

Meral, Amanda Gray; Kumar, Claire

## Research Report

# Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Hungary country profile

ODI Report

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Report

# Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants



ODI Europe

Hungary country profile

Amanda Gray Meral and Claire Kumar

January 2025





# Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: Hungary country profile

Amanda Gray Meral and Claire Kumar



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## **About this publication**

This briefing presents an overview of the key features of migration and asylum policy in Hungary, recent trends in migration patterns and public perceptions and political narratives on refugees and other migrants. It is part of a series documenting public attitudes and narratives around migration across Europe, aimed at informing public and private stakeholders interested in engaging with migration and displacement.

## **About the authors**

Amanda Gray Meral is a Research Fellow for ODI Europe.

Claire Kumar is a Senior Research Fellow for ODI Europe.

# Contents

---

**Acknowledgements / V**

---

**Display items / VII**

---

**Acronyms / VIII**

---

**1 Introduction / 1**

- 1.1 Recent migration trends / 2
  - 1.2 Arrivals of asylum seekers / 4
- 

**2 Current immigration system and approach / 6**

- 2.1 Labour immigration / 6
  - 2.2 Asylum policy / 8
- 

**3 Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know? / 11**

- 3.1 The salience of immigration for the public / 11
  - 3.2 Mainly negative attitudes / 12
  - 3.3 Small attitudinal shifts emerging / 15
  - 3.4 Unwelcoming attitudes towards refugees / 17
  - 3.5 Explanations for Hungarians' negative attitudes / 18
- 

**4 Racist, Islamophobic and threat-based narratives / 20**

---

**5 Conclusions / 23**

# Display items

---

## Boxes

**Box 1** In Focus: Hungary's response to labour shortages / 7

**Box 2** Overview of Hungarian citizenship policies / 8

**Box 3** Racist and Islamophobic rhetoric / 21

## Figures

**Figure 1** Migration timeline / 2

**Figure 2** Recent migration trends in Hungary / 3

**Figure 3** Immigration of foreign citizens by origin (EU and non-EU countries) / 4

**Figure 4** Salience of immigration as a key issue in Hungary / 12

**Figure 5** Attitudes towards immigration: do immigrants make Hungary a worse or a better place to live? / 13

**Figure 6** Is immigration from outside the EU more of a problem or an opportunity? / 15

**Figure 7** Personal experiences with immigration / 16



# Acronyms

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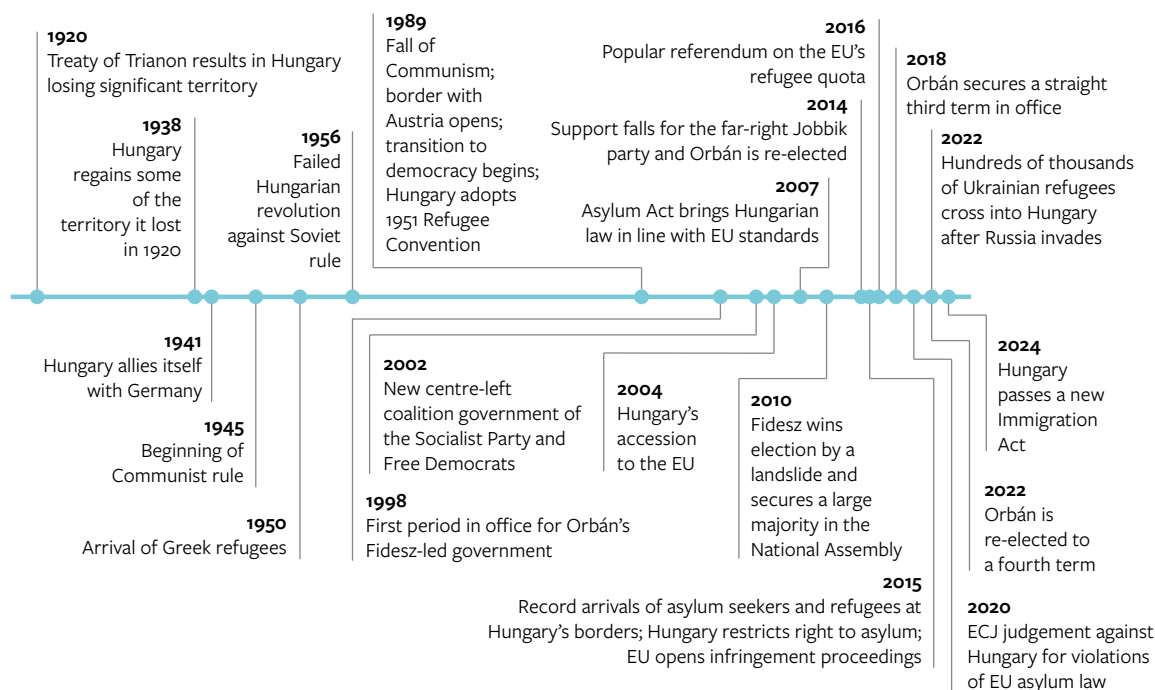
<b>CJEU</b>	Court of Justice of the European Union
<b>ECHR</b>	European Court of Human Rights
<b>ECJ</b>	European Court of Justice
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>EV</b>	electric vehicle
<b>ICT</b>	information and communications technology
<b>IOM</b>	International Organisation for Migration
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organisation
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations Refugee Agency

# 1 Introduction

Hungary has a long history of movement across its borders. Under the Habsburg Empire Germans, Slavs, Italians, Romanians and Jews lived in or transited through the country. Following the First World War and the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, Hungary lost more than two-thirds of its territory and people. Overnight millions of Hungarian citizens found themselves living outside of Hungary (Rusu, 2011). Over 2.5 million ethnic Hungarians still live in neighbouring countries, a factor that remains a defining feature of Hungarian national identity (ibid.; Bayer and Rosca, 2020). Ethnic Hungarians living in other countries have received much more favourable treatment under the country's immigration policy, with current legislation providing the right to acquire Hungarian citizenship without any residency in Hungary if the person meets the criteria of Hungarian descent and language proficiency.

Under Communist rule Hungary was 'closed', with little migration (Rusu, 2011) (see Figure 1). There were exceptions, such as the migration of around 176,000 Hungarians following the failed revolution against Soviet rule in 1956 (Nemeth and Gruber, 2019, citing Habcsek and Illes, 2007), the arrival of Greek communists seeking asylum in the 1950s, Chilean communists in the 1970s and students from other communist countries (Rusu, 2011). Hungary also received Cuban weavers, Polish miners and Russian industrial workers (Nemeth and Gruber, 2019, citing Puskas, 1991).

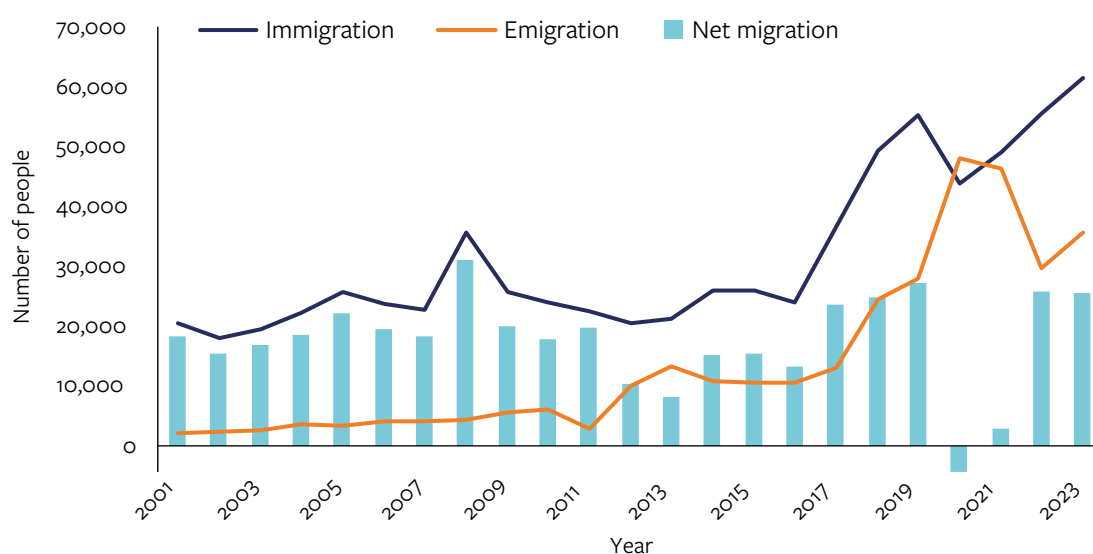
Few Hungarians emigrated during the 1990s, but those who did – largely men looking for work or students – mostly went to the US, Germany and Austria. During the same period, many ethnic Hungarians moved to Hungary from bordering countries. Asylum seekers fleeing the war in the former Yugoslavia also found refuge in Hungary, though many either returned to their home country or used Hungary as a transit route to Western Europe (Rusu, 2011).

**Figure 1** Migration timeline

## 1.1 Recent migration trends

Hungary's entry into the European Union (EU) has had an impact on migration flows. In 2004, when Hungarians gained the right to move and work in selected EU15 countries, emigration from Hungary to other EU countries increased by 35% compared to the previous year (Rusu, 2011). However, Hungary did not experience the mass emigration seen in other Eastern European states such as Poland and Bulgaria (Majoros, 2009). At the same time, Hungary attracted labour migrants from other Eastern European states, in particular Romania, Serbia and Ukraine. The country received the largest influx of workers in its history in 2004, an increase of 38% from the previous year (Rusu, 2011).

Immigration has continued to increase, and notably so over the last decade. Figure 2 shows migration trends in relation to foreign citizens only (i.e. excluding returning Hungarian citizens born in Hungary and foreign-born Hungarian citizens). On top of the 61,000 foreign immigrants recorded in 2023, just under 11,000 foreign-born Hungarian citizens and almost 24,000 Hungarian-born returnees were recorded as coming into the country (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, n.d.). While immigration generally exceeds emigration, net migration levels have remained relatively stable.

**Figure 2** Recent migration trends in Hungary

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office (n.d.)

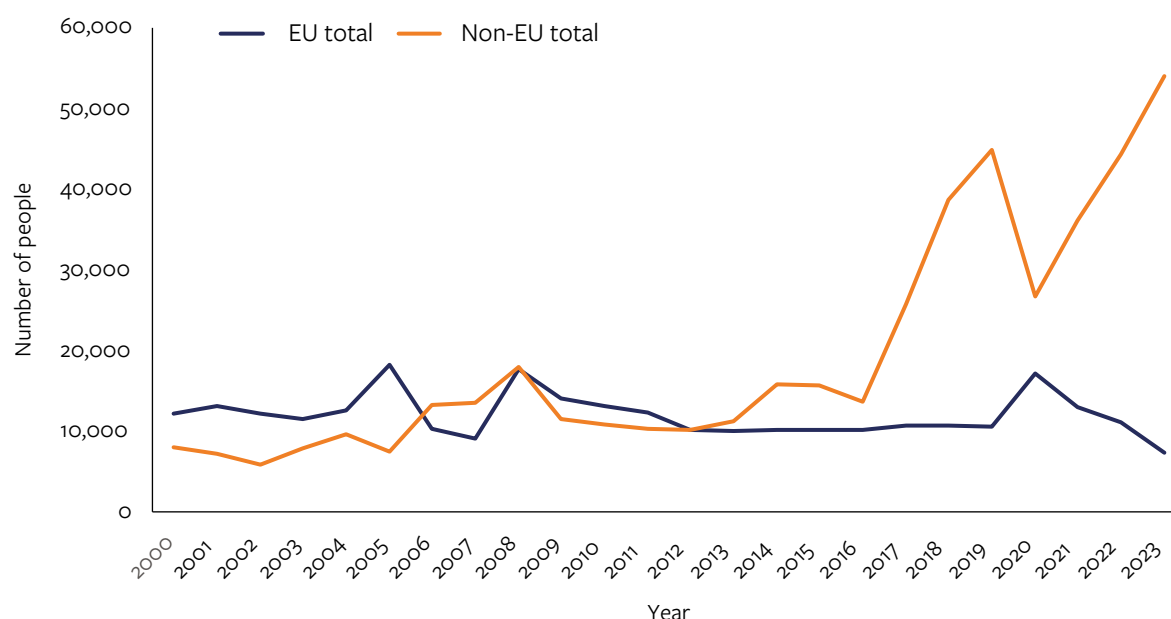
Data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (n.d.) shows that Europeans are the largest group of foreign citizens living in the country, followed by citizens from Asia. Top nationalities residing in Hungary in 2024 include Ukrainians, Germans, Chinese, Slovaks and Romanians. Since 2013, Hungary has consistently received more non-EU immigrants than EU nationals (see Figure 3). Although there has been a large increase in immigration generally, the OECD reports only 6.3% of the Hungarian population is foreign born, far below other European countries (OECD, 2024).<sup>1</sup> Hungary remains a relatively homogenous society; the overwhelming majority of the

population are Christian, and the level of ethnic diversity is low (Simonovits, 2020; Gessler et al., 2022).

The biggest driver of the increase in immigration is employment in a context of acute labour shortages (as discussed in Section 2). Between 2013 and 2023, the number of employment permits issued increased 15-fold (from around 3,500 to 53,500) (Eurostat, n.d.). Hungary issues far more work-related visas than for any other permit category.<sup>2</sup> Hungary is also one of the bigger issuers of employment permits when compared to other EU countries (ranked seventh out of 27 countries in 2023), and offers far more permits than most EU countries of a similar population size (such as Sweden, Greece and Austria) (ibid.).

1 For example, in Germany 18% of the population is foreign born, and in Spain 17% (OECD, 2024). The foreign-born measurement includes people who were originally immigrants on temporary resident visas, and had naturalised as a Hungarian citizen after some time, and ethnic Hungarians from neighbouring countries.

2 Employment permits made up 69% of permits issued in 2023 compared to 15% for educational reasons, 10% for family reunification and 6% for other purposes (Eurostat, n.d.).

**Figure 3** Immigration of foreign citizens by origin (EU and non-EU countries)

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office (n.d.)

An additional factor explaining the increase in labour immigration is that high numbers of Hungarians are emigrating: over 35,000 Hungarian citizens left the country in 2023, accompanied by a similar number of foreign citizens who were living in Hungary but also left that year (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, n.d.). Demography is another factor. Hungary is facing a falling birth rate and its population is declining (from 10.4 million in 1990 to 9.6 million in 2024) (ibid.). This is despite the introduction of generous pro-family policies to encourage women to have more babies, including progressive tax breaks for each additional child, grants and discounted loans for buying a home. Despite absorbing more than 5% of GDP, these schemes have had limited impact on birth rates which have continued, overall, on a downward trajectory (Dunai and Romei, 2024).

## 1.2 Arrivals of asylum seekers

Hungary traditionally received relatively small numbers of asylum seekers. However, following the onset of the Syrian conflict numbers increased rapidly (from 20,000 in 2014 to 180,000 in 2015) (Hungarian Central Statistical Office, n.d.). The country also became an important transit point for refugees, given its position as a corridor between Serbia and Austria (Kasperek and Speer, 2015). The pressure of increasing arrivals was particularly evident in 2015, when the numbers of migrants crossing Hungary's borders spiked substantially; Frontex recorded over 764,000 arrivals that year (Frontex, 2016). In 2015, Syrians and Afghans made up the bulk of asylum applicants, though there was also a large increase in applications from Pakistan and Iraq compared to the year before (IOM Hungary, n.d.). Iraqis,

Afghans and Pakistanis were the main nationalities seeking asylum between 2018 and 2020 (ibid.). Measures introduced to make it extremely difficult to claim asylum (see Section 2) have seen numbers decline steeply in recent years. In 2021 only 40 asylum applications were made (OECD, 2022), and 28 in 2023 (ECRE, 2024). In 2012 there were 2,157 asylum applications (ECRE, 2013).

Ukrainians seeking refuge after Russia's invasion in 2022 have come in significant numbers under the EU's temporary protection scheme. According to UNHCR (n.d.b.), there have been 5.5 million border crossings by Ukrainians into Hungary. The overwhelming majority have travelled on to other countries in Europe, with 61,610 Ukrainian refugees currently living in Hungary (ibid.).

## 2 Current immigration system and approach

### 2.1 Labour immigration

Hungary's labour immigration rules are generally restrictive. A significant change came on 1 January 2024 when the new immigration law was enacted. While previously a residence permit for the general purpose of employment had been available, from 1 March 2024 low- and high-skilled workers must apply for different categories of permits. There are now distinct guest worker statuses targeting specific sectors such as agriculture, construction and manufacturing, and subject to quotas and restrictions. The new permit categories also include a 'Guest Investor Residence' permit, essentially a continuation of an earlier golden visa scheme, available to applicants who invest in real estate (or donate to higher education institutions) subject to certain conditions.<sup>3</sup> This permit category allows work and residence rights for up to 10 years, offers the right to bring family members (who can also work), is renewable and may eventually lead to naturalisation. The scheme has

been especially popular with Chinese elites (Martuscelli, 2024). There is also a separate work permit for nationals of a select list of countries<sup>4</sup> (the National Card). A new permit category, the Hungarian Card, was also introduced, designed to attract highly qualified workers in sectors such as engineering and ICT (Fragomen, 2024b; HHC, 2024b).

The new specifications for guest workers are important. The law privileges certain countries for migration and provides preferential treatment for certain employers and temporary work agencies, as well as limiting the stay of guest workers in the country. Guest workers from selected non-EU countries<sup>5</sup> are allowed to reside and work in Hungary for two years, extendable to a maximum of three years (European Commission, 2024; Martuscelli, 2024). Only 'special status' employers are allowed to employ guest workers for a limited range of jobs, and employers providing segregated accommodation are granted preferential treatment.<sup>6</sup> Migrant workers coming into the country on this

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3 An applicant needs to invest for at least five years, with either €250,000 in a real estate investment fund or €500,000 in the country's residential real estate market. In addition, they can make a non-refundable donation of €1 million into a higher education institution with the purpose of supporting scientific research or artistic activities (Get Golden Visa, 2024).

4 Ukraine, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belarus, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Russia.

5 Currently the list comprises: Brazil, Colombia, Georgia, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, the Philippines, Venezuela and Vietnam.

6 Special status employers are those that are able to implement investments of 'national economic importance', hold partnership agreements under Hungary's Key Exporter Partnership Programme, or are temporary work agencies (Fragomen, 2023).

permit are not allowed to bring their family members, switch their permit or apply for permanent residency (European Commission, 2024; Fragomen, 2024a). Fragomen (2024b) expects the main impact of the reforms will be to make it harder for employers to recruit and retain low-skilled workers.

Despite the government's hostile anti-immigration stance (discussed in Section 4), there has been a realisation that the country will increasingly rely on immigrant labour, including guest workers, given the

acute labour shortages in some sectors and growing foreign investment in the country (see Box 1). Labour immigration is also likely to become more critical for public service provision. Shortages in the healthcare workforce – particularly nurses and in less populated areas – have been an issue for years (OECD/European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2021). These challenges have been aggravated by high rates of emigration of Hungarian health professionals to western Europe (ibid.).

### Box 1 In Focus: Hungary's response to labour shortages

In response to acute labour shortages, the government introduced a new law (rapidly dubbed the 'Slave Law') doubling the amount of overtime employees could be asked to work per year, while allowing payment to be delayed by three years (BBC News, 2018). This led to protests outside the Hungarian parliament, but was approved in December 2018 and remains in place. However, the pressure from labour shortages has not abated. Following the Covid pandemic, more than 77% of Hungarian firms reported having difficulty filling jobs, with the manufacturing sector in particular struggling to recruit; talent shortages are at a 15-year high and the unemployment rate is very low (4.5%) (Manpower Group, 2021; Martuscelli, 2024). In 2023 Orbán publicly admitted that foreign workers would be required to help fill the half a million new jobs forecast to be created over the next few years (Gauriat and Siposhegyi, 2023). Experts estimate that at least half of these workers will have to be recruited internationally (Inotai, 2023).

The need for workers has become even more urgent with increased investment into the country from China. In 2023, Hungary received 44% of all Chinese foreign direct investment in Europe (more than the UK, Germany and France combined), largely driven by investment in the EV sector (Kratz et al., 2024). Hungary is also fast becoming a hub for battery production in Europe (Merk et al., 2024). The battery industry relies heavily on migrant labour, particularly Filipinos and Ukrainians, with Chinese and South Koreans often occupying management positions (ibid.). Wages are typically low and working conditions poor, with exposure to serious health and safety risks a key concern alongside extensive overtime (ibid.). The design of labour immigration policy is a major aggravating risk factor for migrant workers, who are tied into fixed-term contracts with a specific firm and cannot switch to another employer or to another permit.



While there are initiatives at municipal level, Hungary has no national integration strategy, and the government is explicit about not wanting to integrate migrants. There have been reports of tension with guest workers in some areas, with the approach generally to ensure that guest workers are ‘housed in dormitories in industrial zones, away from residential neighbourhoods’ (Martuscelli, 2024: n.p.). As such the government strategy is one of segregation, a deliberate approach to ensure migrant workers do not establish families and put down roots (ibid.).

Attaining citizenship is also not a straightforward process. A person can only acquire Hungarian citizenship through birth if one or both parents are of Hungarian nationality. For those born in Hungary of non-Hungarian parents, or who migrate to Hungary, eligibility for naturalisation depends on years of residence and that certain conditions are met (see Box 2).

### Box 2 Overview of Hungarian citizenship policies

It is possible for someone to naturalise as a Hungarian citizen if they marry a Hungarian citizen, are married for at least three years, and can show continuous residence for three years (UNHCR, n.d.a.). If they do not marry a Hungarian citizen they can first claim permanent residency in Hungary (after residence in the country for three years with a permit); eight years after achieving this permanent residency status, they will be entitled to apply for citizenship through naturalisation (ibid.). Using this channel, the naturalisation process takes 11 years. To naturalise under either route requires showing proficient Hungarian, passing a test on the Hungarian constitution, having a secure livelihood and no criminal record and being of good character. There are accelerated procedures for those who hold refugee status or are stateless, as well as for those who have a child who is a Hungarian citizen (ibid.). Individuals with Hungarian ancestry are only required to prove their descent and have a basic knowledge of the Hungarian language, which has led to a high naturalisation rate in Hungary (Tóth, 2018). This route has been used by people with Hungarian ancestry living in neighbouring non-EU countries to acquire a Hungarian passport and the right to freedom of movement within the EU.

## 2.2 Asylum policy

Hungary adopted the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1989, followed by the European Convention on Human

Rights in 1992. Together with Hungary’s 2004 accession to the EU, this led to a thorough change in approach to asylum seekers and refugees. New asylum legislation, notably the Asylum Act 2007, aligned Hungary with EU standards,

including the Dublin Regulation and relevant EU directives. While Hungary was criticised by UNHCR for its low recognition rates (UNHCR, 2012), and slow procedures were leading to homelessness among refugees (Kallius, 2017), overall the system conformed with EU law.

Following the arrival of large numbers of refugees in 2015, the government introduced a quasi-state of exception ('the state of crisis due to mass migration') and implemented stringent measures to reduce the numbers of asylum seekers and other migrants (HRW, 2024b). A 175km wall was built on the southern border and barbed wire fences were erected (Amnesty International, 2015). Violent push-backs of asylum seekers at the border became commonplace after legislation was introduced allowing Hungarian border guards and police to push back asylum seekers without registering their data or permitting them access to asylum procedures if they were found within 8km of the border (CoE, 2022). Mass pushbacks are often into Serbia; many of those affected are refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan (HHC, 2024a). In June 2016 the government withdrew all refugee integration provisions, including monthly cash allowances, leaving refugees dependent on charities and increasing the risk of destitution and homelessness (Simonovits, 2020).

In 2015, the EU opened infringement proceedings after deeming Hungarian asylum legislation to be incompatible with EU law (European Commission, 2015). Hungary has not been deterred; between 2016 and 2020 it is estimated that around 50,000 asylum seekers were pushed back across the border with Serbia (HHC, 2020). In 2020 the European Court of Justice (ECJ) found Hungary's actions to be in violation of EU law. Frontex then announced its withdrawal from the country (Barigazzi, 2021). The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) found that asylum seekers detained in Hungary's land border transit zones were subject to unlawful detention (ECRE, 2020; HHC, 2021). In 2020, when these transit zones were closed, the government required applicants to apply for asylum prior to reaching the border at Hungarian embassies in Kyiv (Ukraine) or Belgrade (Serbia).<sup>7</sup> Asylum seekers already in Hungary have to travel abroad to file a request to claim asylum. In 2023, the ECJ found the requirement restricting asylum applications to Hungarian embassies a breach of EU law and disproportionate interference with the right to asylum (CJEU, 2023). Orbán's government has criticised the rulings, claiming they are a breach of national sovereignty, and has refused to comply with Brussels on immigration or the courts' judgements (Wanat, 2019).

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7 This is known as the embassy procedure. Asylum seekers must make a 'statement of intent declaration' which then needs to be approved by the asylum authorities at the embassy. Based on this they receive permission to travel to Hungary where they then claim asylum upon arrival (HHC, 2023).

Hungary also refused to participate in the relocation scheme proposed by the European Commission in 2015 to help relieve pressure on EU Member States receiving large numbers of refugees, such as Greece and Italy. The government launched a national consultation on the issue, with a referendum, known as the ‘Quota Referendum’, in October 2016 (discussed in Section 4). The main referendum question was ‘Do you want to allow the EU to mandate the resettlement of non-Hungarian citizens to Hungary without the approval of the National Assembly?’. While most voters rejected EU quotas, turnout was very low (below the required 50%), making the result invalid (Bíró-Nagy, 2021). Ultimately, Hungary and Poland were the only two countries to resettle no refugees from their allocated quota (Šelo Šabić, 2017).

More recently, the Hungarian government has threatened to send migrants and asylum seekers in Hungary to Brussels in protest at the judgments by the ECJ (Szandelszky and Spike, 2024). Meanwhile, the country’s failure to comply with EU rules on the treatment of migrants and the 2020 ECJ judgement has led to a fine of €200 million, which if not paid can be deducted from Hungary’s share of the EU budget (Starcevic, 2024). This political stand-off has led to further diplomatic tensions over the handling of asylum and migration policy, culminating in Hungary

(alongside the Netherlands) asking for an opt-out of EU asylum law (Sanderson, 2024).<sup>8</sup>

The treatment of asylum seekers in Hungary contrasts sharply with the treatment of Ukrainian refugees. Under the EU-wide Temporary Protection Directive, Ukrainian refugees have an immediate right to reside, work and access services in Hungary. However, although initially welcomed, over time the government’s overall anti-immigration agenda and poor asylum infrastructure has also affected Ukrainian refugees. There has been a lack of support around housing, access to education and employment, and integration into Hungarian society generally; many Ukrainians are also struggling to find jobs that use their skill set (Brzozowski, 2023). A new law in August 2024 limits government support and restricts the provision of state-funded accommodation for Ukrainian refugees,<sup>9</sup> likely leaving 2,000–3,000 Ukrainian refugees homeless (UNHCR, 2024).

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8 This is highly unlikely to be granted given it would entail an application to the European Council for amendment of EU Treaties, which would require unanimous agreement of all Member States and approval of the European Parliament (Riegert, 2024).

9 Housing will now only be provided to refugees from a ‘war-affected area’ of Ukraine (UNHCR, 2024).

# 3 Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know?

As noted earlier, Hungary is not an ethnically diverse country. Compared to other European countries, a large share of Hungarian citizens are also considered nationalist (39%), based on feelings of superiority or hostility towards other nations or cultures and feelings of inclusivity based on cultural similarity and descent (Aichholzer et al., 2021). The prevalence of nationalist feeling is significantly higher than the European average (26%), though on a par with the UK (40%), which also tops the sample on this indicator (ibid.).<sup>10</sup> A slightly higher share of Hungarians (44%) were recorded as ‘moderates’ in this analysis, meaning a slim majority did not particularly emphasise national identity or attachment to the nation (ibid.).<sup>11</sup>

## 3.1 The salience of immigration for the public

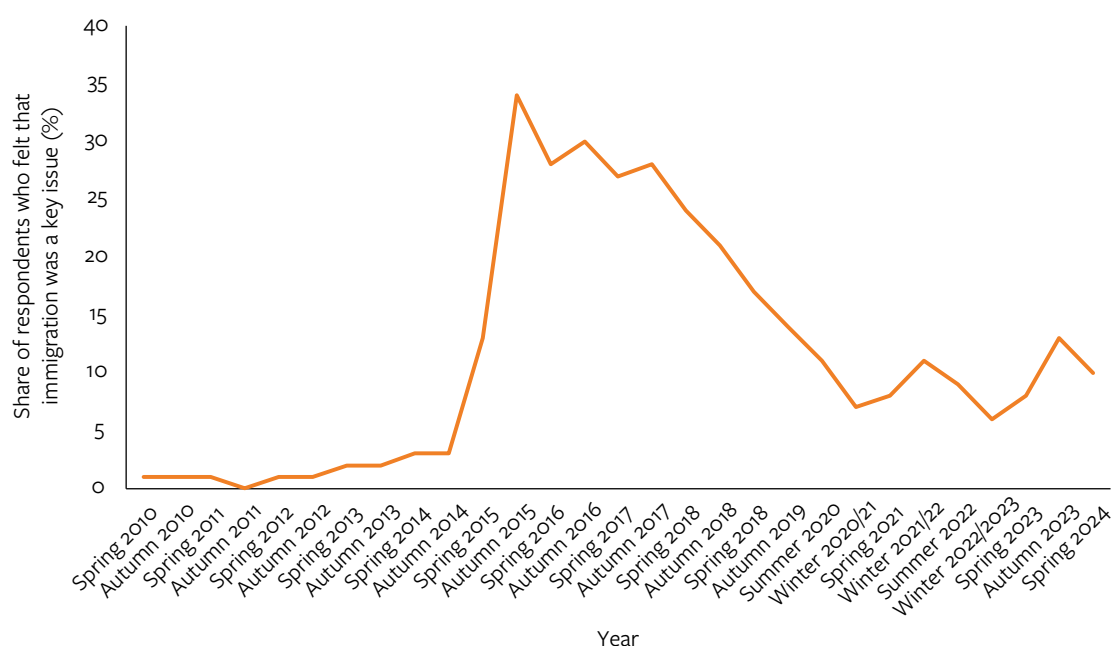
Prior to 2015, immigration was not a dominant issue for Hungarians (Bíró-Nagy, 2021). In the lead-up to the 2014 parliamentary election, it was not referred

to in any of the party manifestos (Klaus et al., 2018), and it did not attract public or political attention even while pressure increased on other EU countries in relation to migrant deaths in the Mediterranean (Bíró-Nagy, 2021).

Immigrants and immigration became a dominant political issue in Hungary in 2015. Data from Eurobarometer shows that the salience of the issue went from basically zero (from 2010 to 2013) to 34% in autumn 2015 (see Figure 4). Although the share of the population reporting immigration as one of the top concerns facing the country certainly spiked, its salience was still significantly lower than in, for example, Germany (76%), Denmark (60%), Sweden (53%) and France (49%) (ODI, n.d.). Public attention to the issue also dropped off fairly quickly from the end of 2017.

<sup>10</sup> This research covers 16 European countries: Belgium, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

<sup>11</sup> The ‘moderates’ group also exhibited above average support for the EU, while nationalists exhibited a low level of support for the EU (Aichholzer et al., 2021).

**Figure 4** Salience of immigration as a key issue in Hungary

Note: This graphic shows the percentage of people answering ‘immigration’ to the question ‘What do you think are the two most important issues facing Hungary today?’ Annual data is presented, with data taken mainly from spring and autumn surveys, though due to Covid-19 some autumn surveys shifted to the winter period.

Source: Eurobarometer (n.d.)

The latest Eurobarometer (n.d.) data (from Spring 2024) finds only 10% of the Hungarian public highlighting immigration as one of their top two concerns, despite the government’s fixation with the issue. Citizens are far more concerned by the cost of living (51% of respondents), health (32%) and the economy (25%). National opinion polling confirms the very low level of concern about immigration compared to other issues (such as the cost of living, healthcare, incomes and corruption) which garner far more attention (Bíró-Nagy et al., 2023). Moreover, far more Hungarians classify immigration as a salient issue *for the EU* than for Hungary itself (Eurobarometer n.d.; Gerő et al., 2023); in Autumn 2015, 68% of Hungarians reported

immigration as a topmost issue of concern facing the EU, compared to 34% who felt the same when asked about the issues facing Hungary (Eurobarometer, n.d.).

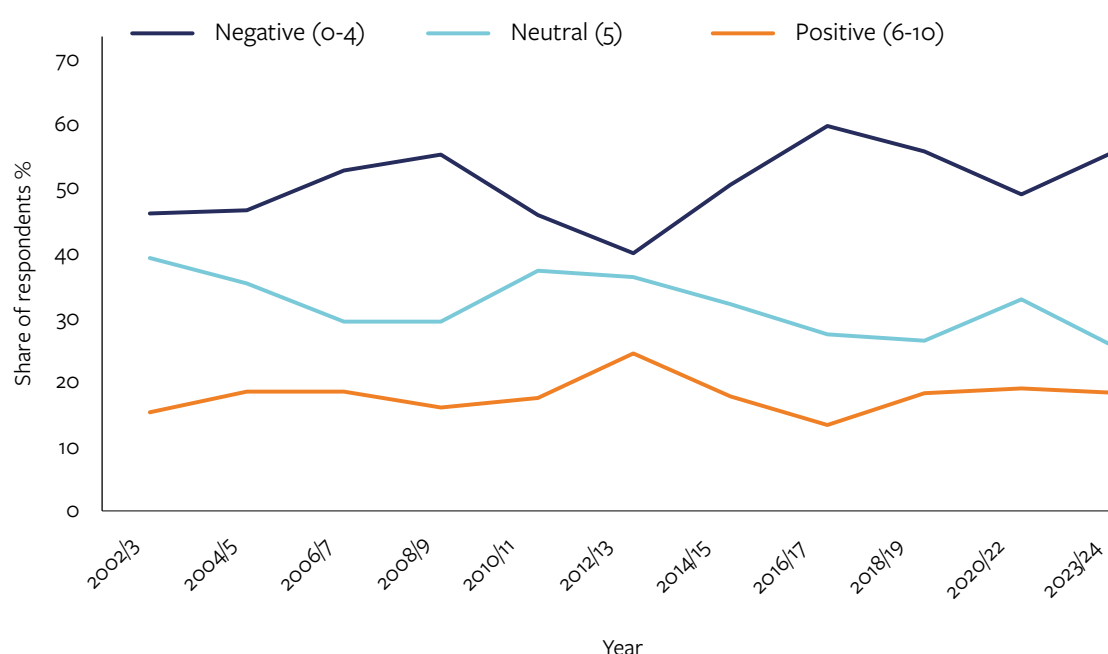
### 3.2 Mainly negative attitudes

It is well established in public opinion surveys that Hungarians are more welcoming towards those of Hungarian ancestry coming from neighbouring countries than towards other nationalities (Bernát et al., 2015). It is also clear from a number of surveys that Hungarians have maintained broadly negative attitudes towards refugees and other migrants, with public attitudes often significantly out of step with other European countries.

For example, data from the European Social Survey (n.d.) shows people have negative views on the general impact of immigration, with a majority (56%) in 2023/24 reporting that immigration ‘makes Hungary a worse place to live’; only a minority (18%) feel that immigrants make

Hungary a better place to live. Negative views are consistently recorded as far higher than positive views on this indicator across the last 20 years (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5** Attitudes towards immigration: do immigrants make Hungary a worse or a better place to live?



Note: This data has been extracted from each wave of the European Social Survey. The survey scores respondents from 0–10. We have classified survey respondents who scored 0–4 in their answers to the question ‘Do immigrants make Hungary a worse or a better place to live?’ as holding ‘negative’ views, those scoring 5 as being ‘neutral’ and those scoring 6–10 as holding ‘positive’ views. ‘Don’t know’ responses have been excluded from the analysis.

Source: European Social Survey (n.d.)

This is unusual compared to many other European countries, where a far greater share of the population report immigrants make their countries a better place and

where positive attitudes strongly outweigh negative ones on this ‘better/worse’ question.<sup>12</sup> Public opinion in Hungary regarding the impact of immigration

<sup>12</sup> This is the case for Finland, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK, for example (European Social Survey, n.d.; ODI, n.d.).

is more in line with countries such as Slovakia, Czechia and Austria (European Social Survey, n.d.).

As illustrated in Figure 5, survey findings for Hungary also show fairly stable attitudes towards immigration over the last two decades, though with a hardening of attitudes visible after 2014/15. This is in line with the research consensus that public attitudes to immigration are remarkably persistent, though younger people's attitudes are more susceptible to change (Kustov et al., 2021). However, the trends in Hungary are still notably out of step with the longer-term shifts seen across Europe. European Social Survey data shows steadily decreasing negative attitudes towards immigration across many countries and, in parallel, generally increasing positive attitudes when people are asked if immigration makes their country a worse or a better place to live (Kumar and Gray Meral, 2023).

Hungary is an outlier in other respects as well. For example, Messing and Ságvári (2021) use a rejection index to measure the share of those who would unconditionally reject the entry of any immigrant from poor countries (i.e. those who answer 'allow none' when asked 'to what extent do you think your country should allow immigrants from poorer countries outside Europe?'). They find Hungary topping the rejection index in 2018/19, with a

result far higher than other EU countries – and far higher than countries that have similarly negative perceptions around immigration (Messing and Ságvári, 2019; *ibid.*).<sup>13</sup> In addition, unlike countries such as Germany, France and Sweden, in Hungary these high levels of exclusionary attitudes are not limited to supporters of right-wing political parties, but extend to supporters of centrist and left-wing parties as well (Messing and Ságvári, 2021).

The general hardening of negative attitudes to immigration in Hungary around 2015 is also reflected in other research. Levels of xenophobia, even though quite high, were fairly stable from 2002 and 2012, but increased dramatically, reaching a peak in April 2015 (coinciding with the government's strong anti-migration campaign, as discussed in the next section) (Bernát et al., 2015). Xenophobic attitudes were more extreme among the less educated and rural population, while views in Budapest and other cities were more tolerant (Molnár and Juhász, 2016). A recent survey also finds that anti-immigration sentiment is particularly strong among young Hungarians, with 76% of 'Gen Z' (those born after 1997) opposing immigration, aligning them closely with older generations (Clark and Duncan, 2024). Millennials (born between 1980 and 1997)

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13 Hungary's figure of 57% can be compared to the 10% recorded in Croatia, 16% in Italy, 37% in Slovakia, 40% in Bulgaria and 42% in Czechia in 2018/19 (Messing and Ságvári, 2021). This 'rejection' figure was even higher for Hungary in 2016/17, at 62.4%, when Hungary was also a notable outlier on this question and far ahead of Czechia (31%), a country with similarly negative perceptions around migration generally (European Social Survey, n.d.; Messing and Ságvári, 2019).

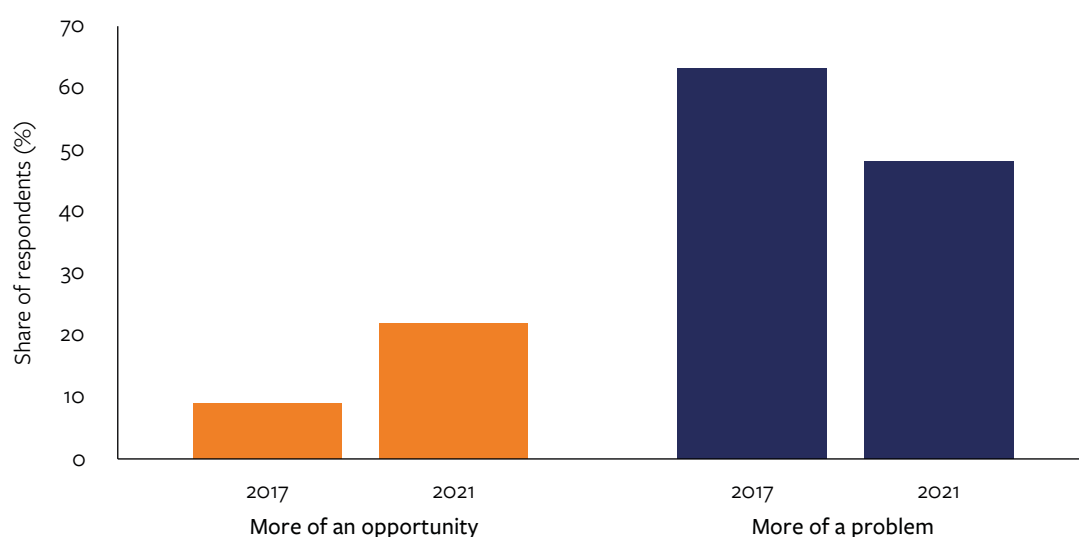
are more open, though still largely anti-immigration (with 68% holding negative views) (ibid.).

Discriminatory attitudes are not unique to refugees and other migrants. The daily prejudice and discrimination experienced by Hungary's Roma population in education, healthcare, employment and housing is well documented, alongside specific instances of hate crime and racist violence (Černušáková, 2017; Király et al., 2021). On multiple occasions, the European Court of Human Rights has found that Hungarian law enforcement failed to protect the Roma community from racial abuse and racially motivated hate crimes (Rorke, 2023).

### 3.3 Small attitudinal shifts emerging

Not every survey has negative findings and Hungary is not always out of step with other EU countries. Eurobarometer polling in 2021 finds that 22% of Hungarians feel that immigration from outside the EU is more of an opportunity than a problem (European Commission, 2022). This is in line with the EU average and puts Hungary on a par with countries such as Finland, Belgium and Portugal. There has been a noticeable shift on this indicator, with the share of the population with negative perceptions – those who would label immigration more of a problem than an opportunity – declining (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6** Is immigration from outside the EU more of a problem or an opportunity?



Source: European Commission (2018; 2022)

There has also been some change in the 'rejection indicator' discussed above. Round 10 of the European Social Survey (2020/22) finds a far lower proportion of Hungarians (41%) reporting they would

prefer to allow no immigrants from poorer countries outside of Europe, though this has risen to 46% in the most recent survey round (2023/24). However, both results are far below the levels in the surveys

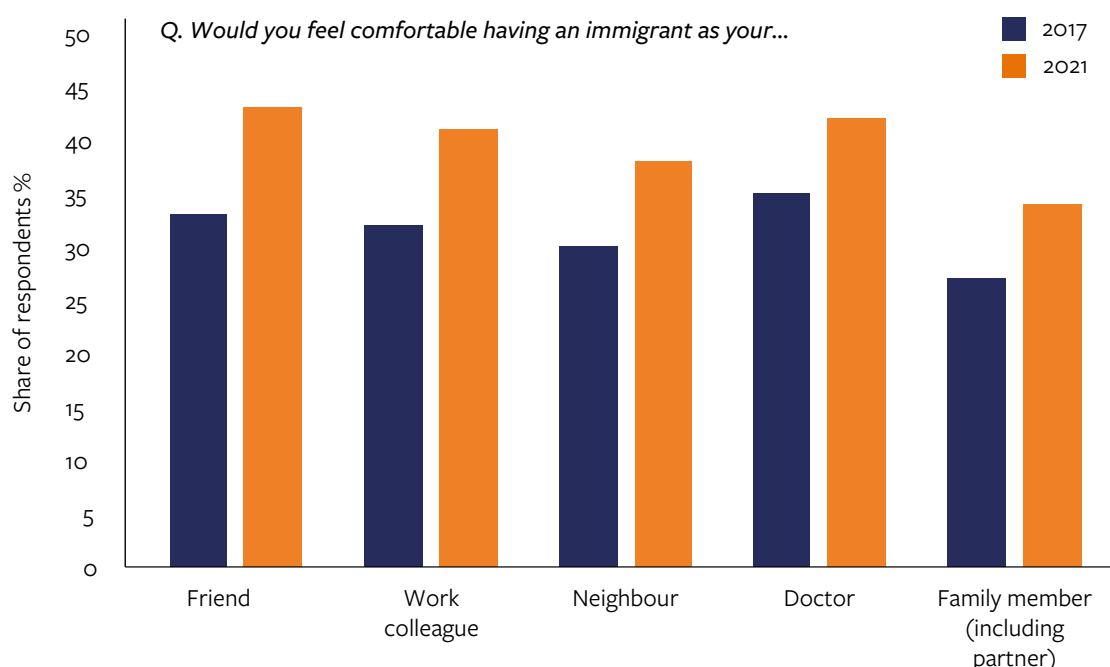


in 2016/17 (62%) and 2018/19 (57%) (European Social Survey, n.d.; Messing and Ságvári, 2021).

Individuals' comfort levels with immigrants are also improving. In 2021, for example, 43% of people reported that they are totally (or somewhat) comfortable having an immigrant as a friend, compared to only

33% in 2017 (European Commission, 2018; 2022). There are similar improvements across all categories related to personal experiences with immigrants (see Figure 7). While Hungary is far below EU averages, and generally at the bottom of the rankings on these measures, these are small signs of progress.

**Figure 7** Personal experiences with immigration



Note: The survey question asked is 'Would you personally feel comfortable or uncomfortable having an immigrant as your friend, work colleague etc.'. Respondents can answer totally comfortable, somewhat comfortable, somewhat uncomfortable, totally uncomfortable (as well as don't know or a refusal to answer). This graphic reports the percentage choosing totally and somewhat comfortable across the two time periods.

Source: European Commission (2018; 2022)

### 3.4 Unwelcoming attitudes towards refugees

When it comes to public attitudes towards refugees, again surveys consistently show more negative results in Hungary than in other European countries.<sup>14</sup> The Ipsos (2024) global survey tracking attitudes towards refugees finds that only 56% of Hungarians believe that people should be able to take refuge in other countries, including in Hungary, to escape war or persecution, putting Hungary close to the bottom of the global rankings and on a par with countries such as Poland (56%) and Türkiye (57%). This compares to a global average of 73%<sup>15</sup> and is far below levels recorded in European countries such as Sweden and Greece (81%), Romania (79%), Ireland (78%), the Netherlands and Spain (76%) and Italy and the UK (75%) (ibid.). In some areas Hungarians' attitudes towards refugees tend to be closer to the average – for example regarding the levels of scepticism that refugees are genuine and when asked if the country should close its borders to refugees. However, Hungarians have very low levels of confidence that refugees can integrate successfully (only 24% believe they can); fewer (22%) believe refugees can make a positive contribution to Hungary (ibid.). These levels are far below global averages, though it is notable that Europe as a continent also figures at the bottom of the global rankings on these two indicators. Attitudes in this area hardened throughout the 2015/16 crisis period: while in October 2015 over half the population

would have accepted an asylum seeker, by January 2016 that had fallen to a third of respondents (Simonovits, 2020).

Attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees, compared to other groups, are more welcoming (in line with typical findings across Europe). Drazanova and Geddes (2023) study eight countries and find that, even in countries with the most negative attitudes – Slovakia and Hungary – people are strongly supportive of welcoming Ukrainian refugees. Only 11% of Hungarians say they would allow no Ukrainian refugees at all, far lower than the share of respondents that would entirely reject Syrian refugees (30%) (ibid.). Hungary also stands out in this study because welcoming attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees are not driven by perceptions of Russia as a threat, which is a considerable factor explaining the warm welcome in Poland, for example (ibid.; Hargrave et al., 2023). A five-country study that includes Hungary finds that support for Ukrainian refugees is considerably higher than support for Afghan and Somali refugees, with individuals' general attitudes and broad predisposition towards immigration an important factor explaining lower support for Afghans and Somalis (Moise et al., 2024). The racialised nature of Europe's refugee response, and the fact that Ukrainian refugees have been welcomed because they 'look like us', has been noted across many EU countries (Aycart-Piquer and Bailey-Morley, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> For exact data on trends in this area, see: Ipsos, 2019; 2021; 2023; 2024.

<sup>15</sup> This is calculated over the 52 countries included in the survey.

Islamophobia is also evident in attitudes towards refugees: 23% of Hungarians say that they would welcome asylum seekers who are being persecuted due to belonging to a Christian denomination, in contrast to only 9% for Muslims (Simonovits, 2020). This is in line with general findings on Islamophobic attitudes. In early 2016, 72% of Hungarian respondents in a Pew Research survey declared an unfavourable view of Muslims in their country, far higher than the EU average (43%), though Hungarians also perceived the Roma and Jewish communities far more negatively as well (Manevich, 2016).

While attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees have been positive and welcoming, this is changing as attitudes towards Ukraine as a foreign policy issue worsen. Polling from March 2024 found that 51% of Hungarians see Ukraine as a threat, up from 16% the year before, with Ukraine now perceived as the main threat to Hungary's security (Inotai, 2024). This is in line with the government's anti-Ukraine campaign, which is seen as having cut through relatively easily because Hungarians, in contrast to Poles, have little cultural affinity with Ukraine (ibid.). This is feeding through into attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees; support for the provision of financial help to Ukraine has dropped and 50% of Hungarians report they would feel 'bad' or 'very bad' to have Ukrainian refugees as neighbours, a dramatic shift from earlier positions (ibid.).

### 3.5 Explanations for Hungarians' negative attitudes

Negative attitudes towards immigration in Hungary have been linked to fear. Migration is particularly feared because of perceived competition over resources, including jobs, housing, services and welfare (Simonovits, 2020). In relation to refugees, Hungarians feel threatened because they pose a financial burden, and their presence increases the likelihood of terrorism (Manevich, 2016).

Research by Policy Solutions and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in 2018 found that migration came fifth in the list of the most pervasive fears in society; top fears included the 'unpredictability and instability of life', 'serious illness' and 'material insecurity, the inability to pay the bills' (Boros and Laki, 2018). Survey results show that fear of immigration is greater among supporters of the current governing party, Fidesz (now in its fourth consecutive term in office since the 2010 election). Fidesz voters ranked immigration second in a survey of their most prominent fears, while it ranked lower (fourth) for supporters of the far-right Jobbik party, and even lower among left-wing voters (Bíró-Nagy, 2021). More recent national polling has found that fears around illness and financial precarity, in particular, are rising and are at similar levels of concern for both government supporters and opposition voters. However, government supporters continue to be far more likely (+12

percentage points) to express fear that immigrants will move to their area than opposition voters (Bíró-Nagy et al., 2023).

The prevalence of negative attitudes, and fear, can to some extent be linked to the low levels of contact between Hungarians and immigrants; only 3% of people report daily social interaction with immigrants compared to 18% across the EU (European Commission, 2022). In addition, 64% of Hungarians report having either zero social interaction or interaction less than once a year with immigrants compared to 31% across EU countries (ibid.). Contact theory is well evidenced by research: people who have the opportunity to communicate with people who are different from themselves are more likely to understand and appreciate diverse viewpoints and harbour less prejudice towards those groups (Dempster and Hargrave, 2017). This is validated by survey research in Hungary which has found that those who personally know migrants tend to be more welcoming (Bernát et al., 2015). However, there is also evidence that short-term contact with refugees passing through Hungary in 2015 has increased anti-refugee sentiment (Gessler et al., 2022). Evidence from voting patterns in the ‘Quota Referendum’ in 2016, and comparing voting patterns in the 2016 and 2018 parliamentary elections, finds that those locations exposed to refugees in 2015 – who were mainly in transit to Western Europe – were significantly more likely to vote against the EU refugee quota in the referendum. They were also more likely

to vote for the far-right opposition party Jobbik than Fidesz in the 2018 elections (ibid.).<sup>16</sup> This implies that contact theory may not hold in circumstances where contact is short-term; other studies of the political impact of refugees have found support for contact theory specifically in the context of long-term contact (ibid.).

While Hungary is clearly an outlier in European terms when it comes to public attitudes towards immigration, this is not solely down to the small numbers of immigrants in the population. It is also inextricably linked to other factors: deeply rooted social problems, low levels of trust and social cohesion in society and the general lack of financial and material security experienced by Hungarian citizens (Bíró-Nagy, 2021; Messing and Ságvári, 2021).

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<sup>16</sup> However, there was no overall impact on votes for the right as a whole, as votes were redistributed from one camp (Fidesz) to the other (Jobbik) (Gessler et al., 2022).

## 4 Racist, Islamophobic and threat-based narratives

The exploitation of immigration as a threat to Hungarian society has been a central feature of Hungarian political discourse since 2015 (Messing and Ságvári, 2021). The Orbán government's extensive focus on immigration can be traced to the terror attack against the magazine office of Charlie Hebdo on 7 January 2015 in Paris. During an interview with national Hungarian TV at the memorial service in Paris, Orbán linked the attack to uncontrolled economic migration, declaring that migration was dangerous for Europe and that Hungary would not become a destination for immigrants (Hirado.hu, 2015). This was widely seen as an attempt to shore up his political position given a recent decline in the polls (Bíró-Nagy, 2021).

A key part of Orbán's narrative has been to link immigration to terrorism. Following the Charlie Hebdo attacks, the Hungarian government sent a 'national consultation' – essentially a questionnaire – on immigration and terrorism to every Hungarian citizen. It was criticised for asking leading questions deliberately linking migration and terrorism and framing migration as an economic threat (Gessler et al., 2022). While Orbán's anti-immigration campaign was already under way, the arrival of large numbers of refugees from Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East in 2015 enhanced the opportunity for inflammatory rhetoric. Orbán and members of his government

continued to emphasise strongly that migrants posed a public security and terror risk and that the country did not need immigrants to sustain its economy (Kroet, 2016). As opinion polling (discussed in the previous section) has illustrated, Orbán has been successful with this strategy, effectively entrenching migration as one of the top fears of Fidesz voters (Bíró-Nagy, 2021; Bíró-Nagy et al., 2023).

To continue whipping up anti-migrant sentiment and keep migration on the political agenda, the Fidesz government held several campaigns and public referenda before the 2018 elections. The 2016 'Quota Referendum' involved a lengthy communications campaign and the widespread use of billboards across the country with statements rejecting migrants and attacking Brussels and the EU (Demeter, 2018). Many of the messages were ostensibly aimed at migrants, but were posted in Hungarian, suggesting they were really intended for the Hungarian public (Cantat and Kumar Rajaram, 2019). Other actions included a 2017 anti-EU campaign, 'Let's Stop Brussels!', which focused on EU institutions and immigration policies that the Hungarian government rejected. Another – the 'National Consultation on the Soros Plan' – was part of the government's campaign against philanthropist George Soros, whom the government accused of 'importing migrants from the Middle

East with the help of Brussels in order to change the cultural background of Europe' (Juhász et al., 2017: 5). Fidesz's political rhetoric has included deeply racist and Islamophobic messages and

stereotypes (see Box 3). This level of anti-migrant rhetoric was unparalleled among EU member states, and was widely seen as propaganda particularly directed at undermining the EU (Demeter, 2018).

### Box 3 Racist and Islamophobic rhetoric

The Orbán government has consistently advanced a version of nationalism that is strongly aligned with white ethno-national Christianity. This has been described as 'paternalist populism' (Enyedi, 2024) and outright racism given its rejection of people of mixed race (Dunai and Romei, 2024). Rhetoric has commonly included anti-Muslim/anti-Arab and Islamophobic statements designed to present the mainly Syrian, Afghan and Pakistani refugees arriving in Hungary during the peak in 2015 as a threatening 'other'. Refugees were portrayed as barbarians abusing their right to humanitarian assistance (Kalmar, 2018; Kende and Krekó, 2020). Syrian asylum seekers were described as part of a 'Muslim invasion'. In an interview for the German newspaper Bild, Orbán said 'We don't see these people as Muslim refugees. We see them as Muslim invaders ... We believe that a large number of Muslims inevitably lead to parallel societies, because Christian and Muslim society will never unite' (Hume, 2018: n.p.).

The avalanche of public messaging portraying immigration as a threat comes from government-controlled media, in a context where media ownership is highly concentrated (Bognar et al., 2019; Tóth, 2020). Since a 2010 restructuring of public media, the pro-government bias has been stark (Bognar et al., 2019). The private media sector is also increasingly dominated by investors and oligarchs that politically align with the Fidesz government (ibid.; HRW, 2024a). Political interference with editorial decisions, surveillance and smear campaigns against journalists are common (HRW, 2024a).

This type of rhetoric and control of the narrative has clearly been a successful electoral strategy for Orbán. The monopolisation of both the Hebdó attack and Europe's so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2015/16 enabled an entirely new direction for Hungarian politics (Bíró-Nagy, 2021). Following municipal elections in October 2014, Fidesz had been losing ground in the polls following a number of corruption scandals and increasing dissatisfaction with its performance.<sup>17</sup> This new strategy heavily politicising immigration enabled the Fidesz government to reverse its declining popularity, and in the 2018

<sup>17</sup> Between September 2014 and January 2015, polling companies variously estimated that Fidesz had lost the support of between 900,000 and 1 million voters (Bíró-Nagy, 2021).

election it preserved its two-thirds majority in parliament (Boros et al., 2018). Orbán also became a leading anti-immigrant voice in Europe and found new political allies on the European far right (Bíró-Nagy, 2021). This is an example of a centre-right party successfully monopolising the issue of migration and out-manoeuvring the far right (Jobbik),<sup>18</sup> leaving it as the ‘follower’ not the ‘agenda setter’ on this issue (ibid.).

While negative narratives have dominated, there have been protests against Orbán’s migration policies, with an event in 2015 organised by opposition party Együtt, and supported by the Democratic Coalition, publicly condemning the government’s fearmongering approach and the inhumane treatment of refugees (Daily News Hungary, 2015). The Catholic Bishop of Vac has also denounced the populist rhetoric aimed at migrants and called on Hungarians to overcome prejudice, in a rare show of support for migrants among the high clergy in Hungary (Than, 2017). During the government’s campaigns, there were attempts by NGOs and civil society to counter the dominant narrative. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee launched the ‘IamMigrant’ hashtag in line with IOM’s global campaign, which gained attention on social media; NGOs, activists and community groups providing direct assistance to refugees also have their own social media communication efforts. However, these have been broadly

ineffective in the face of overwhelmingly hostile government propaganda (Demeter, 2018). The increasingly adverse climate for NGOs dealing with human rights issues is also well documented (Fumarola, 2017), as is the lack of an independent media (Bognar et al., 2019). It is very difficult for civil society, local leaders and journalists to raise their voices and operate effectively.

The contradictions between a country struggling with acute labour shortages (and high rates of emigration) adopting such rejectionist narratives around immigration have increasingly been noted (Messing and Ságvári, 2019; Inotai, 2023). Orbán’s government is now ‘having to champion the idea of importing foreign workers to keep investors satisfied’, with local authorities struggling to handle tensions around the presence of guest workers after years of propaganda against foreigners (Inotai, 2023: n.p.). Ironically, this has led to the left-leaning Democratic Coalition – the main opposition party – accusing Orbán of being ‘pro-migration’ and allowing migrants from Asia to take people’s jobs, while the far-right Jobbik party is claiming that the current, now far higher, levels of labour immigration are undermining the country’s ‘cultural fabric’ (ibid.). All parties are expected to use immigration in their campaigning in the 2026 parliamentary elections (ibid.).

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<sup>18</sup> Jobbik’s traditional stronghold is in Hungary’s least developed east, and it has generally been popular with younger, less educated voters. The party has long embraced hostile rhetoric towards Hungary’s heavily marginalised Roma population and the Jewish population (Pelinka, 2010).

## 5 Conclusions

Although not traditionally a country of immigration, Hungary became a main transit route for refugees and other migrants' onward journeys into Western Europe between 2015 and 2018. Its restrictive approach to asylum policy has resulted in widespread human rights violations and set the country on a collision course with Brussels. Labour immigration has significantly increased in the last decade, with Hungary now one of the EU's top issuers of employment permits. This is unlikely to change given low unemployment, acute labour shortages and declining birth rates.

While immigration barely registered with the public before 2015, Orbán has pushed the issue firmly to the centre of Hungarian political discourse. The narratives around immigration have been extremely xenophobic, racist and Islamophobic, aided by the government's direct control and influence over the media and consistently negative public attitudes towards immigration. Indeed, Hungary consistently features at the bottom of the European rankings when it comes to welcoming attitudes and openness to refugees and other migrants.

While attitudes are largely negative, there are some small signs of positive shifts, most notably with regard to personal comfort levels with immigrants as friends, neighbours and in professional settings, and with a softening in the outright

rejection of poorer immigrants from outside Europe. However, Orbán has successfully stoked fears around migration as a threat to Hungary and sustained a sense of crisis for years, turning 'migration into the political equivalent of a jackpot' (Bíró-Nagy, 2021: 421). Orbán is far from alone in this; political exploitation of the 'immigrant threat' is common across Europe. However, as an example of a centre-right party monopolising migration to pre-emptively sideline (rather than follow) the far right, Hungary's experience has unique aspects.

Cracks are emerging as the need for foreign workers grows and business interests increasingly collide with the extreme hostility of anti-migrant rhetoric. It remains to be seen how this contradiction can be resolved, though it is likely – given the lack of independent media and space for alternative voices – that it may fall substantially to the private sector to shift the narrative on immigration, by emphasising the importance of foreign workers for competitiveness, investment and job creation. Close attention will need to be paid to the working conditions and rights of migrant workers. Hungary's labour movement is an important constituency in this context.



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# ODI Europe

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