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To cite this article: András Bíró-Nagy (2021): Orbán's political jackpot: migration and the Hungarian electorate, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1853905>



Published online: 09 Feb 2021.



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# Orbán's political jackpot: migration and the Hungarian electorate

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## ABSTRACT

PM Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary is often seen as one of the paradigmatic cases of illiberalism and an intense contestation of immigration. This paper argues that the Hungarian government's strong focus on immigration and its hardline positions on the issue proved to be a political jackpot for the governing party. Besides presenting the claims and frames Fidesz has used regarding migration since 2015, three analytical aspects are covered in this article, based on Eurobarometer, European Social Survey and Hungarian domestic polling data. First, the trends in the perception of the importance of migration for the Hungarian voters are compared to the European public opinion. Second, the changes in the attitudes of Hungarians to immigration are also analysed in European comparison. Third, I also present what role the fears related to immigration played at the 2018 parliamentary elections. On the whole, the Hungarian centre-right successfully politicised the issue of migration, and acted as an agenda-setter rather than a follower. It was able to sustain a sense of crisis between 2015 and 2018; it exacerbated the rejection of immigration in society; and it was successful in entrenching migration as one of the top fears among its potential voters.

## KEYWORDS

Migration; radicalisation; politicisation of immigration; public attitudes; Hungary

## 1. Introduction

Migration was without the slightest doubt the defining issue of the 2014–2018 term in Hungarian politics. The migration crisis that shook the entire European Union gave rise to an entirely new situation in both Hungarian and international politics. This gave the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, who has treated this issue as a priority ever since January 2015, an opening in both political arenas. With his wholesale rejection of all types of immigration, and by effectively monopolising the issue in the Hungarian domestic context in a period that was fully dominated by the topic of migration, he managed to set his party on a rising trajectory in the polls again (Juhász, Molnár, and Zgut 2017). At the same time, he was also successful in becoming one of the leading anti-immigration voices in European politics as well. This has also transformed his public perception in international politics. Ever since the right-wing Fidesz party

returned to power in 2010, the Orbán government has been continuously at the centre of international attention because of its actions aimed weakening the democratic institutions (European Parliament 2018), its authoritarian tendencies (Kelemen 2017) and its desire to build an illiberal state (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018).

This was the image that Orbán sought to amend starting in 2015, at which point he began to reposition himself as the ‘protector of Europe’, standing up for a ‘Christian Europe’ and rejecting the ‘Muslim invasion’ (Thorpe 2018). As a bitter opponent of immigration, the Hungarian prime minister found allies in this endeavour among the nations of the Central and Eastern European region, with the result that Hungary punched above its weight in the international debates on managing the migration crisis, thereby garnering the loyalty of many fans among the politicians and supporters of the anti-migration European far-right. The enthusiastic congratulatory messages from politicians of the French National Rally [previously the National Front], the Italian League, the German AfD, the Austrian FPÖ and the Dutch PVV in the aftermath of Fidesz’s 2018 election victory reflected Orbán’s newfound status in this political community.

It took only a few months in 2015 to make clear that with its focus on the issue of migration Fidesz had managed to stop the declining trend in its popularity and that as a result the ruling party was once again rising in the polls. In the period that followed, the Orbán government did all in its power to ensure that in the remaining three years of its term Hungarian politics would revolve around this sole issue. As I will show in this article, it conducted a permanent anti-migration campaign; launched National Consultations; ordered a referendum on the EU’s migrant quota mechanism; built a border fence on Hungary’s southern border; adopted new laws that made it practically impossible for anyone to legally claim a refugee status in Hungary; and encumbered the work of the NGOs that deal with migration as well as targeting those domestic and international players who take a more generous view of the migration issue than the Hungarian government. These substantial efforts of Fidesz to turn migration into a leading topic in Hungarian politics confirm the argument of Hutter and Kriesi in this issue (2020) about the importance of partisan mobilisation for the politicisation of the immigration issue. The above-mentioned examples affirm that in the Hungarian case it was the centre-right that politicized the issue of immigration, and acted as an agenda-setter rather than a follower. At the same time, Hungary’s radical right party, Jobbik missed the opportunity and was outmaneuvered by Fidesz.

The strengthening of Fidesz and the weakening of Jobbik go against the arguments according to which the radicalisation of the mainstream is likely to backfire and lead to the further strengthening of the radical right (Abou-Chadi, Cohen, and Wagner 2020; Dahlström and Sundell 2012; Wodak 2015). This study highlights the importance of issue ownership when it comes to the success or failure of the radicalisation strategies of centre-right parties. In Hungary, Fidesz was the first actor to focus on migration in the public discourse; it monopolised the issue and gave no chance to the far-right to outflank the Orbán government from the right.

This paper investigates how the centre-right politicised the issue of immigration in Hungary, and how the attitudes of the Hungarians changed during the permanent anti-immigration campaign of the Orbán government between 2015 and 2018. Besides the analysis of the politicisation of immigration by Fidesz, the potential impact of

Orbán's migration policies will be illustrated by three aspects of public opinion data. First, it will be compared how the significance of the migration issue shaped up in Hungarian and European public opinion, respectively. Second, changes in the public attitudes towards migration will be investigated. Did the permanent campaign render the Hungarian public's view of immigration more negative, did it increase their rejection of it? As the third analytical consideration, it will be examined what role anxiety about migration played in the 2018 election campaign. By answering these questions, it will be possible to get a better understanding of how the Hungarian society reacted to the main issue propounded by the Orbán government during its 2014–2018 term, and its several years of relentless communication about it.

In the next section, I will briefly introduce the theoretical background. The third section will review the strategy and the communication narrative applied by the Hungarian government to turn migration into the defining issue of the 2015–2018 period. In the fourth section a detailed description of the objectives of the research and the sources of data will be provided. This will be followed by three sections that will assess the importance attached to the migration issue in Hungary and the European Union, changes in the attitudes towards migration in Hungary, and the fear of migration in the Hungarian society at the end of the 2018 parliamentary election campaign, respectively. In the conclusions, the implications of the Hungarian case for how we should think about the politicisation of immigration will be discussed.

## 2. Theoretical background

This article builds on the academic literature about party competition between the centre-right and the radical right. Established, centre-right political parties now face competition in nearly all EU member states from a radical right challenger. In the last decades, academic research on the radical right (see for example Norris 2005; Ivarsflaten 2007) showed that anti-immigrant attitudes are the strongest predictor of voting for the radical right. It has also become a scientific commonplace that when centre-right parties emphasise immigration related issues, it usually leads to more voters supporting the original, and choosing the radical right instead of the centre-right parties (Dahlström and Sundell 2012; Wodak 2015). In this issue, Abou-Chadi, Cohen, and Wagner (2020) confirm that these findings are still valid for the ten Western European countries covered in their study. Anti-immigrant attitudes remain the core determinant of the radical right vote and centre-right parties are not able to win voters back (or lose less voters) when they accommodate the positions of the radical right. Legitimising the radical right is therefore considered a major danger for the centre-right, but shifting to radical right territory credibly may be problematic for centre-right parties for several other reasons as well (Webb and Bale 2014). Shifting to anti-immigration platform raises the challenge of ideological consistency; centre-right parties risk the support of more moderate voters if they promote anti-migration positions; Christian democratic parties also might support protection for refugees on moral grounds.

What is common in the above mentioned researches is that they investigated the competition between the centre-right and the radical right in political contexts where anti-immigrant issues were owned by the radical right for a long time and the centre-right strategies simply tried to react to that. What we know much less about is what

happens when the migration issue is politicised by a centre-right party first, and the traditional radical right just acts as a follower. This paper argues that centre-right hard-line stances on immigration can be electorally successful if a party can win ownership on the issue. This Hungary country study describes an example in which there was strong competition between the centre-right governing Fidesz party and its radical right challenger, Jobbik for several years, but Fidesz took the initiative on the migration issue and managed to benefit electorally from its permanent anti-immigration campaign, while Jobbik lost votes during these years.

Despite the clear wins of Fidesz at the 2010 and 2014 parliamentary elections, the competition between Fidesz and Jobbik had been evident way before the 2015 migration crisis. Fidesz has never wanted to create a *cordon sanitaire* around Jobbik or to label Jobbik as an extremist party. Politicians of the governing party rather always underlined that Jobbik was insignificant and it would never be able to govern the country (Krekó and Mayer 2015). However, fearing from the possibility that Jobbik can win over a part of Fidesz's more radical voters, the Orbán government systematically took over numerous elements of the programme of Jobbik after 2010 (Bíró-Nagy and Boros 2016). Among these were the crisis taxes levied on large corporations (mostly foreign-owned); the inclusion of a reference to Christianity in the new constitution; school visits to formerly Hungarian areas outside the current national borders; removing monuments and renaming streets as Jobbik had proposed; and a national day of commemoration on the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, when Hungary lost large parts of its territory. These are illustrations of the fact that Jobbik's major impact on Hungarian politics has been its capability to set the political agenda. By 2014–2015, Jobbik assumed the position of the second strongest party in opinion polls, overtaking left-wing MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party) in the process. The collapse of the Hungarian left and the rise of the radical right made Jobbik the leading force of the opposition and the main rival of the governing party. Orbán's decision to move into the anti-immigration territory should be interpreted in this context: Fidesz's radicalisation is a direct function of the competition with Jobbik.

This paper agrees with the general approach of the introductory article in this issue (Hadj Abdou, Bale, and Geddes 2020) that immigration as a political issue is dependent on the actions, inactions and interactions of political parties, and that centre-right strategies can potentially alter the dynamics of competition with the radical right. Therefore, the following sections will focus on the centre-right strategy in Hungary, and how the Hungarian population has reacted to the permanent anti-immigration campaigns of the Orbán government.

### 3. Radicalisation of the centre-right: the politicisation of migration in Hungary

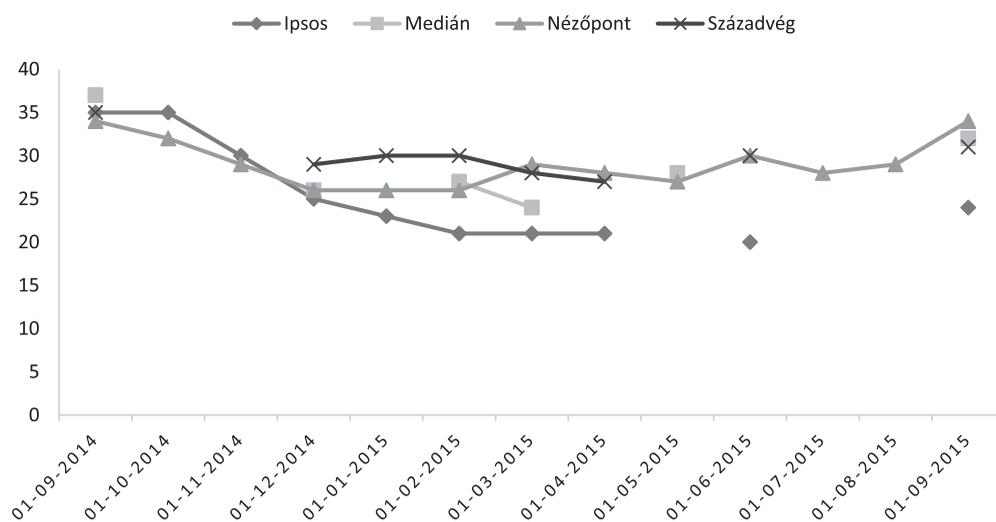
Migration was a marginal issue in Hungary right until 2015. The lack of interest in the issue was readily explained by the extraordinarily low numbers of immigrants arriving in Hungary: Between 2002 and 2012, the number of immigrants from outside the European Union was a mere 1600–4600 persons (Barna and Koltai 2018, 6). Although even before 2015 news reports involving other member states of the European Union referred to the growing pressure from migration and the occasional tragedies afflicting migrants

who tried to enter Europe through the Mediterranean Sea, these cases failed to elicit attention in Hungarian political discourse.

The turning point was the terror attack against the offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. On 11 January 2015, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán struck a completely new tone at the commemoration of the victims in Paris. The Hungarian prime minister said that ‘While I am PM, Hungary will definitely not become an immigration destination’. Even after the Charlie Hebdo attacks, Orbán decided not to narrow down the issue of migration to terrorism, but framed it in a much broader way, highlighting economic and cultural concerns as well. The prime minister took an unequivocally negative view of economic migration, but the topos of rejecting the cultural differences that accompanied migration also cropped up in his statements: ‘We don’t want to see significantly sized minorities with different cultural characteristics and backgrounds among us. We want to keep Hungary as Hungary’ (EUObserver 2015). These comments set the tone for what was to come, not only in the communication of the ruling party over the next few months when the migration crisis peaked in Hungary, but in fact for the entire remainder of the term. Although Orbán started to build his anti-immigration campaign before the migration crisis hit Hungary, it was the huge flow of migrants during the summer of 2015 that triggered the issue to the top of the political agenda. By the time when news about the migration crisis started to flood the media and refugees also appeared in high numbers in Hungary, Orbán was well-placed to be the owner of the issue and exploit it politically.

It should be added that the shift to the anti-immigration platform fit rather well into the Hungarian governing party’s overall approach to politics. The consistent line throughout Fidesz policies and communication is the concept of protection and of halting changes. Protecting Hungary from the changing demographic makeup of the national and local communities, and cultural transformations has suited perfectly this general perspective. Fidesz also has a genuinely anti-pluralist and an increasingly populist approach: the party claims to solely represent the will and interest of the nation against designated enemies who pose a threat to the nation (Krekó, Hunyadi, and Szicherle 2019). Since 2015, the main enemies have become refugees and migrants, and those societal and political actors who, in the government’s rhetoric, help, organise and bring them to Europe (e.g. NGOs, EU, George Soros). The efforts to link these actors to the migration issue in various waves can be qualified as the ‘evolution’ of the immigration issue, and a key element of the tactics to keep the issue alive until the 2018 elections.

For a better understanding of the domestic political context, it is important to stress that in the aftermath of the municipal elections of October 2014 Fidesz began to lose public support very rapidly, shedding some 1 million voters in the span of a mere 3–4 months. This swift decline in the polls was fuelled by corruption scandals (for example the United States’ decision to barr high-level figures affiliated with the ruling party from entering the country due to their alleged involvement in corruption), flawed public policy proposals that backfired (e.g. the internet tax) and anti-government mass protests. As compared to data from September 2014, the figures of the polling company Medián showed that by November Fidesz had lost the support of some 900,000 voters, while at Ipsos the corresponding figure in January 2015 was over a million. Even Nézőpont, a polling company with close ties to the ruling party, found a drop of 8 points (ca. 650,000 persons, see [Figure 1](#)) among the entire adult population.



**Figure 1.** Changes in Fidesz's public support, September 2014 to September 2015 (population at large, percentage).

Source: Közvéleménykutatók.hu. Note: Ipsos, Medián, Nézőpont and Századvég are Hungarian polling companies.

And this drop in support had very concrete political consequences, too: Fidesz suffered a series of defeats in by-elections, first in November 2014 in the Budapest district of Újpest, then in February 2015 in the town of Veszprém, and finally in April 2015 in Tapolca (when Jobbik won its first ever parliamentary by-election). These defeats also led to the loss of its two-thirds majority in Parliament. This was the situation that confronted Viktor Orbán at the time when he was looking for an issue that could halt his party's steep decline in the polls and would allow him to counterattack and seize back control of the political agenda.

In the spring of 2015 the government launched a National Consultation on the issues of immigration and terrorism, and the accompanying campaign billboards all over Hungary began to feature images that played on both economic and cultural fears of the public with respect to migration. The three main messages of the first immigration-themed communication campaign were the following: 'If you come to Hungary, you need to respect our culture!', 'If you come to Hungary, you cannot take the jobs of Hungarians!', 'If you come to Hungary, you need to follow our laws!' (Nagy 2016). These messages were displayed in Hungarian on the billboards that line public roads, thereby indicating that their real aim was not to warn immigrants but to shape the Hungarian public's thinking about this issue.

The National Consultation of 2015 also delineated the discursive framework of how the topic would be presented by the government: the goal was to inextricably link migration to terrorism, to whip up social and religious/cultural fears, and to present the issue as one of a struggle against the European Union. The latter effort was also a reflection of the fact that in May 2015 the European Union put the adoption of an EU-level migration quota mechanism on the agenda. In addition to its communication campaign, the government also took action: on 17 June 2015, it decided to establish a border fence along a 175-kilometer long stretch of the Hungarian-Serbian border. In

the summer of 2015 Fidesz's support began to rise again, and by the fall two-thirds of the 1 million voters it had previously lost had returned to the supporters of the governing party (Kozvelemenykutatok.hu 2018). By this time the country was already past the two-months peak period of the influx of migrants. According to the Hungarian government (2019), approximately 400,000 people had crossed into Hungary through the southern border (and immediately moved on to other EU member states) during August and September 2015.

The key Hungarian political event in 2016 was the quota referendum (related to the European Union's migrant relocation plans) held on 2 October, which marked the culmination of the communication campaign that had been continuously ongoing for a year and a half at that point.<sup>1</sup> While an overwhelming majority of voters rejected the EU's migrant quotas, voter turnout was below the 50% which would have been required for the result to be considered valid.

The idea of a referendum on the issue – just as the notion of building a physical fence – had been first publicly raised by the far-right Jobbik party, which had already campaigned on this issue in the fall of 2015 (Gessler 2017). Ultimately, the Orbán government was successful in expropriating Jobbik's proposal and presenting it as its own, and thus Jobbik leader Gábor Vona and his party had no alternative but to line up behind the government in the referendum campaign. Even though the opposition parties celebrated the invalidity of the referendum (turnout had been 44%, a few points below the validity threshold of 50%) as a victory, this did not stop Fidesz from casting the referendum as a major success in its communication despite the failure to take the validity threshold (which incidentally Fidesz had itself increased for referenda).

This message was based on two figures. For one, 98% of those who had submitted valid votes shared the government's view, that is they rejected the EU's migrant quota mechanism. Second, the result meant that 3.3 million people had endorsed the government's position. With the hindsight of the 2018 elections, we can assert that the latter, the data supporting the notion of what Fidesz called the 'political validity' of the referendum, played a bigger role. The 3.3 million votes agreeing with Fidesz's position showed that at that point the governing party's communication reached well beyond its own base (Fidesz had won 2.1 million votes in the 2014 national election).

The referendum yielded several benefits for the Orbán government. It made sure that the issue of migration would continue to define Hungarian politics through 2016, it successfully monopolised the anti-immigration topic, and in the process, it left the opposition either confused and bewildered, without an adequate response (Jobbik), or relegated it into a defensive posture (the left-wing and liberal opposition parties), while it kept Fidesz's own activists and campaign teams on their toes. The strategic quandary of the opposition parties was brought into sharp relief when they failed to offer a substantial message to counter the government's position, with the result that the only actual opposition message during the campaign came from the satirical Two-Tailed Dog Party, which asked voters to submit invalid ballots.

To feed the anti-migration sentiment in the public, Fidesz conducted two further National Consultations before the start of the official campaign period of the 2018 parliamentary campaign. In a 2017 campaign entitled 'Let's stop Brussels!', it attacked the institutions of the European Union and the politicians who were presumably less rejecting of immigration. Next, it proceeded to launch a communication campaign against the

so-called ‘Soros Plan’, which the Hungarian government claimed was a plan by the Hungarian-American billionaire George Soros to settle millions of migrants from Africa and the Middle-East in Hungary. This period gave rise to an unprecedented level of fake news and conspiracy theories in Hungarian public discourse. As Krekó (2018) has shown, local conspiracy theory-inspired views are typically based on the fundamental shared experience in Hungary of the limitations of national sovereignty that the country had been forced to endure throughout its history. The concomitant narrative of Hungary’s ‘freedom fight’ basically posits that there are outside powers that seek to wrest Hungary’s sovereignty from the Hungarians. The Orbán government’s campaigns about migration provide a good fit with the struggle for sovereignty in which the enemies are identified as the European Union, George Soros, the NGOs dealing with migration-related issues, the ‘international left’ and the ‘liberals’. In the government’s narrative, these all work to turn Hungary into an ‘immigrant nation’. Viktor Orbán has centred the entire 2018 parliamentary campaign around the issues of the antonyms ‘Hungarian land’ and ‘immigrant country’. ‘Hungary today faces two possible futures: either there will be a national government, which means that Hungary will not become an immigrant country; or George Soros’s people will form a government, and it will be transformed into an immigrant country ... Ultimately in April the choice will have been narrowed down to two options: pro-immigration or anti-immigration candidates’ – claimed the prime minister a month before the election, thereby setting the course and tone of communication for the final stretch of the campaign (Orbán 2018).

The above have shown that starting in 2015 the government put all its political communication chips on the issue of migration. In order for the migration topic to continue to be effective in 2018, several preconditions had to apply simultaneously: migration needed to remain a relevant issue at a time when there were no longer large numbers of migrants arriving in Hungary; public attitudes towards migration had to be aligned even closer with Fidesz’s staunch rejection of any and all immigration; and the fear of immigration had to become a major issue during the campaign, at least among potential Fidesz voters. In the following sections, these will be the three issues that define the objectives of my study.

#### 4. Research objectives and data

Seeing how as a result of successfully putting the issue of immigration onto the public agenda Fidesz’s standing in the polls began to improve following the decline in popularity that the governing party experienced at the end of 2014 and in early 2015, the political challenge of the Orbán government was to ensure a continuously high level of interest in the issue. This was contingent on massive communication efforts, especially once Hungarian voters ceased to encounter any new immigrants as a result of the border fence and the new regulations concerning immigration. The Orbán government’s attempt at placing migration at the top of the public agenda for the entirety of the 2014–2018 term of parliament can be considered as successful if during the remaining three years of its term the government managed to sustain a similar degree of public interest in the issue as the level experienced at the time of the European and domestic peak of the migration crisis in 2015. Since in the Hungarian government’s narrative the issue of terrorism was closely linked to immigration, the same analysis is performed

with regard to perceptions of terrorism. This analysis will reveal whether with its ongoing communication campaigns Fidesz has ensured that the extreme importance attached to migration by the Hungarian public would continue to prevail at a time when in Western Europe the issue began to decline significantly in terms of its salience because the migration crisis itself was abating.

In order for a political campaign based on the fear of immigration to succeed, it was not enough for the driving political force behind this campaign to continuously keep the issue on the agenda but it was also necessary to reinforce negative attitudes towards immigration. Even before the migration crisis, xenophobia and the rejection of immigrants in Hungary were high in European comparison (Sík, Simonovits, and Szeitl 2016). In order to see whether the Orbán government was successful in further boosting the rejection of immigration and how significant the resultant shift was, the results of comparative European values surveys will be analysed.

The ultimate test of Fidesz's political strategy based on anti-immigration sentiments was of course the parliamentary election of 2018. In order to ascertain how pervasive voters' fears of immigration were in the last stretch of the campaign, the results of a public opinion survey concerning the fears of migration will be analysed. In the last snapshot taken in the days leading up to the 2018 parliamentary election, I was curious to find out which issues concerned voters the most, which were most likely to make them fearful in the weeks before the elections. More specifically, I also wanted to find out how profound the differences were between the various political camps concerning the importance of migration.

I draw on the results of numerous European and domestic public opinion surveys to answer the questions above. When it comes to the general importance attributed to migration and the changes in attitudes towards migration, the focus is on public opinion at large. However, in the section about the fear of migration at the end of the 2018 parliamentary election campaign, the different voting groups are analysed. I analyse the trends in the importance respondents attributed to the migration issue in Hungary and the European Union, respectively, based on the data from Standard Eurobarometer surveys published twice a year by the European Commission, specifically drawing on the survey results published in the period spanning from the fall of 2014 to the spring of 2018. The surveys use the same questions each time to gauge what issues voters in individual member states view as the most important problems facing the EU and their own countries, respectively. Among the issues explored in the Eurobarometer surveys, I primarily focus on the public perceptions regarding the significance of immigration and terrorism. The changes in Hungarian attitudes towards migration will be tracked on the basis of data taken from the European Social Survey, analyses performed by the Sociology Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences' Center of Social Sciences, as well as the research results of the Tárki Institute.

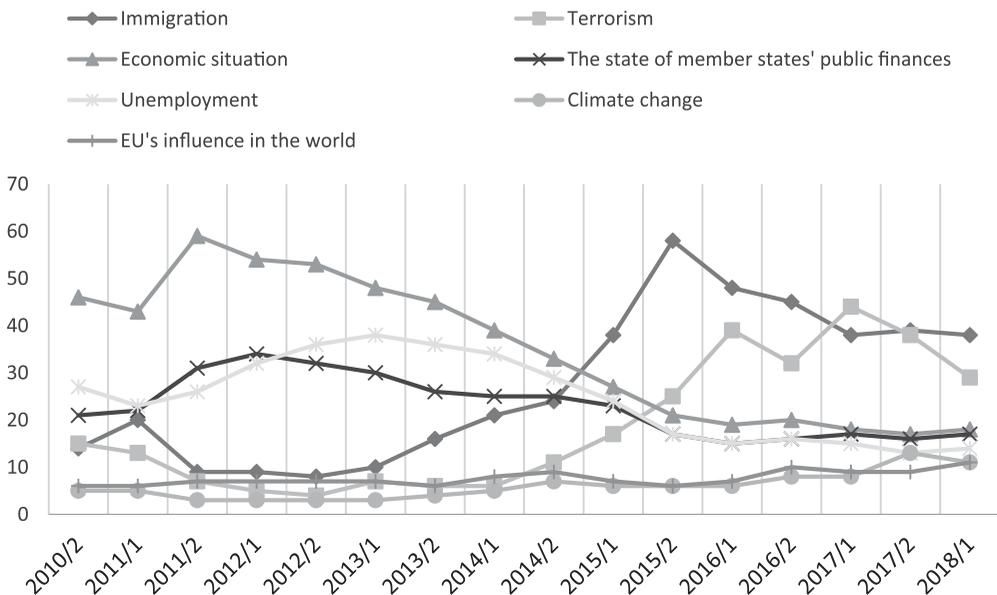
In order to investigate the significance of the public's fear of migration during the Hungarian election campaign, a separate survey explored this particular issue. The poll was commissioned by Policy Solutions, a Hungarian think-tank and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, a German political foundation. It was conducted by the Hungarian pollster Závecz Research between 28 March and 5 April 2018, i.e. in the final days of the parliamentary election campaign, on a representative sample of 1000 persons who were interviewed in person. This survey sought to capture where migration was situated in the distribution of

fears that preoccupied Hungarian voters at the time of the election, how much they focused on that particular issue and how differences in socio-demographic situation and party preference influenced attitudes concerning the key issues during that period.

Overall, the individual data analyses of the following sections (salience of migration, attitudes towards migration, importance of the issue of migration in the 2018 campaign) will illustrate how effective the radicalisation of the centre-right has been after 2015 and to what extent the Orbán government has managed to shape public opinion in its favour with its permanent anti-immigration campaigns.

## 5. The significance of migration in Hungary and the European Union

An overview of Europe's major problems in the 2010s clearly shows that the decade has been dominated by two major crises: the economic crisis between 2010 and 2014 and the migration crisis starting in 2015 (Figure 2). During the first years of the decade the economic situation and unemployment were the issues that the citizens of the European Union's member states were most likely to view as the most important issues facing the EU. Migration joined the top rank of issues that were perceived as problems by EU citizens in the first half of 2015, and within six months it was joined in the second place by the issue of terrorism. These two issues have been in the top two positions in every single Eurobarometer survey from autumn 2015 until the 2018 Hungarian elections, and – with the exception of the first half of 2017 – immigration has always ranked as the top issue facing the European Union. Citizens' perceptions also confirm that the autumn of 2015 can be regarded as the peak of the migration crisis. It was in November 2015 when the share of respondents who ranked migration as one of the



**Figure 2.** The most important issues facing the European Union, 2014–2018 (EU28 average, percent).

Source: Eurobarometer 89 (Spring 2018). Original question: What do you think are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment?

top two issues facing the EU stood at its highest level, 58% calling it one of the top two concerns. The agreement between the European Union and Turkey in March 2016 played a vital role in easing the impact of the crisis, and as a result of the deal the pressure on the Balkan migration route into the European Union was radically reduced.

The alleviation of the crisis is also apparent in the figures of the schematic overview of European problems: after peaking in the fall of 2015, the share of all respondents across the EU who designated immigration as one of the two most important issues declined steadily, and by spring 2017 the overall share of such respondents had dropped by 20 points, with 38% selecting immigration as one of the top two concerns. Since then, migration has stabilised at this level, and in spring 2018 (around the time of the Hungarian elections) it was still selected by 38% of respondents as one of the most important problems. The importance of terrorism in the public perception surged after the attacks against the *Charlie Hebdo* offices and the *Bataclan* in Paris, as well as in the survey following the terror attack in Brussels. During the first half of 2015 the corresponding figure jumped from 11% to 23%, and a year later the ratio of those who saw terrorism as one of the two most important issues had surged to 39%. Eurobarometer's surveys showed that the peak value in terms of how many people saw terrorism as an issue of top importance (44%) was reached in spring 2017, but in the following year the number of respondents who saw it as one of the top two issues had dropped by 15 percentage points.

By the time when Viktor Orbán began talking about migration, the issue of migration had been rising in importance for over a year and a half in the eyes of European citizens. This owed to the fact that the migration pressure had been increasing on the sea-route connecting Africa with Southern Europe earlier than it had in the Balkans. As of the fall of 2014, Hungarians were less likely (18%) than the average EU citizen (24%) to believe that immigration was one of the two most important issues facing the European Union. However, once the issue exploded in the Hungarian domestic agenda in the spring of 2015, this began changing (Table 1). When the perception that immigration was an important issue peaked in Hungary (at 68% in the fall of 2015), its level was 10 points higher than in the average of the EU28. It is also striking that while elsewhere the concern with migration dropped markedly – although it still remained a widespread concern – as the migration pressure itself eased up, in Hungary the anxiety about this issue declined far less significantly. At the time of the quota referendum in October 2016, the share of people who believed that immigration was among the top two concerns

**Table 1.** Mentions of immigration and terrorism among the two most important issues facing the EU, 2014–2018 (percent).

	Immigration – Hungary	Immigration – EU28	Terrorism – Hungary	Terrorism – EU28
Fall 2014	18%	24%	7%	11%
Spring 2015	43%	38%	20%	17%
Fall 2015	68%	58%	34%	25%
Spring 2016	67%	48%	47%	39%
Fall 2016	65%	45%	40%	32%
Spring 2017	60%	38%	55%	44%
Fall 2017	58%	39%	45%	38%
Spring 2018	56%	38%	38%	29%

Source: Eurobarometer 82–89. Original question: What do you think are the two most important issues facing the EU at the moment?

for Hungary was almost as high (65%) as it had been a year before when hundreds of thousands of people had been transiting Hungary within the span of two months. By the time of the 2018 election, the relevant figure had dropped to 56%. However, as recently as then it was still at a level that had been the pan-European peak at the time when the crisis reached its crescendo in the fall of 2015. And the same trend that applied to immigration also characterised terrorism: starting in the spring of 2015, the proportion of Hungarian society that saw it as one of the most important issues was higher than the European average, and that is how it remained in every survey until the 2018 elections.

Of course, we need to distinguish what the citizens of a member state think about European-level challenges and what they consider as serious problems in their own home countries. In this respect the data show that before 2015 immigration and terrorism were practically non-existent issues for Hungarian voters (Table 2). In the last Eurobarometer survey (autumn 2014) before the Hungarian government launched its anti-immigration campaign, a mere 3% of respondents mentioned immigration and only 1% mentioned terrorism as one of the two most important issues facing Hungary. During the same period the average value in the EU was 18% for immigration and 6% for terrorism. In 2015, migration veritably exploded into Hungarian discourse, rapidly rising in importance; in the spring 13% saw it as one of the top two domestic issues but by autumn that year that number had surged to 34%. By the time of the quota referendum it had declined by only 4 points, even though at that point there was no longer any migration in Hungary. Right up to the parliamentary election in 2018 the proportion of citizens who saw immigration as an important domestic issue was higher than in the average of the other EU member states. Furthermore, the decline in the number of its mentions as a top issue was less pronounced than in the average of the EU 28. Despite the Orbán government's ongoing campaign efforts to link the threat of terror to immigration, the public's sense of fear about the potential dangers of terrorism never exceeded the European average, and the share of those who believed this to be one of the most important challenges facing Hungary never exceeded 8%.

## 6. Changes in the attitudes towards migration

Several researches have shown that xenophobia and especially the rejection of migrants arriving from poor countries outside Europe increased massively in Hungary during the

**Table 2.** Mentions of immigration and terrorism among the two most important issues facing Hungary, 2014–2018 (percentage).

	Immigration – Hungary	Immigration – EU28	Terrorism – Hungary	Terrorism – EU28
Fall 2014	3%	18%	1%	6%
Spring 2015	13%	23%	2%	7%
Fall 2015	34%	36%	8%	11%
Spring 2016	28%	28%	4%	16%
Fall 2016	30%	26%	8%	14%
Spring 2017	27%	22%	7%	19%
Fall 2017	28%	22%	7%	16%
Spring 2018	24%	21%	7%	10%

Source: Eurobarometer 82–89. Original question: What do you think are the two most important issues facing (OUR COUNTRY) at the moment?

parliamentary term 2014–2018. Data provided by Tárki, which has been studying xenophobia using the same methodology since the early 1990s, show that levels of xenophobia were roughly stable in the period between 2002 and 2012, although the relevant value had stabilised at a high level. Then levels of xenophobia began surging from their high base value, and as a result pro-immigration, ‘xenophilic’ attitudes practically disappeared in Hungary. Up until the migration crisis, Tárki had classified 8–10% of Hungarian society as pro-immigrant. However, by January 2016 this ratio had dropped to a mere 1% (Sík, Simonovits, and Szeitl 2016, 84). According to Tárki’s research, the share of those who harboured xenophobic attitudes surged to levels never before seen in the 25 years since they started tracking this number, exceeding the 50% (53%) mark for the first time.

Barna and Koltai (2019) also pointed out that the ground for the government’s anti-migration campaign and rising xenophobia had been fertile. It was not only as late as 2015 but in fact already in 2002 that the majority of Hungarians thought that the country would become a worse place with the arrival of immigrants; the real change over the last few years has been the decline in moderate opinions and a rise in the wholesale rejection of any immigration. The most negative changes can be observed in the attitudes towards poor migrants from outside Europe. The share of those who completely reject such immigrants grew from 25% in 2002 to 48% in 2015 (Barna and Koltai 2018, 13). A study by Messing and Ságvári (2019, 44) that draws on European Social Survey data from before and during the migration crisis shows that the Hungarian society’s ‘rejection index’ is the highest across the entire continent (62%), with the share of those who reject immigration rising drastically between the two rounds of the ESS surveys (in 2012 it had been only 39%; Messing and Ságvári 2018, 9). Such a massive surge was not seen anywhere else in Europe. In the countries that follow Hungary in the ranking of the most rejecting countries, namely the Czech Republic, Estonia and Lithuania, the increase during this period was nowhere near as pronounced (Messing and Ságvári 2019).

In the case of the Central and Eastern European countries, anti-immigration attitudes cannot be explained by the presence of immigrants, of course. In fact, these sentiments owe to deep-seated fears, grievances and concerns about a general lack of security (in the existential, social or labour market dimensions). The pervasive anti-immigration sentiments are symptoms of deeply rooted problems, and immigrants appear to be ideal targets for projecting many of the general frustrations and fears that are present in society (Messing and Ságvári 2018, 27–28). Tárki’s researchers also confirm that fears of a deterioration in people’s financial circumstances increase xenophobia (Sík, Simonovits, and Szeitl 2016, 92).

All of the research on migration shows that during the term of the third Orbán government xenophobia and anti-immigration attitudes surged massively despite the fact that the baseline from which they started had been high to begin with. This development was pronounced enough to make Hungary the country where the rejection of immigrants arriving from poor countries outside Europe ranks highest according to the most recent European Social Survey. Moreover, the proportion of those who reject immigrants has radically increased since the previous ESS round. Therefore, it can be stated that between 2014 and 2018, the rejection of migration has surged substantially in

Hungary, while pro-immigration attitudes, which were very low to begin with, had practically disappeared by 2016.

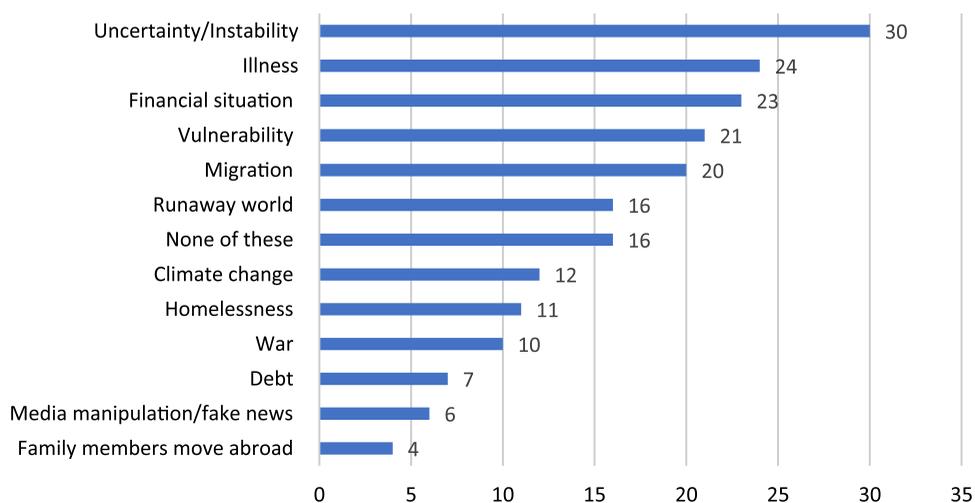
## 7. The fear of migration in Hungarian society at the end of the 2018 parliamentary election campaign

Fidesz has not only managed to entrench the anti-migration topos in public discourse through various means, but in the election campaign of 2018 it put all its chips on this one issue. It did not have a manifesto going into the election and it made no economic or social pledges. In this section it will be reviewed which voters were interested in the issue of migration and how intense that interest was in the final stretch of the campaign for the 2018 parliamentary election.

According to a public opinion survey carried out by Závecz Research in the final week of the election campaign, migration ranked as the fifth most prominent fear in the total electorate (Boros and Laki 2018, 36). The top three responses on the relevant questions were ‘instability and unpredictability of life’ (30%), ‘serious illness, hospitalization’ (24%) and ‘financial uncertainty, paying the bills at the end of the month’ (23%). They were followed by the fear of being relegated into a vulnerable position and losing control (21%), which was barely ahead of the fear of migration (20%) (Figure 3).

Financial fears stemming from uncertainty and unpredictability in the respondents’ financial and life situation trump everything else in Hungarian society (Table 3). Fear of immigration looms large among Fidesz voters; this issue was the second most prominent fear among the supporters of the governing party. For Jobbik supporters and undecided voters, migration ranked fourth in the final days of the campaign. Among left-wing voters, by contrast, immigration did not make it into the top five issues.

In addition to personal fears, it is worthwhile to explore what place immigration occupies among the worries that voters have in connection with the future of the



**Figure 3.** The fears of Hungarian voters in the final days of the 2018 election campaign (percentage).

Source: Boros and Laki (2018), field work: Závecz Research. Time of data collection: 28 March to 5 April 2018. Original question: Please select the three most important issues that you have thought about during the last month which made you apprehensive/fearful.

**Table 3.** The most frequently mentioned fears during the 2018 election campaign.

	Fear No. 1	Fear No. 2	Fear No. 3	Fear No. 4	Fear No. 5
Total population	Uncertainty/ Instability	Illness	Financial situation	Vulnerability	Migration
Fidesz-KDNP voters	Uncertainty/ Instability	Migration	Financial situation	Illness	Vulnerability
Jobbik-voters	Uncertainty/ Instability	Financial situation	Illness	Migration	Vulnerability
MSZP-voters	Uncertainty/ Instability	Illness	Vulnerability	Financial situation	Runaway world
Undecided voters	Uncertainty/ Instability	Vulnerability	Illness	Migration	Runaway world
Budapest	Migration	Vulnerability	Uncertainty/ Instability	Illness	War
County seat	Uncertainty/ Instability	Financial situation	Illness	Runaway world	Vulnerability
Small city	Uncertainty/ Instability	Illness	Financial situation	Vulnerability	Migration
Village	Uncertainty/ Instability	Migration	Financial situation	Vulnerability	Illness

Source: Boros and Laki (2018), field work: Závecz Research. Time of data collection: 28 March to 5 April 2018. Original question: Please select the three most important issues that you have thought about during the last month which made you apprehensive/fearful.

country in general. In the latter context, the most often-mentioned fear was a further deterioration in the state of healthcare, which trumped all other issues among every demographic segment (Boros and Laki 2018, 56). The picture is similarly clear when it comes to the second biggest concern: all political camps are worried about rising poverty. It is only at this point that the fears of voters begin to diverge based on party preferences. While for Fidesz voters the notion of ‘migrants are moving to Hungary’ took the third place, neither for the supporters of the other parties nor for undecided voters did this issue make it into their top five fears concerning the future of Hungary (Table 4). Looking at society overall, the fear of migration ranked fifth both in the personal dimension and among the concerns about the future of Hungary – obviously owing to its pre-eminent position among the anxieties of Fidesz voters.

When we asked about migration-related fears specifically, all political camps exhibited substantial fears about a vision of the future in which ‘a growing number of migrants

**Table 4.** Voters’ most prevalent fears concerning Hungary’s future.

	Fear No. 1	Fear No. 2	Fear No. 3	Fear No. 4	Fear No. 5
Total population	State of healthcare	Poverty	Socio-economic disparities	There won’t be any pensions	Migrants will be coming into the country
Fidesz-KDNP voters	State of healthcare	Poverty	Migrants will be coming into the country	Socio-economic disparities	There won’t be any pensions
Jobbik voters	State of healthcare	Poverty	There won’t be any pensions	Socio-economic disparities	Quality of education
MSZP voters	State of healthcare	Poverty	Socio-economic disparities	There won’t be any pensions	Quality of education
Undecided voters	State of healthcare	Poverty	Socio-economic disparities	There won’t be any pensions	Quality of education

Source: Boros and Laki (2018), data collection: Závecz Research. Time of data collection: 28 March to 5 April 2018. Original question: Please select the three most important issues from the list below that you have thought about during the last month and which made you most concerned in thinking about Hungary’s future.

move to Hungary’ – although once again this fear was most pronounced among Fidesz supporters (43% of whom gave this a score of 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale; Table 5). The fear of ‘migrants settling in Hungary’ stood at least at 30% among all major socio-demographic groups during the final weeks of the campaign. Thus, the difference between the various political and social groups is not so much whether they are afraid of migration but how much importance they attribute to the issue, whether they think it is relevant, be it for their own personal prospects or for the future of the country overall.

In summary, it can be asserted that at the time of the 2018 parliamentary elections the fear of migration was higher among Fidesz supporters than among the supporters of any other party, and they also attached greater importance to the issue than the supporters of the other parties. Fidesz’s success in turning migration into the central issue for its own voters also hinged on the radical changes in the media balance that the government had reached. The importance of the massive expansion of the governing party’s influence in the television and radio markets cannot be overestimated since to this day these count as the most important channels of political information in Hungary. Online news portals and the Facebook universe – which is where critical opinions about Fidesz are still

**Table 5.** How much does the following evoke a sense of fear in you: An ever-greater number of migrants moving to Hungary (all respondents, percentage).

		1 – Does not concern me at all	2	3	4	5 – Makes me very afraid	Don’t know / No answer
TOTAL		18%	17%	24%	17%	22%	2%
PARTY PREFERENCE	Fidesz–KDNP	17%	17%	21%	17%	26%	2%
	Jobbik	20%	14%	28%	19%	19%	0%
	MSZP	24%	18%	20%	11%	22%	5%
	DK	15%	15%	32%	16%	19%	4%
	LMP	16%	12%	29%	20%	21%	2%
	Momentum	11%	23%	49%	17%	0%	0%
	Undecided	17%	19%	22%	19%	20%	3%
GENDER	Male	19%	17%	25%	15%	21%	2%
	Female	17%	17%	22%	19%	22%	2%
AGE	18–29	23%	16%	24%	17%	17%	3%
	30–39	16%	18%	22%	17%	22%	4%
	40–49	15%	11%	27%	20%	25%	3%
	50–59	21%	16%	24%	17%	21%	2%
	60 years or older	16%	22%	22%	16%	24%	1%
EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT	8 years of elementary education or less	15%	18%	22%	14%	28%	3%
	Vocational school	16%	16%	23%	19%	22%	3%
	Grammar school, vocational secondary school	22%	15%	23%	19%	19%	2%
	College, university	17%	21%	27%	18%	16%	1%
	Budapest	14%	22%	21%	14%	28%	1%
TYPE OF SETTLEMENT	County seat	16%	16%	25%	21%	21%	1%
	Town	20%	18%	24%	16%	18%	4%
	Village	19%	15%	24%	17%	23%	2%
REGION	Central Hungary	21%	19%	19%	14%	24%	2%
	Central Transdanubia	20%	20%	17%	16%	26%	1%
	Western Transdanubia	18%	18%	31%	27%	4%	2%
	Southern Transdanubia	21%	15%	25%	18%	19%	2%
	Northern Hungary	12%	16%	25%	21%	24%	3%
	Northern Great Plain	12%	17%	26%	14%	30%	1%
Southern Great Plain	19%	14%	28%	16%	17%	5%	

Source: Závecz Research. Time of survey: 28 March to 5 April 2018.

more widely accessible – did not play nearly such a significant role in the 2018 campaign as television or radio.

That the other widespread fears in society (healthcare, poverty, financial insecurity, vulnerability) which were stronger on the whole than migration did not prove competitive enough probably also owes in part to the fact that when it comes to these issues, which are traditionally considered concerns raised by the left, the voters do not believe that the opposition parties have greater credibility than Fidesz (Bíró-Nagy and Laki 2018). The lack of a credible alternative when it comes to the public's everyday financial fears probably made it considerably easier to ramp up the importance of migration in the eyes of Fidesz voters.

## 8. Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to explore the potential impact of the Orbán government's anti-immigration politics on the attitudes of Hungarian voters. On the whole, it can be asserted that the Orbán government was successful in politicising the immigration issue. It was able to sustain a sense of crisis in the three years leading up to the parliamentary election of 2018; it exacerbated xenophobia and the rejection of immigration in society; and it was successful in entrenching migration as one of the top fears among its potential voters. These factors presumably played a major role in ensuring that Fidesz received 465,000 more votes within Hungary proper (thus not counting dual citizens, who are mainly ethnic Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries) than four years earlier. In addition to the country's good macroeconomic performance (which was less emphasised by the government, although might have won the election for Fidesz anyway) and the fragmentation of the opposition (and their general political weakness), it was the confluence of the abovementioned three elements that turned migration into the political equivalent of a jackpot, and this has turned the issue into one of the major factors in explaining Fidesz's electoral success in 2018. It must be added that Fidesz's shift to the anti-immigration platform and going more radical in general have not only affected the size, but the composition of the party's electorate as well. The Hungarian governing party has been overrepresented among older, rural and lower educated voting groups recently more than ever (Bíró-Nagy and Laki 2020).

The Orbán government veritably exploded the migration issue into Hungarian discourse: within the span of a mere year, the period from fall 2014 to fall 2015, the ratio of those who ranked immigration as one of the top two issues facing Hungary increased tenfold, from 3% to 34%. Although the sense of migration as a domestic threat had dropped by a third by spring 2018, Orbán was successful in perpetuating a sense of European crisis in connection with this issue. At the time of the Hungarian election in 2018, the perception that the migration issue constituted a major EU-level problem exceeded the EU average by 20 points, and Hungary was the EU member country where most people regarded migration as a top-tier problem. In light of the fact that the Hungarian public's direct domestic experience with migration had grinded to a sudden halt two and a half years earlier – unlike many other countries of Europe, where immigration was still an ongoing experience, albeit far less dramatic in terms of sheer numbers – this was a substantial communication success for the government.

Looking at Hungary between 2014 and 2018, it is not only true that the migration issue lost very little of its salience compared to its peak in 2015, but it is also apparent that compared to general European attitudes the positions of Hungarians have become far more hostile to the notion of immigration. Xenophobia had climbed to a record high already in 2016, while the pro-migration attitude nigh disappeared from Hungarian public opinion. It is important to add that anti-migration sentiments are the symptoms of deeply-rooted social problems, especially the lack of security, material security in particular, and a pervasive lack of social trust. Based on these observations, we can conclude that Hungarian society provided a perfect ground for xenophobic campaigns that projected social frustrations onto immigrants.

At the end of the 2018 election campaign, the fear of migration was substantial among all socio-demographic groups and among the supporters of all parties. The differences between the various social groups manifested themselves in the importance they attached to the issue, i.e. in how far they believed this issue to be decisive either for their own personal circumstances or for Hungary's future. Material fears – the fear of no longer being able to make ends meet, losing control and declining in socio-economic status – trump all other fears in Hungarian society, and that is true even for Fidesz supporters. But the Orbán government has been successful in ensuring that its potential voters perceive migration as a top-ranked issue among their personal fears and their concerns for the future of the country in general. In all likelihood, the success of this issue as a campaign theme also owes to the fact that there was no compelling opposition narrative that persuasively responded to the material fears of citizens, and thus there was no credible alternative available to the voters.

To sum up, both the migration crisis and the anti-immigration campaigns of the Orbán government have contributed to the increasing salience of the issue. The attitudes of the Hungarian society provided a fertile ground to such campaigns, and with its permanent campaign focusing on the leading issue of the time, the Orbán government managed to shape public opinion further in its favour. The lack of an attractive opposition narrative also contributed to the political success of Orbán's anti-immigration strategy.

This article has presented a case in which the centre-right successfully politicised the issue of migration, and acted as an agenda-setter rather than a follower. Fidesz managed to score goals with focusing on migration despite the fact that the far-right Jobbik party offered the same content on this issue. After 2015, Jobbik found itself in a situation where they could not simply outmanoeuvre Fidesz from the right, and their moderating strategy was rather an obstacle to appear tougher and more credible on immigration than Viktor Orbán's government. Viktor Orbán's tough reactions to the migration crisis have been successful efforts to take the wind out of Jobbik's sails. Consequently, somewhat uniquely among the populist radical right parties in Europe, Jobbik's popularity actually decreased during the migration crisis.

This development goes against the arguments according to which the radicalisation of the mainstream is likely to backfire and lead to the further strengthening of the radical right. The findings of the Hungarian case suggest that issue ownership (or the lack of it) should be considered as an analytical aspect when it comes to the success or failure of the radicalisation strategies of centre-right parties. In Hungary, given that migration was a marginal political issue before the 2015 migration crisis, no political party

owned the issue; it was basically up for grabs. As the governing party Fidesz reacted first to the opportunity, it monopolised the issue of immigration, giving no chance to the far-right to outflank the Orbán government from the right. Therefore, the analysis of issue ownership may be a useful avenue for future research about immigration politics, especially in countries where immigration was a non-issue before 2015.

## Note

1. The referendum question in English: ‘Do you want to allow the European Union to mandate the obligatory resettlement of non-Hungarian citizens to Hungary without the approval of the National Assembly?’

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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