



POLICE FORCES TO THE BORDER! HUNGARY COMES FULL CIRCLE ON OPEN BORDERS

By John R. Haines



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For other nations, their land has fixed boundaries.
For Rome, its boundaries are the boundaries of the Roman world.¹

So, too, it seems, for the nations of the European Community, and for the Community itself. And that is the basis of the immigration crisis now raging in Hungary.

When the Berlin Wall fell on 9 November 1989—*Der Mauerfall* to Germans—it set the two Germanys on a course to reunification eleven months later. It was in Hungary, however, where “the first stone was knocked out of the wall,” declared Helmut Kohl.

In June 1989 Hungarian foreign minister Gyula Horn and his Austrian counterpart, Alois Mock used wire cutters to cut a symbolic section of the barbed wire fence separating their two countries. The next month, a small group of Hungarian dissidents and Austrian politicians organized what they intended would be a symbolic border opening outside the Hungarian border village of Sopronpuszta. The opening became more than symbolic: within a few hours, some 600 East Germans passed through a simple wooden gate into Austria. By September Hungary opened its borders for East German citizens, over 70,000 of who took advantage and left the German Democratic Republic over the next couple of months.

Fast forward to today, Hungary and its fellow signatories to the 1985 Schengen Agreement abolished all internal borders in lieu of a single external border, within which free movement is guaranteed. One effect has been to make Hungary a transit state for migrants seeking to enter the EU because a section of Hungary’s national border also forms the external border of the European Union.

A recent commentary in the German weekly *Die Zeit* noted freedom to travel in Europe from one country to another has one drawback, at least from the perspective of some governments:

The translation of all source material is by the author unless noted otherwise.

¹ From Ovid’s *Fasti*, 2.683-84. The text reads in the original Latin, “Gentibus est aliis tellus data limite certo. Romanae spatium est urbis et orbis idem.”

“There are also people coming into the country they do not want. For example, refugees. It is ironic that the Hungarian government has now announced once again its intention to build a fence along the 175km border with Serbia...to forestall a further influx of refugees from the neighboring country.”²

Hungary today “is an especially important transit country for Syrians, Iraqis, Afghanis and other refugees coming through Turkey and Serbia who want to reach the EU,” the commentary notes. So far this year some 53,000 have applied for asylum in Hungary, more than the 43,000 who applied in all of 2014.³ This puts Hungary second in Europe only to Sweden in term of the number of refugees on a per capita basis—in a country EUROSTAT reports has one of the European Union’s lowest gross domestic product per capita, less than two-thirds (63%) the average among euro area states.⁴

Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó claimed that the EU “has been focused exclusively on Mediterranean refugees” and called on the EU foreign ministers to meet in Budapest to discuss the so-called “western Balkan migration route.”⁵ Prime Minister Viktor Orbán condemned a May 2015 EU plan to distribute refugees from African and Middle Eastern “conflict zones,” stating, “It is a crazy idea for someone to let refugees into their own country, not defend their borders and say, now I will distribute them among you, who did not want to let anyone in.”⁶ Jobbik went farther, calling the plan “an Orwellian nightmare.”⁷ Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó claimed that the EU “has been focused exclusively on Mediterranean refugees” and called on the EU foreign ministers to meet in Budapest to discuss the so-called “western Balkan migration route.”⁸

This is not to say that Hungarian opposition to the country’s unintended (and unwanted) status as a preferred point of entry into the European Union is entirely based on practical considerations. There underlies a substantial, and ugly, element of racial and ethnic animosity. Hungary’s current immigration law was put in place only after the European Union found illegal an earlier one from 2012, which allowed Hungarian border guards to arrest anyone who crossed illegally into Hungary, regardless of possible refugee status.

In early June, the Council of Europe published a report written by its European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance that strongly criticized Hungary’s third-largest political party, Jobbik, while condemning all political parties across the board. It came on the heels of a May 2015 report published by Tárki⁹ showing xenophobia among Hungarians—measured at 46 percent—was at its highest level since polling began on the subject in 1992.¹⁰ Tárki first found a rise in xenophobia since 2012—the figure hovered between 24-33 percent from 2002-2011¹¹—corresponding with an increased flow of refugees into Hungary. Hungarians expressed the strongest aversion to persons from the Middle East (94%) followed by Roma, Chinese, Africans and Romanians. The lowest aversion was to ethnic Hungarians living outside the country (7%). Unsurprisingly, above average rates of xenophobia were measured for Jobbik supporters—a contemporary poll puts the party only three points behind the ruling Fidesz—and Hungarian Socialist Party¹² voters, as well as residents of southwest Hungary’s South Transdanubia region that borders Croatia.

² Ludwig Greven (2015). “Ein Zaun der Unmenschlichkeit.” *Zeit Online* [published online in German 17 June 2015]. <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2015-06/ungarn-fluechtlinge-grenzzaun-kommentar>. Last accessed 21 June 2015.

³ Of these, 5445 were judged to have merit and adjudicated, and 540 approved. See: “Orbának nem is a menekültkvótákkal van baja” (“Orban is not the problem with refugee quotas.” *Index.hu* [published online in Hungarian 23 May 2015]. http://index.hu/kulfold/eurologus/2015/05/23/orbannak_nem_is_az_eu-val_baja_menekultugyben/?token=eabfdeaa9d5fe1ea9d14db5014a87e23. Last accessed 21 June 2015.

⁴ The gross domestic product per capita data is found at [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:ABVolume_indices_per_capita_2011-2014_\(EU-28%3D100\).png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:ABVolume_indices_per_capita_2011-2014_(EU-28%3D100).png). Last accessed 21 June 2015.

⁵ “Menekültügyi konferenciát kezdeményez Magyarország” (Hungary calls for asylum conference”). *Magyar Hírlap* [published online in Hungarian 22 June 2015]. http://magyarhirlap.hu/cikk/28422/Megszuletett_a_dontes_az_illegalis_migracio_megfekezeserol. Last accessed 22 June 2015.

⁶ “EU readies for refugee quota plan amid opposition from some members.” *Deutsche Welle* [published online in English 8 May 2015]. <http://www.dw.com/en/eu-readies-for-refugee-quota-plan-amid-opposition-from-some-members/a-18439942>. Last accessed 21 June 2015.

⁷ “Orwelli rémálom Brüsszelből” (“Brussels’ Orwellian nightmare”). *Jobbik.hu* [published online in Hungarian 11 May 2015]. <http://jobbik.hu/hireink/orwelli-remalom-brusszelbol>. Last accessed 21 June 2015.

⁸ “Menekültügyi konferenciát kezdeményez Magyarország” (Hungary calls for asylum conference”). *Magyar Hírlap* [published online in Hungarian 22 June 2015]. http://magyarhirlap.hu/cikk/28422/Megszuletett_a_dontes_az_illegalis_migracio_megfekezeserol. Last accessed 22 June 2015.

⁹ Formally, the Budapest-based Tárki Social Research Institute. See: “Magyarország jobban teljesít: csúcson az idegenellenesek aránya – derül ki a TÁRKI 1992 óta végzett kutatásának legújabb adataiból.” http://www.tarki.hu/hu/news/2015/kitekint/20150505_idegen.html. Last accessed 22 June 2015.

¹⁰ “Tárki: Soha nem utáltuk még ennyire az idegeneket” (“Tárki: we’ve never so hated strangers”). *Mandiner* [published online in Hungarian 5 May 2015]. The Budapest-based Tárki is formally called the Tárki Social Research Institute.

http://mandiner.hu/cikk/20150505_tarki_soha_nem_utaltuk_meg_ennyire_az_idegeneket. Last accessed 21 June 2015.

¹¹ “A pirézeket már nem annyira utáljuk, de a románokból alig kérünk.” *Vs.hu* [published online in Hungarian 16 July 2014].

<http://vs.hu/kozelet/osszes/a-pirezeket-mar-nem-annyira-utaljuk-de-a-romanokbol-alig-kerunk-0716>. Last accessed 21 June 2014.

¹² The Hungarian Socialist Party is known as the MSZP, the Hungarian acronym for *Magyar Szocialista Párt*.

Németh Szilárd, a Fidesz parliamentary member, declared, “What we demand is that the Hungarian people’s interests, Hungary’s national cultural heritage, and the democratic traditions of Europe be represented.” The ultranationalist Jobbik rejects all “nonsensical liberal obsessions” about immigration. Its parliamentary deputy Dániel Kárpát said in March

“It has nothing to do with xenophobia, it is pure common sense. The solution for Hungary’s current problem of emigration must be solved by creating a livable country for our youth who are considering leaving. We must create a climate where they see reproduction as a realistic choice.”¹³

In April, the Hungarian government mailed eight million questionnaires as part of a “national consultation” on twelve immigration-related questions. In Prime Minister Orbán’s cover letter to the survey—in which he declared “Brussels has failed in the management of immigration” and the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris “shows Brussels and the European Union may not be able to handle the immigration issue”—he wrote, “Economic migrants cross our borders illegally, and while they present themselves as asylum-seekers, In fact are coming to enjoy our welfare systems and the employment opportunities our countries have to offer.”¹⁴ Jobbik’s Kárpát offered a more acerbic view:

“Dwarf parties and dwarf organizations (the members of which have probably never set foot on the frontier area) would grant voting rights to immigrants, settle them down, give them free language lessons and accommodation in Budapest.”¹⁵

A commentary published under the headline “Hungary Must Act” in the conservative *Magyar Hírlap* reports that as of mid June, some 770 thousand completed questionnaires had been returned. They show, it claims, “the majority is waiting for the government to take more stringent action” on immigration.¹⁶

Action aside, the Orbán government could hardly adopt more strident rhetoric. Prime Minister Orbán declared in August 2014, “The goal is to cease immigration whatsoever.” His ruling Fidesz party is looking to amend Hungary’s asylum law to allow police¹⁷ to turn back migrants who arrive from states designated by the Hungarian government as “safe countries.” These would include all of Hungary’s European Union neighbors as well as Serbia, leaving only Ukraine—with its sizeable ethnic Hungarian population in neighboring Transcarpathia—as an exception. Hungary would enforce a presumption that any migrant arriving from a safe country is doing so for economic reasons, on which basis it would decline to accept an asylum application.

The context here is important since four of every five migrants who reach Hungary come from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan via “the Balkan route” to cross the Serbian-Hungarian border. Fidesz parliamentary leader Antal Rogán rationalized the measure this way: “Maybe someone was in danger in Syria, but if you come from there, pass through Greece and finally arrive in Serbia or another Balkan state, your life is no longer threatened.”¹⁸

During parliamentary debate over the measure—which is supported by Fidesz’s governing partner, the Christian Democrats, and by Jobbik (an ultranationalist party which enjoys popularity approaching Fidesz’s level)—Jobbik’s Ádám Mirkóczki claimed migrants were coming to Europe to “abuse the benefits system” and Hungary could easily become a “target country”

¹³ “Jobbik to enhance and reinforce border guard.” *Jobbik.com* [published online in English 24 March 2015]. http://www.jobbik.com/jobbik_to_enhance_and_reinforce_border_guard. Last accessed 22 June 2015.

¹⁴ The questionnaire and Prime Minister Orbán’s cover (in Hungarian) are available here: http://www.kormany.hu/download/7/e2/50000/nemzeti_konzultacio_bevandorlas_2015.pdf. Last accessed 22 June 2015. See also: Adam Halasz (2015). “MEPs challenge Orban’s ‘horrible’ migration survey.” *EU Observer* [published online 29 April 2015]. <https://euobserver.com/beyond-brussels/128513>. Last accessed 22 June 2015.

¹⁵ “Police Forces to the Border!” *Jobbik.com* [published online in English 2 June 2015]. http://www.jobbik.com/a_border_fence_is_not_a_solution_on_its_own. Last accessed 22 June 2015.

¹⁶ “Magyarországnak is cselekednie kell” (“Hungary must act”). *Magyar Hírlap* [published online in Hungarian 20 June 2015]. http://magyarhirlap.hu/cikk/28367/Magyarorszag_nak_is_cselekednie_kell. Last accessed 22 June 2015.

¹⁷ Some four thousand officers of Hungary’s national law enforcement agency guard its 1100 km-long Schengen border (the specific number deployed on the Serbian border is not disclosed). This is some 700 fewer personnel that were deployed in 2008 when as a condition of Hungary’s accession to the Schengen Treaty, Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány merged the border guards and police into a single national law enforcement agency known as the Rendőrség. Source: *Daily News Hungary* [published online in English 12 June 2015]. <http://dailynewshungary.com/some-3991-police-guard-hungarys-schengen-border/>. Last accessed 22 June 2015.

¹⁸ “Benyújtották a menedékjogi törvény módosítását” (“Amendment submitted to asylum law”). *Magyar Nemzet* [published online in Hungarian 9 June 2015]. <http://mno.hu/belfold/benyujtottak-a-menedekjogi-torveny-modositasat-1290042>. Last accessed 21 June 2015. The quoted text reads in the original Hungarian: „Lehet, hogy valaki Szíriában még veszélyben volt, de ha onnan eljön, áthalad Görögországon, végül megérkezik Szerbiába vagy egy másik balkáni államba, ott már nem fenyegeti veszély az életét.”

if European states to Hungary's west tightened their asylum rules. According to Fidesz parliamentary leader Antal Rogán, Germany and Austria have already indicated their intent to return some 15,000 immigrants to Hungary, which faces the prospect of as many as 100,000 to 150,000 migrants being stranded in the country by the end of the year.

With Hungarian secretary of state Peter Szijjarto declaring, "Hungary cannot wait,"¹⁹ the Hungarian government in mid June ordered preparations to begin for the construction of a fence 175 kilometers long and 4 meters along the length of its southern border with Serbia. This may be more an act of political symbolism, however: as one commentator noted, however, the expected declaration of Serbia as a "safe country" would negate the need for a fence since those caught would simply be expelled. On 22 June, Károly Papp, who directs Hungary's *Rendőrség* national law enforcement agency, reached agreement with his Serbian counterpart, Milorad Veljovics, to deploy Hungarian officers to patrol inside Serbia and to install thermal imaging cameras along their shared border. Veljovics is quoted as saying that about a thousand people a day are attempting to enter Serbia from Macedonia and Bulgaria, and then to Hungary.²⁰

Political tensions escalated on 23 June when the Central European "Visegrad Four"—in the instance, led by Slovakia, along with Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic—rejected draft rules to establish a quota system under which asylum seekers would be distributed across the EU. The draft rules would require every EU member-state to accept a minimum number of migrants based on population, economic, and other factors. Hungary went a step further: Prime Minister Orbán informed other EU member-states that Hungary would no longer accept the return of registered migrants to complete the asylum process (known as the Dublin III regulation).

The move was immediately and widely condemned. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe formally expressed concern about extremist and racist development in Hungarian politics.²¹ Norbert Darabos, secretary general of Austria's Social Democratic Party (known by its German acronym SPÖ) called Orbán's action an "unacceptable breach of EU law."²² Austrian Interior Minister Johanna Mikl-Leitner said, "If you cancel Dublin, the freedom to travel in Europe is at risk."²³ On the other side, Heinz-Christian Strache of Austria's vocally anti-immigrant Freedom Party of Austria (known by its German acronym, FPÖ) was less critical, claiming that Austria's border, too, was "open like a barn door."²⁴ The German government asked the Hungarian ambassador to explain Hungary's handling of refugees. Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi declared to the Italian Senate, "There is a danger that this generation is witnessing the construction of a border fence between Hungary and Serbia. We must prevent the return of the walls."²⁵

Hungary quickly buckled under the criticism, with Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto claiming Hungary's action was misunderstood and had been mischaracterized.²⁶ Hungary's EU ambassador, Péter Gyorkos, stated that "Hungary has not taken any legal decision" but instead had "reached its physical limits" to accept additional asylum seekers. "Where could we put them, on the streets, in the forests? We need camps, houses," Gyorkos said.²⁷

¹⁹ "Ungarn baut Zaun an Grenze zu Serbien" (Hungary builds a fence on the border with Serbia). *Deutsche Welle* [published online in German 17 June 2015]. <http://www.dw.com/de/ungarn-baut-zaun-an-grenze-zu-serbien/a-18522721>. Last accessed 21 June 2015.

²⁰ "Közösen lép fel a szerb és a magyar rendőrség az illegális migráció ellen" ("Hungarian and Serbian police act jointly against illegal migration"). *Magyar Hírlap* [published online in Hungarian 22 June 2015].

http://magyarhirlap.hu/cikk/28433/Kozosen_lep_fel_a_szerb_es_a_magyar_rendorseg_az_illegalis_migracio_ellen. Last accessed 22 June 2015.

²¹ "Rassistische Tendenzen: Europarat rügt Ungarn" ("Racist tendencies: Council of Europe criticizes Hungary"). *Die Presse* [published online in German 23 June 2015]. http://diepresse.com/home/politik/eu/4762375/Rassistische-Tendenzen_Europarat-rugt-Ungarn?from=suche.intern.portal. Last accessed 24 June 2015.

²² "Darabos: 'Inakzeptabler Bruch von EU-Recht'" ("Darabos: 'an unacceptable breach of EU law'"). *Die Presse* [published online in German 24 June 2014]. http://diepresse.com/home/politik/aussenpolitik/4761918/Darabos_Inakzeptabler-Bruch-von-EURecht?from=suche.intern.portal. Last accessed 24 June 2014.

²³ "Flüchtlinge: Europa an der Grenze" ("Refugees: Europe on the border"). *Die Presse* [published online in German 25 June 2015]. http://diepresse.com/home/politik/innenpolitik/4762346/Fluchtlinge_Europa-an-der-Grenze. Last accessed 25 June 2015.

²⁴ "Ungarn: Keine EU-Rechtsnorm gekündigt Die Regierung in Budapest rudert nach massiver Kritik zurück. Missverständnisse sollen ausgeräumt werden" ("Hungary: No EU legislation suspended as the Budapest government pulls back after massive criticism"). *Kurier* [published online in German 24 June 2014]. The quoted text in the original German reads "offen wie ein Scheunentor."

²⁵ "Ungarn rudert zurück: 'Halten alle EU-Rechtsnormen ein'" ("Hungary's pulls back: keeping all EU rules in place"). *Die Presse* [published online in German 24 June 2015]. http://diepresse.com/home/politik/aussenpolitik/4761708/Ungarn-rudert-zuruck_Halten-alle-EURechtsnormen-ein?from=suche.intern.portal. Last accessed 24 June 2015.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Nikolaj Nielsen (2015). "Hungary defends suspension of EU asylum rules." *EU Observer* [published online 24 June 2015]. <https://euobserver.com/justice/129276>. Last accessed 24 June 2015.

Herodotus wrote that nothing more contributed to making one nation completely insulated than a law it adopted removing all foreigners from their country.²⁸ In Hungary's defense, the country is struggling under a highly disproportionate burden imposed by the EU's current non-policy toward unprecedented migration. That being said, the country is less isolated than it might be were the frequent incendiary comments of its political leaders translated more often from a language too little read beyond Hungary's borders.²⁹

Case in point, almost all (94%) the nearly half of Hungarian adults who in Tárki survey self-define as anti-immigrant specify Arab nationalities for particular scorn. Yet earlier this month, Prime Minister Orbán welcomed a Budapest conference of Arab bankers by declaring he "has proven on several occasions" that he is "committed to the cause of the Arab banks". "Hungary is an open and welcoming country," said Orbán, who a few weeks earlier said of migrants, "we don't want them to come here any more! Those who are here should go home." The same Orbán whose administration is spending public money on anti-immigrant billboards around the country—warning migrants to obey Hungarian laws, and discouraging them from accepting jobs "for Hungarians"—while at the same time Trade Minister Péter Szijjártó claims, "The Arab world is particularly important to the Hungary's foreign trade policy."³⁰

Perhaps the situation in Hungary is best summed up by Leonidas Asimakopoulos, who writes, "In many countries when there is xenophobia, it's raised by marginal parties, it's raised by right wing parties, it's raised by some fringe groups. What is unusual in Hungary is to see the government trying to whip up xenophobia."³¹ For readers who remain unconcerned about the situation in Hungary, consider Viktor Orbán's words quoted approvingly on a far right European website:

"Today mass migration is taking place around the globe that could change the face of Europe's civilization. If that happens, that is irreversible...There is no way back from a multicultural Europe. Neither to a Christian Europe, nor to the world of national cultures."³²

And then consider how they are interpreted:

"As diversity is enforced upon European civilization, the question remains of when civilizations will be changed beyond recognition—or even be destroyed. The threshold to chaos is frighteningly low, as the Second World War showed...Given the horrific crime statistics today, which are almost all led by Muslim immigrants, it is plausible to assert that the 6-7.5 percent of Islamists in Europe will cause even more deaths [than the Nazis] unless they are stopped."³³

²⁸ Pierre Henri Larcher (1844). *Larcher's notes on Herodotus, historical and critical comments on the History of Herodotus*, William Desborough Cooley, trans. (London: Whittaker & Co.), 71.

²⁹ Leonidas Asimakopoulos suggests Hungarians "feel isolated because there isn't a country nearby with a similar language and ethnicity. Magyar is a completely different language and Hungarian culture, with its rare identity, would have difficulty spreading across Europe." See: Asimakopoulos (2015). "Xenophobia on the Rise in Hungary: Is the Hungarian government 'whipping up' xenophobia?" *One Europe* [published online 22 June 2015]. <http://one-europe.info/xenophobia-on-the-rise-in-hungary>.

Last accessed 22 June 2015.

³⁰ "This is an open and welcoming country, PM Orbán tells to Arab bankers." *Free Hungary* [published online in English 9 June 2015]. <http://www.freehungary.hu/index.php/56-hirek/3889-this-is-an-open-and-welcoming-country-pm-orban-tells-to-arab-bankers>. Last accessed 22 June 2015.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² <http://www.europeanguardian.com/81-uncategorised/immigration/356-migration-threatens-european-civilization-says-hungarian-pm>. Last accessed 22 June 2015.

³³ <http://www.europeanguardian.com/81-uncategorised/immigration/389-what-are-6-7-of-muslim-immigrants-accountable-for>. Last accessed 22 June 2015.