

## THE STRATEGY BEHIND ORBÁN'S ANTI-REFUGEE RHETORIC

Dániel Mikecz

**R**einforcing stereotypes against minorities, as well as intensifying and generating conflicts to mobilise successfully for elections are standard political tools of the right-wing, populist Fidesz government. Apart from the LGBT community, refugees have been attacked most often by the government since the mid-2010s. Due to economic hardships in Hungary, the government can be expected to continue its policy of incitement and mobilisation against ethnic, sexual and social minorities and vulnerable social groups in the 2022–2026 election cycle as well. This chapter reviews how Viktor Orbán's illiberal regime created a hostile environment for refugees and refugee-aiding organisations and uses negative sentiments for its benefit. The chapter also recommends some strategies against this fearmongering.

### The 2015 refugee crisis and the reactions

The refugee crisis that culminated in the summer of 2015 caught Hungarian society by surprise in more ways than one. Never before have they been confronted with immigration from outside Europe on such a large scale and so directly. The sudden onset of this unknown phenomenon was accompanied by a political communication campaign at a scale unprecedented since the fall of the Berlin Wall. As early as 2015, posters calling on refugees and immigrants to respect Hungarian culture and jobs – in Hungarian – were already flooding the country. The following year, in 2016, the government initiated a referendum on the European distribution quota, an issue for which a majority in parliament would have been sufficient. The aim of the referendum was to keep the issue on the agenda and mobilise voters. It was also the purpose behind national consultations associating immigration with terrorism, then demonising George Soros and presenting immigration as a cultural and demographic change in Europe. In the consultation questionnaire, the Hungarian Helsinki Committee and Amnesty International were referred to as Soros organisations. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee sued the government agency responsible for the consultation. In late

2019, the Supreme Court ruled that the government had violated the organisation's reputation. Hence, the narrative also involves the stigmatisation of NGOs as foreign agents. During these publicly-funded campaigns, government posters were found state-wide, reaching every household and every voter with the government's political message. The government's message was also delivered by the entire public media and the press in the hands of oligarchs close to the government. The public funding of the campaign could have also been effective because of the strong antipathy towards foreigners and immigration in a society still unable to come to terms with the trauma of the loss in Trianon. However, the extensive government communication since 2015 has reinforced this attitude.

### **The logic of anti-refugee agitation**

While it is well known that in 2015, during the European refugee crisis, the Hungarian government deliberately reinforced prejudices against refugees, other campaigns targeting other minorities followed a very similar pattern. This strategy is the process of creating enemy images<sup>50</sup>. A similar tool was the criminalisation of homelessness. In 2018, the two-thirds legislative majority of Fidesz banned and criminalised 'living in public places' in the Fundamental Law of Hungary. Before the coronavirus outbreak, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said the compensation awarded to Roma youths in a small town in East-Central Hungary for local school segregation practices was unfair. The government also raised the issue of what it described in its communication as 'prison business'. It refers to compensation awarded to detainees for inadequate detention conditions, in an anti-Roma context. In February 2020, the government even planned a national consultation on school segregation and compensation for inadequate detention conditions. However, due to the outbreak of the global pandemic, top-down mobilisation was set aside. Nevertheless, in 2021, the government launched a referendum on the protection of minors, which included questions suggesting that LGBT organisations were promoting gender reassignment for minors in public schools and through media. The top-down-initiated referendum was part of the government's anti-LGBT narrative, which objected to sexual education and child protection<sup>51</sup>. The referendum was held at the same time as the general electin

---

50 Kopper, Á., Susánszky, P., Tóth, G. & Gerő, M. (2017). Creating Suspicion and Vigilance: Using Enemy Images for Hindering Mobilization. *Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics*, 3(3).

51 Takács, J., Fobear, K. & Schmitsek, S. (2022). Resisting genderphobia in Hungary. *Politics and Governance*, 10(4). <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i4.5528>

in 2022, yet it was invalid due to low turnout. However, the campaign that preceded it stigmatised awareness-raising programmes on the acceptance of sexual minorities.

Nevertheless, to properly understand the reason why the government uses the anti-refugee narrative and agitates against refugee-aiding groups and NGOs, the entire issue should be put into a broader context. First of all, explicit ethnocentric and implicit racist messages can be conveyed in relation to migration. Also, the opposition parties do not explicitly address the issue, so Fidesz could identify its opponents, such as NGOs and civil society organisations. The anti-refugee narrative can also serve as a negative message alongside the government's positive pro-family policies. The latter is also frequently juxtaposed with immigration as a solution to the challenge of the decreasing population. Furthermore, another important function of the anti-refugee narrative is to juxtapose the West, which involves 'Brussels' and East-Central Europe. According to Viktor Orbán's narrative, the West is losing its economic power and political influence mainly due to the rise of China. One of the reasons for the 'downfall of the Occident' is the loss of Christian identity. In his view, it is the consequence of mass immigration from non-Christian countries and regions. Hence, for Fidesz, anti-refugee politics is an ideal topic in several respects. As international comparisons show, public opinion in Hungary is more negative about immigration (Table 1). In 2012, the attitude regarding immigration was higher than before 2010, yet after the 2015 refugee crisis, there was a substantial decrease (Table 1). Such a tendency can be found in Germany as well, yet the proportion was lower. The data demonstrate that anti-immigration sentiments existed before 2015, yet they did not manifest in a political conflict. However, the Orbán government could effectively utilise such latent attitudes.

**Table 1. Mean values of attitudes towards immigration, 2012–2018**

Immigrants make country worse or better place to live

0 = 'worse place to live', 10 = 'better place to live'

Germany					Hungary				
2008	2012	2014	2016	2018	2008	2012	2014	2016	2018
5,05	5,35	5,34	5,21	5,35	3,79	4,39	4,03	3,53	3,88

Source: European Social Survey

Thus, with the help of the issue, the 'decadent' Western and the 'healthy' Eastern Europe could be juxtaposed, which also includes the above-mentioned framing of the government's family support policy as an alternative to immigration.

### **Liberal answers, counter-arguments**

To successfully challenge the populist right's politically-motivated agitation against refugees and migrants in Hungary, certain aspects of the government's campaign should be considered and used to create counter-arguments. This section briefly discusses these points.

- Since 2015, Viktor Orbán has been talking about the cultural degradation that immigration is bringing to the western half of Europe. After eight years, it is possible to demonstrate that, despite undeniable tensions, those societies are able to deal with internal and external problems more effectively.
- In the context of the war in Ukraine, it is advisable to raise Hungarian society's awareness that many refugees are fleeing real conflict, risking their lives and their families.
- Finally, it would be beneficial to reach a joint stance on certain social issues, which could be juxtaposed with Fidesz's rhetoric of seeking an adversary.

### **Not a mere communication**

For Fidesz, social conflicts are not problems to be solved with good governance but opportunities for politicking. The Hungarian populist right-wing government is looking for issues in which its own opinion enjoys the majority's support. At the same time, it can force the opposition parties to represent a minority opinion. During the refugee crisis in 2015, it became clear that most Hungarians shared the position of Fidesz in rejecting immigration. Of course, for the '60–40' strategy (60% support for the government) to work, it is also necessary for Fidesz to keep the given issue on the agenda with the help of state resources and to formulate the position held by the opposition. For example, in connection with the refugee crisis and immigration, the Hungarian opposition never referred to the related writings of George Soros. Yet, Fidesz was able to successfully spread the opposite information among the Hungarian public.

While the anti-refugee narrative was very successful during the 2018 election, the Hungarian government has used different enemy images, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the regime returns to anti-immigration and ethnocentric narratives from time to time. In 2022, in his annual speech, Viktor Orbán differentiated between mixed and non-mixed races, and he declared not to belong to the latter. Nevertheless, the anti-refugee, anti-minority narrative is not a mere communication tool but marks the alliance-making strategy of the Hungarian government as well, which might also have consequences on European politics.

### References

ESS Round 4: European Social Survey Round 4 Data. (2008). Data file edition 4.5. Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC. doi:10.21338/NSD-ESS4–2008.

ESS Round 6: European Social Survey Round 6 Data. (2012). Data file edition 2.4. Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC. doi:10.21338/NSD-ESS6–2012.

ESS Round 7: European Social Survey Round 7 Data. (2014). Data file edition 2.2. Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC. doi:10.21338/NSD-ESS7–2014.

ESS Round 8: European Social Survey Round 8 Data. (2016). Data file edition 2.2. Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC. doi:10.21338/NSD-ESS8–2016.

ESS Round 9: European Social Survey Round 9 Data. (2018). Data file edition 3.1. Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC. doi:10.21338/NSD-ESS9–2018.