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Trust and Threat: Discursive Interpretations of Migration in Hungary[1]

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Abstract

Aim: The study aims to demonstrate how migration-related fears and social trust are interconnected in Hungarian society, with particular attention to the interpretive frames of irregular migration after 2015 and to the context of the post-socialist trust deficit.

Methodology: The study adopts a theoretical-interpretive approach and is based on a synthesis of peer-reviewed Hungarian and English-language literature published between 2015 and 2025, complemented by seminal works addressing post-socialist trust structures. Drawing on both empirical and theoretical research, the analysis examines the framing role of political communication and explores the relationship between migration-related trust and fear in the Hungarian and broader Central and Eastern European context.

Findings: The analysis suggests that the inhabitants' sense of threat in Hungary is primarily caused by violations of rules and norms caused by irregular migrants and indirect information processing, while the lack of direct personal experience amplifies the thematizing, dramatizing, and categorizing effects of political and media discourses. The construction of migration as an issue of security, morality, and identity politics is linked to low levels of institutional and generalized trust: the fragility of trust increases experiences of unpredictability, which may intensify and stabilize migration-related fears. Hungarian atti-

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tudinal patterns can also be explained through Central and Eastern European regional specificities, where the cultural nation model, the trust deficit, and political communication jointly shape attitudes toward outsiders.
Value: The novelty of the study lies in interpreting migration-related fears not merely as an external "migration effect," but at the intersection of trust dynamics and discursive mechanisms. It also argues that public policy responses have not only an institutional but also a communicative (discursive) dimension: differentiated category use and trust-building language are relevant for perceptions of security and for social cohesion.

Keywords: social trust, irregular migration, fear, anti-immigrant attitudes, political communication.

Introduction

From 2015 onward, the social and political life of the member states of the European Union underwent significant transformation. The largely irregular migratory wave arriving from the Middle East, North Africa, and other regions posed not only technical and legal challenges to border control but also brought to the surface profound socio-psychological, political, and moral questions. Although migration is an integral part of the history of modern societies, the novelty of the post-2015 situation lay in the suddenness, scale, and unregulated nature of the process (Tálas, 2017; Tánczos, 2024; Hautzinger & Mágó, 2025). Common European responses emerged only partially and frequently in contested forms. At the same time, not only the events themselves but also their construction in public discourse and political communication are crucial to how the situation is interpreted. The framing of migration as a "problem," the use of security-oriented language, and the drawing of moral boundaries constitute a communicative process that independently shapes fear and trust (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993).

Hungary occupied a distinctive position within this process. Measures related to border protection, legal restrictions, and communication campaigns became embedded in a discourse of national sovereignty and security, exerting a significant influence on the social perception of migration. This not only shaped public perceptions of migration but, alongside Hungary's geopolitical characteristics, also affected the country's role as a transit state through measures aimed at curbing irregular migration, including border fences, stricter legal regulations, transit zones, law-enforcement interventions, and deterrence-oriented communication (Glied, 2020). This study treats that influence not merely as

an "environmental factor" but as a mechanism: the agenda-setting and framing role of political communication intersects with the post-socialist deficit of trust, jointly producing a perception of threat that is particularly strong in the absence of direct personal experience.

The main research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

- Along which structural dimensions is social trust organized in Hungary, and how is this related to fears and feelings of uncertainty associated with irregular migration?
- What distinguishes the social perception of regular and irregular migration, and what role do personal experiences and indirect forms of information processing play in shaping these perceptions?
- How do Hungarian societal attitudes toward migration relate to Central and Eastern European and Western European patterns, with particular attention to regional differences in conceptions of the nation, identity, and xenophobia?
- In the case of Hungarian society, should we speak of xenophobia, or rather of defensive mechanisms rooted in fear and distrust – and what role do political culture and political communication play in this regard? Through which discursive tools (categorization, framing, dramatization, moral boundary-drawing) is migration linked to issues of security and trust in the Hungarian public sphere?

Although a substantial body of Hungarian and international scholarship is available on migration, xenophobia, and social trust, the integrated examination of these themes has received less attention in the Hungarian context. In particular, there is a lack of comprehensive syntheses that address post-2015 migration processes, post-socialist trust structures, and the framing role of political communication within a unified interpretive framework. This study seeks to contribute to filling this gap by examining migration-related fears and attitudes through the interconnected lenses of trust, uncertainty, and discursive mechanisms.

The study is based on a theoretical and interpretive synthesis of the relevant literature. The primary source base of the analysis consists of Hungarian and international scholarly publications published between 2015 and 2025 on migration, social trust, political communication, and xenophobia, supplemented by earlier seminal works that are indispensable for understanding trust structures in post-socialist societies. Only peer-reviewed academic publications were included in the selection of sources. The analysis draws on both Hungarian- and English-language scholarship and incorporates empirical research as well as

theoretical approaches. The primary criterion for selecting the literature was its substantive contribution to the interpretation of the relationships among migration, trust, and social attitudes, with particular attention to the specific characteristics of the Hungarian and broader Central and Eastern European contexts.

Public discourse on migration does not merely "reflect" perceptions of threat but actively structures them; accordingly, political communication is conceptualized as a mediator of trust dynamics.

Social Trust and Trust Capital: Theoretical Framework

The Concept and Role of Trust

Social trust is one of the fundamental concepts of modern societies, shaping the structure of social cooperation. According to Francis Fukuyama (1995), trust is a form of social capital operating at the collective level that reduces transaction costs, facilitates cooperation, and contributes to economic development as well as social stability. In this sense, trust functions as an invisible form of capital: it is not directly measurable, yet it plays a decisive role in the acceptance of institutions, participation in public life, and the quality of horizontal relationships among citizens.

Hardin (2002) conceptualizes trust as a relational construct: trust is not generalized goodwill but a situationally bound expectation directed toward a specific person or institution ("I trust you to do X"). Trust contributes to the predictability of actions, reduces perceptions of risk, strengthens social solidarity, and, in the long run, becomes one of the fundamental preconditions of institutional legitimacy.

The opposite of trust is not merely distrust but suspicion, which involves the assumption of the other party's ill will or potentially harmful intentions (Festinger, 1968). This distinction is particularly important when examining social tensions and attitudes related to migration.

The concept of trust is further enriched by Sztompka's (2000) approach, which interprets trust as one of the most important moral resources of modernity, as well as by Putnam (2000), who regards it as a central component of social capital.

Trust and Social Differentiation

Social trust is closely linked to socio-economic conditions. Empirical research has long demonstrated that societies with higher income levels and greater equality tend to exhibit higher levels of generalized and institutional trust, whereas in societies burdened by inequality, trust is often confined to immediate, informal environments (see, among others, Putnam, 2000; Fukuyama, 2007). Social changes – such as the growing proportion of single-person households, the weakening of kinship ties, and the spread of social isolation – also contribute to the erosion of trust. Increasing income and wealth disparities further intensify social distance: upwardly mobile groups tend to possess greater self-confidence and social recognition, while downwardly mobile groups more frequently experience frustration and distrust toward others, particularly toward out-groups and unfamiliar social groups (Grünhut & Bodor, 2022). Among those occupying disadvantaged positions in the social hierarchy, we can often speak of compelled trust: they exist in dependent relationships with actors whose power or resources position them as benefactors, while they do not necessarily believe that these actors genuinely represent their interests. In groups characterized by consistently low levels of autonomy, this dynamic leads to a persistent trust deficit (Boda, 2016).

Types of Trust: Bonding, Bridging, and Linking Trust

The structure of social trust is commonly differentiated in the literature along three basic types (see, among others, Sztompka, 2000; Utasi, 2002):

Bonding trust, which is based on close ties within homogeneous groups – such as family, kinship, ethnic, or religious communities. Alongside strong internal solidarity and commitment, this type of trust often coexists with heightened suspicion toward outsiders and reinforced boundary-making.

Bridging trust, which is built on connections that span different social, ethnic, or cultural groups. This form of trust facilitates social integration and mobility and reduces intergroup prejudice. The presence of bridging trust is one of the key conditions for the successful integration of immigrant communities.

Linking trust, which is grounded in vertical relationships – between citizens and institutions, as well as decision-makers. Its foundation lies in the legitimacy, effectiveness, and predictability of institutions. Without linking trust, social cooperation becomes fragile, and members of society are less likely to feel that institutions are capable of representing and enforcing their interests. From the perspective of migration and integration, the key question is whether bonding trust – naturally strengthened within ethnic diasporas – is comple-

mented by bridging and linking trust. If not, the risk of ethnic segregation, the formation of isolated communities, and a reciprocal spiral of distrust resulting from a lack of interaction increases (Putnam, 2000; Örkény & Székelyi, 2010).

Trust, Perceptions of Security, and Political Communication: Mediating Mechanisms

In the relationship between migration-related fears and trust, the mediating role of political communication becomes particularly pronounced when personal experiences among the population are limited and the phenomenon appears primarily in a mediatized form (Bennett & Entman, 2001; Entman, 2003). In such contexts, "migration" emerges not only as a social phenomenon but also as a communicative construction: the categories used in the public sphere (refugee, migrant, irregular), the security-oriented and moralizing language, and the drawing of "us–them" boundaries can generate an interpretive framework that positions the initial level of trust at a lower baseline. From the perspective of trust, a crucial factor is that political communication also shapes where responsibility and control are perceived to lie. When confidence in the predictability of institutions (linking trust) is weak, promises of security and narratives of threat can more easily become tools of public mobilization. This does not imply that fears are "fabricated," but it does suggest that the intensity and object of fear may be partially stabilized through discursive processes. These mechanisms also help explain why experience-based attitudes toward regular, long-established groups diverge from perceptions of the mediatized figure of the "unknown migrant": in the latter case, indirect information processing and the influence of political communication frames become more pronounced.

The Hungarian Trust Structure and Historical Background

Post-socialist Legacy and Trust Deficit

The level of trust in Hungarian society, based on most international comparative surveys – most notably the European Social Survey (URL1) – has persistently remained below the European average. This is particularly true with regard to generalized trust in strangers, trust in political institutions (parliament, government, political parties), and trust in law-enforcement institutions

(the police, the courts) (Tóth, 2009). The lack of trust constitutes a structural phenomenon with deep historical roots.

A defining component of this trust deficit is the post-socialist legacy. The Hungarian political system operating for an extended period under Soviet influence was built on the logic of enforced loyalty, political conformity, and pervasive state control (Sztompka, 1996). The state fulfilled a paternalistic role of care – ensuring relative stability in housing, basic provisions, and employment – while at the same time, members of society became accustomed to caution, and even suspicion, toward the state as a natural part of everyday life. The norms of the system were often grounded not in transparency, but in the second economy and the duality of formal and informal rules. The post-regime-change period did not necessarily result in strengthened trust either. Although democratic institutions were established, for broad segments of society the capitalist transformation primarily produced uncertainty, economic inequalities, and social vulnerability. The disappearance of jobs, the rapid transformation of the social structure, and intense competition among political institutions all contributed to a situation in which some citizens view the security of the previous system with nostalgia, even if objective living standards were lower. The post-socialist lack of trust is frequently described in the literature as a moral vacuum or a trust deficit (Seligman, 1997; Sztompka, 2000). Large segments of society lack historically rooted institutional experience that could have established a trust-based relationship between the democratic state and an autonomous civil society. As a result, both political and institutional trust remain fragile and are easily influenced by rapidly changing political and economic conditions.

Migration, Trust, and Integration

Regular Migration and Ethnic Diasporas

For immigrants participating in regular migration, the migration decision entails both a physical and a symbolic separation from their previous social environment (de Haas, Castles & Miller, 2020). The social safety net available in the country of origin – the system of family, kinship, friendship, and workplace ties – is significantly weakened or may even disappear entirely following migration (Portes, 1998; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). In the new social context, immigrants most often initially find their own ethnic diaspora, which, through its cultural codes, shared language, and similarities in religion and lifestyle, provides a sense of familiarity and belonging. Attachment to ethnic communi-

ties strengthens bonding trust: shared cultural background, collective migration experience, and norms of mutual assistance create an internal support network that significantly reduces the existential and psychological risks associated with migration (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993; Putnam, 2000). At the same time, the excessive dominance of bonding trust tends toward social closure: it can intensify ethnic separation, slow down integration, and increase the likelihood of the emergence of parallel social structures.

Bridging and Linking Trust in the Migrant Life Situation

Successful social integration through migration cannot be based solely on bonding trust. In the case of migrants, bridging trust is manifested in relationships established with members of the majority society, while linking trust is reflected in confidence in the functioning of institutions. In the absence of such ties, the risks of ethnic segregation, marginalization, and the persistence of social distance are significantly greater (Heckmann, 2005; Putnam, 2007; Ager & Strang, 2008). If bridging and linking trust fail to develop, ethnic segregation, ghettoization, and persistent marginalization become the dominant survival strategies. Research by Antal Örkény and Mária Székelyi (2010) has shown that in Hungary, migrants' quality of life, satisfaction, and material situation are closely linked to their ability to build networks that extend beyond the boundaries of their ethnic community. Immigrants who establish durable, trust-based relationships with members of the majority society tend to achieve better economic positions, develop stronger attachments to Hungary, and more frequently feel that the host country has become their home. In contrast, those who restrict their trust-based relationships exclusively to their own ethnic group are more likely to live on the social periphery and less frequently report successful integration experiences.

Who Trusts How? – Migrants' Trust in the Host Society

Migrants' trust toward the host society is heterogeneous and stems from multiple structural factors. Research suggests that the poorer or more disadvantaged the country of origin, the more likely individuals are to idealize the institutions of the host country and to display higher levels of trust toward them (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014). Immigrants with lower levels of education often exhibit greater trust toward the majority society, partly because they rely more heavily on state or civil support systems.

By contrast, highly educated immigrants with greater resources tend to adopt a more critical stance toward institutions, as they have a clearer understanding of structural barriers and articulate higher expectations (Alba & Nee, 2005). Among migrants working in low-prestige occupations on the social periphery, compelled trust may emerge: trust in institutions is not based on positive experiences but on necessity, as access to institutional support becomes a condition of survival. Trust thus functions simultaneously as a precondition and a consequence of integration. Immigrants who enjoy stable economic and legal conditions are more likely to develop trust-based attitudes; conversely, those who experience uncertainty, livelihood risks, or social exclusion are more inclined to approach the host society and its institutions with suspicion.

Migration-Related Fear, Anxiety, and Irregular Migration

Why Do We Speak of Migration-Related Fear?

The concept of migration-related fear primarily serves to describe social reactions associated with irregular or unlawful border crossing. In everyday thinking, the interpretive framework of the host society often rests on implicit norms: those who arrive as invited guests or enter a country with permission are regarded as legitimate and potential partners; by contrast, those who arrive by circumventing rules and in an uncontrolled manner tend to be met with initial reactions characterized by caution, suspicion, or fear (Bigo, 2002).

Migration-related fear is often structured by metaphorical cognitive schemas. Unlawful border crossing is frequently interpreted through the logic of a violation of private space – similar to the act of entering a private domain without authorization. This metaphorical schema results in irregular migration being understood not only as a legal category but also as a moral transgression, as a consequence of which the initial conditions of trust toward it are lower. The deficit of trust thus does not stem from any ethnic or cultural characteristic but from a perceived violation of the social norms of rule-following (Kury & Redo, 2018). In our view, migration-related fear is fundamentally a matter of perception: for the host society, it is not necessarily the presence of the stranger itself, but the manner of arrival – regular or irregular – that determines the framework of reaction.

Fear, Distrust, Xenophobia

Fear and anxiety, if they persist over time, can easily transform into generalized distrust. Information contexts in which the population becomes aware of migration play a significant role in strengthening this process. When members of the majority society rely primarily on indirect, mediatized sources – news coverage, social media, or political messages – while having minimal personal experience, their attitudes toward migration tend to connect to broader patterns of fear (Bauman, 2006; Wimmer, 2013). In the social science literature, xenophobia is described as persistent fear, distrust, and rejection directed toward foreign groups. Xenophobic attitudes are often underpinned by collective stereotypes, social frustration, or mechanisms of scapegoating. Socio-economic insecurity, a sense of loss, or the perception of cultural threat can all intensify these mechanisms (Gidron & Hall, 2017). It is important, however, to distinguish between rational, defensive reactions to perceived security risks and generalized rejection projected onto collective categories. The demand for security in itself cannot be regarded as xenophobia; xenophobia becomes dangerous when fear is linked not to specific actions but to large cultural or religious groups treated as homogeneous. In such cases, fear and distrust can easily turn into collective prejudice or stigmatizing practices (Perry, 2001).

Political Communication and Moral Panic

Over the past decade, the evolution of social fears related to migration across Europe has been significantly influenced by political communication and the functioning of the media. During the 2015 refugee and migration crisis, the classic mechanisms of moral panic were observable in many countries (Glied, 2020; for the theory of securitization, see also Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998; for a broader sociological and socio-psychological perspective on the topic, see also Cohen, 2011). In Hungary, migration became one of the defining themes of the political agenda. The instruments of this process included various communication campaigns, national consultations, and the prominent social and media representation of measures related to border protection and legal tightening. These elements – similarly to practices observed in other European countries – may have contributed to migration being perceived by broad segments of public opinion as a highly emotionally charged issue linked to identity and security. According to this approach, the emergence of "migration" as an object of public discourse is partly the result of agenda-setting and framing processes: political communication determines what is regarded as a threat,

what is perceived as "disorder," and how the promise of security is linked to these interpretations.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize the dual nature of political communication. On the one hand, it is capable of articulating real concerns present in society – whether cultural, economic, or security-related. On the other hand, when communication relies on simplifying, dramatizing, or exclusionary logics, it can contribute to the population perceiving diverse and complex migration processes as a homogeneous, undifferentiated migrant category. This can increase general feelings of uncertainty and threat and further weaken trust-based attitudes toward foreign groups (Bleich, 2011). A key communicative point is that homogenizing categorization may create a "short circuit" from the perspective of trust: social cognition becomes oriented toward symbolic figures rather than concrete individuals and situations, thereby stabilizing suspicion and reducing the likelihood of trust.

Hungarian and European Context: East–West Differences

Theories of the Nation and Identity Models

The interpretation of the concept of the nation in the social sciences is based on several major theoretical traditions. According to modern nation-theoretical literature, two fundamental models of nationhood can be distinguished: the political nation and the cultural nation.

The political nation (civic nation) is primarily based on citizenship, legal membership, and belonging to a political community (Kohn, 1944). In this model, the criterion of belonging to the nation is the acceptance of political institutions and a shared civic identity, while ethnic or cultural differences are secondary. In classic examples – the United States and France – political values (liberty, equality, republican ideals) constitute the foundation of national cohesion. By contrast, the cultural nation (ethno-cultural nation) interprets the nation as a historical-cultural community held together by a shared language, origin, religious traditions, historical memory, and symbolic cultural codes (Smith, 1988). In this conception, the boundaries of the nation more strongly overlap with ethno-cultural boundaries, and the distinction between "us" and "them" is more pronounced. This model is particularly characteristic of Central and Eastern Europe, where the formation and modernization of national identity were closely intertwined with the ideal of ethno-cultural homogeneity. Hungary's identity structure is closer to the cultural nation model. Key

elements of national self-identification include the Hungarian language, historical traditions, collective memory, and the cultural construction of the Hungarian national character (Csepeli, 1992). The experience of belonging to the nation is often tied to ethno-cultural boundaries; as a result, the acceptance of outsiders, especially when they are perceived as culturally distant, can easily activate identity-protective reflexes. This phenomenon is not uniquely Hungarian but follows from the historical patterns of nation-building in Central and Eastern Europe, where the nation was long interpreted through the ideal of cultural homogeneity.

East and West: Different Logics of Xenophobia

Forms of xenophobia display significant regional differences across Europe. Numerous studies have pointed out (Brubaker, 2010; Wimmer, 2013; Csepeli & Örkény, 2017) that the differing historical experiences and social-structural patterns of Western European and Central and Eastern European countries have given rise to distinct logics of xenophobia.

In Western Europe, this phenomenon often appears embedded in expectations of assimilation: many regard the internalization of majority norms, culture, and ways of life by immigrants as a prerequisite for social integration (those who do not adopt "our culture" cannot become full members of the community). Xenophobic attitudes frequently emerge in normative language – for example, in the name of protecting social cohesion or shared values – and are therefore articulated in more hidden, indirect forms (Gale, 2004).

In Central and Eastern Europe, by contrast, hostility toward foreigners is often expressed more openly. This has several structural reasons:

- migration here has not become an everyday experience to the same extent as in the West,
- during post-regime-change nation-building, the ideal of cultural homogeneity remained dominant,
- social uncertainty and low levels of trust in state institutions can intensify fear of outsiders.

In this context, otherness often appears as a disruptive factor in images of national homogeneity. Hungary fits into this regional pattern. Research consistently shows that:

- even with relatively few immigrants, high levels of anti-foreigner attitudes can be measured,

- acceptance of difference is often limited, especially in the case of groups perceived as culturally distant,
- national pride is built predominantly on historical, linguistic, and symbolic dimensions (historical past, cultural heritage, sporting achievements), and is less connected to modern democratic values (rule of law, pluralism, minority rights).

This structural difference contributes to East and West Europe responding differently to the same migration phenomenon (Sik, Simonovits & Szeitl, 2016).

The Relationship Between Migration-Related Fear and Social Trust in Hungary

Social Perceptions of Regular and Irregular Migration

In Hungarian society, attitudes toward migration are strongly shaped by migration status – that is, whether immigrants arrived within legal frameworks and whether they are present in the country on a long-term basis. Research indicates that long-established communities with legal status – such as Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants, as well as certain Hungarian communities from neighboring countries – are perceived in a more pragmatic and less emotionally charged manner overall (Örkény & Székelyi, 2010). In their case, everyday interactions, business and service relations, and routine presence play a normalizing role. Any social distance toward them is typically based on cultural differences rather than perceptions of existential threat.

By contrast, perceptions of population groups arriving in Europe after 2015 and often labeled in the media as irregular migration are shaped primarily by indirect experiences, narrative frames, and representations. Since the overwhelming majority of the Hungarian population has not encountered members of these groups personally, social perceptions are largely based on media images, political communication, and transnational discourses (Berry, Garcia-Blanco & Moore, 2016). These media representations are frequently linked to themes such as crime, cultural conflict, or terrorism, which can easily activate mechanisms of fear and suspicion, even in the absence of direct personal experience. As a result, the unknown migrant as a symbolic figure often appears as a collective label that is not based on individual characteristics or real interactions, but on homogenized, mediatized narrative frames. The phenomenon of categorized otherness thus contributes to the persistence of distrust (Esses, Medianu & Lawson, 2013) and hinders differentiated evaluation.

Political Culture, Trust, and Perceptions of Security

Migration-related fears and distrust cannot be understood without reference to the broader context of Hungarian political culture. Post-socialist societies – including Hungary – are characterized by a historically rooted trust deficit: low levels of trust in institutions, an ambivalent relationship with the state, and strong political polarization (Sztompka, 2000; Medgyesi & Tóth, 2005). These factors easily connect with heightened social demands for security. Political communication operates with particular effectiveness in this environment: messages about security also convey promises of control and predictability, which carry increased relevance in a context of low trust (Bennett & Entman, 2001). Low levels of institutional trust simultaneously increase the demand for simple, black-and-white explanations. In such an environment, complex social problems – such as economic inequalities, tensions between winners and losers of globalization, or welfare insecurity – can easily lead to scapegoating. The migrant, as a category – especially when presented as homogeneous in public discourse – can become an ideal scapegoat: external, different, lacking political leverage, and suitable for the symbolic projection of a wide range of social frustrations (Heitmeyer & Anhut, 2008). The communicative dimension here is that scapegoating is not only a psychological but also a discursive process: recurring categories and motifs in public discourse stabilize who is perceived as "threatening" and who is positioned as "protective." This structure does not necessarily cause the trust deficit, but it renders it visible and politically mobilizable.

Question: Are We Xenophobic or Uncertain?

From the perspective of social psychology, xenophobia is often one form of defensive mechanism: in a world perceived as unstable, people tend to foreground groups onto which they can project danger and with whom they have little personal contact (Allport, 1954; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). In such contexts, hostility toward foreigners does not necessarily stem from conscious hatred but from a lack of trust, a sense of lost control, and social uncertainty.

Political communication can at times intensify these processes, especially when it presents migration within a one-dimensional, threat-oriented frame. At the same time, the formation of attitudes is far more complex: it combines historical experiences, economic conditions, media content, and patterns of social capital. In the Hungarian case, xenophobia can therefore be interpreted primarily as a defensive mechanism rooted in uncertainty, shaped jointly by the political and social environment (Sik & Szeitl, 2015).

Conclusion

The overarching aim of this study was to demonstrate how migration-related fears and uncertainties in Hungarian society are interconnected with the structure of social and political trust, as well as with historical and regional specificities. Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that the development of attitudes toward migration in Hungary is influenced less by the actual number or direct presence of immigrants than by the combined effects of trust deficits, uncertainty, and socio-historical experiences. The primary source of fear is not migration itself, but its irregular and uncontrolled form, which, through the dimension of rule violation, becomes a moral and symbolic issue. The perception of irregularity undermines the baseline of trust and intensifies perceptions of threat. The post-socialist legacy of Hungarian society and its historically embedded trust deficit contribute significantly to the ease with which suspicion toward external groups is activated. In the case of long-established, legally present immigrant groups, the normalizing effect of everyday experience prevails, mitigating rejection. This suggests that fear does not primarily stem from otherness as such, but from a combination of unfamiliarity, unpredictability, and the absence of personal experience. European comparison highlights regional differences: in Western Europe, attitudes toward foreigners are often more concealed and embedded in normative expectations of assimilation, whereas in Central and Eastern Europe, due to the historical significance of cultural homogeneity, social distance is articulated more openly. The structural roots of these differences also explain why social responses to migration crises vary across regions. Political communication in Hungary – similarly to other European countries – has significantly shaped perceptions of migration and at times reinforced feelings of uncertainty and danger. While it may mobilize public attention in the short term, in the long run it can contribute to the deepening of existing trust and social cleavages, thereby complicating calm, evidence-based public policy decision-making.

Normative Lessons

In managing migration, it is essential to clearly distinguish between categories: refugees seeking protection, economic migrants, and those arriving irregularly. Different groups require different social policy responses.

Migration-related fears should not be trivialized, as perceptions of security and trust are socially real and significant factors. At the same time, it is important to avoid collective stereotypes, assumptions of group guilt, and one-sided criminalizing narratives. The long-term interest of Hungary and Europe lies in

strengthening social and institutional trust, ensuring transparent, rule-of-law-based frameworks for managing migration, and balancing the requirements of security, fairness, and social stability in public policy decisions. In summary, migration-related fear can be traced not primarily to external groups themselves, but rather to the fragility of trust, social uncertainties, and the dynamics of identity protection. Therefore, future solutions must extend beyond the management of migration to include the strengthening of trust, social cohesion, and institutional stability. From the perspective of political communication, it can further be concluded that the coupling of "security" and "migration" in the public sphere is not merely reactive but constitutes part of public policy action itself: the shaping of categories, frames, and agendas feeds back into levels of trust and, indirectly, into the intensity of fear. Consequently, trust-building is not only an institutional but also a discursive task: the use of differentiated categories, transparent and predictable language, and the reduction of dramatization are all relevant to long-term social stability.

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