

Fears about migration in Hungary in the view of representatives of civil society organizations

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Abstract

The article is based on interviews conducted with representatives of civil society organizations. The interviewees shared their thoughts about an ever-growing fear present in the population of Hungary with regard to migration. The author talked about the roots and reasons of this fear, and the ways and means of facing it, with András Kováts, the Director of the *Menedék* Association for Migrants, Márta Mészáros, staff member of the Cordelia Foundation, and two representatives of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Gábor Gyulai, the Head of the organisation, and András Léderer, a staff member of the Refugee Programme. The present article provides a synthesis of these interviews. As such, it may contribute to a more refined understanding of some of the central issues examined in this journal special issue: namely, the demand for, and the precise dynamics of, the securitisation of migration, and the ways and means of coping with challenges related to it, to be able to provide for the needs of asylum-seekers as required in terms of universal human rights and the basic moral principle of solidarity.

Keywords: asylum-seekers, refugees, fears, manipulation, community meetings, education, migration

Introduction

The interviews aimed at identifying the different sources and the basic nature of fear amongst the Hungarian people related to migration, and additionally at discussing the significance of an open dialogue. Due to the institutional affiliation of the author, the interviews were conducted in a rather informal way that provided ideal circumstances for

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the interviewees to share their personal views. The author sat down with her colleagues on separate occasions, but the interviews were based on the same general questions which were the following: (1) What kind of fears related to migration were shared with you by members of the local populace with whom you were in contact while communicating as a representative of your civil society organization? (2) How would you define the roots of these fears? (3) How did you respond to these concerns? (4) What tools and events could provide an ideal framework for an open dialogue, and what are the keys to efficiency in such dialogue?

The need to understand fears and concerns related to migration

With regard to migration, an everyday tension is perceivable in the ranks of the Hungarian population between views of sympathy on the one hand and rejection on the other. The standpoint of rejection is based on fear. The interviewees are all of the view that fear on migration should not be labelled illegitimate or unrealistic. Those who are afraid of migration cannot be stigmatized as if having prejudices or no reason for fear.

According to *András Kováts*, Director of *Menedék*, this approach would be inexpedient since an existing phenomenon given in society would thus go unaddressed. At the same time, fear itself can be a source of conflict – this being all the more a reason it needs to be dealt with. Kováts emphasized that fear is an absolutely normal human feeling that one has to confront. It is not worth to deny its existence or to stigmatize those who are afraid (one will not become racist just because of fear). Fear might not disappear, but it is important to deal with it by proper means. Mistrust may even be necessary for one's survival in unknown situations. Even in the asylum system, initial mistrust is useful and needed, but it is extremely important to step beyond it when possible. It is similarly crucial that those who meet the requirements of the asylum procedure have a chance to become a member of the local society. It is not obvious that everyone must identify with the standpoint of giving and giving up one's own interests to help people from different parts of the world. A universalistic, human-rights-based approach is not inherent to the knowledge and views of all citizens of Hungary. Even though the desire for freedom and human rights was a strong sentiment in the 1980s, before the change of system, today it appears that this common feeling has faded. Obviously, a total rejection of the idea of receiving asylum-seekers and the need to provide assistance conflicts not only with values rooted in human rights but also with the general moral principle of solidarity.

None of the interviewees stated that information on negative experiences and difficulties related to migration should or could be suppressed. In the opinion of *Gábor Gyulai*, Head of the Refugee Programme of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee problems can emerge especially under circumstances where cultural differences are significant, such as when extremely conservative immigrants arrive to a generally open, tolerant and liberal society. As opposed to this situation, it is easier for immigrants arriving for example from Morocco or Ecuador to Spain where they are seen as less different from the locals. Many Western European states did not handle immigration in a proper way. A negative example is the hypocritical approach of the 1960s which led to the acceptance of a high number of immigrants into simple jobs but without an efficient integration policy. As a result, not even members of the third generations can sufficiently integrate, and remain under harsh financial circumstances. At the same time, if we talk about difficulties deriving from migration, the fact cannot be denied that immigrant communities who do not strive for assimilation also exist.

What is important for a better understanding of related issues is to see and to accept that certain elements of migration are bad and may result in difficulties, while other aspects are good and beneficial. We need to be open about discussing all these issues frankly.

Reasons behind fears and concerns related to migration

While media reports and personal, everyday social intercourse provide frequent opportunities to gain information about fear felt by Hungarian people, I asked my interviewees what specific aspects of fear were articulated by those with whom they were in contact in their work.

The psychologist *Márta Mészáros* who volunteers for MigSzol (Migrant Solidarity Group of Hungary) talked not only to migrants but also locals in 2015 when a high number of migrants appeared at train stations and other locations in Budapest and other Hungarian cities. Independent volunteers and volunteers of MigSzol organized a community meeting for locals at Pope John Paul Square close to the Eastern Train Station of Budapest. The organizers felt this was necessary because tensions and fear of locals were clearly perceivable. Mészáros and her colleagues went door-to-door in the neighborhood in order to talk to locals, to answer potential questions, and to listen to their concerns. According to her account, numerous concerns were articulated with regard to hygienic issues (e.g. if I go with my child down to the playground which is also used by

migrant families, is there a possibility that my child may get infected by some disease?) and potential loss of employment or social benefits due to the arrival and presence of migrants. As regards the latter concerns, in the specific context of the great influx of migrants in 2015 it was easy to provide reassuring answers to some of these questions, given that it was a temporary situation and most of those who arrived soon left the country. Questions on hygienic issues were professionally addressed by a medical practitioner. In addition, locals were provided general information about migration, a psychiatrist spoke about traumas suffered by refugees and their difficulties in foreign countries, and there was room for discussing any other concerns related to foreigners. She emphasized that it remains very important even today, even after the influx of migrants peaked in 2015, to listen to these concerns or else political stakeholders may instrumentalise these with various aims. People frustrated by poverty and everyday existential difficulties can be easily manipulated, and their negative emotions can be easily turned against a certain group of the society – currently towards migrants who may have replaced Roma people in this respect.

András Léderer, staff member of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee communicates on behalf of the organization on social media sites on an everyday basis. He shared his experience that fear related to public security (related to terrorist attacks and importing diseases) is the primary focus of these discussions. Another kind of focus is a less specific, existential fear, namely that Hungarian ethnicity might disappear as a result of significant demographic changes, and that the community of Christians and the Hungarian culture might altogether be confined to a minority position in the future. With regards to hygienic risks, he frequently shares his personal experiences with those adding comments to online posts of the organization: he aided migrants at the train stations of Budapest in the summer of 2015 for months, and he had migrant families in his home whom he allowed use his bathroom and to stay overnight, yet he was not infected by any disease. On one occasion all members of an Afghan family put the toilet paper they used into an iron kettle placed beside the toilet (out of precaution with a view to the drain pipe). When they left, Léderer cleaned the kettle, and even then he did not become sick. Having said that, the necessity of medical measures and control is not disputed.

As regards physical safety, Léderer did not deny the fact that the current Hungarian national security services might not be able to identify „bad apples.” They do not have a sufficient number of interpreters and experts having accurate knowledge about the source countries involved. In his view, the general attitude of rejection and mistrust

on the side of the authorities does not facilitate efforts for national security. If migrants do not trust the authorities, they are less likely to report it if they detect themselves that someone is suspicious. The radicalization of foreigners and immigrants is a complex and urging issue but it does not follow directly from the situation of migration. It has deep roots in the system of education, social services and employment that contribute to segregation in host societies. The key to prevention is thus not to be found in total rejection and mistrust, but in genuine efforts at integration.

At the same time, *András Kováts* pointed out that fears connected to mass migration should not be understated. Germany appeared on the top 10 list of countries receiving migrants last year. The novelty of the situation itself can lead to fears in people. Real problems cannot therefore be disregarded. Migration comes with challenges: for instance, funding must be provided for the basic needs of people in refugee camps or reception centres. The argument that the problem exists also in other countries is not convincing, since the same problem leads to severe difficulties in those other states as well. Some of those understating the significance of the challenges faced focus on the fact that the issue concerns only 1 million people, and thus only 0.2 per cent of the whole population of Europe. This argument disregards that the phenomenon affects in fact only 6 to 8 European states. In addition, the burden appears in the affected states concentrating in certain areas, and leads to unique challenges for public services, e.g. in education, health care, and in the field of social security. These problems need to be addressed.

Having concluded that, facing the challenges of calling for solidarity is one thing – fears enhanced through mass manipulation constitute a different level of challenge. *Gábor Gyulai* referred to surveys which demonstrate that the level of fear is low exactly in those countries where a significant number of immigrants arrived in the last 50 years. For instance, Sweden, Portugal or Spain are still open to receive newcomers, even if immigrants have been arriving to the country in high numbers for decades. (For example in Spain, the number of inhabitants born outside of the country's borders has risen from 1 to 6 million between 1998 and 2016, according to the Spanish National Institute of Statistics.²) According to the reports of the EU, these three countries are the „least xenophobic” states within the Union. The reason for this may be, perhaps, either that openness is part of the cultural identity of these countries' populations, as it is in Sweden,

² Omar G. Encarnación: „The Spanish Exception – Why Spain Has Resisted Right-Wing Populism.” *Foreign Affairs*, 20 July 2017, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/spain/2017-07-20/spanish-exception?cid=int-lea&pgtype=hpg> (accessed on 28 November 2017).

or migration is deemed a solution for demographic problems and thus beneficial with regard to economic interests, as in Spain. In the meantime, xenophobia is significant in Central and Eastern European countries, such as Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary or Bulgaria, where currently migrants are not present in high numbers. (In the case of Romania, xenophobia is less apparent, most likely due to the fact that a high number of inhabitants are leaving the country.) We can draw the conclusion that the lack of practical experiences can thus become ample ground for the rise and increase of xenophobia. In Hungary, in 2015, when refugees were present and seen by the locals, xenophobia was not as widespread as later on. It increased drastically in the wake of the departure of these people.

According to Gyulai, it is an essential issue whether political stakeholders see potential political advantage in xenophobia. In Spain, for example, no political party includes xenophobia in their campaign messages since they would not find any support among the locals due to negative experiences under the Franco regime and the mass emigration deriving from it. Further, it is much more difficult to present differences as a subject of fear in a cultural atmosphere where national identity is based on citizenship as opposed to ethnicity.

A special category of fear related to migration is the rather abstract fear of losing one's cultural identity. *Kováts* shared his experience that while walking in the neighborhoods of Brussels which became ethnic ghettos, where the contours of the old city are still to be seen, sometimes he feels sad. The change of culture can appear quite radical in certain areas. At the same time, he deems it paradoxical that fear from the appearance of ethnic ghettos is much stronger among the people of Budapest than in Brussels, Stockholm or Malmö, where it is present as a real problem. It is a great challenge to moderate and contain fears so out of step with reality.

According to *Léderer*, uncertainty about self-identity might be a basis of existential fears related to ideas that we might be made disappear. The sense that we always played the role of the victims, and that we have always been on the losing side in conflicts throughout our history, can result in a lack of self-confidence which then may become the basis of abstract, existential fears.

As regards the reality of this abstract fear, *Gyulai* pointed out that it is not entirely pointless: a society can change under certain circumstances. An example for this is Lebanon where the mass immigration of mostly Muslim Palestinians resulted in the breaking of the uneasy balance between the country's constituent social groups, and thus

led to a conflict. However, considering the current European trends, he holds that fear about the disappearance of Hungarian ethnicity as a whole belongs to the world of science fiction. Such theories consider the community of migrants as a homogeneous mass without a single member who would be able to integrate into local society. These theories disregard the fact that in most of the cases the children of the immigrants will go to local public schools, will learn the local language, and will adapt to local customs. There are immigrants who do not intend to assimilate but no statistical data indicates that they would be a majority of immigrants, and integration can be facilitated by targeted programs of education or culture.

In conservative communities of migrants, traditions exist which remain to be followed by the members of the community and which may not comply with the legal and moral value system of the receiving society (e.g. female genital mutilation in certain migrant communities living in Western European countries). In these cases, the state has to intervene by severe criminal sanctions and measures of prevention. There are other cases which demand non-criminal measures. For instance, the state is entitled to prohibit the wearing of the *burqa* (female clothing concealing the whole face) for the sake of identification of individuals in public places. By reverse analogy, *Gyulai* referred to how it is similarly not permitted to walk the streets naked. Those who arrive to a country have to accept certain norms applicable in the receiving country, and the fundamental principles of life given in the local society, including the principle of tolerance.

At the same time, the possibility of living together needs to be enhanced, as it, including certain differences, may have advantages. Let us just think of the most simple examples: the possibility of budget shopping in Chinese stores or the chance to eat a *gyros* – or other kinds of ethnic food.

The discussion of fears and concerns related to migration: Experiences and tentative guidelines

During the interviews, we touched upon the experiences of the interviewees with regard to the communication conducted with average Hungarian people about fears related to migration. A common understanding of the interviewees was that there is a need for open discussions. Self-censorship for the sake of political correctness is harmful, words about existing frustrations and fear must not be expressed as unambiguously as possible. Unaddressed frustration can lead to tension, and tensions may eventually be directed towards a target. *Kováts* emphasized that tension and hate frequently targets minority

groups protected by human rights organizations. These organizations must therefore deal with these attitudes as part of their mandate. Following a brief discussion about the best way to approach the issue at professional trainings, in institutions of education and online, the interviewees focused in their work on community meetings with locals.

The Menedék Association managed more than ten accredited professional trainings targeting different groups of audience, such as members of the armed services, practitioners of medical care, social workers, police officers and intercultural mediators. The major focus of these trainings was intercultural communication and they aimed at providing a forum where participants could openly share their problems and questions. According to *Kováts*, „we do not put a muzzle on the participants, we strive to create such an atmosphere which facilitates open discussions.” The main aim of these trainings is not to improve the theoretical knowledge of the participants about human rights but to provide them with tools for the management of difficult situations appearing in their everyday work. The trainers provide arguments as to why it is important and useful for the participants to respect applicable rules and to handle foreigners in a proper way. Accordingly, the trainings are of a pragmatic rather than an abstract, theoretical character. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee organized professional trainings with a similar approach for media workers as well.

Staff members of civil society organizations conduct occasional visits upon the invitation of institutions of education too. *Léderer* shared his experience that at these events the approach is similar to that of professional trainings, namely that there are no taboos in these discussions, there are no improper questions – any issue can be raised openly and frankly, since the sole aim of these events is to involve the participants in an open dialogue. He shared the experience gained at a specific event that illustrates well the relation between fears and reality. In this roundtable discussion held at a university in 2017 he requested students to guess how many migrants are present in the country on that very day. The lowest number appearing in the responses of the students was 10 thousand even though in fact that many migrants have not been present in the country in the course of the whole year. *Léderer* had the fresh statistical data from the early morning – the total number of migrants was slightly over 400. *Mészáros* pointed out that such occasions at institutions of education can work well if a refugee is also present – someone who can recount first-hand experiences to the students. She mentioned the successful example of Robert Biedron, the mayor of the Polish town of Słupsk. Some years ago, the atmosphere in the town was similar to the general atmosphere currently in Hungary. The mayor

encouraged programs of education where members of civil society organizations held lectures or moderated discussions involving refugees, in schools and universities. In a matter of a few years, the attitudes of many inhabitants of the town changed, and the majority became open to the reception of immigrants.

Special places of open discussions about fear related to migration are local community meetings. Distinct approaches may be warranted related to the establishment of long-term institutions (e.g. reception centres) close to a certain township on the one hand, and occasional events/programs organized for refugees and asylum seekers on the other. With regard to the first case, the interviewees agreed on the obvious necessity of a dialogue with the locals – opinions related to the necessity of community meetings in the second scenario varied.

Kováts emphasized that no communities are identical, and solutions in each case shall meet local specificities. He recalled a community meeting which was organized upon plans for the establishment of a large reception centre in the vicinity of a small town close to Pécs. He attended the meeting together with representatives of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee. He was well aware of the concerns of the locals, and that this kind of change may pose a challenge for a small community. In his opinion, it would be a hypocritical standpoint to say that this kind of situation cannot lead to any problems. (Therefore, he also thinks that large institutions aiming at the reception of migrants should not be established near small towns, and smaller institutions may be more acceptable from the point of view of everyone involved.)

Occasional events such as summer camps for youth may require a different approach. Keeping a low profile may actually work in this respect. This was debated by the interviewees related to relevant recent experiences. For instance, when a summer camp was organized in Keszthely by Migration Aid, there was significant media attention centered on the tension among locals related to this.³ *Menedék* organized another summer camp nearby, in Balatonberény, with the involvement of a high number of migrant children. *Menedék* reported the event to the police but did not notify the local municipality, nor did they organize a community meeting related to this, and no conflict emerged. In the view of *Kováts*, such a program should consequently not be preceded by events drawing the public's attention. A hostile response is not likely to target the children

³ Windisch Judit: '„Beleállunk” – Nem mond le a menekültek balatoni nyaraltatásáról a Migration Aid.' *HVG*, 7 August 2017. http://hvg.hu/itthon/20170807_menekult_Balaton_nyaralas_migration_aid (accessed on 28 November 2017).

themselves attending a given program. Tense interactions can take place but they can be handled instantly. *Mészáros* reported opposing views, however. She deems it essential to take precautionary measures (also in the form of community meetings) while organizing such events in order to prevent any potential conflict. *Léderer*, sharing her views, would organize a meeting with local leaders with the involvement of local inhabitants and experts so that concerns and fears can be discussed instead of waiting to see if an explosion of tension takes place.

A community meeting is never automatically successful, according to *Léderer*, especially if the moderators of the discussion at the meeting do not have sufficient expertise concerning mediation and moderation. In these unfortunate cases, they may become “punchbags” themselves, and the sole outcome of the event may be the expression of feelings of tension without substantive dialogue. *Gyulai* shared this opinion, and he finds that in many cases locals cannot specifically identify their fears. Deep layers of frustrations may be involved, and the event may easily end up in an explosion of negative feelings, without any solution. It is important to have someone with expertise in mediation present at the meeting. He added that it is extremely difficult to deal with the results of the systematic hate propaganda targeting Hungarian society.

An additional risk coming with local community meetings involving a refugee is that he or she might be traumatized by the comments of the locals. *Léderer* spoke about his experience gained at a local community meeting held in the town of Etyek in 2017. A refugee from Afghanistan, a client of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee who was present, broke into tears when a local participant spoke about his opinion based on a video seen on *YouTube* wherein it was stated that the majority of Afghan people are raping children and animals. (A number of inhabitants attending the meeting immediately responded to defend the refugee and his community related to this.) *Gyulai* shared this view of *Léderer*: he would not expose to such risk a client who has just survived an armed conflict, or may have been tortured. However, he would consider involving refugees who have been living for a considerable amount of time in the receiving country and who feels not traumatized any more.

As opposed to practical concerns related to security or interpersonal conflicts, it is more difficult to address fears related to the disappearance of cultural identity. At the same time, *Léderer* would find it an interesting approach to discuss this issue at a community meeting, since not many towns exist where immigrants have not appeared at a certain point of history. An interesting topic to consider could be how the immigrant

ethnic groups did not wipe out but enriched the local communities. However, he emphasized that historians, not staff members of civil society organizations, ought to have the competence to lead such a project.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, let me share the account of *Léderer* about his positive experiences gained at the above mentioned local community meeting of Etyek. It was the local librarian who invited the representative of Migration Aid to the event who then involved the other contributors as well: an Imam (who talked about Islam and Islamic religious customs), *Léderer* himself, and a client of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee who was officially recognized by the Immigration Office as a refugee from Afghanistan, and has by that point lived in Hungary for five years, and spoke Hungarian.

The main fear expressed by the local inhabitants was related to differences in the language, customs, clothing and the colour of skin of immigrants. As regards the issue of foreign language, a man who fled from Etyek to Köln, Germany, under the time of Communism, spoke about his feelings that he is afraid of Muslims who speak German but in their everyday lives refrain from using it, and prefer their own language. Another participant of the event responded by saying that his two daughters lived in England and he doubted that they ever talked to each other in English instead of Hungarian, even though they do speak English.

An Iraqi medical practitioner who lives in the town of Bicske shared with the other participants that his children go to classes of Catholic religious education in the local school, and that there is only one custom of Islam that they still follow: they do not eat pork. However, he added, as a doctor he would advise this to everyone for medical reasons. His remark was followed by participants laughing out loud.

His story may thus demonstrate that reconciling differences, even assimilation, is possible. The chance to transform fear into understanding and sympathy was well illustrated when, at the end of the three hour-long discussion, a participant who voiced a number of concerns related to migration at the beginning of the community meeting, shook hands with the Afghan refugee, and said that he now feels sympathy for him and wishes the best luck to him.