



# Advertising Populism in Hungary

## *Populism Rising*

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**In 2015 the government used billboards to promote its anti-immigration stance. A satirical opposition hit back.**

Visitors to Hungary in the spring of 2015 were likely to see blue billboards scattered around the country, primarily in the capital city of Budapest. While they may have noticed that several were defaced, it is unlikely they would have understood the message or its purpose, although the messages were ostensibly directed toward outsiders. In Hungarian the white text told would-be migrants to keep out or, if they must come, to abide by Hungarian laws. Unsurprisingly, the billboards were ineffective in keeping out migrants, but they did achieve their real purpose: to foment public anxieties about immigration, incite fear of outsiders, and create a climate of xenophobia favorable to the right-wing populist government. The billboards appeared on the Hungarian landscape prior to the refugee crisis of 2015, but were essential in framing the government's response and providing support for its isolationist policies.

## **"If you come to Hungary, you have to keep our laws"**

In 2010, the right-wing national populist party, Fidesz, gained political control of the Hungarian parliament and Viktor Orbán was appointed prime minister. Migration did not appear on the political radar until January 2015 when Orbán made an [anti-immigration speech](#) following the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, which seemed to resonate with the public. Soon after, the government initiated a [National Consultation on Immigration and Terrorism](#) to survey public attitudes. One question on the national survey, for example, asked: "There are some who think that mismanagement of the immigration question by Brussels may have something to do with increased terrorism. Do you agree with this view?" Through the use of use of heavily biased push polling

questions such as this one, the survey showed that the Hungarian people were extremely concerned about protecting their borders.



**A defaced government sponsored billboard. The text, which has been painted over, reads "If you come to Hungary, you must keep our laws!" Stefan Roch**

The billboards were a powerful visual representation of the survey results; they proudly displayed nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric that presumably came from a concerned public, not the government. One read, “If you come to Hungary, you have to keep our laws.” Another, “If you come to Hungary, don’t take Hungarian jobs!” The messages were written in Hungarian, a language rarely spoken outside of Hungary, and supposedly aimed at economic migrants who, as Orbán explained in the introductory letter to the [survey](#), cross the border illegally to “enjoy our welfare systems and employment opportunities.” While directed at these nameless, faceless, dangerous migrants massing at the borders, the billboards were intended for a domestic, Hungarian audience. Public opinion was “measured” by the survey and then distributed in such a way that made invasion seem imminent.

The **2014 Eurobarometer** survey indicated that few Europeans considered migration a top concern but by June 2015, the situation had changed. During what has been called “Europe’s refugee crisis” hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and other Middle Eastern and Northern African countries entered Europe with the aim of gaining asylum in Germany or another relatively welcoming Western European country. Most passed through Hungary, which

borders Europe's **Schengen Area** in which free travel is allowed. From **June to September**, humanitarian organizations and individual activists worked to provide food, shelter, and **information** to migrants traversing the country. Conversely, the government maintained its xenophobic position, and rather than investing in infrastructure for processing asylum seekers, put governmental resources towards the construction of a border fence. A government spokesperson expressed the administration's rationale:

We have always emphasized that the first issue you do is to control your borders. If you're not able to control your borders, anything else—talking about the quota, thinking in terms of treating and feeding and solving the problem is impossible because if you're not in control, then it's impossible to introduce any kind of measure (personal communication, June 2015).



**A poster sponsored by Kétfarkú kutya pointing to the number of Hungarian citizens who emigrate in search of better economic opportunities elsewhere in Europe. Stefan Roch**

On September 15, 2015 the government erected a razor wire fence to close the Serbian border and on October 16, the border with Croatia was sealed. From this point on, the border was only open at two **"transit zones"** along the southern border.

The border fence and other anti-immigrant policies were quite effective and the flow of asylum seekers into Hungary effectively stopped. Despite the fact that there were now very few migrants or refugees in the country, the government maintained a strong rhetoric of anxiety over border security and a sense of national belonging. In the run-up to the **referendum on the EU's migrant quota plan** to require member states to each settle a proportionate number of asylum claimants

held on October 2, 2016, [a second government sponsored billboard campaign](#) hit the streets, this one aimed at “informing” the public of the threat posed by migrants and sending a message of rebellion to Brussels. Here are some examples of messages:

- Did you know? The Paris attacks were committed by migrants.
- Did you know? Brussels wants to deport the equivalent of a town of migrants to Hungary.
- We send a message to Brussels so they understand it, too!

Despite a low voter turnout (40.4 percent), 98 percent of those who took part voted in favor of the government’s plan to reject the EU proposal. The result represented a victory for the government but with a lower than 50 percent turnout, the results were nonbinding.

Critics of the government assert that the anti-immigrant messages serve only to distract the public away from other more pressing issues such as [health care](#) and [education](#). And while this may be the case, the referendum and its campaign slogans displayed on billboards across the country allowed Orbán and his party to point to evidence that “the people” do not want outsiders in Hungary. In an interview with the news site [portal888.hu](#), Orbán declared, “It is not the Hungarian government rebelling; it is the people, and the government represents what the people want.” With this claim to represent the popular will, the current regime has criminalized migration, severely restricted access to humanitarian aid, and advocated for placing all [asylum seekers in detention](#) while their applications are under review.

### **“Did you know? People are not stupid”**

Far from creating the voice of a homogenous public, the billboard campaign has opened up a space for dissent and protest. During the first campaign, government billboards were routinely defaced and [alternative posters](#) put up; many by the satirical political party [Kétfarkú kutya part](#) (Two-Tailed Dog Party, MKKP). These messages were primarily in English and proclaimed “Sorry about our Prime Minister!” and “Come to Hungary, We’ve got jobs in London!” During the government’s 2016 ““Did you know?” campaign, a number of rival posters announced:

- Did you know? There is a war in Syria.
- Did you know? People are not stupid.
- Did you know? More than 1 million people want to leave Hungary for Europe.

These slogans poked fun at the government’s claims while also highlighting Hungary’s socio-economic problems, which are prompting many in the intellectual class to emigrate westwards (precisely the aim of many economic migrants). In this case, satire is particularly effective because it



is one of the only avenues of resistance available to citizens. Hungary's media is largely controlled by the government or those closely affiliated with the ruling party. The left-wing opposition is fragmented and lacks a strong leader. As such, those who oppose the government often lack a medium through which to voice their objections. They might also be afraid to voice dissent since so many Hungarians are reliant on the public sphere for employment. The satirical posters provide a safe and simple way to express disapproval.



**A Kétfarkú kutya billboard reads, "If you are the Hungarian Prime Minister, you must keep our laws!" Stefan Roch**

In purporting to demonstrate evidence of populist support, the government's billboard campaign fabricated consensus among the Hungarian public, manufactured an image of lawless migrants, and stoked a discourse of crisis in which the borders of the nation were under imminent threat. Plastering these messages across the physical landscape of Hungary, the government demonized migrants and effectively provided the false impression that support for their policies is greater than it actually is. Very few people turned out for the referendum vote and most of my informants in Hungary characterize the public as being fairly apathetic on the issue, "Hungarians don't care, but if they do, they are on the right." That being said, the satirical posters have claimed some success. A similar protest poster campaign attempted to derail government ambitions to host the [2024 Olympics](#) with a message that the money would be better spent on socio-economic areas like health services and education. However, Fidesz's anti-immigrant position still appears an effective tool in galvanizing the support of those who turn out to vote, and the billboards are just one of the ways in which the party crafts itself as the authentic voice of "the people."

More recently, the government has continued to strengthen its anti-immigrant stance. On March 7, 2017, parliament approved a measure to detain all asylum seekers in detention camps constructed from [converted shipping containers](#) until their cases are heard. At the same time, Orbán has called for a new national consultation—this time focused on the civil sector—and framed nongovernmental organizations as one of “[five threats](#)” facing Hungary (including immigration). This current position was made possible in part by the billboard campaigns that helped to create and maintain a public majority that is supportive of such isolationist policies. Push-back, although present, is relatively quiet and unable to stem the right-wing populist tide.

**Andria D. Timmer** is assistant professor of anthropology at Christopher Newport University. Broadly, her research concerns civil society, particularly in Hungary. Her recently published book, [Educating the Hungarian Roma](#) (2016), explores civil sector action to provide quality education to Roma youth. Her current research investigates humanitarian responses to refugees entering Hungary.

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