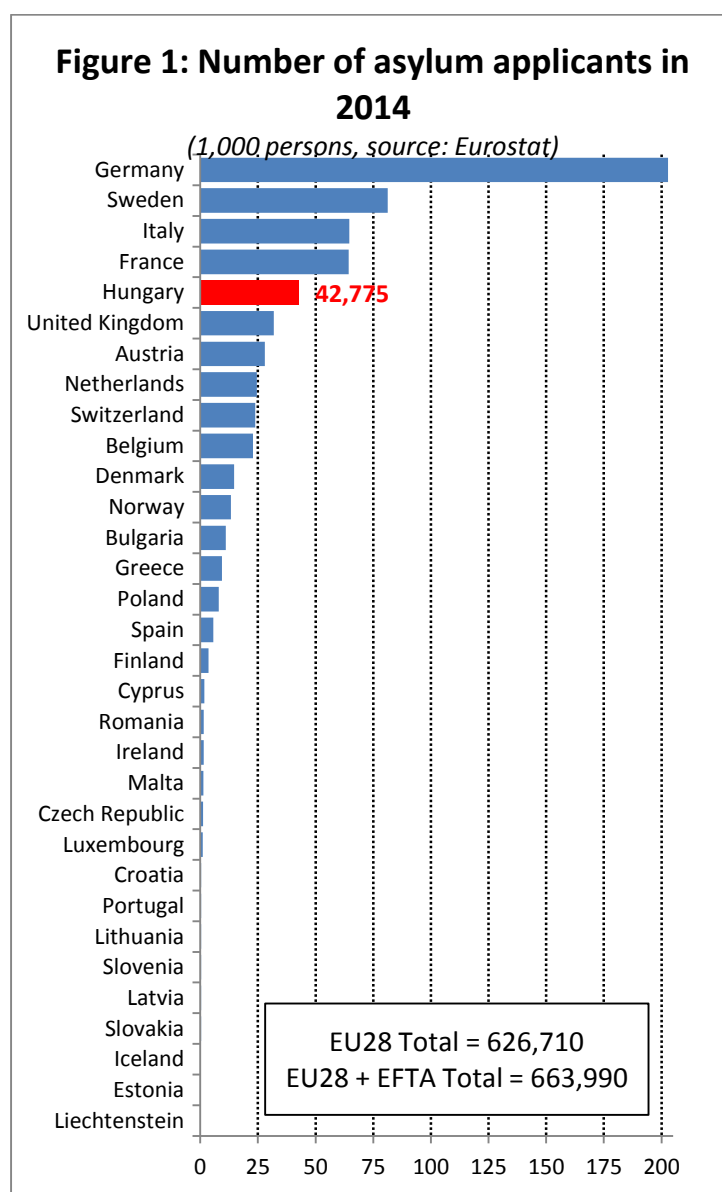
A new wave of asylum-seekers from Kosovo

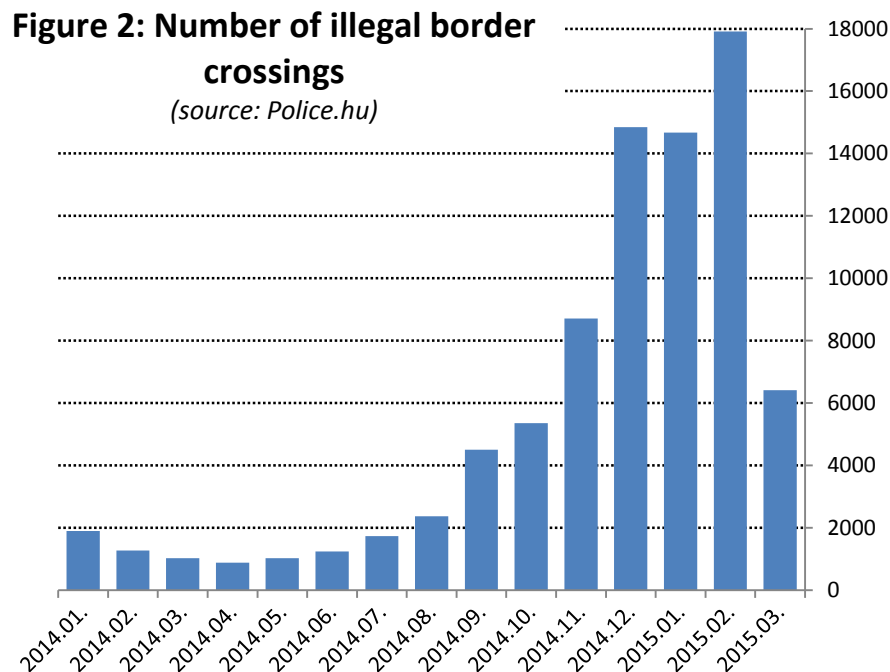
While following the turn of the millennium the number of submitted asylum applications declined steeply, this trend has changed in the last few years, especially due to the Kosovo crisis. **The number of asylum applicants has been growing dramatically, in 2014 their number almost reached 43,000, which is high even in European standards: this is the fifth biggest figure in EU member states** (see Figure 1 below). This trend goes in parallel with a dramatic rise of illegal border-crossings (see figure 2.). These increasing trends put an enormous burden on Hungarian institutions even on European scale. The increasing trend of immigration, therefore, is not a politically construed issue in itself.

However, for several reasons this threat is less serious for Hungary than the rising figures would suggest. First, as a result of the help of the German authorities on the Serbian side of the Serbian-Hungarian borders, where most of the Kosovan immigrants are arriving to the territory of the EU, the ratio of illegal border crossings started to decline. Second, only a small minority of the applicants (3,000 of 43,000 in 2014) receive a refugee status due to the strict Hungarian regulations on immigration. Third, most of the asylum-seekers and immigrants want only to go across Hungary. **Hungary (unfortunately) is not attractive enough for being a destination country but it is rather a transfer country: a gateway to Western destinations such as Austria and Germany.** As a consequence of this, currently, the proportion of foreign citizens in Hungary stands at 2 per cent of the entire population, which is almost insignificant by European standards. According to the data from the Office of immigration and nationality, the number of immigrants, settled persons and persons whose stay surpasses three months' period was 213,361 at the end of 2014. This is by 4 per cent less than it was a year ago, on December 31, 2012, which also shows that there is no rise of immigrants staying in the country. The conditions for asylum-seekers of

Hungary are extremely bad (even according to German courts), which does not make Hungary an attractive destination for asylum-seekers.

Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of the immigrants are ethnic Hungarians from neighbouring countries, primarily Romania, Ukraine, Slovakia and successor states of the former Yugoslavia. There are an additional roughly 200,000 immigrants who are Hungarian citizens born abroad and living abroad. As a result, today the percentage of foreign-born citizens stands around 4 per cent, a rate well below of what we can find in countries of similar size and geographic position (Czech Republic 5 per cent, Slovakia 8.2 per cent and Austria 15.3 per cent). Roughly two-thirds of foreign citizens residing in Hungary and over 90 percent of those who were granted citizenship are ethnic Hungarians coming from neighbouring countries.





Non-Hungarian immigrants constitute an extremely heterogeneous group representing over 170 countries. With the exception of a few groups (Chinese, Vietnamese and Turks) no specific ethnic communities can be identified due to their low number. For instance the 800 to 1,000 Africans living in the country came from more than 40 different countries. Very high ratio of immigrants (40 per cent) live in the capital (where 20% of the Hungarian population – approximately 2 million people out of just under 10 million – live) although for some groups this rate is significantly higher, 80 per cent and 90 per cent of the Chinese and Vietnamese, respectively. The majority of European and American immigrants are ‘expatriates’ who often have relatively good paying jobs in higher positions, such as in diplomacy, business or educational institutions. These people typically come to Hungary for a limited time, and hence, do not form distinct ethnic groups¹.

While there is a relatively large Chinese diaspora, there is only a minimal community of Muslim immigrants. **Therefore, the problems associated with immigration are almost non-existent compared to what we can find in Western European countries.**

While Hungary is not a main target for immigrants, it is increasingly becoming a source for emigrants. After the regime change and following the country’s accession to the European Union, Hungary did not become a major sending country. Compared to its size and especially to other countries in the region (Romania, Bulgaria and Poland) the rate of emigration from the country

¹ Örkény Antal, Székely Mária: **Hat migráns csoport összehasonlító elemzése**, In: Kováts András, Örkény Antal, Székely Mária (szerk.) *Az idegen Magyarország: Bevándorlók társadalmi integrációja*. Budapest: MTA Etnikai-nemzeti Kisebbségkutató Intézete - ELTE Eötvös Kiadó, 2010. pp. 49-95.

has been negligible. However, this trend has been showing signs of change in the past two years: an increasing number of Hungarians consider leaving the country and, in fact, they are leaving in larger numbers than before to seek work abroad. The major immigration destinations are Germany, Austria and Great Britain².

Platonic Xenophobia in Hungary: anti-immigrationism without immigrants

Despite the low levels of immigration (especially from culturally distant countries), **xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiments are extremely strong in the Hungarian society**. This sentiment is extended not only to specific ethnic groups but also to all ‘immigrants’, seen uniformly as alien and foreign. In the absence of relevant political discourse and concrete experience with migrant populations, social attitudes about immigration are mainly shaped by three factors: the fear of the Unknown, the abstract image of the immigrants as it is presented by the media, and the increasingly strong anti-immigrant political rhetorics. As a consequence of these, and as shown by a 2011 Helsinki Committee survey, the Hungarian media paints a negative image of migrants without offering any evidence. In most cases the local media covers foreigners in the crime section, describing migrants and refugees essentially as criminals posing a national security threat³. Therefore, any anti-immigrant political campaigns can build on these simplifying but well-grounded anti-immigrant attitudes and narratives.

According to research conducted by Tárki, in 2015, those who openly admit xenophobia comprised around 46% of the population, and the Political Capital Demand for Right Wing Extremism Index indicators measuring prejudice and welfare chauvinism also showed that close to half the population (45%) holds extremely intolerant views of minority group. This is a remarkably high ratio even in regional comparison (see Figure 3).

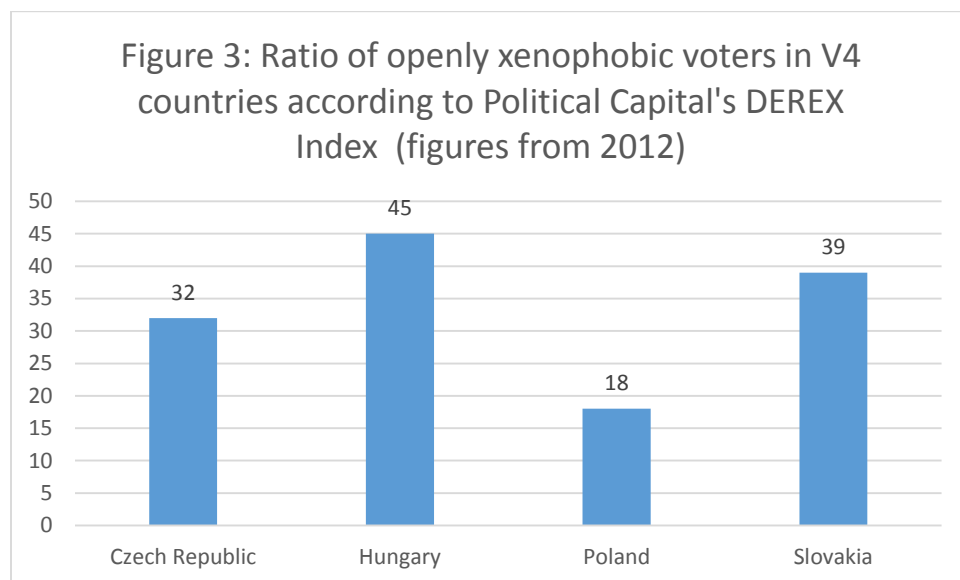
² **Austria:** According to the Hauptverband der österreichischen Sozialversicherungsträger, 65,174 Hungarians worked in Austria in 2014. The rise is steady: it was 57,955 in 2013, 47,950 in 2012, 34,579 in 2011 and 25,999 in 2010 (Source: [Statistische Daten aus der Sozialversicherung - Beschäftigte in Österreich - Jahresdurchschnitt 2014](#) (Tab 26).

Germany: According to the Statistisches Bundesamt, 156,812 Hungarians stayed in Germany in 2014. The rise is steady again: was 135,614 in 2013, 107,398 in 2012, 82,760 in 2011 and 68,892 in 2010 (Source: [Ausländische Bevölkerung Fachserie 1 Reihe 2 - 2014](#))

UK: According to the Department for Work and Pensions, the number of national insurance number allocations to Hungarians was 22,331 in 2014. Though this is less than in 2013 (26,770), but more than it was in the previous years. 2012: 21,760, 2011: 17,925, 2010: 14,215 (Source: [National Insurance number allocations to adult overseas nationals entering the UK to December 2014](#))

The Hungarian Labour Force Survey reports lower figures, because it only showing figures on the ones who have family members at home, because this survey is based on households.

³ Prischetzky R. & Szabó E. (2011), ‘Migránsok a magyar médiában [Migrants in Hungarian Media], Hungarian Helsinki Committee. www.helsinki.hu. (Consulted on 1 February 2013).



Source: *derexindex.eu*

Political campaigns against immigrants – popular but marginal

Since the transition, political actors have regularly appealed to popular fears over migration. The first major political move aimed at generating anti-immigrant sentiment came in 2002 when Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), in opposition at the time, envisioned the arrival of 23 million Romanian jobseekers, and in 2004 the same party, a governing party by that time, again running a softly xenophobic campaign, arguing against the dual citizenship of ethnic Hungarians⁴. For some time parties of the right (Fidesz and KDNP) developed the habit of scaring the population with non-European, primarily Chinese immigrants. These narratives were then rather replaced by the far right's more aggressive, conspiracy-inspired theory envisioning primarily Jewish immigration, for example via real estate investments.

In the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks though, the government tries to reclaim the political initiative by putting the immigration issue on the agenda. The messages put out may prove to be popular because the majority of the population is hostile to immigrants as mentioned above although the depth of public concern regarding this topic remains to be seen. However, according

⁴ In winter 2004, the Hungarian Workers Party (Magyar Munkáspárt) collected signatures for a referendum against the privatisation of public health service in Hungary. Half a year later, the Hungarian World Union (Magyarok Világszövetsége) also initiated a referendum to decide whether ethnic Hungarians in adjacent countries could apply for Hungarian citizenship through a simplified procedure. The two issues were presented together in a double referendum on 5 December 2004. Despite the fierce political campaign which evolved around the citizenship issue, the public was, in general, confused whether granting citizenship was desirable or not for ethnic Hungarians. Finally, due to low participation rates, the results of both referendum were declared invalid

to Eurobarometer data, 3 percent of Hungarians consider immigration to be one of the most urgent problems, while in respect to terrorism this ratio is one percent. In Western European countries, these ratios are incomparably higher: 37 percent of Germans, 38 percent of Brits and 20 percent of Austrians think that the issue of immigration is important. Consequently, it will be difficult for the government (especially with its weakened media background) to put this issue at the top of the political agenda.

While some media reports maintain that putting the immigration issue on the top of the agenda may have to do with international considerations, the real motivation lies in domestic politics: exploiting a popular issue and mobilizing voters by fighting with “external enemies”: the immigrants and the EU that is too soft on immigration policies. The same motive stands for putting the death penalty on the table.

According to the research of sociologist András Kovács, close to two-thirds of the Hungarian voters still support capital punishment. Results of the European Values Survey from 2008 indicated that Hungary was the most supportive country towards capital punishment. Following a series of corruption scandals and unpopular initiatives in the last months of the previous year the government’s popularity dipped precipitously and it was forced into an increasingly defensive position. The Fidesz-KDNP coalition tries to recapture some support (their support in the overall population dropped to 21 percent from close to 35 percent a year ago, according to Ipsos poll) through the introduction of militant ideological topics that it believes could win the support of at least its own camp. These topics include anti-Americanism, stirred up in connection with the banning scandal, the proposal for drug testing, capital punishment, and zero tolerance for immigration that, incidentally, contradicts the government’s own migration strategy adopted in 2013. However, given the low interest in the topic and the government’s reluctance to organize “public consultations” regarding other unpopular issues, such as the Sunday closing of retail stores, it is far from guaranteed that the immigration issue will develop into a political topic attracting the attention of the majority voters.

Competing with Jobbik’s anti-immigration rhetoric, the government tries to raise the voters’ interest and fuel popular anxiety over migrants. News reports on asylum-seekers (few of whom receive any form of asylum status) and “hoards” of illegal immigrants racing through the country are an attempt to justify potential tightening of migration policies.

A manipulated national consultation?

What consequences can we expect from this “national consultation”? This is a non-representative push poll with highly manipulative questions such as “*We hear different views on the issue of immigration. There are some who think that economic migrants jeopardise the jobs and livelihoods of Hungarians. Do you agree?*” or “*There are some who believe that Brussels’ policy on immigration and terrorism has failed, and that we therefore need a new approach to these questions. Do you agree?*”? The “questionnaire” is obviously manipulative, linking terrorism to immigration in a country without radical groups. The questionnaire is also confusing “economic immigration” with the issue of asylum-seekers and terrorism. “Economic immigrants” are represented as people whom pose a threat to Hungarian workplaces, and framed as a counterpoint to Hungarian families. The questionnaire raises the issue that the immigrants and asylum-seekers should be made working in Hungary, and only emphasizing the cost factors of migration.

While the national consultation is nonsense in terms of public opinion polling, the main problems are political rather than methodological.

- First of all, the militant campaign against immigrants can definitely lead to more frequent manifestation of xenophobic attitudes socially and institutionally as well, encouraging officials in state institutions (for example, policeman and officials dealing with immigration) and municipalities to apply discriminative practices against immigrants.
- Second, fuelling anti-immigrant rhetoric on the EU level can backfire for a country that is sending a significant amount of immigrants to Western European countries. While the Hungarian PM differentiates between migration in the EU and immigration from outside the EU, this differentiation is not self-evident everywhere in the EU (see for example the widespread discussions in the UK over restriction of freedom of movement).
- Third, with its campaign, the government puts itself under pressure to act. After making this issue a top priority, the government will take steps to restrict immigration policies on national and EU level as well. On the EU level, the government might try to prevent a new EU regulation, aiming to distribute the refugees among member states. According to our information, on the national level the government seems to deliberately delay finalizing and passing of a migration regulation package, which would restrict procedures respecting EU law. The delay could lead to an infringement procedure against Hungary that the Hungarian government aims to capitalize on. Additionally, Hungary would not be the first country not respecting European immigration and asylum laws: Greece for example was doing so poorly in this regard that they were excluded from the Dublin Treaty. And while the issue of the asylum-seekers from Kosovo definitely needs to be addressed, arresting the immigrants who only want to pass the country and trying make them work would cost much more than simply letting them go.

- Fourth, the government seems to continue its unsuccessful political strategy against Jobbik. Fidesz has no adequate response for the Jobbik-phenomenon: for years, Fidesz essentially failed to attack its rival to the right of the political spectrum on ideological grounds, and instead tried to win over Jobbik voters, practically since 2010, by incorporating Jobbik's policies into governmental action, Fidesz recently opted for a tactic of the left that clearly failed in the past few years: stigmatization of Jobbik ("Jobbik is a neo-Nazi party" – as leading politicians of Fidesz repeatedly said in recent weeks). But trying to position Jobbik as an extreme party while using its rhetoric will prove a strategy of failure, and it will only strengthen Jobbik. Although Fidesz will continue to maintain that it represent a guarantee against the far-right, the message no longer carries much weight either in Hungary or abroad. The current competition for voters receptive to authoritarian and exclusionist messages can have a long-term impact on the attitudes, party politics and policies in Hungary.
- And finally, on the international level, Orbán is facing harsh criticism and isolation again. After some steps trying to improve his reputation in the EU following the elections (meetings with EU leaders in January this year, and the meeting with Merkel in early February), with the current anti-immigrant campaign and exploiting the issue of death penalty, Orbán raised criticism from high-level EU members, such as Martin Schultz, Jean-Claude Juncker and Frans Timmermans. Other governmental politicians of the region seem to use a completely different rhetoric: Romanian PM Victor Ponta, for example, underlined the importance of empathy with immigrants and assistance to help their integration, instead of letting them die. While Orbán might have expected to receive criticism from the left and liberal side of the European political spectrum, as most of the political forces on the right are stricter on immigration, the language that the government and its "national consultation" initiative applies is not something that most of EU leaders want to be associated with. Overall, while Orbán aimed to strengthen its domestic and international position of raising the popular issue of anti-immigration, this can rather contribute to his political marginalization.

Péter Krekó is the Director of Political Capital Policy Research and Consultancy Institute, a think-tank based in Budapest. He is also assistant Professor at ELTE University.

Attila Juhász is senior analyst of Political Capital Institute and a lecturer of Pannon University.

The views expressed in this paper are the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.