Between Fact and Form: Literary Journalism and Narrative Authority in East-Central Europe

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Abstract: This article examines literary journalism in East-Central Europe as a hybrid narrative form that reshapes the perception of politically saturated realities. Rather than approaching journalism as a transparent medium of information, it argues that long-form reportage mobilizes literary techniques—such as focalization, montage, testimonial embedding, and character construction—to produce what can be described as narrative knowledge. Through close readings of works by Emma Jane Kirby, Sándor Jászberényi, Mikołaj Grynberg, and Bartłomiej Sabela, the article demonstrates how these narrative strategies reconfigure readerly engagement and intervene in contexts marked by media capture and state-sponsored discourse. Focusing on representations of migration along the Balkans route and the Polish-Belarusian border, it shows that literary journalism does not simply counter dominant political narratives at the level of content, but operates at the level of form, exposing and transforming the narrative mechanisms through which such discourses are produced. In doing so, the article positions East-Central Europe as a critical site for rethinking the relationship between narrative, journalism, and political knowledge.

Keywords: Long-format journalism, literary journalism, narrative form, narrative knowledge, focalization, testimonial narrative, montage, East-Central Europe, counter-narrative, anti-migration attitudes, hybrid narrative genres, media capture, propaganda, hyperrealism, testimonials, narrative knowledge.

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Introduction

Situated between factual reporting and literary narration, long-format journalism mobilizes techniques traditionally associated with fiction—such as focalization, characterization, temporal structuring, and narrative voice—to produce what may be described as narrative knowledge: a form of understanding grounded not in data alone, but in the lived, relational, and affective dimensions of experience. This article argues that literary journalism in East-Central Europe functions not merely as a corrective to political discourse, but as a narrative form that actively reshapes the conditions under which political realities are perceived. Rather than treating journalism as a transparent medium of information, it approaches long-form reportage as a hybrid genre whose literary strategies enable it to intervene in contexts marked by ideological polarization, media capture, and the proliferation of state-sponsored narratives. In doing so, the article shifts attention from the question of *what* is represented—here, the European refugee and migration crises of the past decade—to *how* these events are narratively mediated, and how such mediation reconfigures the reader's relationship to them. In clear contrast to the official narratives surrounding the crisis initated by East-Central European governments, journalists have managed to offer counternarratives to official anti-immigrant propraganda in their works.

The theoretical framework for this analysis builds on scholarship that has emphasized the permeability of boundaries between fictional and non-fictional narrative. As John S. Bak notes, drawing on Gérard Genette, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction cannot be sustained as a strict binary, since both domains share formal and rhetorical devices that shape narrative representation.[1] Long-format journalism exemplifies this hybridity: it is grounded in empirical research and factual accuracy, yet it relies on narrative techniques—selection, arrangement, focalization, and emplotment—that inevitably structure the reader's experience. Rather than viewing this as a limitation, this article treats such hybridity as the very condition of possibility for journalism's intervention into political discourse.

The empirical focus of the article is on long-format journalistic representations of migration along two key border zones

1.John S. Bak, "Introduction," in *The Routledge Companion to World Literary Journalism*, ed. John S. Bak and Bill Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2023), 5–6; Gérard Genette, "Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative," in *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

of the European Union: the so-called "Balkans route"[2] during the peak of the 2015 refugee crisis, and the Polish-Belarusian border, particularly the Białowieża Forest[3], which became a site of humanitarian crisis in the early 2020s. These locations are not treated primarily as geopolitical case studies, but as narrative spaces in which encounters between migrants, state actors, and local populations are rendered through specific storytelling techniques. Despite the worldwide press coverage at the time of these crises, very little has been made available in English language research on representations of migration, let alone their depiction in long-format journalism, *in the regional, i.e. East-Central European context*. There can be many reasons for this, and one certainly is the multitude of smaller regional languages in which the journalistic pieces were written. Another major difficulty is political in nature: the official narratives that framed the crisis, especially in the countries that lay at its crossroads: Fidesz-led Hungary and PiS-led Poland. Our goal is to show how long-format journalism can be seen as an antidote, as counter narrative to the official, anti-migration and anti-refugee government-initiated framing of the story (in state-captured media,[4] in political discourse, and in actual political actions).

The article proceeds by first outlining the narrative characteristics of long-format journalism as a hybrid genre, with particular attention to its capacity to generate narrative knowledge. It then situates the East-Central European context in a compressed historical frame, emphasizing how the region's specific encounters with migration have been mediated through political and media structures. The central sections of the article offer close readings of selected journalistic works—including texts by Emma Jane Kirby, Sándor Jászberényi, Mikołaj Grynberg, and Bartłomiej Sabela—focusing on the narrative strategies through which these authors construct readerly engagement and reframe dominant political narratives. The conclusion returns to the broader implications of these findings for literary studies and for the understanding of journalism as a form of cultural production that operates at the intersection of narrative, politics, and regional experience.

"Our greatest challenge in decades": The Historical and Political Context

Angela Merkel, then Chancellor of Germany, famously declared in October 2015 that the wave of refugees that reached Europe in the summer of that year was "perhaps our greatest challenge in decades."[5] By "our" she meant on the one hand the people of the European Union, and on the other the governments and decision makers of the 28 members states (the U.K. left the EU years later, in 2020). A lot has been said, researched, discussed, and written about the latter aspect of the crisis. Less has been said about how average Europeans reacted to something that, for most of them, was a new experience: in the span of a couple of weeks in the summer of 2015, huge numbers of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and other Middle-Eastern countries reached the borders of the European Union, traveling by land on what has since been called the "Balkans route." Observers of the period repeatedly noted the sense of disorientation accompanying these encounters. As Geert Mak describes in his account of travels across Europe during the crisis, *The Dream of Europe: Travels in a Troubled Continent*, signs of displacement appeared in disparate urban and peripheral spaces alike: improvised shelters along railway lines, temporary encampments in city centers, and the visible exhaustion of those in transit.[6] These scattered images, while widely circulated, remained fragmentary, often failing to cohere into a narrative that would enable sustained understanding.

2. The "Balkans route": the border zone that connects the Schengen Area of the European Union with the non-Schengen Area of the North-Western Balkans—redirected from the Mediterranean crossing, which had become too dangerous and guarded. The Schengen Area comprises 29 European countries (25 of which are EU member states) that abolished all types of border control at their mutual borders. It has a population close to 500 million people, and an area of more than 4.3 million square kilometers. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/schengen-borders-and-visa_en. Accessed March 15, 2026.

3. Less than ten years later in 2023, the Białowieża Forest on the Polish-Belarusian border became a focal point for migrants attempting to enter the EU, often facing extremely harsh conditions as they became stranded in the forest due to heightened border security measures implemented by Poland. See Ivan Zakharov and Maksim Agafoshin, "Reform of the asylum policy and control of illegal migration: pan- European and Polish approaches," *International Organisations Research Journal* 183, no. 3 (2023): 92–106. The Polish government, responding to the perceived threat of uncontrolled migration, constructed barriers and increased military presence along the border, which further complicated the situation for migrants seeking asylum. See Eunice Blavascunas and Benjamin Cope, "Wild border of politics," *Ethnologia Polona* 43 (2022): 159–177.

4. For more on this see, for example, Péter Bajomi-Lázár, "Echo chamber journalism: migration reporting in Hungary," in *The Routledge Companion to Journalism Ethics*, ed. T.P. Lada, K. Sanders, and W.N. Wyatt (London, UK: Routledge, 2021), 263–272; Oktatói Hálózat, *Hungary Turns its Back on Europe: Dismantling Culture, Education, Science and the Media in Hungary* (2010-2019), Report by the Hungarian Network of Academics, Budapest (2020), https://oktatoihalozat.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/angol.pdf. Accessed March 15, 2026; Oktatói Hálózat, *Hungary Turns its Back on Europe 2: Dismantling Culture, Education, Science and the Media in Hungary* (2020-2021), Report by the Hungarian Network of Academics, Budapest (2022). https://oktatoihalozat.hu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/hungary_turns_its_back_on_europe_2_20200308_web.pdf. Accessed March 15, 2026.

5. Quoted in Nick Thorpe, *The Road Before Me Weeps: On the Refugee Route Through Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 122.

6. Geert Mak, *The Dream of Europe: Travels in a Troubled Continent*, trans. Liz Waters (London: Penguin, 2023), 336. "As a traveler you could see signs of the exodus all over Europe in those years. Next to the railway in Budapest, tents and huts had been cobbled together out of plastic bags by refugees. In Ostend, in the elegant Venetian Galleries along the promenade, full of children and beach toys, black migrants lay asleep all over the place, exhausted. In Calais an illegal tent city grew up in the dunes. In Paris, on wasteland near the Gare du Nord, faded rags and tarpaulins were everywhere, with the occasional wooden hut and the smoke of a few fires. In Oslo there were beggars on every street corner, right out into the suburbs. In London and Berlin you could see the places where they slept under the bridges and walkways, sometimes with elaborate structures made of sleeping bags, plastic and cardboard boxes."

Instead, they contributed to a saturation of representation that risked producing distance rather than engagement. The backdrop of the crisis in the Białowieża Forest on the Polish-Belarusian border is rooted in exactly the consequences of the 2015-2016 wave of migration. The EU's response to this earlier crisis involved a shift towards the securitization of migration policies, which framed migration as a security threat rather than a humanitarian issue.[7] This securitization has led to stricter border controls and a focus on externalizing migration management, often resulting in humanitarian crises at the borders of the EU. The situation in Białowieża was intensified by the geopolitical tensions between the EU and Belarus, particularly following Belarus's controversial actions in 2021 that encouraged migrants to cross into Poland as a form of political leverage against the EU.[8] As a result, the Polish government constructed a wall, trapping fleeing refugees from Somalia, Iraq, Syria, and other conflict zones in Belarus, stateless, with no path forward or backward.

Bulgarians, Croats, Hungarians, Poles, Serbs, Slovenians, and, a little bit more generally speaking, the peoples of East-Central and South-Eastern Europe have changed and have become different people because of their experiences encountering the masses of escaping individuals and families from the Middle East, whose looks, skin color, language, culture, religion were different from theirs, and different from what they were historically used to seeing. Traditionally, the countries in these regions have not been target countries of mass migration for clear historical and political reasons. The East-Central and South-Eastern European countries, without exception, became Communist after the Second World War. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, most of them became sovereign (more or less) democratic nations, with (more or less) functioning market economies, but that still did not make them as attractive for mass migration as the West European countries. This is because of the Western European model of the social democratic welfare state that came into being after decolonization, a model that most West European countries followed. The enlargement of the European Union in 2004 initially brought changes in this respect, when the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia became EU member states (following the Czech, Hungarian, and Polish accession to NATO in 1999). Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007 and Croatia in 2023. As of 2015 both Southernmost and Easternmost borders of Hungary were effectively the Southernmost and Easternmost borders of the Schengen Area of the Union (it changed only years after the 2015 "migration crisis," when Croatia was also admitted to Schengen in 2023).[9]

What these political changes (EU, NATO, Schengen Area memberships; introduction of a democratic political system; market economy; etc.) meant was that people, mostly but not exclusively from the Global South, started to look upon these countries in the East-Central and South-Eastern European regions as potential target countries of migration. And people living in these countries, started to experience encountering Others from quite different cultures than theirs—pretty much for the very first time in their lives.[10] The fact that they were isolated in the Communist camp for four decades after the Second World War, and then not admitted to the European Union for another fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall meant that generations in the East-Central European region were unfamiliar with the phenomenon of mass migration and the sight of refugees. This set them apart from their West European counterparts in urban centers, for whom waves of refugees were part of everyday life, to varying degrees depending on the desirability of the intake country.

In East-Central Europe, this fragmentation intersected with a distinct historical trajectory. As Attila Melegh has shown, the region's comparatively strong anti-migration attitudes cannot be explained solely by the scale of migration itself, which

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7. Luca Raineri and Francesco Strazzari, "Dissecting the EU response to the 'migration crisis,'" in *The EU and crisis response*, ed. Roger MacGinty, Sandra Pogodda and Oliver P. Richmond (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 201–226; Diego Caballero Vélez and Ekaterina Krapivinitskaya, "The EU migration policy securitization process: from a domestic to a foreign dimension," *Studia z Polityki Publicznej* 4, no. 28 (2020): 105–122.

8. Shaun Walker, "Beatings, dog bites, and barbed wire: life and death on the Poland-Belarus border," *The Guardian*, October 2, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/02/beatings-dog-bites-and-barbed-wire-life-and-death-on-the-poland-belarus-border. Accessed October 5, 2026

9. Bruno Nikolić and Primož Pevcin, "How to improve sustainability of the Schengen agreement on open borders?," *International Migration* 60 (2022): 244–257.

10. So-called inter-regional migration in the Central-European region had been happening earlier, of course, but it is important to point out that those that relocated in those periods shared the same or very similar historical, cultural, linguistic, etc. backgrounds, very much *unlike* the refugees that arrived in the 21st century. After one of the largest and most powerful European states of the previous era, the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy fell in the aftermath of the First World War, migration among the so-called successor states began. It was much less possible during the four decades of Communist rule (1948 – 1989), but from the mid 1980s it got re-started: first from the Soviet satellite countries (e.g., Czechoslovakia, Hungary) to Austria (and further to the West) and then, a couple of years later, from the ex-Yugoslavia, escaping from the war there. For statistics and analysis, see Max Haller and Roland Verwiebe, "Central Europe as a Space of Transnational Migration," *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 41 (2016): 361–371. Painfully, but understandably, it was for the exact same reasons (shared historical, cultural, and social heritage) that the refugees from Ukraine (also numbering millions), after the war with Russia broke out in early 2022, were not only enthusiastically helped by nationals in the East-Central European region (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, etc.), but very warmly welcome. For the contrast between the reception of Middle Eastern refugees in 2015 versus the reception of Ukrainian refugees in 2022 see the sociological study by Judit Tóth and Anikó Bernát, "Menekültválság 2022-ben: Az Ukrajna elleni orosz agresszió menekültjeinek magyarországi fogad(tat)ása" in *Társadalmi Riport*, ed. Tamás Kolosi, Iván Szelényi and István György Tóth (Budapest: TÁRKI, 2022); and Ewa Ślęzak and Agnieszka Bielewska, "Cities' migration policies in a country with a deficit of migration policy. The case of Poland," *International Migration* 60, no. 3 (2021): 173–187.

remained relatively limited, but must be understood in relation to broader patterns of historical development and sudden integration into global processes.[11] The encounter with migration in the 2010s thus constituted not only a demographic or political event, but also a perceptual and narrative rupture—a "shock" that disrupted existing frameworks for interpreting social reality. This rupture was further intensified by the conditions of media production and political communication. In contexts where public discourse was increasingly shaped by state-sponsored messaging and highly polarized narratives, representations of migration often took the form of simplified, repetitive storylines that framed refugees as threats, intruders, or abstract masses. Such narratives operated through reduction: they minimized individual variation, suppressed temporal depth, and replaced lived experience with symbolic figures. The result was not merely a particular political stance, but a narrowing of narrative possibility itself. Against this backdrop, the significance of long-format journalism lies not simply in offering alternative content, but in reconfiguring the terms of representation. By expanding temporal scope, foregrounding individual trajectories, and constructing relational encounters between actors, these texts transform sites such as the Hungarian–Serbian border or the Białowieża Forest from geopolitical zones into narrative spaces. In these spaces, the encounter between migrants, local populations, and state authorities is not presented as a static confrontation, but as a dynamic process unfolding across time, shaped by contingency, interaction, and perspective.

A scene described by the Hungarian journalist András Földes captures this transformation at the level of perception. Writing about the southern border zone during the summer of 2015, he evokes an atmosphere in which linguistic, cultural, and sensory elements converge: "the lights of fire danced on their brown faces—conversations in Pashto, Urdu, and Arabic were mixed, and *it seemed less and less realistic that Hungary was just ten kilometers away*."[12] Such moments do not merely document events; they reorganize perception, rendering the familiar unfamiliar and the distant immediate. In doing so, they open a space in which readers are invited to engage not with an abstract "crisis," but with a narrated world structured by presence, interaction, and uncertainty.

The central argument of this article proceeds from this shift. Rather than treating the historical and political context of migration as a stable background against which journalistic texts operate, it approaches that context as something constituted, in part, through narrative mediation. Long-format journalism does not simply reflect reality; it actively shapes the ways in which that reality can be perceived, understood, and contested. Our main research question is how insights such as these based on social scientific research are translated into the register, language, and context of literary journalism. Furthermore, this article aims to bring a specific geographic region into view that is less represented in the relevant global discourse: that of East-Central and South-Eastern Europe.[13] It is important to note that standard, legacy media coverage is not the focus here,[14] nor are the fictional representations (be they textual or visual). Surprisingly, for the period between 2015 and the present, it seems that fictional representations outnumber literary journalistic pieces, and the same applies to their respective secondary literatures as well.[15] One could speculate that in times when "life is stranger than fiction," sticking to pure facts and meticulously researching and re-creating "reality," i.e., things and events as they "really" happened, is harder to do than (at least slightly) fictionalizing them.

Truth be told, especially in the context of literary journalism scholarship, one has to acknowledge that the borderline between fictional and non-fictional representations of events/characters can almost always be contested, and it is almost always porous.

To further complicate the issue, literary journalism must be understood as a hybrid narrative genre that unsettles the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. As John S. Bak observes, drawing on Gérard Genette, "fiction and nonfiction [...] fail to sustain a binary system" because both rely on shared narrative techniques.[16] Genette similarly

11. Attila Melegh, *The Migration Turn and Eastern Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 255–57.

12. András Földes, *Mit tegyünk, ha fegyvert fognak ránk?* (Budapest: Libri, 2018), 20, emphasis added. All texts translated by the authors, if not indicated otherwise.

13. For comparison, see how much has been written about similar issues in other geographic contexts, e.g., the so-called Mediterranean route (of refugees) during the 2015 European refugee crisis, e.g., Rippy Das and Kabindra Sharma, "Security Predicament of Syrian Refugees through Gender Lens in Line with EU–Turkey Joint Action Plan 2015," *International Studies* 60, no. 2 (2023): 209–230; Simon Goodman, Ala Sirriyeh, and Simon McMahon, "The Evolving (Re)Categorisations of Refugees throughout the 'Refugee/Migrant Crisis,'" *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 27, no. 2 (2017): 105–114,

14. Much has been published about this topic, i.e., media coverage of the 2015 refugee crisis in the EU. See Xu Zhang and Lea Hellmueller, "Visual Framing of the European Refugee Crisis in Der Spiegel and CNN International: Global Journalism in News Photographs," *The International Communication Gazette* 79, no. 5 (2017): 483–510; S. Parker, A. Naper, and S. Goodman, "How a Photograph of a Drowned Refugee Child Turned a Migrant Crisis into a Refugee Crisis: A Comparative Discourse Analysis," *For(e)dialogue* 2, no. 1 (2018): 12–28; Maria Avraamidou, "The 'Refugee Crisis' as a Eurocentric Media Construct: An Exploratory Analysis of Pro-Migrant Media Representations in the Guardian and the New York Times," *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 18, no. 1 (2020): 478–493.

15. See studies in the field of "refugee literature," for example Francisco Fuentes-Antrás, "Shatila as a Campscape: The Transformation of Bare Lives into 'Agent Lives' in Shatila Stories," *Humanities* 13, no. 1 (2024): 23; Areej Al-Hamad, Kateryna Metersky, and Yasin M. Yasin, "Dramatizing Care: An Ethnodrama into Syrian Refugee Women's Healthcare Challenges and Coping in Ontario, Canada," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 23 (2024).

16. Bak, "Introduction," 5.

argues that, in practice, there is neither "pure fiction" nor strictly objective history, since both involve forms of "plotting" and narrative construction.[17] Rather than a limitation, this hybridity constitutes the formal basis through which literary journalism produces meaning. This has important implications for how narratives shape public perception. In contexts marked by strong political messaging, the question is not only which representations are accurate, but which are *narratively compelling*. András Földes reflects on the Hungarian context of 2015, noting that the crisis has since been remembered as a "historic war," yet this image reflects "the extent to which propaganda rewrites reality," obscuring the fact that "the story was in a very different mood."[18] Narrative, in this sense, is not merely descriptive but constitutive: it determines how events are remembered, interpreted, and emotionally registered. At the same time, competing narrative frameworks coexist. As Geert Mak notes, the Hungarian government framed refugees as a "Trojan horse of terrorism," embedding migration within a broader ideological narrative of national defense.[19] Such formulations reduce complex human situations to simplified symbolic roles, limiting the possibility of alternative interpretations. Faced with such narratives, the problem is less one of factual verification than of narrative accessibility: which stories can readers enter, and with whom can they identify? This question of readerly engagement is central to the narrative strategies of long-format/literary journalism. Reflecting on her reporting during the crisis, Emma Jane Kirby describes a sense of "compassion fatigue," as audiences became saturated with repetitive images and stories.[20]

This shift in focalization does not change the underlying events, but it alters the conditions under which readers encounter them, creating new pathways for identification and engagement. Taken together, these examples suggest that the force of long-format journalism lies not simply in presenting alternative information, but in reorganizing narrative perspective. By foregrounding relational encounters, redistributing attention, and reshaping the structures of storytelling, these texts intervene in political discourse at the level of form. This is how one of the most celebrated, book length journalistic accounts of the 2015 migration crisis, Kirby's *The Optician of Lampadusa*, was born: "flipping the story on its head." This meant framing and forming the narrative in such way, i.e., establishing the focal point with those Europeans that were affected by the crisis, that results in the creation of an unavoidable dialogue and relation between the two major human actors of the story (migrants/refugees and Europeans that receive/confront them). This unavoidable dialogue and relationship are then re-created in the reader-narrative relation/experience, too, and this is what accounts for the book's success.. It thus manages to establish such a relationship between the reader and the story (of migration/refuge) that annihilates the "compassion fatigue" and results in solidarity and engagement.

Counter Narratives

I. "What Lampedusa is to the Mediterranean, Ásotthalom is to the Balkan route";
Or, People are not Their Governments, and How Journalism Helps Us to Understand This

In 2022, Sally Hayden's book *My Fourth Time, We Drowned*, about African refugees trying to reach Europe through the Central Mediterranean route, was named the Irish Book Awards non-fiction book of the year, and the *Kirkus* best non-fiction book of the year, among many other awards. Also in mid-April of 2022, the author published a list of "14 Books About Refugees Trying to Reach Europe" on the webpage of Electric Lit.[21] Although the subtitle makes it clear that she researched non-fiction and fiction books on African and Middle Eastern asylum-seekers in the 2010s, *none* of the fourteen mentioned focuses on the Balkans route which was used by far the most heavily by Middle Eastern refugees trying to reach Europe in the mid-2010s.[22] It is an impressive list, nonetheless, including such well-received volumes

17. Genette, "Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative," quote in Bak, "Introduction," 5-6.

18. András Földes, "2015 nyara, amikor megjelentek, majd elbújtak az embermentők," *Mérce*, September 14, 2020.

19. Geert Mak, *The Dream of Europe,* 342–43.

20. Emma Jane Kirby, "Cardiff Book Talk," video, October 28, 2021. "we knew, the time I was reporting, that there had been some sort of compassion fatigue setting in. People were saturated with the migration tale, they were seeing the same images [...] hearing the stories of migrants "Yea, I've heard that" [...] And we thought how do we try and refocus our audience's mind on one of the biggest crises and stories of our age. And we decided to flip the story on its head and instead of interviewing migrants this time [...] we would interview ordinary Italians who were affected by the migration crisis and see that if it could steer back people into focusing."

21. Sally Hayden, "14 Books about refugees trying to reach Europe" *Electric Lit,* April 11, 2022, https://electricliterature.com/14-books-about-refugees-trying-to-reach-europe/. Accessed 15 March 2026.

22. A similar blind spot can be seen with Jászberényi, Hungarian journalist, war correspondent, photojournalist, in his non-fiction book *Budapest – Kairó: egy haditudósító naplója* [Budapest-Cairo: the diary of a war correspondent]. It is about a chapter in history, the 2011 revolution in Egypt that resulted, together with other similar events that we commonly refer to as the Arab Spring, in the so-called European refugee crisis of 2015, and he writes the following. "If I go to a bookstore, there are separate shelves for the books written about the revolution by foreign [i.e., non-Egyptian, non-Arab] authors. Germans, English, and French wrote mediocre books; parachuters who only came [to Egypt] for the turmoil and the best-case scenario was that they stayed for more than two weeks. There is nowhere an Arab, and Egyptian author! It seems that the Western world is not really interested in how the Egyptians themselves saw their own revolution, at least not in large circulation, in international distribution. The Western world is only interested in how their own journalists saw and understood the events, which, let's just face it, we smoothly deliver." Sándor Jászberényi, *Budapest – Kairó: egy haditudósító naplója* [Budapest-Cairo: The Diary of a War Correspondent] (Budapest: Libri, 2013), 13.

as *The Naked Don't Fear the Water: An Underground Journey with Afghan Refugees* by Matthieu Aikins and *Don't Tell Me You're Afraid* by Guiseppe Catozzella, among others, and also features *The Optician of Lampedusa* by Kirby, referenced above. Lampedusa, a very small island in the Mediterranean Sea, which belongs to Italy but is much closer to Africa than the European continent, has thus become a symbol for both pro-migration and anti-migration sentiments. It was in the latter sense that a right-wing, conservative East-Central European weekly, *Heti Válasz* published a "warning" about "migrants" in January 2015 with the bombastic title "What Lampedusa is to the Mediterranean, Ásotthalom is to the Balkan route."[23] Ásotthalom is a small town in the southern part of Hungary with two thirds of the population of the Mediterranean island (four thousand vs. six thousand). But size is not important as location.

Nick Thorpe, a BBC correspondent who has lived in Hungary for more than thirty years and calls it his "adopted country," published a non-fiction book on migration-related topics in his region of the world, i.e., East-Central and South-Eastern Europe, titled *The Road Before Me Weeps: On the Refugee Route Through Europe*. He writes the following about this small town, which is likened to Lampedusa in the weekly cited above:

> "Ásotthalom had become the main bottleneck for migrants entering Hungary from the Balkans, and the reason was abundantly clear. At one point the motorway ran only 500 metres from the Hungarian border. When I returned to the village a few days later, the rain had turned to snow. This time there were Afghans, Africans, and Syrians beside the Kosovars, huddled round small fires beside the main road, watched over by nervous policemen. The Kosovars were treading the grass flat on the Balkan route, for all the other nationalities to follow."[24]

The first wave of migrants who chose this route were the tens of thousands (if not hundreds of thousands) of refugees from Kosovo to the European Union in the 1990s; in the mid-2010s, the Middle-Eastern refugees also chose this route as their main way to Europe by land. People on the run seeking shelter and a safer life, often with their families, and official personnel on the other side of the border at Ásotthalom clearly had no clue as to how to handle the situation in the summer of 2015. Thorpe continues:

> "'Where the fuck are the Maltese?' one of the police shouted into his walkie-talkie, referring to the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta. A grey-bearded Afghan man approached us in tears carrying a child in his arms. The three-year-old boy had not been able to sleep or keep food or water down for several days. He vomited everything back immediately and had a high fever. We laid the child on the back seat of my car and explained the situation to the police. A coach was supposed to arrive soon to take all the refugees to the police registration centre in Szeged where the child would get medical care. Around the embers of a fire, the man's three other children crouched with their mother, eating apples given them by locals."[25]

Many types of people and organizations involved in the drama are present in this scene: 1) a policeman, 2) a charity organization, 3) a refugee (grown up), 4) a minor refugee, 5) a volunteer helper (the author himself), 6) the police, 7) a registration centre, 8) medical support, 9) a female refugee, a mother, 10) the locals (Hungarians from Ásotthalom). This inventory could be seen as components of what social scientists calls "transnational social spaces,"[26] particularly in the context of migration/refugee studies. As Haller and Verwiebe remark when researching patterns and changes in migration in the Central-European region in the past 30-35 years:

> "Today, migration is not any more a simple process, involving a single and definite decision to move to another country, and to settle there forever; rather, it involves several stages of moving to another place, staying there for shorter or longer periods of time, and moving back to the home country or moving back and forth between countries. These processes are supported by modern means of communication and much more efficient means of traffic and transport."[27]

The above list of actors does contain most of the human and non-human agents that co-create "transnational social spaces" in the context of migration and refugee studies.[28] However, an additional element is missing (which is unambiguously featured in Thorpe's book, too, but not in the paragraph cited above): government produced propaganda.

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23. Qtd. in Thorpe, *The Road Before Me Weeps*, 15.

24. Ibid., 19.

25. Ibid., 20.

26. Ayse Caglar, "Transnational Migration," in *Routledge Handbook of Immigration and Refugee Studies*, second edition, ed. Anna Triandafillydou (London: Routledge, 2023), 34–43.

27. Haller and Verwiebe, "Central Europe as a Space of Transnational Migration."

28. For many other, equally relevant aspects see Triandafillydou, *Routledge Handbook of Immigration and Refugee Studies*.

As is well-documented, during this crisis and in its aftermath, a growing number of European countries re-elected right-wing, often populist governments and the continuous rise of right-wing and far-right political parties could be observed. That was the case in Austria,[29] France, Hungary, Poland, Switzerland and in some Scandinavian countries as well. Hungary has the distinction among these countries of having had a populist, right-wing, anti-migration government in place since from 2010. If one is confronted everywhere by pieces of a coherent narrative[30] with the sole mission of getting a brutally simple, primitive, and easy to understand (but grossly misleading) message through to the people, then logic would dictate that a counter-narrative would emerge. In a media environment absolutely saturated with propaganda that re-shapes reality, the counter-narrative provided by literary journalism is one of the only alternative truths that can break through the propaganda and reach people directly, sometimes with shock and hyperreal emotional registers.

II. "If you come to Hungary, you cannot take the Hungarians' jobs away"

One powerful demonstration of a counter-narrative, by Hungarian journalist and writer Sándor Jaszberényi, is *A varjúkirály* [*The Crow King*] (2020), written in a hybrid genre. To help the reader get their bearings, something quite unusual happens early on: in addition to the standard disclaimer that "the similarity of the stories and reality is the result of pure coincidence," the reader is also informed on the very same page that the cover photo of the book jacket is a picture of "refugees marching along the [Hungarian] border towards Austria in September 2015." There should be no doubt about the verisimilitude of the narrative, which is further supported by verbatim [italicized] quotes taken from various media outlets of the day.[31] For Jászberényi, who is also a photojournalist and war correspondent, pictures are extremely important. In his most recent bilingual documentary photography book, *Ten Years' Wars* (2022), he claims: "[...] the photo has one remarkable feature: it cannot be disputed. [...] A documentary photograph lacks fantasy."[32]

The narrative of *A varjúkirály* [*The Crow King*] takes place in the barely fictionalized Ásotthalom ("Átokháza" in the story) and its vicinity, the border zone between Hungary and Serbia, i.e., the land between Schengen Europe and non-EU "rest of the world." The reader is hit with rock hard reality as early as lines 8 and 9 of the first page that throws the rather hostile phrase "IF YOU COME TO HUNGARY, YOU CANNOT TAKE THE HUNGARIANS' JOB AWAY."[33] The story introduces composite characters (cf. many characters in, for example, Kapuscinski's literary journalism) and very real events that focus on the activities of semi-legal groups that "defend the Hungarian borders." The Serbs are blamed for "putting them on buses and directing the Arabs to Hungary" and the refugees are accused of (potentially) "setting your house on fire," and "taking our jobs away," etc.[34] The actions against the refugees get more and more inhumane, brutal, violent, and cruel. Tension builds up in the narrative and quotes are taken verbatim from media of the day, significantly contributing to this effect. Jászberényi employs a very specific technique, a kind of collage, alternating between documentary fragments from the news media and emotionally brutal extrapolated narrative elements. One documentary news piece reads like this: "Underage Hungarian woman raped by migrant on train. The foreign man forced the woman into the bathroom and raped her."[35] The gang reacts to this kind of news with "It is now war" (273). They take revenge on a group of five: a man and woman in their fifties, a teenage girl and two teenage boys (apparently a family of unknown origin). The gang forces

29. As for Austria, see, for example, Paul Lendvai, *Vielgeprüftes Österreich: Ein kritischer Befund zur Zeitenwende (Ausztria álarc nélkül: kritikus látlelet a korszakhatáron)* [Austria without a mask: a critical vision of the frontier], trans. Lídia Nádori (Budapest: Corvina, 2022), 77.

30. Propaganda was indeed coherent and all over: as part of what political scientists call "state capture," media capture also happened already in the early 2010s and thus a nation-wide campaign was easy to initiate and manage in Hungary. Print and online, digital, and social media all churned out anti-refugee and anti-migration propaganda. For the East-Central European media scene see Bajomi-Lázár, „Migráció és média.". For a very convincing account about the major differences between how the respective governments and media systems of the two key player countries in the crisis, in the region under investigation, Hungary and Serbia managed and framed the events and issues, see Toma Viktória Zakinszky, "Sajtóinformációk szerint": Migránsok, menekültek és menedékkérők Magyarországon és Szerbiában," *Médiakutató* 22, no. 3-4 (2021): 79–87. In short, what is found and proven with empirical data in that research is that the Serbian reaction was a lot more welcoming and humanitarian than the official Hungarian one. On significant differences between official vs. semi- or non-official reception of internationally relevant cultural and media issues in contemporary Hungarian intellectual history see György Túry, "The Institutionalization of Memory Politics in a Hybrid Political Regime," *New German Critique* 50, no. 2 (2023): 133–154, 149.

31. Personal conversations with the author also confirm this statement.

32. Ibid., 12. Fantasy still has one crucial function to play, even in creating non-fiction narratives: that of the organizing force of giving form to the narrative. For example, in deciding questions like what to include, what not to include; who to introduce in the narrative and who to omit; what details to be emphasized and which ones not to, etc.

33. In the billboard campaign that was already in full swing in the summer of 2015 one could see such signs: ironically enough in Hungarian! Clearly, the target audience could not have been the non-Hungarian speaking refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, etc. Rather: the ruling party wanted to get this message through to its actual and potential supporters. (Capital letters in original text.) For a photograph of the billboards with this text see https://24.hu/kozelet/2015/10/09/nem-vettek-el-a-magyarok-munkajat/, accessed March 15, 2026.

34. Sándor Jászberényi, *A várjúkirály* [The crow king] (Budapest: Kalligram, 2020), 232, 226.

35. Ibid., 271.

them get naked, take all their possessions, brutally beat them (some to death), and gang rape the young girl ("look at the tattoed little bitch" [275]). After this graphically brutal, and gory climax, the very last page of the text informs the reader that the "border guards" are warmly received by the local police and encouraged "to join their ranks to protect the border" (319) (though the police do not know about the criminal deeds of the gang).[36]

Through this montage structure, Jászberényi transforms mediated discourse into experiential narrative, allowing readers to grasp how abstract rhetoric acquires affective and material consequences. The text thus produces a form of narrative knowledge that cannot be reduced to factual reporting alone. Instead, it reveals the mechanisms through which stories shape perception, emotion, and ultimately action. In doing so, the text functions as a counter-narrative to Hungarian political propaganda by exposing how its reductive and inflammatory rhetoric is narratively constructed—and how it translates into lived violence.

III. "Everytime we went out into the forest, we crossed more borders."[37]

Two recent works of Polish literary journalism that use similarly documentary detail are *Jezus umarł w Polsce* [Jesus Died in Poland] by the journalist Mikołaj Grynberg and "The Promised Land," the long-format text by Bartłomej Sabela mentioned above. Grynberg's account intertwines a series of interviews with those directly involved in providing assistance to refugees in the Podlasie region. He is able to document not just the fear of those trapped at the border, but also those helping them: "You hand someone a bottle of water and look around to see if anyone can see you. That's when I really started to get scared, because there were reports that, besides those people who were looking for refugees, there were also those who were looking for helpers. Apart from one case, however, nothing bad happened. Then they smashed the cars of the Medics at the border."[38] This feeling of isolation within Polish society, due to the distance from official discourse and the particularly xenophobic tendencies of this part of rural Poland, made critic Justyna Szklarczyk invoke a post-traumatic, post-memory comparison in reading Grynberg's narrative; she sees a direct response to the Polish cultural memory of the Holocaust, and the „crisis of association" with an oppressed people (interestingly, one absolutely not present in the Polish response to Ukrainian refugees).[39] Grynberg's emphasis on the risks taken, the sense of catastrophe, and the overall feeling of hopelessness on the part of the volunteers might seem like a distraction from the real victims of the humanitarian crisis, but it provides a narrative bridge to the identification of the reader with refugees in the forest, a border-crossing of identity towards those who have been dehumanized in the Polish official depiction of the refugees. Another aid worker reports: "one of the hardest moments in the forest is when they thank us. It's terribly embarrassing, I break down completely, because I feel like they shouldn't be thanking me, I should be thanking them, it is I who should apologize to them. We cry with them."[40] If anything, the state of abject helplessness depicted by Grynberg is a reflection of the feeling that we all feel when witnessing a humanitarian crisis unfolding in journalistic media and calls on Poles to turn that same compassion they feel for all acts of injustice to their own Eastern border.[41]

Sabela takes a different approach to providing a counter-narrative, that of intense humanization of individuals. His long-format piece "Kraina Obiecana" [Promised Land] provides a strong echo in its title of the 1899 novel by Władysław Reymont, *Ziemia Obiecana,* which is also translated as "Promised Land" in English.[42] Reymont's novel is a work of critical realism that exposes the exploitation of Polish works in the industrialization of Łódź, so bears little in common thematically with the crisis in the Białowieża Forest, but it shares a similar strategy of developing characters for the reader to intensely empathize with, only to have them suffer a cruel fate. This literary strategy manifests in the structure of "Kraina Obiecana," which alternates between backstories of individual refugees

36. Unfortunately, such atrocities happen every day, everywhere. Staying in East-Central Europe, in the report *Violence and Pushback at Poland-Belarus Border*, a refugee is quoted to say "We had walked in freezing cold and snow for seven to eight hours when Belarusian guards caught us and we were wet, tired, and without energy. After forcing us to pay money, they [Belarusians] took us to the Polish border and made us go through. We walked about two or three kilometers in Poland before we got arrested. They [Polish border guards] destroyed our phones and they took my bank card [...] I asked them to show us respect and because I did, I was kicked, punched, tasered, and pepper sprayed."

37. Grynberg quoted in Justyna Szklarczyk, "Strategie unikania. Recenzja książek Dobrosława Kota 'Tratwa Odysa. Esej o uchodźcach' i Mikołaja Grynberga 'Jezus umarł w Polsce'" [Strategies of Avoidance: A Review of Dobrosław Kot's *Odysseus's Raft: An Essay on Refugees* and Mikołaj Grynberg's *Jesus Died in Poland*], *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2023): 157–168, 165.

38. Mikołaj Grynberg, *Jezus umarł w Polsce* [Jesus died in Poland] (Warsaw: Agora, 2023), 18.

39. Szklarczyk, "Strategia unikania," 165.

40. Grynberg, *Jezus umarł,* 61.

41. The subject position of the bystander is one of the most difficult roles to capture in any medium and is a common trope of East-Central European literature and culture. See Jessie Labov, "Cold Days in the Cold War on the Hungarian-Serbian border," *Slavic and East European Cinema* 6, no. 2 (2015): 139–153.

42. The difference between the word 'kraina' and 'ziemia' are significant, as *kraina* denotes kingdom or domain, a territorial sense of land, and ziemia is closer to earth that can be plowed. This is also an explicit reference to Ziemia Obiecana [The Promised Land], an 1899 novel by Władysław Reymont depicting multiethnic coexistence and exploitation of labor in late 19th century Łódź.

(Sabela even travels to their country of origin as an act of reportage, explaining the details of the crisis that led each individual to flee their country), the narrative of their arrival at the Polish border and experiences there, and a larger framework of the wider context of Polish migration policy, European attitudes towards refugees, and photographs and infographics supporting each aspect. As a result, the reader goes on journey after journey from each country of origin, with an individual refugee and their family, just to end up at the Polish border in harsh conditions. One refugee's moment of trying to cross in the forest is depicted by Sabela as a familiar scene from Polish history:

> "In the evening, by bobbing flashlights, the soldiers yell as they pack people onto trucks, the children cry. This time the ride is long, Umed fears that they are on the way back to Lithuania. There are legends about the cruelty of Lithuanian border guards, spread by Belarusian guards and Lukashenko's regime media. And on top of that, the terrain is difficult, including swamps and the Nemunas River. To their relief, it's Poland. At night, they hear drones flying in the distance, otherwise all is quiet. But as the migrants pass over planks above the barbed wire, a Polish patrol suddenly appears. The Belarusians lay into the Poles with pepper spray, there is chaos, screams. Belarusian soldiers push Umed to the Polish side, he runs as fast as he can into the forest, catching up with a group of young Kurds from Syria. He asks them to wait, but they refuse."[43]

As Szklarczyk comments about Grynberg's narrative, the intense familiarity of the situation from experiences of the Polish twentieth century represents a two-step process in Sabela's narrative: first, we as readers engage with each individual's past, context, family, personality, and fundamental humanity; then, we follow them in their flight through the primeval Polish forest, trapped by higher powers and geopolitical influences over which they have no control. And Poland is the promised land. The power of these documentary voices, as well as the literary fiction that draws on them, raises vital questions in this context. To what extent can one relate to the raw numbers of migrants that sociologists often use in describing these phenomena? How effectively can statistics that policy makers might use create a profound reaction in us? How much are we expected to believe in government announcements and policies? How can we fight propaganda, fake news, misleading information, hate speech? The position of this article is that one of the most effective ways to reach people through the official anti-immigrant discourse is through the production, dissemination, and consumption of counter-narratives. What this article has tried to demonstrate is that they are among the very best tools we have to combat the repressive, bigoted forces that surround us all in the very compex and dangerous world we live in: stories that we can relate and respond to with all that we as human beings have. Literary journalism is a prime tool to mobilize these much needed agents.

Conclusion

The case studies analyzed here demonstrate that the power of literary journalism lies precisely in its hybrid narrative status. As Bak and Genette suggest, the instability of the boundary between fiction and non-fiction is not a weakness but a generative condition that enables narrative to operate across epistemic registers. In Kirby's strategic reconfiguration of focalization, Jászberényi's montage of media fragments and fictional extrapolation, Grynberg's testimonial polyphony, and Sabela's character-driven narrative arcs, we observe a shared set of formal operations: the redistribution of narrative perspective, the embedding of individual trajectories within broader structures, and the transformation of mediated discourse into experiential knowledge. These techniques do not merely represent reality more vividly; they reorganize the reader's cognitive and affective engagement with it, producing a mode of understanding that exceeds both statistical abstraction and ideological simplification.

What emerges across these texts is a consistent redefinition of narrative authority itself. Rather than deriving authority solely from factual accuracy or documentary evidence, literary journalism establishes credibility through its capacity to construct relational worlds in which readers can situate themselves. This is what we have termed narrative knowledge: a form of knowing that arises from temporal immersion, perspectival shifts, and the ethical demands of witnessing. In the East-Central European context, where political discourse has often functioned through reduction, repetition, and symbolic polarization, such narrative strategies reopen the field of interpretation. They make visible not only the lived realities of migration, but also the narrative mechanisms through which those realities are distorted, instrumentalized, or obscured. In this sense, literary journalism does not simply oppose propaganda at the level of content; it intervenes at the level of form, exposing and reconfiguring the narrative structures that sustain it.

The specificities of the genre of literary journalism make it possible, perhaps imperative, to do not only meticulous fieldwork and research, but also to form their material in a way that makes it way more impactful and enduring than

43. Bartłomiej Sabela, "Kraina obiecana/Promised Land," *Pismo*, August 7, 2024, https://magazynpismo.pl/soczewka/the-promised-land/, accessed March 15, 2026.

the mainstream media snippets of the day that surround us. As Mark Deuze remarks, we no longer live *with* media, but we live *in* media: a lot depends on what exactly the medium is like that we all live in.[44] Literary journalism, as so many of its practitioners and researchers have made clear, can offer something that many other, more often consumed media formats simply cannot: a more intimate engagement with the events, people, and phenomena that they introduce. It provides the kind of narrative knowledge that often transforms into actual action and is capable of mobilizing agents (human beings, organizations, interest groups, etc.). If journalism of any kind has ever had any mission, this is it.

The significance of literary journalism in challenging dominant, state-sponsored narratives extend far beyond East-Central Europe. More broadly, the patterns of narrative control, media suppression, and counter-narrative resistance seen in East-Central Europe mirror global trends that warrant urgent scholarly and public attention. The rise of nationalist, populist, and anti-immigrant political forces worldwide has coincided with systematic attempts to reshape public discourse through disinformation, censorship, and media co-optation.

In an era where media ecosystems are increasingly controlled by political and economic interests, the role of independent, fact-based narrative in shaping public perception and policy responses to migration is critical worldwide. From the United States' southern border to the refugee camps of Bangladesh and the Mediterranean crossings into Europe, journalists have served as witnesses to humanitarian crises that governments often seek to obscure or reframe. Their work not only documents human rights violations but also forces the public to confront the lived realities of displacement, suffering, and resilience at a time when that public is very willing to look away, believe xenophobic narratives that privilege their position over any outside. Media scholars of East-Central Europe have already described the empathy gap between the reception of Ukrainian refugees and those from the global south; the texts we have described in this article are seeking to fill it. In this context, fact-based narratives—grounded in rigorous fieldwork, ethical reporting, and human-centered storytelling—become indispensable tools for civic engagement and policy critique.

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