

Building “Security Walls” To Keep Migrants Out of the EU: Hungary, Immigration and Asylum

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“If you come to Hungary, could you please bring a sane Prime Minister?” Gergő Kovács, July poster campaign, 2015

The walling fetish is catching. While the European Union struggles to defend its ideas with the influence of sundering forces at various ends of its membership, Hungary is busy sealing its borders off from so-called irregular migrants.

This seems rather odd for the grandest of transit countries, girded by migratory tendencies. “Hungary’s special characteristics,” notes Judit Juhász, “are rooted in this history of fluid borders, as well as the strong migratory tendencies of Hungarian ancestry” (Migration Policy Institute, Nov 1, 2003).[1]

For centuries, as a key administrative unit within the Hapsburg Empire, the very idea of borders was deemed absurd. The multi-ethnic state was typified by internal movements to various parts of the empire. Migration, in short, was the ultimate tool of population distribution of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Two world wars put pay to the tradition: borders were established along nationalist lines; evictions were engineered, ethnicities exchanged.

The current fascination with territorial integrity in Hungary is a fundamentally economic one. It all lies in the business of numbers – and the perception that sovereignty is taking a battering from a human current stemming from the Middle East and Africa. Some 72,000 migrants have entered the country – at least according to government assessments. This compares with 43,000 last year. With a degree of timed alarmism, Interior Minister Sándor Pintér claimed that, “Hungary is confronted with the biggest surge of migrants in its history, its capacities are overloaded by 130 percent.”

Earlier this month, Hungary’s parliament got busy passing laws allowing for the creation of more camp facilities to deal with migrants, accelerating asylum processing and placing limits on judicial review. On Monday, the governing Fidesz party, with the support from the right-wing Jobbik party, got 151 votes to the 41 naysayers. A senior government source has told the BBC that a mere “several dozen, or at most a few hundred” migrants will be accepted in future.

Such moves come unnervingly close to breaching the UN Refugee Convention of 1951, though government spokesman Zoltán Kovács is convinced that Hungary is, in fact, operating within the letter of the law. With a true manager’s eye for evasion, he argues that the procedure of processing asylum seekers and migrants will continue, albeit it more speedily. In that, he can refer to precedents across Europe and from further afar.

This becomes even more problematic given the populist designation of all refugees as rapacious economic migrants. The categorisation tends to prove handy to those who wish to lift the drawbridge - these "migrants," so goes the urgent rhetoric, come from conflict zones to earn a living rather than flee oppression. (Read: pinch local jobs and consume local services.)

Conflict areas such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, are deemed to be procurers of a particular type of migrant. As the UNHCR's Babar Beloch explains, "This is a refugee crisis, but it's being wrongly described as a migrant crisis by politicians here" (BBC, Jul 7).

Hungary has shown form since the end of the Cold War with legislation specifically dealing with illegal border crossings. These have tended to ebb and flow. The Act on Borders and the Border Guards (1997), as suggested by its name, granted guards greater sources and powers.

Then came the Act of Asylum of 1998, specifically removing the geographical limitation to Europe, while also establishing a system of dealing with asylees through processing, shelter and settlement. This invariably led to an increase in non-European applications, notably from Afghanistan, Iraq and Bangladesh. Regulation with the EU came into play in 2002, whereby domestic regulations were brought into line with the union.

Since then, Hungarian governments have overseen an expansion of the immigration detention system, introduced in 2010. Amendments were made to the Asylum Act in July 2013 narrowing the basis for detention, but the Hungarian Helsinki Committee found in April last year that some 40 percent or more of adult males seeking asylum for the first time were detained.

A report released this month by Amnesty International suggests that detention can take place "in overcrowded and sometimes degrading conditions".[2] Police also do their bit in affording poor treatment. The report admits that the majority of asylum-seekers are released to "open reception centres" but absconding is deemed a risk the authorities take seriously.

An overall strategy of designation has been adopted towards Hungary's neighbours. The Balkans and Greece are being frowned upon as "safe" countries, where poorer authorities are struggling to maintain and process migrants. Better Serbia, Macedonia, and Bulgaria than the authorities in Budapest. Europe, argues Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó, fiddles on the subject of migration, while Hungary's borders fray.

Serbia has expressed very public consternation at the move to seal the 175km border between the two countries, promising that it will not follow suit with cutting off Macedonia and Bulgaria. "Serbia is not going to close itself in," suggested the country's irate Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić. "Serbia is not going to live in Auschwitz." [3]

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has given meek reassurances that the fence is not directed at the south. A country that was one of the first to rent the Iron Curtain by snipping the barbed wire in 1988 has become one of the foremost critics of open European borders.

Orbán's words after a meeting with Serbian colleagues bear a striking resemblance to those developed countries keen to avoid the matter of processing the impoverished and the

oppressed. "It's an illusion for anyone to think that people from the African crisis areas will keep arriving in Europe only until the crises there are pacified." [4]

He did not stop there. Fantasies of a deluge, a positive drowning of Hungary, were envisaged. "If we allow it, a modern mass migration could take place of millions, even tens of millions and even hundreds of millions."

There is also a tinge of irony in the move, given that young Hungarians are actually leaving their country to find sources of employment elsewhere. The Magyar, as ever, migrates. Current figures suggest that there are 350,000 working abroad. The Hungarian Central Statistics Office has rather striking figures: 31,500 left the country in 2014, constituting an increase of 46 percent from 2013.

There is more than faint speculation that this has been encouraged by the reactionary stance taken by Orbán. That said, he has little desire to find any non-European replacements in a hurry.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/hungary-transit-country-between-east-and-west>

[2] file:///ntapprdfs01n02.rmit.internal/eh6/E79986/EUR7015792015ENGLISH.PDF

[3] <http://budapestbeacon.com/public-policy/critics-denounce-plans-to-build-175--km-fence-along-serbian-border/24502>

[4] <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/hungary-serbia-meet-debate--hungarian-border-fence-plan-32146599>

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