Hungary's New Immigrants

Co-organised by the Institute of Sociology
and the Institute for Minority Studies at ELTE Centre for Social Sciences,
and the Institute for Global Studies, Corvinus University of Budapest

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ELTE Centre for Social Sciences
Budapest 9, Tóth K.u. 4. Room K.0.11–12.
Zoom link

The most recent academic volume aimed at producing a comprehensive understanding of Hungary's immigration situation was published in 2010 (Hárs and Tóth 2010). That volume noted that the share of immigrants both in the country's population and especially in the work force was among the lowest in the European Union (Hárs 2010:20-22). In the two decades following the 1990 democratic transition, immigration and immigration policy had not been a subject of public debate. With the exception of the migration of ethnic Hungarians from neighbouring countries, immigration had been treated as a policing issue. Discussions about the benefits and risks of immigration and the desirability of an immigration strategy had not gone beyond a narrow circle of academics and professionals (Tóth 2010).

In 2015, this changed: after the European "refugee crisis," the Hungarian government made combatting immigration a centrepiece of its political discourse, where it has remained since (Barlai and Sik 2017).

In September 2015, Hungary's Parliament declared a state of emergency caused by mass immigration, which has been perpetually extended, allowing the government to rule by decree.

Yet the government maintained an investment-for-immigration scheme it had launched two years earlier, eventually approving around 20,000 applications under it. It also launched a drive to attract more foreign students. By 2022, there were 40 thousand foreign students in the country. Many of these students end up in the work force and stay in the country after graduation. This was followed by the decision, in 2017, to facilitate the introduction of temporary workers from selected countries outside the EU. Beyond this new legislation targeting specific categories of migrants, there is evidence that the issuance of work permits and residential visas based on existing legal frameworks was quietly liberalised. In total, according to official statistics, the number of foreign citizens residing in Hungary grew from 140 to 251 thousand between 2013 and 2024, with Asians registering the steepest growth, from 27 to 93 thousand.

In other words, in the past decade, the Hungarian government has pro-actively facilitated immigration while discursively thematising it in a negative fashion, both of which represents a break with the past. This shift coincided with a gradual shift in both European and global migration patterns. Within Europe, two trends are of particular significance here. First, westward labour migration from the "new," Eastern member states of the European Union caused labour shortages attracting migration from farther east to fill available jobs, causing a "migration transition." (Compared to other countries in the region, this transition took place in Hungary with some delay, as large-scale labour emigration did not take place until after 2010.) Second, Eastern Europe slowly emerged as a destination of Western European lifestyle (particularly retirement) migration (Davies, Hayes, and Feischmidt 2022). On a global scale, beyond continuing economic migration and flight from poorer countries, an increasingly salient phenomenon is the rise of middle-class lifestyle migration. As a result of this trend, the semiperipheries of Europe and Asia are increasingly emerging as destinations of both labour and lifestyle migration (Nyíri and Xiang 2022). An exploration of the changing migration scene in Hungary will help us understand these broader processes.

This informal workshop aims both to take stock of the diversity of the new immigration to Hungary and to restart regular exchanges among scholars active in this field. We invite contributions on all aspects of immigration and immigration policy. Emphasis will be on discussion, for which we plan to leave ample time, as much as on individual papers. The workshop will be open to all interested. Online participation is possible.

CORVINUS UNIVERSITY of BUDAPEST

ELTE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES INSTITUTE FOR SOCIOLOGY

ELTE INSTITUTE FOR MINORITY STUDIES CENTRE FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES

Hungary's New Immigrants

9.00–9.15
Welcome

Boldizsár Megyesi, Director,
Institute for Sociology, Centre for Social Sciences

Margit Feischmidt, Institute for Minority Studies,
Centre for Social Sciences

Introductory remarks

The last fifteen years of migration and migration studies in Hungary

NYÍRI Pál, Corvinus University of Budapest, and Institute for Minority Studies, Centre for Social Sciences

9.15–11.15
PANEL 1.
Labour migration

Guest work in Hungary
Many or few, typical or atypical

HÁRS Ágnes, Kopint-TÁRKI

Despite – or perhaps because of – the anti-immigration narrative in Hungarian public discourse, the presence of foreign nationals in Hungary —particularly within the labour market—has been steadily increasing. Over the past decade since 2015, both national and Eurostat data indicate a remarkable expansion, the growth has been impressive over the decade since 2015. The number of immigrants with foreign citizenship has almost doubled (increasing by 175%). The most substantial growth has occurred among those staying for employment purposes (more than 2.5 times), while the number of those staying for study purposes nearly doubled, as well as the small number of those under international protection.
The composition of residence purposes has also shifted considerably. The share of foreigners residing for employment purpose increased by 13 percentage points, while other categories have declined proportionally. More than half (56%) of the total increase is attributable to employment-related migration, followed by those staying for study purposes (17%) and permanent residents (7%). The relatively high proportion of individuals classified under "other" or "unknown" categories (12%) suggests the need for further clarification and analysis. Despite this dynamic expansion, immigrants still constitute a relatively small share of the Hungarian population (2.7 per cent in 2024, compared to 1.5 per cent in 2015). The paper interrogates the extent to which this quantitatively modest yet structurally significant change affects the Hungarian labour market and broader socio-economic context, and how it is shaped by, and interacts with, an enduring anti-immigration narrative.
Drawing on comparative statistical analysis within a regional and European framework, the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the emerging patterns of labour migration to Hungary and their implications for national labour market restructuring, migration governance, and societal perceptions of foreign workers.

Remittances from Hungary
Overseas Filipino Workers and the flow of care

Andrew LACSINA, University of the Philippines, Diliman, and Venes Carmelo Tiñana BANQUILES, Ateneo de Manila (online)

The numbers of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) in Hungary has exponentially increased. According to Hungarian and Philippine governmant data, there were only 374 documented Filipino migrants in Hungary in 2019. In March 2024, there were already 11,637 Filipino migrants, which include both Overseas Filipinos (OFs) and Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). By December 2024 the number of Filipinos in Hungary increased to 16,098 (Presidential Communications Office). The Hungarian government's policy on the so-called 'guest workers' significantly contributed to this increase, through which the state welcomed outsourced migrant labor force mostly from countries from the Global South. Further, the Hungarian government on January 1, 2025 included the Philippines in countries allowed to send 'guest workers' to Hungary, alongside Georgia and Armenia. This situation seemingly makes Hungary a welcoming country to migrants. On the contrary, however, the Hungarian state remains anti-migrant both in discourse and propaganda. The situation therefore presents an irony that Hungary has been trying to pave the way for their migration regulatory infrastructure (Chee, 2017; Xiang & Lindquist, 2014) to OFWs because the state consider them as diligent workers, proficient English speakers, and people who have a deep Catholic faith that fits the current agenda of the Hungarian state in maintaining traditional family values, yet is their main institutional antagonist. Despite the state-sponsored propaganda against these migrants who fill in the labor lacuna, OFWs continue to thrive amidst precarious labor circumstances.
Within the influx of OFWs in Hungary, and Hungary being a new participant in the global labor migration of Filipinos, the amount of remittances to the Philippines is also expected to gradually increase. Remittances interest us not only because it is a salient feature of Filipino overseas migration, but also because they serve as important means of translo-

cality (Mckay, 2004) and are central to the making and maintaining of transnational Filipino families. Observing the remittance flow and transaction to the home country might be an over-researched area (Carling, 2020). However, the economic practice of sending remittances remains a relevant research area because these financial transactions entail a multi-faceted experience, with consequences far beyond the economic realm (Carling, 2020; Meyer, 2023). In this paper, we conceptualize the sending of remittances as a practice of care that allows for at least three things: surviving migration, doing family, and maintaining transnational relations. In thinking care through, we follow Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's definition: care is everything that is done to maintain, continue, and repair "the world" so that all can live in it as well as possible (2017, p. 161).
Drawing from in-depth interviews with Filipinos in various Hungarian cities, we look at the remittance practices of OFWs as a multi-directional process of care between OFWs and their families. We argue that beyond mere sending of cash, remittances are what keep Filipino transnational families 'kept', both maintained and sustained, disturbed and unsettled.

Privileging the underprivileged
Hungary as both lifestyle and survival destination for Indonesian migrant workers

PAMUNGKAS A. DEWANTO, Waseda University (online), and NYÍRI Pál, Corvinus University of Budapest

This paper seeks to address two main questions with regard to the placement of Indonesian workers to Hungary. First, it asks what Europe, as a new destination, means to migrating and non-migrating actors in Indonesia. Unlike Southeast or East Asian destinations, which have a strong infrastructural connectivity with Indonesian migration industries, European countries, apart from the colonial legacies of the Netherlands, have little historical foundation that would trigger a strong migration profile from Indonesia. While the expansion of migration facilitators to Central Europe is a readily visible aspect of this growing migration, we know less about the aspirations of the workers. Second, this paper asks how Indonesian workers experience placement to Hungary through private recruitment companies and an apprenticeship program. What do these experiences tell us about Hungary as a new destination to Indonesian workers? To what extent are expectations shaped by government and private actors involved in the Indonesia-East Central Europe migration system?

Come, work, leave
Labour conditions inflicted upon Filipino migrant workers in Hungary, at the semi-periphery of Europe

ZELENYÁNSZKY Edina Allegra (MA, CEU)

Within the volatile Hungarian legislative frames concerning migrant workers, the governmental decree 450/2024. (XII. 23.) provides a legislative loophole that allows for the Philippines to keep sending workers, while except for Armenia and Georgia, other countries from beyond the European Economic Area have lost this access. Correspondingly, in comparison to other third country national guest workers, Filipinos are present in significant numbers, yet their work conditions, journey overseas, informal migration structures, coping mechanisms and their ties to the actors involved in the fragmentation of labour power import, have mostly been discussed only in journalistic articles. In this thesis I discover the key points of precarity Filipino migrant workers face in the semi-periphery of Europe, adding data and analysis to research written by Bodor (2024) and Meszmann and Fedyuk (2016). In the first half of the thesis, I provide a background of the Hungarian policy discourse surrounding migration and migrant work, then contrast these discourses with the growing labour power demand in the manufacturing sector. After introducing migrant workers' general statistical data and the state relations between the Philippines and Hungary, I analyse the semi-structured interviews conducted with the Philippine Embassy of Budapest, its Labor Office and finally, workers. The findings suggest that the lives of overseas Filipino migrant workers deployed in Hungary correspond to precarious lives faced by migrant workers thanks to the host-country's segmented labour market, institutionalised exclusion. Their flexiblisation and control is resolved via the fragmentation of institutional responsibility, creating both uncertainty and consequently, a rising level of informality. Finally, I analyse the selfconceptualisations responding to the emotionally and physically draining conditions, which often internalise culturalist images of one's identity.

Coffee break

11.30–12.00
PANEL 2.
Migrations and the Ukraine war

The refugee–citizen paradox
Ethnic Hungarians from Ukraine in Hungary

BERNÁT Anikó and TOMKA Zsófia, TÁRKI

Building on migration and citizenship theories – "conditional inclusion" (Hackl, 2023), "paradoxes of integration" (Geurts, Lubbers & Spierings, 2022), and the "participation paradox" (Klarenbeek & Weide, 2020)—this paper investigates a "refugee–citizen paradox." It examines ethnic Hungarians displaced from war-torn Ukraine, many of them dual citizens, who find themselves in a liminal position in Hungary: legally and linguistically tied to the country, yet excluded from protections granted to "standard" refugees.
The study highlights systemic exclusion shaped by policy gaps and reinforced by discrimination. Hungarian citizenship formally excludes this group from temporary protection, which in theory provides equivalent benefits, but in practice leaves many without healthcare and housing, while discrimination in housing, education and the labour market persists because they are labelled "refugees." Inequalities are further compounded for ethnic Hungarian Roma from Ukraine (Eredics, 2024). Methodologically, the research employs a mixed-methods design based on UNHCR's 2023 Multi-Sector Needs Assessment (MSNA) in Hungary, coordinated by the authors: a survey of ~700 households (~1,500 individuals) and 15 focus groups. While not statistically representative, the survey offers indicative patterns, while the focus groups reveal lived experiences of paradoxical belonging, ambiguous legal status, and exclusion. Conceptually, the paper challenges binary distinctions between citizens and refugees, illustrating how diaspora politics and migration policy intersect (Çağlar & Gereöffy, 2008). It also demonstrates how formal citizenship can produce a substantive citizenship deficit (Chen, 2020). Empirically, it documents the overlooked hardships of a group often assumed to be privileged, contributing to rethink systemic inclusion and exclusion.

12.00–13.00 Lunch break

13.00–14.00
PANEL 3.
Student migrations

Student mobilities to an 'offbeat' or 'onbeat' destination? The Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Programme in illiberal Hungary

ÁRENDÁS Zsuzsanna, Institute for Sociology, ELTE CSS, Budapest

This paper explores international student mobility under Hungary's illiberal regime through narratives of Stipendium Hungaricum (SH) participants. Launched in 2013, SH aims to internationalize Hungarian higher education and strengthen ties with non-EU countries, particularly in the East. The findings highlight contradictions between Hungary's anti-immigration stance and its selective policies that position international students as desirable immigrants. However, is Hungary equally desirable for students? The study argues that Hungary is both an „onbeat" and „offbeat" study destination. As an „onbeat" choice, it is perceived as „Europe's gateway" and a place of „public peace and safety." Conversely, students describe it as „offbeat" due to local anti-immigration and Islamophobic sentiments. Interviews between 2020–2022 reveal how Hungary's illiberal policies shape student perceptions, reflecting the complex discursive processes behind its dual characterization as both an attractive and challenging destination.

Study first, stay later: Higher education as a migration pathway for Southeast Asians in Hungary

NOVÁK Eszter (BA, ELTE)

This research examines how higher education functions as a strategic migration pathway for Southeast Asian university students in Hungary. With the rise of affordable tuition and scholarship programs in Central Eastern Europe, such as the Stipendium Hungaricum scholarship, Hungary has become an appealing destination for students from countries such as the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Previously, economic migration was the primary driver of immigration from these countries, but the introduction of such scholarships has begun to change that trend. Although this shift is still in its early stages, it reflects a growing pattern in which education is increasingly leveraged as a strategic entry point into Europe. Through a mixed analysis of Southeast Asian student's narratives, the study explores how educational mobility intersects with potential processes of long-term migration aspirations. The findings highlight that many students view education not merely as means of academic advancement but as a stepping stone towards

broader European, especially Western European, mobility, employment and even settlement, therefore transforming from student migrants into economic migrants in the future. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how international education serves as a deliberate strategy within the global migration landscape, focusing on Southeast Asian immigrant students in Hungary.

14.30–15.30
PANEL 4.
Lifestyle and retirement migrations

New faces in the countryside
Privilege and Dutch migration to Hungary

Siel DEFRANCQ (PhD, ELTE) (online)

International human migration has become increasingly complex, extending beyond familiar patterns. One growing phenomenon is the mobility from wealthier to less wealthy countries, including the growing flow of Dutch people to Hungary. This presentation is based on my PhD research over the past four years, undertaken to better understand this phenomenon.
First, using quantitative analysis of official statistics and spatial data, I map the size, distribution, and social profile of Dutch immigrants in Hungary, and trace how their presence and characteristics have changed over time.
Second, drawing on qualitative methods, including participant observation by bicycle and semi structured interviews with Dutch citizens in the Hungarian countryside, I analyse the motivations and structural drivers that shape this phenomenon. The analysis uncovers intertwined cultural and economic motivations that stimulate and sustain this form of migration. In doing so, I show that Dutch migration to the Hungarian countryside is, in part, a response to perceived losses of economic and cultural status in the homeland, and an attempt to (re)gain privilege through migration.

International retirement migration to Hungary
The pursuit of security

ERŐSS Ágnes, Universität Bozen-Bolzano and ELTE CERS, and GÁBRIEL Dóra, ELTE CERS

The paper is based on 29 semi-structured interviews conducted in multiple locations in peripheral municipalities in Hungary between March 2022 and April 2024 with older adults who migrated to Hungary, either from Western Europe or from Ukraine. The research employs the theoretical framework of international retirement migration while broadening the geographical scope of related research. Our contribution explores the multiple motivations and compares the strategies of older migrants from the East and West. The research delivers new data on a topic that has been overlooked in post-socialist countries such as Hungary and explores the peculiarities of the narratives of older adult migrants. Our data draws on the understanding of geographical arbitrage described by Hayes (2014) as individuals take advantage of global inequalities in order to counteract financial insecurity or to improve life circumstances in retirement. Based on the interviews, we identified similar motivations for migration, where economic factors are strongly intertwined with family strategies, lifestyle choices and political considerations. Noteworthy is that the sense of security (with altering meaning) appeared as a narrative strategy in both groups, partly to conceal the economic reasons. Western European older migrants list ideological reasons for moving to Hungary, which they describe as secure and traditional. Migrants from Ukraine – overwhelmingly ethnic Hungarians – additionally point out their sense of belonging to the motherland.

Coffee break

15.45–17.15
PANEL 5.
Hungary's immigration paradox

Government policies that both curb and encourage migration, or 2 in 1

TÓTH Judit, University of Szeged

Over the past decade and a half, alongside populist law enforcement and xenophobic political measures treat migrants as enemies, while there have also been rules attracting foreign workers, students, researchers, and investors. In this presentation, I examine whether these two simultaneously acting forces have created some kind of balance, or whether law enforcement populism, countless emergency measures, and the multitude of migration authority reorganizations have in themselves deterred refugees and guest workers seeking predictability, and even prompted the domestic population to emigrate.
So who are the new immigrants, the returnees, and those who have decided to stay or enter after all?

Empowered by control
Rhetoric, reality, and the effectiveness of migration policy in Hungary (2015–2025)

SANNA Szabrina (MA, Corvinus University of Budapest)

In a recent address, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán reaffirmed Hungary's commitment to demographic self-reliance, insisting that population decline must not be offset through immigration. He warned that when "there are more guests than hosts, home is no longer home," framing migration as a threat to national identity. This statement encapsulates the government's enduring "no migration" doctrine, a central element of its political narrative since the 2015 migration crisis. However, as recent analyses show, Hungary's actual migration policy has evolved into a far more complex and internally inconsistent system than this rhetoric implies (Migration Policy Centre, 2024). Hungary's migration strategy is not about complete exclusion but rather strategic selectivity—an approach that prioritizes the political messaging of closure while addressing the state's practical needs for openness. In the realm of migration politics, the emphasis is often on what governments are perceived to oppose, rather than their actual actions and while Hungary's government has positioned itself as a proponent of „zero migration," its laws still allow for various legal migration routes, particularly for labor migration from non-EU countries. After a decade of asserting border closure—symbolized by the fence on the Serbian and Croatian frontiers—how real is Hungary's achievement of 'zero migration'?
This paper argues that migration has not stopped; it has shifted form, becoming more selective, less visible, and more politically instrumental; it aims to investigate which factors help explain the gap between the Hungarian government's anti-immigration rhetoric and actual migration policy outcomes, and whether this gap represents a policy failure or a political design.
Drawing on Hollifield's (2004) liberal paradox and Natter's (2023) illiberal paradox, the paper demonstrates that Hungary's approach embodies the logic of being empowered by control: the capacity to weaponize migration rhetorically while selectively liberalizing it in practice. Through this lens, the Hungarian case exemplifies how illiberal regimes reconcile nationalist closure with economic necessity, turning contradiction into governance.

Doing migration in the illiberal context of Hungary

ÁRENDÁS Zsuzsanna and MESSING Vera, Institute for Sociology, ELTE CSS, Budapest

This paper explores migration governance in Hungary under the increasingly autocratic Fidesz government, highlighting the paradoxes that characterize migration policy in illiberal regimes. Since 2015, Hungary has deployed an intensely anti-immigration narrative rooted in protectionist nationalism, which coexists with a highly selective immigration system designed to serve short-term economic and political interests. While publicly rejecting multiculturalism and portraying itself as a defender of ethnic homogeneity and European Christian identity, the Hungarian state admits carefully chosen migrant labor to meet economic demands, particularly through temporary work schemes.
To analyze this contradiction, we apply and extend Natter's (2018) concept of the illiberal paradox in migration governance, adding insights from racial capitalism to show how labor market needs and nationalist ideologies intersect. Hungary's migration regime demonstrates a distinct selectivity not constrained by liberal democratic values such as human rights yet remains responsive to electoral pressures. Unlike liberal states that must balance humanitarian principles, economic interests, and public opinion, Hungary swiftly enacts exclusionary policies without democratic deliberation, due to its centralized autocratic structure.
Through two case studies—migrant laborers in industrial sectors and asylum seekers—we illustrate how migration policies operationalize selective inclusion and exclusion. We also reflect critically on methodological biases in scholarship on Eastern Europe, challenging simplistic dichotomies between liberal and illiberal regimes. By offering a nuanced analysis of Hungary's migration governance, our paper contributes to broader debates on the evolving dynamics of migration policy in both autocratizing and democratic contexts.