Article

An anti-migration campaign and its impact on public opinion: The Hungarian case

SAGE

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Abstract

During the 2015 migration wave, Hungary was a transit, rather than a target, country for migrants fleeing from North Africa and the Middle East to Europe. In reaction to this, Viktor Orbán's right-wing populist government built a wall on the country's southern border and launched an anti-migration communication campaign, portraying itself as the saviour of European, Hungarian and Christian values. This article reconstructs the messages and effects of this campaign. It finds that in a context of limited political and media pluralism, an anti-migration campaign may exert a significant impact on public opinion and political behaviour.

Introduction: Media and migration in Central and Eastern Europe

Work Package 11 of the REMINDER project mapped media narratives on migration and mobility in nine European Union (EU) member states on the basis of focus group interviews conducted with journalists and non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives in late 2017 (REMINDER 2017–2019). The Central and Eastern Europe team studying Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovenia found that – despite similarities in their recent political histories and current economic positions – migration was covered differently across the region. The issue of migration has divided these societies, including their journalism and NGO communities, even though few migrants from beyond the EU have actually stayed in these countries. Two competing narratives were identified:

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the *nationalist approach*, considering migrants from the Middle East and North Africa a threat to national culture and security, and the *humanitarian approach*, regarding migrants as people in need of assistance. The nationalist approached dominates in Hungary, followed by Poland, whereas the humanitarian approach prevails in Slovenia, followed by Romania. The public debate about migration has been found to be of a highly *emotional nature* in Hungary and to some extent in Poland, with the positions of journalists and NGO representatives following the ideological cleavages dividing society. By contrast, the debate is of a more *rational nature* in Slovenia and in Romania, where most actors seek to take an unbiased position. Which approach and of what nature is dominant occurs to be a function of the political actors affecting the discourse: Hungary and Poland have right-wing populist governments, whereas Slovenia and Romania are led by technocratic ones (for details, see Bajomi-Lázár, 2018).

This article takes a closer look at the Hungarian case, which, in terms of the government's reaction to the 2015 migration wave, seems to be unique among EU member states. It reconstructs, on the basis of the research conducted in the framework of the REMINDER project and the scholarly literature, the 5-year-long anti-migration campaign launched by the government, focusing on the campaign messages and their possible effects. It suggests that in a context of limited political and media pluralism, an anti-migration campaign may exert a significant impact on public opinion and political behaviour.

Background: Hungary's political and media landscapes

Since the victory of the right-wing populist Fidesz/Christian Democrats party alliance in the 2010 legislative elections, repeated in the 2014 and 2018 elections, Hungary's democracy indicators have been deteriorating. According to the Freedom House Nations in Transit reports, the country's overall democracy score fell from 2.29 points in 2009 to 3.71 points in 2018 on a 5-point scale where a higher score means a lower level of democracy. The latest report observes 'authoritarian practices' and 'the erosion of democratic institutions', particularly in the fields of civil society, media freedom and academic freedom (Nations in Transit, 2018). Once a consolidated liberal democracy that joined North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1997 and the EU in 2004, the Hungarian political system is currently described as a 'dynamically changing hybrid regime', where fair political competition has given way to an 'uneven playing field' and the opposition parties have very little chance of defeating the incumbents via legislative elections (Bozóki and Hegedűs, 2017: 8, 15).

Through the redistribution of radio and television frequencies, senior positions in the media authority and the public service media organisations, state advertising and loans by state-owned banks to government cronies, Viktor Orbán's successive governments have gradually taken informal control of most media outlets, including the publicly owned MTVA (an umbrella organisation of 14 public service radio stations and television channels as well as the national news agency) and the privately run KESMA (a foundation coordinating the news services of 476 private outlets across the country). Currently, opposition voices are hardly covered outside the capital city Budapest; only some online news sites and the evening news bulletins of the private commercial

television channel RTL Klub provide exceptions to this rule. Via clientelistic networks, the government has turned most media outlets into its echo-chambers and established a near ideological hegemony across the country (Bátorfy, 2017; Urbán et al., 2017). By 2017, Fidesz had come to control 78% of all news media outlets, as calculated in terms of the ratio of their net state and market revenues (Mérték Media Monitor, 2019). The journalism community is divided along ideological cleavages, news reporting is highly biased and kompromat journalism is widely practised (Bajomi-Lázár, 2019; Sipos, 2013). According to the World Press Freedom Index of Reporters Without Borders (2019), Hungary moved on the global list from position 26 in 2009 to position 87 in 2019. Freedom House (2012) has listed Hungary among the 'partly free press' countries since 2012.

The campaign messages

In early 2015, hundreds of thousands of refugees fled from North Africa and the Middle East to Europe. The migration wave affected the entire EU: some of its member states were target countries, while other ones, including Hungary, were transit countries located on the main continental pathways to Western and Northern Europe. Unlike many European governments that offered humanitarian aid to refugees, the Hungarian government built a wall on the southern border of the country and launched a large-scale anti-migration communication campaign. More specifically, the campaign began on 11 January 2015, shortly after the terrorist attack against the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, that is, before the first migrants actually crossed the Hungarian border – and after the Fidesz/Christian Democrats party alliance had lost almost a million voters in just a few months, according to opinion polls (Bíró-Nagy, 2018). Campaign messages have been simultaneously delivered on outdoor posters, radio stations, television channels, online news sites and in print publications for 5 years at the time of writing in Spring 2019, albeit with varying intensity. The scale and length of the campaign, delivered both during and outside election periods, resulted in what may be described as 'captive audiences' in that few, if any, could escape the government's messages.

In chronological order, the first campaign theme was migration from North Africa and the Near East, framed as a threat to both Hungary and Europe. In fact, the very first outdoor posters were seemingly addressing migrants, as they carried the message 'If you come to Hungary, you must respect our laws!' but the message was written in Hungarian, not any of the languages spoken by migrants, and therefore could only appeal to native Hungarians (see Pictures 1 and 2 in Appendix 1). The theme of the second campaign, launched in July 2017, was an alleged conspiracy with Hungarian-born American billionaire and philanthropist George Soros as a mastermind behind migration (see Pictures 3 and 4). The third and latest campaign theme, starting in February 2019, was a secret plan attributed to the EU and personally President of the Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, backed by Soros and aimed at enhancing migration (see Picture 4). The campaign blurred the line between economic migrants and war refugees, as well as between migrants and terrorists.

The media campaigns have been coupled with 'national consultations'. Prime Minister Orbán sent letters to every citizen of voting age, asking them questions about migration

and encouraging them to reply. The answer options were framed in line with the government's campaign messages and were later used in government communications as a reference to popular will (Előd, 2017).

The government's campaigns have also been backed by the press releases of state agencies such as the police. Pro-government outlets frequently reported on crimes and terrorist attacks committed by migrants in Western Europe, using the themes and frames constructed by the government (Bernáth and Messing, 2015). A content analysis of a governmental site (kormany.hu) and two pro-government news sites (888.hu, magyaridok.hu) looking into a total of 1248 articles in September 2016 found 644 articles that were linked to migration, which amounts to 51%, as opposed to between 17% and 40% in critical outlets (such as index.hu and 444.hu). Most of these articles (53%) used a war terminology, suggesting that Hungarian culture must be defended from both migrants and 'Brussels bureaucrats' who wanted to 'impose' a resettlement quota on Hungary (Demeter, 2018). An automated content analysis of over 10,000 photographs published between September 2014 and June 2016 on online news outlets found that these typically portrayed migrants as a faceless flood and as criminals, not as a heterogeneous group of individuals (Fülöp et al., 2017). Media outlets have repeatedly reported on the establishment of 'no go zones' in various Western European cities, including in Stockholm and Vienna, allegedly flooded by migrants and filled with crime to such an extent that native citizens avoided them (e.g. PestiSrácok, 2016).

The successive waves of campaign blurred the line between different political actors, including the government (as most messages were labelled 'government information'), the incumbent parties (whose main theme in a public referendum in 2016 and the legislative elections in 2018 was the rejection of the European resettlement quota plan) and the prime minister (as the 2019 European parliamentary election campaign was run with the slogan 'Let us support Viktor Orbán's programme, let us stop emigration').

The campaigns were hardly countered by the opposition parties. The right-wing opposition Jobbik party largely seconded to the government's position, while the most outspoken left-wing force, the Democratic Coalition party, first expressed the view that Hungary should welcome 'a couple of hundred refugees', but then acknowledged that the Hungarian population had negative attitudes towards migrants (Bernáth and Messing, 2015; Bíró-Nagy, 2018; Kiss and Szabó, 2018).

As shown by a content analysis carried out in 2015 and covering both pro-government and critical media, including online news sites and print magazines, most independent outlets have also failed to critically approach government narratives and often adopted the campaign frames criminalising migrants, for example, by calling their moves 'illegal border crossing' or by publishing photos of handcuffed migrants. Migrants themselves were never given a voice (Bernáth and Messing, 2015).

According to a study comparing migration reporting in 17 countries, in Hungary – a country practically untouched by migration before 2015 – journalists were unprepared to report on migration, which explains why they relied extensively on government sources, as more than 50% of all quotes in migration reporting came from government leaders, as opposed to NGOs and experts with a mere 10% share. Journalists of state media were reportedly told to use the word 'migráns' ('migrant', an expression of negative connotations in Hungarian), rather than 'menekült' ('refugee', one of empathetic connotations)

when reporting. Migration reporting was 'hysterical', while 'fact-based reporting was almost impossible because of the lack of facts . . . Most coverage was emotional' (Weyer, 2017: 42). The findings of the focus group research conducted among journalists as part of the REMINDER project add to this that many journalists were aware of the government's efforts at influencing them. For example, one of them observed that 'words are beginning to lose their meaning', while another noted that 'the term "migrant" has become a means of scapegoating', and yet another said that 'we could use the term "migrant", but it is a delicate one as it is widely used by pro-government propaganda'. Just like journalists, NGO representatives were also largely divided over the issue of migration, some of them subscribing to what they called a 'migration realist' position, as opposed to those representing a 'migration optimist' perspective. Yet, given the government's grip over most media outlets, critical voices, including those of civil society, could not reach many people.

The campaigns might raise the question of whether the government's messages amount to racism or not. PM Orbán said in a public speech in 2017 that it was vital to 'preserve ethnic homogeneity' in Hungary and argued in an interview given later that year that the problems caused by migrants moving in Hungary are similar to those generated by ethnic Hungarian Gypsies moving into towns from rural areas (Herczeg, 2019). More particularly, the messages targeting George Soros, a known Holocaust-survivor, raise the question of whether the campaigns had an anti-Semitic element. While no direct symbols of anti-Semitism were ever used, and the Fidesz/Christian Democrats party alliance has always insisted that it had a 'zero tolerance policy' on anti-Semitism, the unfavourable photos portraying Soros as a wicked old man might have reminded observers of the iconography of Nazi propaganda posters picturing rich Jews. Also, the words 'Let us not leave Soros laugh at the end of the day' (Picture 3) are an almost verbatim quote from a speech delivered by Adolf Hitler at the Reichstag on 30 January 1941. There, the Führer said this: 'Once the German Jews laughed at my prophecy. I do not know whether they are still laughing, or whether they are laughing on the other side of their faces. I can simply repeat – they will stop laughing altogether' (Jewish Virtual Library, 1997).

Final remarks: The campaigns and their impact

Anti-migration themes have been recurring on the political agendas of right-wing populist parties across Europe since at least the 1980s. Yet – according to the findings of the REMINDER project – the Hungarian incumbents' campaign has been unparalleled among EU member states in terms of its scope, intensity and length. By introducing migration, until then a non-issue for most Hungarians (Bíró-Nagy, 2018), and by defining it as a 'crisis' ('crisis' being a political construction rather than an objective given, see Kiss and Szabó, 2018), the government's campaign has successfully set and framed the political, media and public agendas. In Hungary, the ratio of migration rejection grew from 39% in 2012 to 62% in 2016/2017, which was the highest rate in a sample of 20 EU member states, according to the European Social Survey (Messing and Ságvári, 2019). To date, 56% of Hungarians consider migration a major problem, as opposed to a European average of 38%, and 38% of Hungarians define terrorism as a major problem, as opposed to a European average of 29% (Bíró-Nagy, 2018), even though no terrorist action was carried out in Hungary.

The messages delivered were labelled as 'government information', but many analysts described them as 'propaganda campaigns' (Bátorfy, 2017; Demeter, 2018; Máriás et al., 2017). This latter interpretation seems warranted in that the campaigns were not aimed at promoting a meaningful and well-informed rational-critical discussion on migration, but met several criteria of political propaganda: they included both recurring and new elements in order not to become too repetitive; they communicated simple messages meeting existing stereotypes; they promoted conspiracy theories; they offered a black-and-white interpretation of real-life events; they appealed to basic instincts such as fear; and—perhaps most importantly—they portrayed migrants as potential terrorists, that is aggressors, not victims (on propaganda, see Brown, 1971 [1963]; Klemperer, 1984 [1947]; Lasswell, 1927). This way, these campaigns created an 'enemy' that threatened European and Hungarian culture and Christian values. By making a distinction between 'Us' and 'Them', the campaigns were a means of enhancing in-group cohesion and mobilisation among Fidesz/Christian Democrats supporters.

Real-life events proved that the construction of the 'enemy' was successful. In June 2015, a young man believed to be a refugee was beaten in the city of Szeged (Index, 2015). In October 2017, a hotel owner in a village called Őcsény invited refugee children and women for a brief holiday, but had to give up his plan after local residents damaged his car (Index, 2017). In January 2018, passers-by called the police on a group of tourists believed to be migrants (Index, 2018). Other atrocities against perceived migrants ensued. At the same time, fear from migrants among Hungarians grew from 21% in 2012 to 43% in 2016, and especially among those living in rural areas where no personal experience with migrants could mitigate this feeling (Bíró-Nagy, 2018). Because the number of migrants staying in Hungary is very low, and it is practically nil in the rural areas, these actions and figures may be seen as symptoms of a *moral panic*.

As noted earlier, the campaign was first launched after the Fidesz/Christian Democrats party alliance had lost almost a million voters. Before the 2018 legislative elections, anti-migration fight was the only message of the incumbents. As a result of the campaign, they first regained their lost constituency, then earned another 465,000 voters, and finally won the elections with nearly 50% of the vote (Bíró-Nagy, 2018), which, given Hungary's mixed election law, gave them a constitutional supermajority (66.8%) of mandates in parliament.

As regards xenophobia, a significant change has been registered: according to European Social Survey, its ratio grew from 45% in 2015 to 54% in 2016 among Hungarians (Kolozsi, 2016), best described as the mainstreaming, or 'normalisation', of formerly relatively marginal views. The highest level of growth was observed among the less educated, the elderly and those who lived in rural areas where pro-government print and broadcast media were in a hegemonic position and the Internet was rarely used, whereas growth was significantly lesser in Budapest (Juhász and Molnár, 2016; Mérték Média Monitor). While it is not known whether it is xenophobia that has grown under the impact of the campaign, or the tolerance of xenophobia (i.e. people would more overtly express their existing xenophobic views under the impact of the campaign), these findings suggest that public opinion is more likely to change when pro-government messages are neither countered by powerful opposition voices, nor by critical media, nor are they mitigated by personal experience.

Funding

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Appendix 1

Examples of anti-migration outdoor posters

Picture 1. 'Government information. IF YOU COME TO HUNGARY, YOU MUST RESPECT OUR LAWS! National consultation on migration and terrorism'.

Picture 2. 'STOP'.

Picture 3. 'National Consultation 2017 – 99% reject illegal migration. LET US NOT LEAVE SOROS LAUGH AT THE END OF THE DAY!'

Picture 4. 'YOU TOO HAVE THE RIGHT TO KNOW WHAT BRUSSELS IS ABOUT TO DO! They want to introduce a mandatory migration quota. They want to weaken member states' rights to defend their own frontiers. They want to introduce a migrant visa to make migration easy. SOROS – JUNCKER.