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# Central Europe's Faceless Strangers: The Rise of Xenophobia

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- Xenophobia has increased all over Europe due to the refugee and migrant crisis. Although Central European countries lack significant foreign-born populations and have mainly been unaffected by the crisis, xenophobic sentiment is widespread in the region. This shows that anti-immigrant attitudes are unrelated to the actual presence of immigrants—rather, attitudes often present themselves as symbolic fears of the unknown, fostered by political forces for domestic purposes.
- While far-right and right-wing populist forces have gained ground all over the EU, there is a key difference between the Visegrad countries and Western Europe. In Western Europe, far-right and anti-establishment groups have driven the increase in these sentiments, but in the Visegrad countries, anti-immigrant rhetoric comes from the very center of the political space. In these countries, long-established right- or left-wing forces exert a "supply side" effect: they make political capital out of anti-immigrant sentiment and thus legitimize xenophobia.
- Similarly, while counterterrorism legislation has been tightened all over Europe, in Western Europe the changes reflect a high level of actual threat and are embedded in a stable democratic system. In the Visegrad region, the proposed amendments mainly serve symbolic goals and come in systems with weaker levels of institutional development. This securitization of the debate enables politicians to portray themselves as leaders who can deliver; they can stay in power longer by playing on the public's fear.
- The successful exploitation of xenophobic sentiment and weaker checks and balances, as well as fraying rule of law, make for a dangerous cocktail in Central Europe. It is unclear how long politicians can keep up securitization in the absence of real immigrants, although fresh counterterror laws show an intent to keep the topic alive. Recent developments demonstrate that it can be hazardous for mainstream populist parties to concentrate their efforts on exploiting fears of immigration at the expense of other policy areas. Instead of mainstream parties, it might be far-right and anti-establishment forces that benefit from the fanning of resentment.

## Introduction

The refugee and migrant crisis[1] is one of the most serious challenges that the European Union has faced in its history. Since the start of the crisis, xenophobic sentiment has increased across the continent, far-right and populist parties have gained ground, and member states have replaced solidarity with calls for national solutions. By harshly refusing to accept refugees and opposing a common European solution based on solidarity, the so-called Visegrad Four (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) have become key actors in this conflict and served as role models for many Western European far-right parties. This brief gives an overview of the current trends in xenophobia within the EU, examines the reasons and consequences of these tendencies, and shows the main differences between Central and Western Europe as well as the underlying factors.

The main driving force behind xenophobia is fear of certain groups of people that are different from the group perceived as "us". This fear mainly relates to economic, cultural, and security threats that could be abstract or realistic in their nature. Historically, the level of fear has been high in all Visegrad countries. In 2015, the most anxious countries were the Czech Republic and Slovakia, followed by Hungary, while the figures in Poland were considerably lower.[2] As Figure 1 shows, worries around health and social changes (deterioration of way of life) are the most profound, closely followed by public security concerns and fear of cultural changes. Except for Poland, where economy-related worries are the second-most prevalent, people are less worried about immigrants taking their jobs than about cultural changes. At the same time, the high level of anxiety around social changes is a sign of welfare chauvinism, a key characteristic of the region. **Many people in postcommunist societies fear the appearance of more vulnerable "foreign" groups will lead to a decrease in social status and social transfers.**

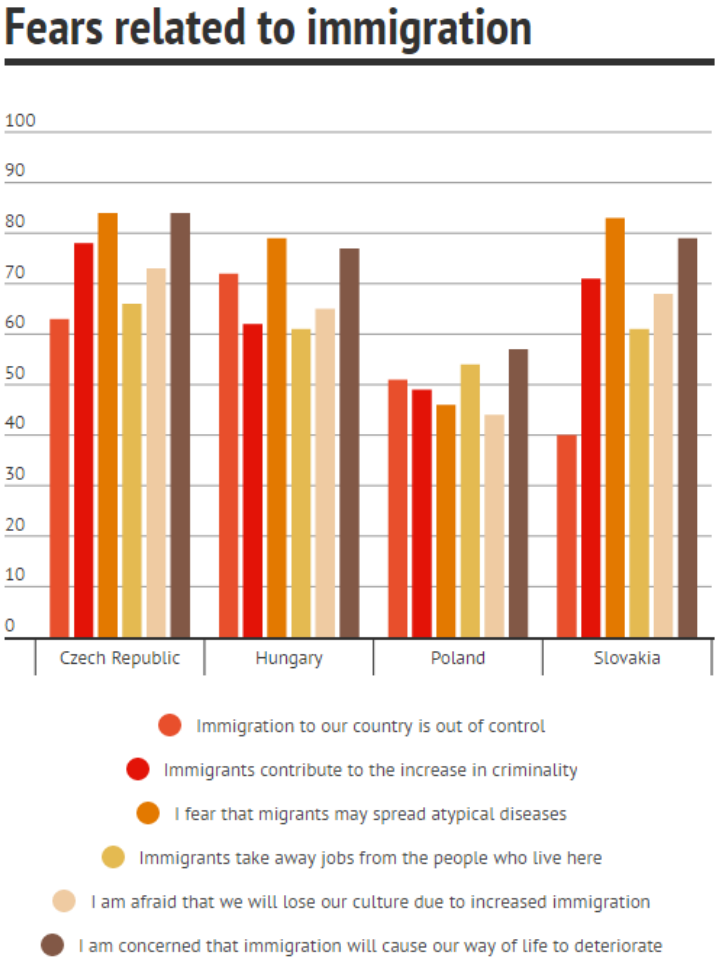


Figure 1: Percentage of those who "strongly agree" and "moderately agree"
Source: CBOS

Despite these differences, research shows that threats are strongly related with each other, and are hardly separable in people's minds. Moreover, the vast majority worry extensively about both realistic and symbolic threats related to migration. However, direct or indirect personal experiences play a key role in the perceived anxiety and lead to a lower level of fear of cultural differences, although the impression that migration is "out of control" sticks. Levels of trust and political affiliations also play an important role in the type of perceived threats.[3]

The level of xenophobia has traditionally been high in these countries. **Well before the start of the current refugee crisis, opinion polls showed that anti-immigrant prejudice and welfare chauvinism were strong in the region.** On the basis of European Social Survey (ESS) data from 2010/2011, the Demand for Right-Wing Extremism (DEREX) Index[4] revealed high levels of anti-immigrant sentiment in all Visegrad countries except Poland. The country with the highest levels was Hungary, where 49% of respondents expressed anti-immigrant views, compared with 36% in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, and 16% in Poland in 2011.[5] ESS data for Western Europe, focusing on the four countries examined in this paper, shows a significantly lower level, but a mixed picture: in the same

year the percentage of people with anti-immigrant sentiments was 22% in Austria, 21% in France, 16% in Germany, and 4% in Sweden.[6]

While the numbers above show a divide in Europe, when looking at the data more in detail (e.g., attitudes toward certain groups), we can see a significant amount of hostility in Western Europe as well. For instance, according to two separate 2009 surveys, 37% of French and 21% of Germans would not want an immigrant or foreign worker as a neighbor; 27% of British and 69% of Italians had a negative view of Muslims; and 30% of Germans disliked Turks.[7] The differences between Central and Western Europe, therefore, might be explained by cultural and social norms that make public expressions of xenophobia unacceptable.

## The impact of the refugee crisis

The refugee and migrant crisis has had a significant impact on attitudes towards immigration in Europe as xenophobia has increased all over the European Union. In 2015, immigration was perceived as the second biggest challenge within the EU, up 33 percentage points within two years. Eastern European countries tend to be more concerned with immigration, indicated by the fact that all Visegrad countries, except for Poland, are above the EU average.[8] Similarly, while on average 65% of all EU citizens agree that their countries should help refugees, opposition to the idea is significantly higher in Central and Eastern Europe.[9]

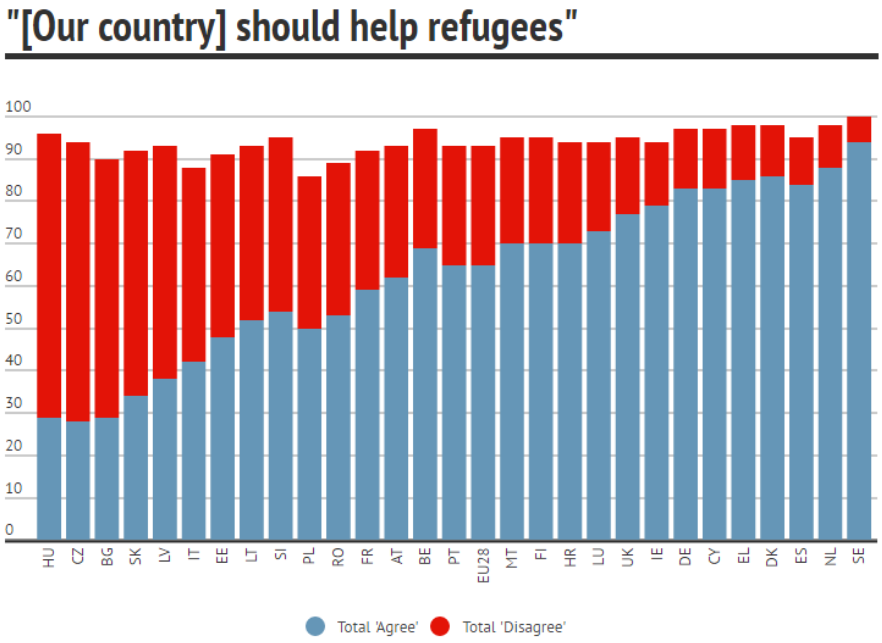


Figure 2: Percentage of those who agree and disagree
Source: Standard Eurobarometer 84

**Attitudes towards migration are unrelated to personal experiences. A significant feature of xenophobia in the Visegrad region is that anti-immigrant sentiment in these countries is not based on actual experience with foreigners.** The countries of the region are monocultural and mainly monoethnic, with only a negligible ratio of foreign-born population (the biggest ethnic minority in the region are the Roma, followed by Hungarians in Slovakia, Slovaks in the Czech Republic and Germans in Poland). Hence, prejudices against and aversion to foreigners are merely based on theoretical and symbolic fears of the unknown.[10] **"Virtual" foreigners are apparently capable of generating more fear and aversion than tangible ones.** Scapegoating nonexistent groups and presenting them as enemies seems to pay off for political forces because the vast majority of the population cannot verify the accusations, and parties using xenophobic rhetoric will not be punished by voters belonging to the group presented as an enemy.

This mechanism worked during the refugee crisis as well. Anti-immigrant sentiment has increased the most in countries that either have not received a significant number of asylum seekers (e.g., Slovakia and Czech Republic) or have been transit countries (e.g., Hungary). On the other hand, countries that have received

the largest number of asylum applications have been the most open to immigration (e.g., Sweden and Germany).[11]

Figure 3 shows that due to the crisis anti-immigrant sentiment has generally increased more in the Visegrad countries than the EU average. In addition, there was sharp rise in very negative opinions about immigration in Austria, which means the country exhibited similar trends to the Visegrad group.

The importance of actual experience with foreigners was also reflected in the supportive attitude of Hungarians towards people coming from war zones—in contrast with their predominantly negative feelings towards immigration in general. According to an October 2015 survey, 65% of the respondents agreed with providing shelter—though mostly temporary—to people fleeing war zones. After Hungarians, many of whom had actually met refugees transiting through the country, the second most supportive were Poles, who had had an influx of Ukrainian refugees and migrants earlier. The other two Visegrad countries were less welcoming, as 50% of Czechs and 63% of Slovaks opposed taking in refuges from war zones.[12]

## Political exploitation of fear and xenophobia

As shown above, there is a significant correlation between xenophobia, fear-generated welfare chauvinism and scapegoating. While in each society there is a certain "demand" for xenophobia, there is always a "supply" as well: social and political players fostering and exploiting fears among the population for their political purposes. As a consequence of the refugee and migrant crisis, political forces with strong anti-immigration agenda have gained ground in most countries all over the EU. **However, there is a key difference between the Visegrad countries and Western Europe in this regard. In the West, far-right and antiestablishment forces drive and exploit xenophobic sentiment, while in Central Europe, it is the center that does it.** Even though in some countries such parties have become part of the establishment by participating in the government (e.g., The Finns Party, Freedom Party [FPÖ] in Austria) or being members of the parliament (e.g., Alternative für Deutschland [AfD] in regional parliaments in Germany), in most cases other parliamentary parties oppose them. In France, for instance, the major political parties all reject Front National, and are ready to support each other's candidate in case of a run-off with a Front National candidate. In Germany, AfD is ignored by some parties and was excluded from televised debates. The extra-parliamentary movement Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident (Pegida) was criticized for xenophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric even by Chancellor Angela Merkel.

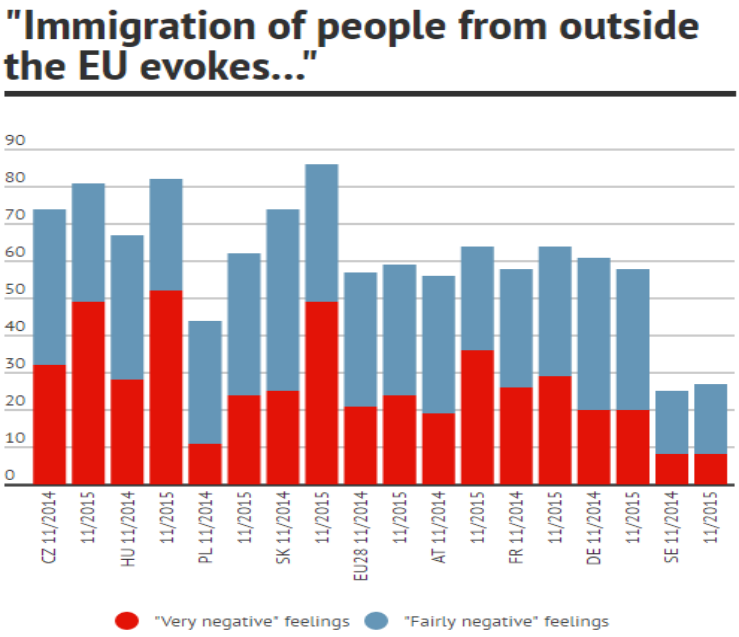


Figure 3: Percentage of those with "very negative" and "fairly negative" feelings
Source: Standard Eurobarometer

**In the Visegrad countries, the refugee crisis blurred the boundaries between the far-right and right-wing populist forces, and mainstream right- or left-wing parties have exploited fears and anti-immigrant sentiment for their political purposes.** This approach legitimized xenophobia in the public discourse, which further enervated already weak norms of tolerance and mutual respect.

Hungary's governing Fidesz party and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán took a hard line on immigration already at the beginning of 2015, just a few days after the terrorist attack on the French magazine Charlie Hebdo. The government launched campaigns and public consultations that built on societal fears, labelling refugees and migrants "subsistence immigrants" and "illegal immigrants." It also introduced policy measures to discourage

migrants from crossing the border and show that the government is taking action (e.g., tightening the asylum law and building a border fence).

The reason behind this approach was political; Fidesz wanted to stabilize its electoral support and regain momentum by reframing the political agenda. The party also fought hard to prevent the far-right Jobbik from seizing on the topic. Fidesz divided the political arena into two conflicting camps: the patriotic camp "defending Hungary" and the anti-patriotic camp consisting of the refugees and migrants who threaten Hungary and "traitors" who disagree with the campaigns.[13] Public opinion data clearly show that there was a significant correlation between the government's anti-immigrant rhetoric and the increased level of xenophobia in society. Orbán was successful: by the end of 2015, he had reshaped the domestic political scene and had become a significant player in European politics.

Politicians in the other Visegrad countries also exploited the crisis, albeit with less success. In Slovakia—besides far-right forces like Marian Kotleba's L'SNS and the Slovak National Party (SNS), which have successfully capitalized on fears and crossed the threshold to enter parliament in 2016—Prime Minister Robert Fico has also taken a harsh stance, opposing taking in refugees and migrants, and spreading xenophobic messages. In Poland, Jaroslaw Kaczyński and his governing Law and Justice (PiS) party have represented the anti-immigrant position among the mainstream forces. In the Czech Republic, the president, Miloš Zeman, has spread anti-immigrant messages from the highest office. This does not mean the Visegrad Four can be considered a monolithic bloc; the common anti-refugee stance of the four countries is already tenuous. While Hungary and Poland continue to fiercely criticize European solutions, the Czech Republic has already started advocating for a common answer and Slovakia will have to take a more conciliatory approach ahead of the start of its EU Council presidency in July.

> While in each society there is a certain "demand" for xenophobia, there is always a "supply" as well: social and political players fostering and exploiting fears among the population for their political purposes.

## The securitization of the debate

**Mainstream political forces have framed migration as a phenomenon causing existential problems and requiring extraordinary measures. T**he securitization of the issue has provided political players with an opportunity to present themselves as those who take decisive actions in order to protect citizens. In the absence of actual immigrants and foreign-born population, migrants became suitable scapegoats in the Visegrad countries.

The terror attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Brussels in March 2016 made it possible to **link the topic of migration to terrorism.** As a consequence of the attacks, counterterrorism legislation has been tightened all over Europe. In Western European countries such measures reflect the high level of threat, and are embedded in a stable system of rule of law and checks and balances. In the Visegrad region, in contrast, where the threat of jihadist terrorism is significantly lower, such measures would serve symbolic goals and would be embedded in a political and legal context with weaker independent institutions and more fragile rule of law. **Therefore, in the Visegrad countries the risk is much higher that tightening counterterrorism measures would further undermine civil liberties and marginalize independent institutions.**

In Austria, for example, the grand coalition passed a new law on the organization, tasks, and competences of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution and Counterterrorism ("Polizeiliches Staatsschutzgesetz") in February 2016, after almost a year-long dispute. The law expands the competences of the secret service, limits the accessibility of sensitive documents, and creates a flexible system: the greater the threat, the more power officers have. While the opposition and NGOs criticized parts of the bill, they did not claim the law threatened democratic checks and balances.

In Hungary, by contrast, the government announced unexpectedly in January 2016 that it plans to amend the constitution and introduce a new legal category, the "state of terrorist threat." The changes lacked an accurate legislative definition of "terrorism" and would have granted the government extraordinary legal powers for 60 days, including the suspension of fundamental rights and deviation from certain laws without

parliamentary and judicial control.[14] The proposal was eventually postponed due to unanimous rejection from opposition parties, and the parliament passed a watered-down version on June 7 with the votes of Fidesz and Jobbik MPs.

In Poland, the PiS government has also passed a counterterrorism law, which, according to opposition parties and human rights NGOs, grants authorities too much power and disproportionately limits civil liberties. Among other things, the law, which currently awaits the president's signature, curbs freedom of assembly and communication and places all foreigners under general suspicion.

In Slovakia and the Czech Republic, counterterrorism regulations have provoked less criticism so far. The Slovak parliament passed a package focusing on military, security, and intelligence measures after the Paris attacks. The package included changes to the constitution (extending the detention period), Criminal Code, Code of Criminal Procedures, and other laws. According to Prime Minister Fico, the package was an explicit reaction to the risks posed by the unprecedented wave of refugees and the Paris attacks. Fico stressed that the security of Slovak citizens is "of higher priority than the rights of migrants" and added that authorities monitor "every single Muslim in Slovakia."[15] While there have been some legal steps to counter the threat of terrorism in the Czech Republic as well (e.g., new definition of terrorist attack, introduction of a 4-level system to declare the degrees of threat by terrorism), no comprehensive package has been passed yet. In December 2015, Justice Minister Robert Pelikán stated the government does not plan any modification to legislation related to combating terrorism because the prevailing Czech laws are sufficient to deal with the issue.

## Conclusion

**Political forces in Western Europe and the Visegrad region are successfully exploiting xenophobic sentiments. This poses a bigger threat to democracy in the Visegrad Four because mainstream political actors endorse the securitization of the debate. Combined with a weaker system of checks and balances and less institutionalized civic activism, these countries face a potentially "dangerous cocktail."**

**However, it is questionable how long political elites can benefit from securitization—without the presence of immigrants the topic may lose its appeal and voters' attention could turn to other policy areas.** In Hungary, the government concentrates all its efforts to keep the topic of immigration and terrorism at the top of the political agenda (e.g., via legislation and a referendum against the quota system), while opposition parties try to direct attention to other issues (e.g., corruption, education, and healthcare). Opinion polls have not shown yet which narrative will prevail. In Slovakia, even though Fico was reelected in general elections in March 2016, his Smer party lost 16 percentage points compared to the elections in 2012, while two far-right parties have gained ground. The refugee crisis and the question of security played a key role in Fico's campaign, but they failed to gain him enough votes. While the securitization discourse played into the hands of far-right parties, these forces also benefitted from voters' discontent and antiestablishment sentiment stemming from corruption scandals and the lack of reforms in education and healthcare. This shows it can be hazardous for populist parties to concentrate their efforts on exploiting the topic of immigration without the actual presence of immigrants while neglecting other policy areas.

Regardless of the long-term success of the securitization approach, it is clear that political forces already had a basis on which xenophobic messages and fear-mongering could thrive. General discontent, high levels of antiestablishment sentiment, a weakening culture of mutual respect in the public sphere, and fear of decreasing social status are the key factors behind the success of populist forces. Hence, measures aiming to tackle the rise of xenophobia in the region will have to address the complex and deeply rooted causes behind it.

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[1] The term "refugee and migrant crisis" is used throughout the brief for the sake of simplification. It refers to a set of crises caused by the unprecedented scale of migration to Europe in 2015. These include a policy crisis, reflected in the fact that the EU and member states were unprepared to cope with number of refugees and that conventional asylum mechanisms have failed, as well as a political crisis within the EU.

[2] CBOS Public Opinion Research Center, 'Attitude to Immigrants in the Visgrad Group Countries', December 2015, http://www.cbos.pl/EN/publications/reports/2015/178_15.pdf

[3] TÁRKI Social Research Institute, 'The Social Aspects of the 2015 Migration Crisis in Hungary', March 2016, http://www.tarki.hu/hu/news/2016/kitekint/20160330_refugees.pdf

[4] DEREX Index is a comprehensive theoretical model elaborated by Political Capital to measure the „social demand" for far-right ideology. The index is an aggregate number that shows the proportion of „attitude radicals" – those who are receptive to antidemocratic, anti-Western, xenophobic, chauvinistic, authoritarian and scapegoating messages. The index is composed of 4 categories: 1) Prejudice and welfare chauvinism; 2) Right-wing value orientation; 3) Anti-establishment attitudes; 4) Fear, distrust and pessimism. The DEREX index is based on data from the European Social Survey, a biannual examination of values and attitudes in 32 countries in Europe and the Middle East. For more information visit http://derexindex.eu.

[5] Source: derexindex.eu

[6] Source: derexindex.eu

[7] Kenan Malik, 'Is Eastern Europe Really More Racist Than the West?', The New York Times, 3 November 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/04/opinion/who-invented-fortress-europe.html

[8] European Parliament, 'European Parliament Eurobarometer 84.1: Parlemeter 2015 – Part I, The main challenges for the EU, migration, and the economic and social situation', October 2015, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2015/2015parlemeter/eb84_1_synthese_analytique_partie_1_migration_en.pdf

[9] European Commission, 'Standard Eurobarometer 84 Autumn 2015: Annex [Wave EB84.3 ]', December 2015, http://ec.europa.eu/COMMFrontOffice/PublicOpinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/instruments/STANDARD/surveyKy/2098

[10] Attila Juhász, 'Anti-Immigrant Prejudice in Central and Eastern Europe', Riskandforecast.com, 16 September 2010, http://riskandforecast.com/post/in-depth-analysis/anti-immigrant-prejudice-in-central-and-eastern-europe_581.html

[11] On the basis of the number of asylum applications submitted in the respective countries in 2015,Germany received 441,800 applications, Hungary 174,435, Sweden 156,110, Austria 85,505, Italy 83,245, France 70,570, Poland 10,255, Czech Republic 1,235, Slovakia 270. In the case of Poland, 68% of applicants were Russian citizens, 15% Ukrainian, 5% Tajik, and 3% Syrian. Source: Eurostat

[12] 'A Visegrádi Országok Lakosságának Véleménye a Menekültek Befogadásáról [Public Opinion in the Visegrad Countries on Accepting Refugees]', Tarki.hu, 18 November 2015, http://www.tarki.hu/hu/news/2015/kitekint/20151118_befogad.html

[13] Attila Juhász, Bulcsú Hunyadi, Edit Zgut, 'Focus on Hungary: Refugees, Asylum and Migration' (Political Capital, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, December 2015), http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/pc_boll_hungary_refugees_asylum_and_migration_web.pdf

[14] Kriszta Kovács, ' Hungary's Struggle: In a Permanent State of Exception,' verfassungsblog.de, 17 March 2016, http://verfassungsblog.de/hungarys-struggle-in-a-permanent-state-of-exception/

[15] 'Fico: Security More Important than Migrants' Rights', Spectator.sme.sk, 16 November 2015, http://spectator.sme.sk/c/20063953/fico-security-more-important-than-migrants-rights.html

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