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# The Ruptures and Continuities in Hungary's Reception Policy: The Ukrainian Refugee Crisis

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*This article reflects on the role that Hungary has played with respect to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. It elaborates on two issues. The first is Hungary's relatively amicable relationship with Russia and how the Hungarian political elite has approached the Ukrainian crisis in view of its domestic political goals. The second is the migration policy that Hungary adopted when faced with the arrival of irregular Middle Eastern refugees and the mitigations in this policy to respond to the Ukrainian arrivals. The paper discusses the evolution in the governance of migration in Hungary and the actors and the politics underpinning the Hungarian reception policy from the perspective of these two issues. In this context, it draws on the literature on leadership and how the latter affects political contexts and social realities, particularly with respect to migration politics.*

**Keywords:** migration, refugee crisis, Russian aggression, Ukraine, reception policies, Hungary

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## Introduction

Europe faced another refugee crisis in 2022, soon after the one triggered by wars in the Middle East in 2015. Once again, the crisis was caused by a war – but one that is on Europe’s doorstep. It is therefore closer to and taking place in what Europeans have long felt to be their ‘extended self’ rather than their ‘other’. The war in Ukraine, which started after Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, has seen millions of Ukrainians and third-country nationals (TCNs) cross into countries to the west and south of Ukraine, including Turkey. Due to the complexity of classifying the population, we use both the terms ‘Ukrainian refugees’ and ‘refugees from Ukraine’ interchangeably throughout this article. Hungary was one of the receiving countries; notably before the war Ukraine had a sizable minority of Hungarian speakers and ethnics in its western provinces. Beyond presumably feeling the need to protect a sizable Hungarian ethnic minority in Ukraine, however, what makes Hungary an interesting case study for the reception of refugees is its legacy of the security-oriented and exclusivist tone of migration politics – at times putting it at odds and in legal battles with the European Union. A further notable issue that makes it singular is Hungary’s difficult relationship with Ukraine since the latter’s first transition to democracy in 2014 and its problematic relationship with Russia since then. Unlike other countries in the region, Hungary has had normal, if not exactly friendly, relations with Russia that have also evolved into energy partnerships alongside bilateral trade expansion during the subsequent Fidesz governments since 2010. The war in Ukraine played a major role in helping Fidesz to win a fourth parliamentary election in 2022 due to the scaremongering by the state media about how Hungary would join the Russian-Ukrainian war, if the opposition won the election, by sending troops and weapons to the frontline (Híradó.hu 2022). Even though the opposition coalition stated many times that these claims were complete fabrications, the Fidesz media conglomerate bombarded the population with more and more claims about the opposition’s (unspecified but suspicious) secret deals with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky (Scheppele 2022).

Considering the above, it becomes crucial to follow refugee politics and the formulation of reception policies in Hungary amidst the war in Ukraine. Inevitably this also relates to wider debates on the securitisation and politicisation of migration politics and, in this regard, our paper starts with a short reflection of such concepts in view of how they can relate to humanitarianism. We then shift our focus to the history of Ukrainian migration to Hungary. We also reflect on the relations between Ukraine and Hungary in view of the Hungarian ethnic minority in the country and the fact of Hungary having had an amicable relationship with Russia. After a summary of this background, we discuss the mitigations in Hungarian reception policy in view of the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

Hungary is a crucial case through which to study continuities and ruptures in migration policies. The Hungarian reception policy has received much attention since the summer of 2015 (Gyollai and Korkut 2020), especially concerning the protection and reception conditions for refugees in the country – not to mention the lack of support for their integration. What emerged as the governance of migration in that period was a highly securitised, legalised and controlling framework that sought to banish refugees from arriving in Hungary and to punish the NGOs working to assist in their protection, reception and integration. In view of this legacy and to assess the current mitigations of the Hungarian reception policy, we are interested in evaluating the governance of the Ukrainian refugee reception in Hungary, tracing the political narrative in effect and the actors involved. We thus foreground the racial bias in Hungarian reception policy while noting the shift in Hungarian governance practices from securitisation during the Middle Eastern refugee crisis to the rather hands-off attitude of the Hungarian government in the face of the Ukrainian refugee crisis. In discussing this, we first look at the political and media narratives that surrounded both migration crises and at the roles of the respective actors of migration governance, considering the formal and informal functions that they have taken on.

The securitisation of an issue is always socially constructed in that its different influencers play a role in its construction at different levels, including the media, political elites or security professionals (Bigo 2002; Hampshire 2011; Tsoukala 2011). Securitisation discourses can wage a direct impact on the way in which politics and the public treat migrants. While elites construct discourses, discourses also speak through us – through our human agency – and thus privilege and shape certain ways of apprehending the world. A discursive frame could then become a deeply structured symbolic apparatus that we use to make sense of the world (Korkut and Eslen-Ziya 2017). According to Mumby and Clair (1997: 202), ‘this frame provides the fundamental categories in which thinking [regarding socio-political challenges] can take place. [Frames] establish the limits of discussion and define the range of problems that can be addressed’. Securitisation narratives also unfold in a certain historical, social and political context, which the politicians can affect, inescapably determining the comprehension and interpretation (van Dijk 2008) of what external migration, in this instance, implies for the public. When securitisation narrative meets humanitarianism, however, a subsequent recontextualisation of humanitarianism for the self – but not for the other – legitimises strategies of migration control and exclusion. Furthermore, a reconceptualisation of human rights as the rights of citizens and of Christianity as a constituent of national/European identity – and *vis-à-vis* the migrant other – abate humanitarianism and constrain its universal essence. Korkut, Terlizzi and Gyollai (2020) earlier showed how humanitarian rhetoric, albeit with an interpretation limited to protecting the self against the other, can be used to justify and legitimise the implementation of security measures. This would imply humanitarianism and securitisation as not necessarily representing two distinct logics but could also be conceived as a condition for humanitarianism if a streamlined common logic were adopted (Little and Vaughan-Williams 2017; Stepka 2018; Watson 2011). In this respect, it becomes crucial to assess Hungarian reception policies during the war in Ukraine and the refugee crisis after 2015 that involved people coming from the Middle East.

### **An overview of Hungarian minorities in Ukraine and the relationship of the neighbouring states to Hungary**

As two neighbouring post-communist countries, Ukraine and Hungary have had a history of cross-border movements. There is a historical kinship between the Western regions of Ukraine, particularly within the area of Transcarpathia, where many ethnic Hungarian-speakers live. This dates back to the aftermath of the First World War, when Hungary lost two-thirds of its former territory and its inhabitants. The Treaty of Trianon is one of the darkest chapters of Hungarian history and still constitutes a great tragedy for the country considering the substantial economic, political and social changes that it brought on the life of the nation (Romsics 2007), notwithstanding the feelings of injustice and the grievances widely shared among the Hungarian people. To this day, Trianon still resonates in Hungary and plays an essential role in the formation of Hungarian national identity and politics around it (Putz 2019).

While, during the communist era in Hungary, Trianon was strictly off the agenda and ethnic Hungarians, torn away from the motherland and living in its neighbouring countries, were quietly ignored (Schöpflin 2022) the Fidesz government has managed to reconnect the Hungarian nation with its long-rooted grief with the Trianon Treaty by promoting 4 June as the Day of National Belonging. Since Fidesz gained a two-thirds majority in the 2010 parliamentary election, it extended voting rights to Hungarian ethnics in neighbouring countries by making them citizens. This has also largely contributed to its second consecutive electoral victory in 2014, as the Hungarian ethnic vote became an indispensable advantage for the government. The nationalist Fidesz party also promoted the togetherness of Hungarians in neighbouring countries, including the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine where an estimated 140,000 Hungarians live (Brzozowski 2019).

Indeed, the historical kinship between Hungarians and the ethnic Hungarian speakers living in Ukraine took on a new character after Hungary joined the EU in 2004 and the Schengen area in 2008. To achieve a link between Hungary and Hungarian minorities in its neighbouring states has been a political objective for Fidesz governments over a number of years (Scott 2018: 25). The Schengen-area accession of Hungary in 2007, alongside Slovakia and Slovenia – where many Hungarian ethnics live – has partially fulfilled this objective. Furthermore, the EU accession of Romania in 2007 and Croatia in 2013 and the removal of Schengen visa obligations for the citizens of Serbia and Ukraine respectively in 2009 and 2017 allowed Hungary to achieve a free-travel zone in its neighbourhood for its kin. The Fidesz government welcomed these developments, though it maintained a strict position on the need to have borders for other countries in Europe. The then-State Secretary for Parliamentary and Strategic Affairs, Bálint Orbán, indicated that '[the Hungarians] do not like borders because it has separated them from one and other but not because (...) others from us' (Orbán 2015: 17). This sheds light on the key migratory developments in Hungary, particularly after the end of 2014, as it coincided with various refugee crises triggered by the political turmoil in the Middle East. In this period, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz government exploited borders both 'physically and symbolically in ways that resonate with fear of migrants and conservative scepticism of multiculturalism and open borders', while praising the enlargement of the Schengen area and the visa liberalisation between Ukraine and Hungary (Scott 2018: 26). Since joining the EU in 2004, we have seen, in parallel, Hungary's search for cross-border cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe alongside a 'policy of border securitization, which essentially entailed a re-nationalisation of its border regime and its framing of the political border as a protective barrier against threats to national and European identity' (Lamour and Varga 2017 cited in Gyollai and Korkut 2020: 11; Scott 2018: 19).

Amidst the nation-building process in Ukraine after 2014, the language question of ethnic minorities in Ukraine caused a stir in Hungary. The Fidesz government, in reaction to Ukraine's 2017 laws that limited the rights of ethnic minorities, attempted to block the country's NATO and EU rapprochement process. Hungary justified its intervention by stating that the new law – which was widely criticised (Denber 2015) as it restricted the right of minorities to use their mother tongue in education – did not meet Western and European standards. The Fidesz narrative was later exploited by propaganda channels in Russia and by many disinformation portals, stating that the Kiev administration discriminated against minorities and was used to raise support in Russia against Ukraine by building a base for the current war as well as the war back in 2014 (Takácsy and Szicherle 2020).

The war in Ukraine became a central element of the campaign in the 2022 general election in Hungary. The Hungarian government's communication strategy mostly consisted of a plan to stay out of the Russian-Ukrainian war so that they could portray themselves as the protectors of the Hungarian nation and families to their electorate. The government did not condemn the Russian aggression extensively but stressed that Hungary should retain a good business relationship with Putin's Russia in order to maintain affordable energy prices. A section of the Fidesz-controlled media even challenged the legitimacy of the Ukrainian government and mostly sided with Russia, condemning the conflict as a war provoked by the US and Ukraine. The role that Zelensky has played in this regard became highly politicised, while the Fidesz media appended its pre-existing anti-EU and anti-elite narratives to Zelensky's political personality. Furthermore, the media remained silent on the fact that the Hungarian government has been building close relationships with Russia and justified this with Hungary's quest to 'protect the Hungarian families, conservative values and the energy price caps' (Bákonvi 2022). While most of the broadcasts on the war covered neutral footage, the undertone is usually anti-Ukraine (Keller-Alánt 2022).

The war in Ukraine also turned out to be considerably profitable for the Fidesz government. Amidst the instability in neighbouring countries, the government showcased Hungary as a beacon of stability despite the world-wide pandemic, the ongoing war and the continuously rising inflation. The Fidesz government also

pursued a narrative that ‘Hungary must remain neutral in this war’ – while producing continuous smear campaigns against the opposition by stating falsely that ‘if the left-wing opposition wins, war between Russia and Hungary will start on the following day of the election’ (ORIGO.hu 2022). However, in the end, their tactical portrayal of Hungary’s neutrality resulted in an overwhelming victory for Fidesz, with a renewed supermajority within the Hungarian parliament during the 2022 national elections (Taylor 2022); Hungary did not support most of the EU sanctions and tried to veto the developments to constrain Russia via economic regulations (Herszenhorn, Barigazzi and Moens 2022). The Fidesz party’s communication emphasises that they must also protect the Hungarian people and families from Brussels, the US and Ukraine from rising energy prices. Interestingly, the list of ‘enemies’ this time does not contain migrants fleeing conflict, although xenophobia has been the flagship of all polarising Fidesz narratives in the past decade (Pepinsky, Reiff and Szabo 2022). In view of this political setting, we are looking, here, at how the war in Ukraine mitigated Hungary’s reception policy by making it diverge acutely from its securitised racist undertones to its novel informal and hands-off reformulations. We argue that, while becoming less formalised, institutionalised and exclusivist, it is still *ad hoc* and determined by the domestic political priorities of the Fidesz rather than adopting a humanitarian scope that would follow a fully-fledged formal set of reception policies. In view of this, Orbán’s political aims and narrative determine the course of Hungarian reception policy despite its more liberal scope towards the Ukrainians.

### Methods, data collection and conceptualisation of research questions

This article uses Viktor Orbán’s speeches regarding external migration and Europe after 2014, as that was the year when migration gained much relevance in Hungarian politics and reached its climax as a political issue as from 2015. This was due to the increasing irregular arrivals of migrants to Hungary, particularly from the Middle East and beyond, starting in mid-2015. Furthermore, in view of its external migration and the future of Europeanisation, Viktor Orbán’s voice has gained traction not only in Hungary but also in the rest of the European Union (Josipovic *et al.* 2022 NOT IN REFS). The speeches sampled for this paper derive from 25 major speeches that Orbán gave on the issue of migration and Europe between 2016 and 2019. Hence, we present an overview of the most dominant themes in these speeches. While we could analyse the speeches of Viktor Orbán from the 2015 refugee crisis, the Ukrainian migration crisis did not feature in Orbán’s speeches as extensively, as it was governed by more-technical solutions that we list below. This means that the data collected for Ukraine rely only on the analysis of newspaper and journal articles.

Since 2010, analyses on crisis and socio-political change in Hungary, the rule of law and Hungary’s shifting geopolitical orientation, as well as migration governance, have featured extensively in Hungarian and Western academic and media debates (Bánkuti, Halmai and Scheppele 2012). Considering this debate, the empirical material of this article departs from Viktor Orbán’s re-formulation of Hungarian conservatism – which was originally associated with the ideas of József Antall, who served as the first prime minister of Hungary after 1990 – and national rather than European solutions to international problems such as migration featuring in Hungarian language political discussions and media outlets. Here, we refer to the conservative, centrist and liberal media outlets in Hungary in order to see how they have embedded narratives, slogans and tropes from Orbán’s speeches. We also looked at opinion pieces such as editorials in conservative, centrist and liberal media outlets and used the simple keyword *migráció* (migration) in order to collect as many examples as possible. During the period of the so-called migration crisis, between 2015 and 2018, we collected 431 pieces (91 in *Népszava*, 232 in *Magyar Hírlap* and 108 from hvg.hu) and traced narratives, slogans and tropes in relation to migration embedded in political speeches. Finally, we selected 50 articles out of the 431 we collected which had a similar distribution from conservative, centrist and liberal outlets.



While noting that Viktor Orbán's leadership has been divisive both nationally and internationally on migration and other issues related to Europe, the article also underlines the deeply polarised nature of Hungarian politics. This environment generates concerns for researchers who need to account for full partiality when it comes to elaborating on political narratives and may compromise reflexivity in data collection. However, the reflexivity problem that this article notes should be understood from the perspective of the general concerns that discursive scholars face in their work on politically polarised contexts. There is value in delving deep into the context and building local knowledge around which research problems appear. This still leaves us with the issue of how to achieve impartiality in data collection in politically polarised contexts whereby the political stance of the analysts could determine the opinions that we analyse. Fairhurst (2009: 1609) argues that 'without the pressure to build generalizable theory, discursive scholars feel freer to embrace the context and, especially, its historical, cultural, and political aspects'. Yet should a comprehensive elaboration of historical, cultural and political factors specific to the context preclude theoretical generalisations? While it goes beyond the remit of this article to offer comprehensive responses to these questions, it still underlines the fact that discursive studies gain from following changes in formal institutions and analysing political developments in tandem (Korkut *et al.* 2016). This is why the article offers a study on the making of the reception policy in Hungary during two refugee crises, considering both the discursive and the institutional aspects of this process conjointly.

We refer to how the Hungarian media has circulated the Hungarian government's migration narratives, looking at newspaper articles as well as direct quotations from political speeches. Those using newspapers as a resource for research should bear in mind the full control of the public media by the Hungarian government and how the media authority regulates the private media to prevent any anti-government voices. Overall, media freedom is extensively compromised in Hungary (European Federation of Journalists 2019) and this would possibly affect how institutional and discursive practices regarding migration politics have become represented in print and digital media in Hungary. As the International Press Institute stated, Hungary's public service media have been deformed into an audio-visual propaganda tool of the ruling party. Editorial independence is virtually non-existent for news programming on public radio and TV, which uncritically amplifies the Fidesz party's messaging. There are only a handful of left-liberal voices that could propose a critical reflection on politics, including Orbán's migration discourse. However, previous research has shown that even such voices in the media did not take a critical position on migration politics and discourse either but simply engaged with it, offering sometimes only alternative justification for the securitisation of migration (Gyollai and Korkut 2020: 11). Therefore, despite the deep polarisation in the country between the conservative and the liberal factions, it does not look as though the latter could present an alternative discourse to displace Viktor Orbán's and his government's eminence in the making of migration narrative. When it came to media analysis, while achieving impartiality in data collection in politically polarised contexts was our aim, this paper shows that conservative-centrist-left/liberal media outlets actually did *not* differ too much in their evaluation of how Hungarian politicians narrativised external migration. This, in a way, disqualified the need for impartiality in the face of the deeply entrenched partiality of the Hungarian media.

Overall, our article makes ample references to Hungarian language discussions in order to portray Orbán's earlier narratives to allegedly defend Europe from external migration and moralise using executive control by leaving a narrow playing field for his left-liberal critics. It also elaborates on how the Ukrainian migration crisis mitigated this situation, as it provided another instrument for Orbán to carve out a leadership role for himself exploiting insecurities – this time beyond the migration crisis but which the general crisis around the war in Ukraine has fostered within the general population. The article investigates how leaders stimulate the processes by which their followers' understanding of the world is produced (van Leuwen 2007: 95) to generate their audiences. The theoretical foundation of the article relies on leaders' social knowledge

production, legitimation and inculcation of such knowledge among their followers (van Leuwen 2007) in a bid to foster an audience for discursive and institutional change for the allegedly sole purpose of responding to a crisis. The 2015 Middle Eastern and the 2022 Ukrainian migration crises have provided Orbán with such tools.

When debating legitimation, the leadership literature emphasises the importance of the social construction of context and social reality (Fairhurst 2009; Grint 2005) by the leader and sensemaking (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Weick 1995), visionmaking (Bennis and Nanus 1985) and cultural transformation (Deal and Kennedy 1982) to qualify the leader's capacity. Leaders' change agency (Mabey and Freeman 2010) and their effect on their followers (Yukl 1999: 286) also matters. Thus, leaders' discursive tools persuade their followers that action is required to recapture safety and stability. Skilfully used, these discursive tools shift people from a previously comfortable environment to a less familiar one (Mabey and Freeman 2010: 512). Essentially, the social construction of the problem legitimises the deployment of a particular form of moral authority and limits alternatives to an extent that those involved begin to react supportively (Grint 2005: 1475).

The media, opposition parties, political colleagues and activists construct certain 'truths' about political leadership and leader effectiveness (Grint 2000, cited in Iszatt-White 2011: 119). The theoretical contribution of this article is to emphasise discursive processes in the making of migration politics – but conjointly with formal institutional changes. As noted above, discursive processes operate in conjunction with institutional mechanisms in political contexts, qualifying the subsequent social processes and power relations (Korkut *et al.* 2016). Institutional mechanisms relate to collective rationality and identity construction (Pye 2005) for they enable the subsequent transmission and consolidation of political choices during crises. Therefore, while collective rationality is essential to the consolidation and operation of leadership in crisis contexts, its making requires both institutional and discursive tools. In view of this conceptualisation, we first reflect on Hungarian reception policy and its changes since 2015 from the perspective of both the Middle Eastern and the Ukrainian refugee crises.

### **Hungarian reception policy changes since 2015**

Back in 2015, when a large number of Middle-Eastern refugees were approaching the southern borders of Hungary, the Fidesz government was unprepared for their protection and reception – let alone their integration. While the same government was occupied with changing most of the cardinal laws of the country, including the Hungarian constitution, the laws and policies that governed migration remained untouched. A 2012 UNHCR report on Hungary described the then-legislations on asylum as a policy 'consistent with international and European standards and contain[ing] essential safeguards'. However, when millions of displaced Middle-Eastern refugees started their journey towards the EU, the Hungarian government bandwagoned its emergent scepticism with European federalism and multiculturalism to its politics, policy and narratives of border management that have long been manifest amongst other conservative circles in Europe. In the case of Hungary, however, this implied keeping migrants at bay and in transition spaces around the EU's external borders – making it impossible for them to settle down in Hungary by rejecting their protection. Therefore, the Hungarian migration regime followed a course that maintained a central role for nation states rather than accepting that the European Union play a central role.

From summer 2014 to the end of 2015, the securitisation of migration in Hungary first started discursively but soon led to more fundamental legal and policy changes, beginning with the government's announcement of a 175km-long fence along the Serbian border and Hungary suspending the Dublin III regulations in order to remain a zero-migration country. In order to consolidate its voters base, the government called for a series of *nemzeti konzultáció* (national consultation) on migration, which operated through letters sent to citizens'

homes asking them to express their opinion on issues that the government deemed important. The language used in these consultations was symptomatic of the securitisation frame by Fidesz. At the same time, the government placed billboards all across the country with slogans such as ‘If you come to Hungary, you need to abide by our laws/respect our culture’ and ‘You cannot take away the jobs of Hungarians’. As Szalai and Göbl (2015: 24–25, cited in Gyollai and Korkut 2020) note, ‘The billboards were clearly not targeting migrants, but the general population: they were all in Hungarian and used the informal speech register, which in this context suggested condescension’.

Boldizsár Nagy (2016) considered the developments in this period in Hungary as ‘denial’, ‘deterrence’, ‘obstruction’, ‘punishment’, lacking solidarity and breaching domestic, European and international law. Hungary has clearly avoided its obligations regarding asylum-seekers and portrayed itself as the ‘protector of the EU’ (Korkut 2020: 11). The government managed to keep most of the public in the dark through smear campaigns against migration based on forged or out-of-perspective imagery in order to influence public opinion. In hindsight, we can see that the Fidesz narrative paid well as their handling of the refugee crisis resulted in consecutive electoral victories. Since 2016, applications for asylum can only be processed at the transit zones and anyone apprehended crossing Hungary’s borders at other points are sent back to the Serbian side of the border fence. Kallius, Monterescu and Rajaram (2016) noted the construction of a border fence and the transit zones at the border with neighbouring Serbia and Croatia as an attempt to ‘fabricate the political through processes of marginalisation and exclusion wherein a number of groups have at best a tangential relation to the political norm’. Particularly, the creation of transit zones allowed the Hungarian government to culminate the securitisation of mobility and ‘fix (...) asylum-seekers in time and space and make them invisible to mainstream society’ (Scott 2018: 27 in Gyollai and Korkut 2020). These reception centres on the southern border of Hungary enabled the inhumane treatment of refugees by the authorities and resulted in a myriad of court cases for human rights breaches (Zalan 2017, in Gyollai and Korkut 2020: 11). Following the ruling of the Court of Justice of the European Union (2020) – Joined Cases C-924/19 PPU and C-925/19 PPU – case against Hungary, the reception centres were shut down all over the country. This contributed to one of the largest policy changes since 2015, although it made Hungary entirely unable to provide help for the arriving Ukrainian refugees in 2022.

Overall, Hungarian migration policy was completely reshaped, starting in 2015, making it impossible for refugees to complete their migration journeys into Europe as the Fidesz government had turned Hungary into a country defending Europe’s south-eastern borders. Moreover, the Hungarian government also introduced the so-called ‘Stop Soros Act’ in May 2018, which comprised a legislative package with, *inter alia*, amendments to the Criminal Code that effectively criminalised NGOs and civil-society actors providing humanitarian support for asylum-seekers (Gyollai and Korkut 2020). While the conservative media picked up on the alleged role that Soros has played more extensively than did the centrist and left/liberal media, the latter’s criticisms and commentary on this law remained at best tepid (Korkut 2020). In the end, curtailing the functions of NGOs and removing opposition eventually opened up more space for the Hungarian government to manage migration politics without much opposition. In response to this, the European Union started an infringement process concerning the Sargentini report for the European Parliament, calling on the Council to determine, pursuant to Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union, the existence of a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the values on which the Union is founded, leading to the current rule-of-law procedure launched against Hungary in early 2022.

The refugee crisis unleashed in 2015 by the wars in the Middle East and particularly the civil war in Syria presented Orbán with the possibility to consolidate his illiberal politics. Orbán warned that migrants were watching the EU from Hungary’s southern borders with what he called their ‘wolf eyes’. He introduced it as the Hungarian government’s duty to protect Hungarians from this very threat. Yet despite having stated that



migrants had ‘wolf eyes’ watching from outside the borders of Europe, Orbán did not decline the obligation to extend humanitarianism in certain circumstances. He stated that ‘migrants have been lured into making such dangerous journeys with the promise of welfare at their destinations. It is those terrorists who exploit some of those migrants’ [legitimate] claims [and] migrant groups are full of conflicts’.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding this humanitarian stance, Orbán still upheld his warning to the Brussels elite, the European leaders and the Hungarian opposition, who allegedly advocated that ‘all people who come to Europe intend to live here according to [European] customs and laws. Yet, the facts are showing the opposite’.<sup>2</sup> Instead, an ideal Europe, with regard to the handling of external migration, would be one where [security forces] retain the duty to make sure that whoever comes follows national laws.<sup>3</sup>

Orbán also maintained that Hungary has been self-sufficient and that, when migration reached its doors, the country did not expect help from anyone; he also stated that Europe would have done better had it not rejected Hungarian solutions that were both operational and useful. Proposing that the European public needs to be heard, Orbán stated that ‘We don’t know what Europeans think about migration but we certainly know what their leaders think’.<sup>4</sup> Once again, with his narrative, Orbán sought to present himself and the migration politics of the Hungarian government as ‘pro-European’, in an attempt to establish a direct link with the European public even while capturing a continent-wide disenchantment with the elite. Finally, Orbán presented what the European elite has done on migration politics as ‘hurry-scurry’ that led to chaos and suggested that European institutions,<sup>5</sup> faced with the [migratory] movement of people, had resigned itself and accepted that migration could not be stopped and that they could not do anything against it. Yet, he suggested that it was rather ‘more humanitarian not to accept them [those without refugee status] into the EU than having them on the European territory for a few years and to force removal in a few years’.<sup>6</sup> Orbán continued to state that ‘We did not know what successful integration is’ yet we knew that migration is the Trojan horse of terrorism. In the end, the EU needs to see sense.<sup>7</sup> The future course of Europeanisation and the role that the member states can play in effect is then as follows. It is noteworthy that, regardless of ideological colour, all conservative, left-liberal and centrist media elaborated on the theme of the ‘danger’ that migrants and refugees posed to Europe too (Korkut 2020), making Orbán’s discourse and politics to stop external migration so resonant and dominant in Hungary.

### **The reception of Ukrainian refugees in Hungary**

There has been no significant change in recent decades in migration from Ukraine towards Hungary (KSH 2022). The data suggest a decline in migration from 2009 up until 2014 (Erőss, Kovály and Tátrai 2016; KSH 2022). The period of turbulence in the Eastern Ukrainian region which began in 2014 increased migration flows by 60 per cent, although the most popular migration routes were to Poland, Slovakia and Western Europe. Since Hungary is the only non-Slavic-speaking country among Ukraine’s Western neighbours, we see the migration towards Hungary being mostly of Hungarian-speaking people from the Transcarpathian region (Erőss *et al.* 2016). Between 2009 and 2021, fewer than 10,000 people migrated to Hungary from Ukraine each year (KSH 2022).

According to the EMMI (Ministry of Human Resources), more than half a million people had crossed the border from Ukraine to Hungary by the end of March 2022 (Magyarország Kormánya 2022a) and the latest communications from the Hungarian government estimated the number of refugees in Hungary as more than a million (Mohos 2022). Unlike the securitisation narrative that qualified the 2015 refugee crisis, the Hungarian government pledged that, for the Ukrainian refugees ‘they would do whatever it takes for all refugees’ in their first press release – although reading the text further it becomes apparent that what they meant was all refugees arriving from Ukraine (Magyarország Kormánya 2022a). Viktor Orbán himself sent a video message for the

‘Stand Up for Ukraine’ charity event stating ‘I would like to assure our Ukrainian friends that everyone fleeing the war will continue to find a safe haven in Hungary. We continue our support programmes, we take care of refugees and we continuously raise and provide the necessary financial resources. Hungary helps!’ (Magyarország Kormánya 2022a). The ‘Hungary Helps!’ narrative refers to the role that Hungary has adopted to protect Middle-Eastern Christians in their ancestral lands and make humanitarianism an aspect of their populist foreign policy (Hisarlıoğlu *et al.* 2022). Despite a clear pro-Ukrainian stance, the Fidesz government still refused to uphold economic sanctions against Russia by emphasising that ‘[they] could not help Ukraine by ruining [their] own economy and lives. That would be entirely pointless’ (Magyarország Kormánya 2022b). Although the pro-Fidesz press and the government itself declared that Hungary was providing every possible help to the refugees, the only work that appeared to have been carried out was essentially done by local and national charities. As Erőss (2022) states, in the first couple of days on the Hungarian side of the Ukraine border there was spontaneous help offered by locals to the arriving waves of mostly Hungarian citizens. After this, there were help centres opening where refugees were transported after crossing the border; these were run by aid organisations or local councils (Erőss 2022). While there are no data indicating that the government has coordinated or contributed to the primary protection of refugees, evidently the government still sought to take all the credit for this. Therefore, in setting the governance of the Ukrainian crisis apart from the Middle Eastern crisis, the Fidesz government has pursued informal governance tools unlike the much formalised and institutionalised tools that it devised to handle the 2015 crisis. Yet, it did not necessarily put further institutionalisation in place to support its reception policy.

Yet, the Temporary Protection Status for Ukrainian refugees, which was formally activated by the 2001 directive by the Council on 4 March 2022, extended initial legal protection and certain rights to Ukrainian refugees. Moreover, Hungary, as a member state of the EU, played a part in providing immediate relief by not hindering the border-crossings of Ukrainian refugees – in contrast to their migration policy towards arrivals from the Middle East since 2015. The Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Péter Szijjártó, emphasised that:

*Illegal immigrants and those fleeing Ukraine cannot be equated. The Hungarian authorities have a lot of experience with the former (...) their actions are aggressive, they violate the green border, destroy the infrastructure, and attack the police. Ukrainian refugees, on the other hand, arrive legally, through border crossings, respect the rules and, if necessary, stand in line for hours or even days (Flori 2022).*

Nevertheless, to draw a parallel between the 2015 refugee crisis and the current migration towards Hungary from Ukraine, we can state that in neither instance did the refugees approaching the Hungarian border plan to stay in Hungary. The vast majority of them only wished to enter the Schengen area and to travel further to more developed countries within Western Europe (Gyollai and Korkut 2020). Out of the 500,000 border-crossings from Ukraine to Hungary, as of 15 June, only 24,615 applications were registered for temporary protected status, while other EU countries together received 3.2 million applications; thus the Hungarian participation in the EU’s efforts to accommodate refugees does not even reach 1 per cent (Mohos 2022). Even among those with temporary protection, we cannot know for certain how many stayed on in Hungary.

The greatest difference between the 2015 and the 2022 crises is that the Hungarian government has left the Ukrainian border ‘unregulated’ in comparison to the over-regulated southern border, which is still guarded by a fence since the refugee crisis of 2015. While the Criminal Code was amended at this time to ensure that the ‘border closure’ was a successful policy against the waves of refugees (Gyollai and Korkut 2020) the Ukrainian border remained completely unregulated by the parliament. Undoubtedly, the Ukrainian refugees fit well with the conservative and Christian family values that Orbán endorsed – to provide for Hungary in particular and

Europe in general – as they were mostly Christian and often Hungarian-speaking Ukrainian elderly people, women and children, whereas the arrivals through the southern border were alleged threats to such values. Still consistent with their anti-migration politics, the Fidesz government simply turned their heads away from the situation at the Ukrainian border and let the EU Directive and charity organisations attend to the issue of refugees rather than formalising a full-fledged reception policy – in contrast to its neighbours. Therefore, unlike the Middle-Eastern refugees, Hungary tacitly facilitated the Ukrainians' protection but did not put any institutions in place for their long-term reception. In this way, the reception conditions for Ukrainians are not much different from the earlier cases of refugees.

Nevertheless, owing to the implementation of the EU Temporary Protection Directive, long queues were avoided at the border-crossings as the authorities required only very little evidence of residence or nationality. Ukrainian ID cards are accepted in those cases when someone is not in possession of a passport and the entry is given automatically without any need for further paperwork. However, in order for the arrivals to receive temporary protection status in Hungary, they are required to travel to a destination where their cases can be processed. In order for them to travel within Hungary, the Hungarian Railways Zrt. (MÁV) introduced solidarity tickets, which anyone from Ukraine can use free of charge. On the larger motorways, there were signs in Ukrainian and English so that refugees could travel more easily. Hence, the application of the EU Directive facilitated the reception of Ukrainian refugees, setting them apart from those from the Middle East. Yet, their status is not ascertained right at the border-crossing and they are obliged to make lengthy trips.

Still, the securitisation of migration and the highly punitive tone of migration politics directed at NGOs have left a legacy, the impact of which is pretty acute, considering the informal underpinnings of Hungarian reception policy. This means that, even though local authorities and city councils pledged to provide temporary assistance to Ukrainians in the form of housing, clothes and food, the majority of support is provided by the many NGOs and charities. As the migration-related support system was completely demoted by the government during the period between 2015 and 2016, the Ukrainian refugees now face a crisis in Hungary. Firstly, 90 per cent of the refugees fleeing the Russian offensive are women and children (UNHCR 2022) as the current state of emergency in Ukraine demands that military-aged men remain in the country. This presented dangers such as human trafficking, smuggling, violence and sexual exploitation. There is also a housing crisis unfolding in Hungary, making it more difficult for refugees to find accommodation. In the current situation, the Hungarian state has not been able to provide housing on a massive scale, therefore this task has been left to NGOs and private individuals, although their capacity, too, is limited (Moravec 2022). The other reason for the lack of housing options for Ukrainian refugees is that the Hungarian government closed almost all refugee accommodation during the period 2015 to 2016 in order to discourage asylum-seekers from entering the country.

Despite its earlier critical discourse in view of the role that the European Commission has played in humanitarian assistance to refugees, the Hungarian government has, this time, endorsed using REACT-EU funds to assist the refugees fleeing the war. It has also been reported that the Hungarian government deliberately over-estimated the number of asylum-seekers in order to receive the largest share possible (Moravec and Tarnay 2022) – perhaps to compensate for their missing EU covid recovery funds over corruption and rule of law abuses in Hungary. However, Orbán is looking for the country's earlier foes to blame for the war in Ukraine. In his most recent press talk, he stated that György Soros would 'make a fortune from a Ukrainian-Russian war, thus he wishes to lengthen it' (Mandiner 2022). As we noted above, the Hungarian-born American businessman and philanthropist has been a target of Fidesz in the past. The government previously alleged that Soros caused and funded the refugee crisis in 2015 (Than 2017) drawing parallels between terrorism and migration and inciting hatred against migrants. In the current political climate,

too, Viktor Orbán's references to Soros foreground yet again the oppressive and polarising narrative of the Fidesz party, which the country experienced during the 2015 refugee crisis.

## Conclusion

Comparing the 2015 and 2022 refugee crises presents us with both continuities and ruptures in Hungarian reception policy. While, in terms of the protection and reception conditions, the Ukrainian border-crossing is significantly more humane – mostly because the current migration wave includes Hungarian citizens and Hungarian ethnic minorities living in Ukraine – in terms of facilities, the conditions have been limited. During the 2015 refugee crisis, the Hungarian government targeted NGOs which raised funds to help refugees and securitised the whole migration issue while, during the Ukrainian crisis, there was more of a *laissez-faire* attitude towards NGOs. Though their role was never formalised in the delivery of reception policies, the government did not interfere with their activities although it did try to take all the credit. In view of the legal foundations of the reception of refugees, the two cases also present differences, especially considering the racist and highly formalised institutionalisation of border closures and transit centres at the Serbian border and the crossing of Ukrainians into Hungary under the guidance of the EU Temporary Protection Directive. This despite the fact that Hungary did not support the extension of the EU Directive on Temporary Protection Status to Ukrainian refugees but had to accept it in the face of the binding European Council decision. As a criticism of this directive, Gergely Gulyás, Minister of the Prime Minister's Office, stated that Hungary did not support the EU's initiative and commented that neither Hungary nor any other V4 countries supported the directive, which initially dated back to 2001 as a late response to the conflict in former Yugoslavian and Kosovo. He added that ethnic Hungarians living in Ukraine would not receive protection since they were citizens and Hungary would offer help to non-Hungarians in the long term (HVG.hu 2022).

This cynical asylum policy took systematic discrimination against refugees to a new level in Hungary. While Hungary had to extend a special status enforced by the EU to refugees fleeing the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, the masses on the Serbian border remained vulnerable. Currently there are more than 4,000 Middle-Eastern and African asylum-seekers camping on the Serbian side of the Hungarian southern border, with an almost zero likelihood of them receiving any recognised refugee status from the Hungarian authorities (Dragojlo 2022). This puts Hungary in violation of the Refugee Convention of 1951, in particular its Article 3 requiring states to apply the provisions of this Convention to refugees without discrimination because of race, religion or country of origin.

Despite the relatively humane treatment of refugees from Ukraine, however, its governance still resonates with the 2015 crisis. In both instances, the Hungarian government sought to moralise the role that Hungary has played – in the earlier instance by defending the nation and Europe from the instability that foreign invaders would cause and, in the second instance, defending stability and energy security in Hungary in the face of an instability caused by external events. Hence, refugees were markers of a great instability that would put Hungarian families in peril. In both cases the government sought to affect their domestic audiences by scaremongering and seeking to consolidate their voter base by proposing to defend them from an invasion and war that had nothing to do with Hungary. This has repeatedly justified the government's not providing the due reception facilities – in the first instance even curtailing primary care and protection and punishing independent NGOs that attempted to provide them. In terms of the political underpinnings of migration governance, Orbán and his government's discourse set the tone of migration politics, affecting their legal aspects prospectively. In both instances, policies were *ad hoc* and reactionary rather than responsive, although what sets the Ukrainian refugee crisis apart is also its *ad hoc* legal composition. In terms of discourse, too, we see a significant difference between how Hungary received Ukrainian refugees and (mis-)treated the Middle-Eastern asylum-

seekers. On the one hand, for the latter the message from the Hungarian government was loud and clear – demarcated by the 175-kilometre-long fence along the Serbian–Hungarian border, the slow application processing times and the inhumane conditions in which asylum-seekers were unlawfully held in detention centres. On the other hand, the current situation on the North-Eastern borders of Hungary is *laissez-faire* – not obstructive but not fully receptive either. Therefore, Orbán and his government retained their leadership intact in a bid to moralise the role that Hungary should play in the exclusivist discourses in effect in both crises by rejecting non-Europeans in the first instance and accepting only Europeans in the second.

## Notes

1. Magyarország az otthonunk, meg kell védenünk! (29 September 2016), available at <http://www.miniszerelnok.hu/magyarország-az-otthonunk-meg-kell-vedenunk/> (accessed 4 June 2022).
2. Orbán Viktor beszéde a határvadászok eskütételén (12 January 2017), available at <http://www.miniszerelnok.hu/orban-viktor-beszede-a-hatarvadaszok-eskutetelen> (accessed 4 June 2022). Orbán Viktor beszéde a határvadászok eskütételén (7 March 2017), available at <http://www.miniszerelnok.hu/orban-viktor-beszede-a-hatarvadaszok-eskutetelen-2/> (accessed 4 June 2022); Orbán Viktor beszéde a XXVIII. Bálványosi Nyári Szabadegyetem és Diáktáborban (22 July 2017), available at <https://www.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszerelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/orban-viktor-beszede-a-xxviii-balvanyosi-nyari-szabadegyetem-es-diaktaborban> (accessed 4 June 2022); Orbán Viktor beszéde a XXIX. Bálványosi Nyári Szabadegyetem és Diáktáborban (28 July 2018), available at <http://www.miniszerelnok.hu/orban-viktor-beszede-a-xxix-balvanyosi-nyari-szabadegyetem-es-diaktaborban/> (accessed 5 June 2022).
3. Orbán Viktor beszéde a rendőrtiszthelyettes-jelöltek eskütételén (14 September 2015), available at <https://www.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszerelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/orban-viktor-beszede-a-rendortiszthelyettes-jeloltek-eskutetelen> (accessed 4 June 2022).
4. Orbán Viktor beszéde a XXVIII. Bálványosi Nyári Szabadegyetem és Diáktáborban (22 July 2017), available at <https://www.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszerelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/orban-viktor-beszede-a-xxviii-balvanyosi-nyari-szabadegyetem-es-diaktaborban> (accessed 4 June 2022).
5. Orbán Viktor sajtónyilatkozata a Visegrádi Négyek kormányfőinek és Ausztria kancellárjának csúcstalálkozóján (21 June 2018), available at <https://www.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszerelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/orban-viktor-sajtonyilatkozata-a-visegradi-negyek-kormanyfoinek-es-ausztria-kancellarjanak-csucstalalkozojan> (accessed 4 June 2022).
6. Orbán Viktor sajtónyilatkozata az Európai Tanács ülését követően (21 October 2016), available at <https://www.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszerelnok/beszedek-publikaciok-interjuk/orban-viktor-sajtonyilatkozata-az-europai-tanacs-uleset-kovetoen> (accessed 4 June 2022).
7. Orbán Viktor beszéde a határvadászok eskütételén (7 March 2017), available at <http://www.miniszerelnok.hu/orban-viktor-beszede-a-hatarvadaszok-eskutetelen-2/> (accessed 4 June 2022).

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No conflict of interest was reported by the Authors.



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