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Frontispiece: Newly arrived irregular immigrants waiting outside Yuma for Border Patrol agents to take them to the processing center.

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Doing It Our Way

Ildikó Kaposi

Guarding the Gates of Europe: The Hungarian Approach to Migration

Migration Research Institute

Budapest, October 2024

123 pages

Migration was forcefully brought to the fore by Europe's 2015–2016 migration crisis that offered up a fresh case for studying this contested issue. The human rights/humanitarian framework has been competing since with the security approach to offer explanatory frameworks for making sense of the events in their complexity. The long-term economic and environmental impacts of the crisis are still unclear, but its political consequences have been emerging more clearly.

State sovereignty, territorial integrity, and European identity security were among the related issues that highlighted some fundamental differences between 'old' and 'new' Europe's reactions to the crisis. Within the 'new' bloc, Hungary's approach attracted especially intense scrutiny, in part due to the country's forceful vocalization of its position, including on the perceived threats posed by the wave of migration. The Hungarian rhetoric and the defensive measures implemented early on came to be widely regarded as 'securitization', or the discursive construction of migration as an existential threat to Hungarian – and European – culture, values, and identity. The designation of migration as a threat was followed by extraordinary measures taken by the government, and by public acceptance, thus completing the successful cycle of securitization.

The Hungarian approach drew severe criticism from domestic and EU political opponents, media, and scholarship. Yet, until now, no coherent summary has been available about the events and the political, legal, and policy responses from the perspective that motivated Hungarian decision-makers. The book published by the Migration Research Institute fills this void by taking a concise, systematic look at the Hungarian approach to migration.

Chapter One discusses migration from a historical perspective to establish the claim of Hungary being a land of inclusion where newly arrived peoples have

found a home for over a millennium. Foreshadowing the chapters to come, it cites the words of the country's founder, King St. Stephen who saw foreigners as enriching additions to the kingdom due to the skills and knowledge imported with them. The chapter stresses the successful integration of new arrivals through their mastering of the Hungarian language and adoption of local culture to achieve a 'melting pot' outcome with incoming Pechenegs, Cumans, Saxons, Jasz, Jews, Romanians, and other peoples throughout the centuries. The historical account then discusses the formation of an ethnically relatively homogeneous nation as a result of the post-World War I transformation of the region with the signing of the Peace Dictate of Trianon and the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. There is also a brief but helpful discussion about the local conceptualizations of 'nation' that places Hungarian understandings of the term at the intersection of French and German models to demonstrate why local discourse about minorities differs from Anglo-American or current French models.

Chapter Two focuses on migration in recent Hungarian history, from the time of the momentous political transformations of 1989–1990 to the 2015 crisis. Hungary's entry to the global migration scene is dated to the time of the transitions and attributed to geographical position. The major waves of migration experienced in the country prior to 2015 all originated from the region. The first wave involved ethnic Hungarians fleeing discrimination they suffered in Romania under the Ceausescu dictatorship. Hungarian-speakers from birth, the 34,000 people who arrived this way in 1988–1989 faced no particular difficulty with social integration and incorporation into the labor market, and their arrival found support with the majority of the population. Such support became official government policy when the first freely elected Hungarian government made preferential naturalization available for ethnic Hungarians from neighboring countries, making ethnic Hungarians from Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine the biggest group of immigrants to Hungary for the first couple of post-transition decades. Another distinct wave hit as the result of the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and the bloody civil war that accompanied the process. Between 1990–2001, 86,000 refugees fled the conflict to find temporary protection in Hungary. However, most of these refugees moved on to Western Europe and beyond, as did the large numbers of East Germans whom the government allowed in 1989 to cross the border to the western side of the iron curtain.

In sum, prior to 2015 Hungary served mainly as a transit country for refugees fleeing conflicts from the region and for the increasing number of non-European

migrants. The majority of people who settled down in the country were ethnic Hungarians from neighboring countries who were easily integrated into society thanks to the shared language and culture with the receiving country. This pattern was changed dramatically with the 2015 migration crisis, the topic covered in Chapter Three. The 2015 migration wave came as an unprecedented shock for which neither Hungary nor Europe was prepared. The existing Hungarian infrastructure developed for managing the flow of refugees and migrants was not able to cope with the flood of people: reception centers were filled beyond capacity, and thousands of migrants filled the streets of downtown Budapest. The chapter provides statistical evidence to demonstrate and archive news photos to illustrate the severity of the crisis which, coupled with Islamist-motivated terrorist incidents in Western Europe, led to the Hungarian government's designation of uncontrolled migration as a security threat, followed up by a communication offensive of public campaigns focusing on the risks of immigration. It is in Chapter Three that the book's narrative states the government "had no choice but to take the necessary steps", due to its obligation to safeguard public safety and honor the terms of the Schengen Code.

Chapters Four and Five detail the extraordinary measures taken by the government in response to the phenomena established as a threat. The physical border barrier became a powerful symbol of the Hungarian approach for both supporters and critics at home and abroad. Its construction is explained in great technical detail, but the most interesting parts of the chapter for lay readers is the exploration of its impact. Confirming the government assessment that migration run amok posed a security risk, the chapter describes the riots that ensued once the border fence between Serbia and Hungary was complete, and migrants found their way to the EU blocked. The effect of the closure was to redirect the flow of migration, and the countries finding themselves under siege reacted in a fashion rather similar to Hungary: they erected their own fences. A map on p. 51 provides a visual summary of the proliferation of border fences in Europe, for the practice of strengthening Europe's borders with physical barriers continued since the 2015 crisis as Russia and Belarus started applying migration pressure on the EU from 2018. To its credit, the book does not gloat, rather it presents such developments in a factual tone. The chapter's ending foreshadows a subsequent recurring theme, that of the legal and political disputes between Hungary and the EU over the approaches to migration.

Chapter Five details the steps taken by the Hungarian government to build the legal border barrier in tandem with the physical one. Declaring and extending

a crisis situation created by mass immigration, amending the Fundamental Law and the acts on asylum and state borders, as well as decreeing safe third countries were among the legal fortifications Hungary saw necessary for the management of the crisis. Crucially for the Hungarian approach, even though the repeated extensions of the state of crisis came under a barrage of criticism from local and international human rights NGOs, evidence shows that the government's moves were supported by the majority of the population. Chapter Five cites public opinion polls from 2018 and 2022 to show that just over 60% of Hungarian survey respondents felt concerned about the influx of irregular immigrants, just under 60% were satisfied with how the government handled immigration, and a whopping 79.3% agreed that the physical border barrier was justified. In other words, the majority accepted the government's designation of uncontrolled migration as a threat, along with the extraordinary measures introduced in response. Adding further proof to the factual foundations of the government position, Chapter Six details the transformation of the Western Balkans migration route since the 2015 crisis, providing statistical evidence of the continuation of pressure on the southern borders and highlighting the criminal organizations exploiting the asylum-seekers and irregular migrants as part of their lucrative business operations with the result of a state of lawlessness turning the Balkans side of the Hungarian border into a 'wild west'.

Chapter Seven tackles the disputes between Hungary and the European Union that the stringent Hungarian approach has provoked. By diverging early on in the migration crisis from the mainstream EU position, Hungary incurred the wrath of Western European establishment politicians who have criticized the country repeatedly for its approach to migration. The ideological differences driving a (further) wedge between the EU and Hungary on the issue can be summed up as clashes between the human rights- and the security-focused interpretations of migration. The differences of opinion indeed look irreconcilable, although as the chapter demonstrates, over time the tide of public opinion began to turn in Western Europe towards the skepticism that inspired Hungary's early stand against mass irregular migration. The latest issue where the disagreements resurfaced forcefully was the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. Unlike in 2015, however, by this time the political frontlines became more muddled, with countries from the east and west, north and south of the EU forming coalitions of agreement on their rejection of the implementation of the Pact.

Migration remains a highly salient issue in Europe. The closing chapters clarify the Hungarian position beyond its rejection of much of the EU establishment's approach to the question. Chapter Eight describes the welcome Hungary extends to regular immigrant expatriates who settle down in the country, refugees such as the thousands crossing the border from Ukraine, and guest workers arriving through legal recruitment channels controlled by government policy. Chapter Nine details the Hungarian position that the problems of migration must be

tackled at their roots. According to the strategic priority of offering help locally, support is best granted in the sender countries, through military assistance in stabilization operations, scholarship programs for bringing students to Hungary to earn a higher education degree, and the aid activities of a nonprofit governmental organization. Through the presentation of these support activities, the book ends on a positive note showing the proactive ways Hungary, commensurate with its size and economic capabilities, makes major efforts to improve living conditions in crisis-ridden countries to tackle migration.

Guarding the Gates of Europe goes beyond daily political rhetoric to present an evidence-based account of the official Hungarian approach to migration. It may require the initial willing suspension of disbelief from ideological opponents, but it does invite all readers to listen to an authoritative account of why and how the government of Hungary acted, and continues to act, on issues of migration. At the very least, it serves as a good starting point for quality discussion.

