

# Migration narratives in media and social media

The case of Hungary

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# Abstract

This BRIDGES national report contains two case studies in Hungary. The first one follows the media coverage of an incident that lasted only for a few seconds: a Hungarian camerawoman tripped over refugees, including children as they were running away from the police near the Serbian border in the wake of the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015 in Hungary. The second case is the national consultation on immigration and terrorism, a push-poll, employed by the Hungarian government in 2015 in order to legitimize its policies.

The two cases present completely different dynamics: The first case was a spontaneous incident and since the event itself did not fit the government’s pre-existing narrative on migration, articulated in billboard campaigns, the pro-government media minimised the coverage of the event in the first phase of the story. This, however, opened up space for independent and anti-government actors to create the dominant narrative of the event.

The opposite was the case with the second case. As part of the moral panic button (MPB) propaganda technology, it was initiated by the government to create and manipulate public opinion. Consequently, pro-government actors, including pro-government media, from the beginning were in a hegemonic position when it came to creating the narrative and interpretations of the event, putting everyone else in a reactive position - doomed to lose.

There is, however, a common feature of the cases: the lack of any discussion, let alone debate, we otherwise identify with the media’s role as a democratic institution. In Hungary’s polarized and politicized media environment, the common characteristic of the narratives present in the stories is that they can be easily identified by who propagates them (whether pro-government or non-government actors). The debate is often reduced to binaries that limits arguments and narratives to “are you for or against” migration/the Hungarian government/Hungarians. This lack of colours of potential narratives and arguments is the success of MPB: the production of a narrative is part of a larger propaganda machinery which is pushed for so long (already at least for seven years) with such intensity that it cannot be fought.

**Keywords:** migration, narratives, media, social media, Hungary, László, national consultation, moral panic button, MPB

# 1. Introduction

The way we make sense of the world is a complex process in which the media play a pivotal role. Through selection and conscious or unconscious choices of modes of representation, they are engaging in meaning making, and contribute to our construction of reality. Narratives are important elements of this process as they create structure and meaning through association of cognitive elements and a formulation of a story that is comprehensible and emotionally relatable to audiences with a moral conclusion. A narrative puts events and actors in a causal relationship, ‘brings a sense of order and meaning to the myriad of details’ (Murray 2003, p 98).

Importantly, narratives also have a productive or generative role, enabling powerful forms of influence or manipulation. Social actors can strategically manipulate social meanings, for example through portraying certain groups as undeserving or deviant. (Boswell et al, 2021, p8)

In certain social contexts, the struggle for meaning making, for “hearts and minds”, becomes fierce, showing the nature of the power struggle in a transparent form. We are arguing that Hungary, especially during the “refugee crisis” in 2015, is a special case: the public discourse on migration has been captured by the government, and the media was used to manufacture and maintain public opinion preferred by the government. This kind of power technique is identified as the moral panic button (MPB) (Barlai-Sik, 2017, Gerő-Sik, 2020, Bognár et al, 2022b)<sup>1</sup>.

**We are arguing that Hungary, especially during the “refugee crisis” in 2015, is a special case: the public discourse on migration has been captured by the government, and the media was used to manufacture and maintain public opinion preferred by the government. This kind of power technique is identified as the moral panic button (MPB)**

The concept of MPB is based on the theory of moral panic (Cohen, 2011) but while all of the characteristics of a moral panic are present in the operation of an MPB, they constitute only the necessary but insufficient conditions. The main characteristics of MPB are as follow:

1. It assumes strong governmental control of the media (directly or through „friendly oligarchs” (i.e., selected and strictly controlled clients),
2. uses various instruments beyond the mass media (such as national consultation, referendum, election) as the source of their propaganda,
3. continuously selects new scapegoats (while keeping the previous ones as well) and uses these combinations to maximize the efficiency of fearmongering (by fine-tuning the message towards well targeted segments of the population),
4. applies strong framing techniques (e.g., the monotonous repeating of simplified messages, using fake and misinformation to humiliate and ridicule the enemy, character assassination, etc.),
5. has uncontrolled financing from the state budget, and
6. flexibly incorporates (often unofficially) pro-government actors, such as, think-tanks, NGOs (church, sport, civil organizations), municipalities and for-profit firms (owned by the clientele), etc. which are intertwined and organized by a few core state institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed analysis see (Sik, et al, 2022). Certain chapters of this paper were prepared for the MILAB project (<https://milab.tk.hu/en>), and the paper was written while Endre Sik was a Fellow at HWK (<https://hanse-ias.de/>).

MPB used the migration discourse as its core topic, and applied various techniques (fake news, conspiracy theories, scapegoating and character assassination etc.) to build a post-truth world around it. The aim of MPB has always been to maximize the visibility of pro-government messages in the total population and keep the sympathizers (and potential voters) of Fidesz mobilized.

A necessary, and from the report's perspective, vital condition for the efficiency of MPB is the governmental control over the media. Since 2015, the Hungarian media is under the hegemonic rule of the state: a significant number of media outlets, including the public service broadcasters, are under direct or indirect influence of Fidesz and its allies. This segment covers events from the government's perspective, and acts as a propaganda channel for pro-government messages. Independent media exists only in eco chambers served by a few weeklies and by online sites (struggling to survive financially on the highly distorted advertising market and under continuous attacks from state authorities). This distorted media structure leaves significant parts of the population (especially the rural and the poorer section of it) exposed only to government propaganda.

Taking these considerations into account, we are presenting the findings of a study that aims at depicting the migration-related narratives put forward in Hungarian media through two case studies. We examine the characteristics of the different narratives and of the coverage in online media news, television news and social media (Facebook), the relationship between these different channels, and the reflections of actors on their strategies in covering the events in focus.

Since narratives are at the forefront of our analysis, and there are almost as many definitions as studies, we would like to provide the definition we found the most useful for our analysis. In this we follow Boswell et al (2021):

A narrative is a story with a temporal sequence of events unfolding in a plot that is populated by dramatic moments, symbols, and archetypal characters that culminates in a moral to the story." (Jones and McBeth 2010, 329) Jones and McBeth specify that narratives must possess the following qualities: 1. a setting or context; 2. a plot with temporal dimension (beginning, middle, end) that sets out relationships between characters, settings and identified causal mechanisms; 3. heroes, villains and victims; 4. a moral of the story, and implied solutions. (Boswell et al. 2021, 6)

We also use frames in the course of the analysis, which we understand

as a "central organising idea" (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 143), an angle through which a story can be told and becomes meaningful. Frames may be linked with broader phenomena or issues (Fishman 1978) to compare different ways to select and highlight. While such selection is also a feature of narrative, framing does not involve a sequential dimension; nor does it necessarily involve a plot and characters and a denouement in the sense identified above. (ibidem, 7)

We try to describe the characteristics (who says what, where and when) of content that make their way across the media arena. To this end, we aim to explore the following questions:

- Who are the voices that are represented in the media, and what narratives they put forward?
- Where are narratives present in the media ecosystem, and what patterns emerge between online media and social media?
- What are the characteristics of the competing narratives?
- When, that is in which contexts and circumstances, certain narratives obtain a competitive edge?

The report contains two case studies (Chapter 2 and 3). The first one follows the media coverage of an incident that lasted only for a few seconds: a Hungarian camerawoman, *Petra László*<sup>2</sup> tripped over refugees, including children as they were running away from the police near the Serbian border in the wake of the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015 in Hungary. Through the close examination of this case, we are going to show how a relatively small event carries the main features of narrative making in Hungarian media: from a common interpretation of events, opposing, and highly polarizing narratives on migration are developing around the concept of the “victim”.

The second case is the national consultation on immigration and terrorism (NCIT), a fake public opinion survey (or, as we argue, a push-poll), employed by the Hungarian government in 2015 in order to legitimize its policies. By studying this long-lasting and extensive propaganda against immigrants, we want to illustrate how MPB works in the Hungarian setting. Table 1.1 contains the basic characteristics of the two case studies.

**TABLE 1.1. Mix of features of the two cases**

	<b>PETRA LÁSZLÓ, VILLAIN OR VICTIM?</b>	<b>NATIONAL CONSULTATION ON IMMIGRATION AND TERRORISM</b>
Frequency	Once	Recurring
Scale	National	National
Development	Eruption then steady decrease, with recurring interest	Intentionally created a lasted a few months, as planned
Dominant frames	Victim/responsibility, national/international reaction, legal, security/terrorism	Financial/security/manipulative/comparison/scapegoating
Relevant stakeholders	Police, media workers, human rights activists, NGOs	Political parties, government bodies

In the first two case studies, we gathered and analysed the pertinent news-stories published in online media outlets and two primetime television news programs, representing pro-government and independent actors. The data was analysed quantitatively briefly with the focus on qualitative analysis. Each case study includes the description of the methodology and the included media outlets. In addition, we analysed (using both quantitative and qualitative methods) the presence of the stories on social media (Facebook) to get insights into the engagement potential of different narratives and actors.<sup>3</sup>

2. The brief summary of the relevant characteristics of the Hungarian actors (italics in the text) are in Annex 1.

3. Facebook was the obvious choice in case of Hungary, as this is the most often used social media platform, especially for news whereas Twitter is only used by a very small segment of the population (59 percent and 4 percent, respectively, Bognár, 2021).

## 2. Case Study No 1. In Search of a Victim: The Story of Petra László in Hungarian Media<sup>4</sup>

The case study focuses on a few seconds within the months of the so-called “refugee crisis of 2015”. We concentrate on a tiny story embedded in a unique and turbulent series of large-scale stories. First, we introduce the turbulent events along the Southern border of Hungary into which our case study is embedded. To avoid a priori politicization of the story, we will try to characterize these events by using quantitative and historical data but restrict ourselves to a descriptive analysis. Then we will introduce the findings of an in-depth content analysis to dive deep into the main narratives and frames used in the coverage of the event, followed by the analysis of social media posts related to the story, and the insights gained from interviews with stakeholders.

### 2.1 The story of Petra László

The story of Petra László (from now on Ms. Laszlo) serves as a litmus-test of narrative production on migration in Hungarian media. The incident concerning Ms. Laszlo occurred on the 8th of September 2015 near the temporary camp set up for migrants in Röszke, a village about three kilometres from Hungary’s border with Serbia. At the time, Ms. Laszlo was working as a camerawoman for N1TV, a right-wing nationalist television channel with links to the Hungarian then-far-right party, Jobbik. She was recording a group of migrants attempting to break away from police when she tripped a migrant father escaping with his son in his hands, who subsequently fell to the ground (Picture 1.1 and 1.2). With his son crying, the man stood up and began to yell at Ms. Laszlo, who continued to film him. A reporter for the German television channel RTL was able to capture the incident and upload it to Twitter, from where it spread throughout international media. The Hungarian media outlet Index later shared a separate video<sup>5</sup> of her kicking two migrant children.

The man who fell over was Osama Abdul-Muhsen Algahadab (from now on Mr. Algahadab), a Syrian football coach who fled from his hometown of Deir Ez-Zor.<sup>6</sup>

The footage circulated on social media and prompted an international outcry, with many condemning Ms. Laszlo’s actions. Her employer terminated her contract immediately. Ms. Laszlo later wrote a letter to right-wing daily Magyar Nemzet, in which she stated that the chaotic scenes caused her to panic, which ultimately led to her acting impulsively. Although she subsequently issued an apology, she described the widespread condemnation of her actions as a witch-hunt, asserting that she is not “a heartless, racist, children-kicking camerawoman” (The Guardian, 11 Sept 2015). She later planned to sue Facebook for failing to censor the attacks she received on social media (CBC, 22 Oct 2015).

A year after the incident, Ms. Laszlo was charged with a breach of peace, defined as ‘antisocial, violent behaviour capable of inciting indignation or alarm’ (Time, 7 September 2016), however, the prosecutor stated that there was no reason to assume that her actions stemmed from her attitude towards migrants

4. For a more detailed version of this chapter, see (Bognár, et al, 2022a). The references to the articles and posts in the text are also available there.

5. The short video of the incident is available here: [VIDEO: Camerawoman for N1TV trips a refugee carrying a small child as he runs from police](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...). Pictures are available here: [https://index.hu/belfold/2015/10/21/laszlo\\_petra\\_beperelne\\_a\\_felrugott\\_menekultet/](https://index.hu/belfold/2015/10/21/laszlo_petra_beperelne_a_felrugott_menekultet/)

6. Information about his backstory varied across the media landscape. Multiple outlets reported that he was captured and tortured by ISIS in Syria, while Russia Today quoted a Kurdish daily which stated that he was a member of a local chapter of Al-Qaeda (although this was never confirmed by any other outlet) (Index, 22 Sept 2015). After it was revealed that he is a football coach, the Spanish club Getafe offered him a job, and he moved to Spain with two of his sons. However, after his efforts to reunite his family in Spain failed due to a lack of documents, he moved back to Turkey (24.hu, 25 January 2016).



(NPR, 07 Sept 2016). In January 2017, the Szeged District Court sentenced her to three years of probation for disorderly conduct, which was later overturned by the Hungarian high court. The high court declared that, although her actions were illegal and immoral, they only amounted to anti-social behaviour, a misdemeanour, and her case was closed (Hungary Today, 30 October 2018). Currently, she is employed at Pestisrácok, a pro-government, radical right-wing outlet. She filed a civil action lawsuit against three media outlets with the help of right-wing lawyer and politician Tamás Gaudi-Nagy. These lawsuits were dismissed; therefore, she appealed to the constitutional court for defamation (Pestisrácok, 16 Nov 2020).

There are many elements of the event that became subject of heavy contestation depending on the political stance and the viewpoint of the observer. These will be closely analysed in the qualitative section of the media coverage. We chose this and the subsequent events as the topic of our case study since what happened on Sept 8, 2015, on a field close to the Röszke camp became a highly debated legal and political issue.

## 2.2 The context: Röszke

As mentioned above, the larger context of the Ms. Laszlo-story is the location of Ms. Laszlo's assault, the village of Röszke which played a pivotal role in Hungary's handling of the migration crisis of 2015. Located next to Hungary's border with Serbia, Röszke was the entry point of the Hungarian section of the Balkan route. Before the establishment of the 110-mile razor-wire fence alongside the Hungarian-Serbian border in September 2015 (The Guardian, 22 June 2015), some 160,000 migrants were able to pass through (The Guardian, 15 Sept 2015). However, as many were not allowed to continue towards Austria until the processing of their asylum claims, and many refused to apply, fearing that they will be forced to stay in Hungary, thousands were stuck in temporary camps (The Guardian, 10 Sept 2015). Frustration with a lack of information, slow processing, and living conditions described as "abysmal" by human rights groups (Human Rights Watch 11 Sept 2015) all contributed to several attempts by migrants to break free and continue with their journey (one of which prompted Ms. Laszlo to intervene (NBC, 8 Sept 2015)).

In 2020, the European Court of Justice ruled that Hungary had been detaining migrants unlawfully, saying that 'the conditions prevailing in the Röszke transit zone amount to a deprivation of liberty' (DW, 14 May 2020). The ruling led to the closing of the transit zone camps with all migrants being moved to reception centres (The New York Times, 22 May 2020).

## 2.3 Quantitative content analysis of Ms. Laszlo's story

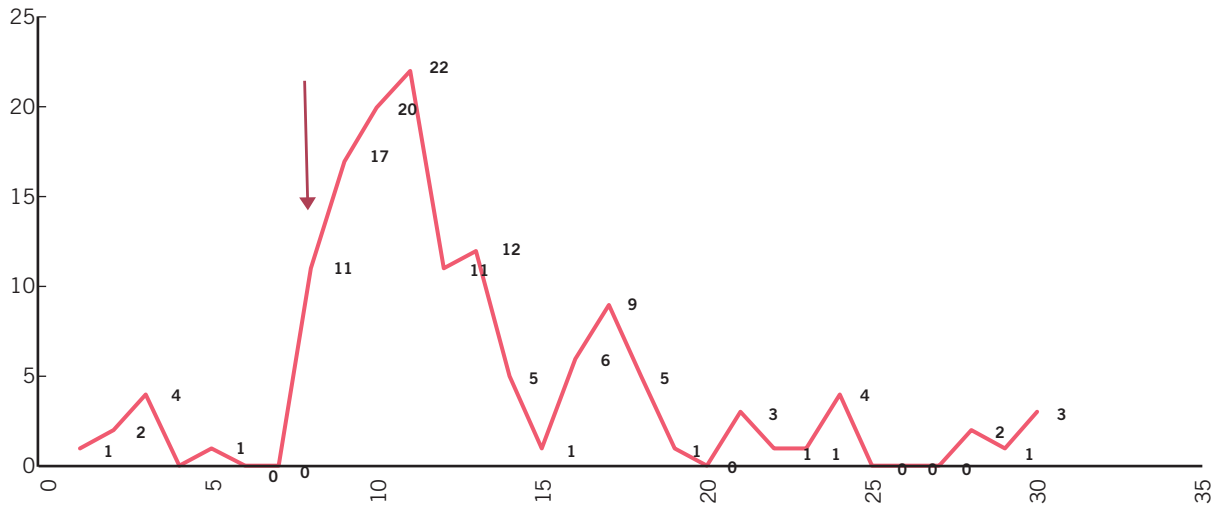
The aim of the quantitative analysis is limited to describe the salience and temporal distribution of the media coverage of the Röszke, and within it, Ms. Laszlo's story with a few observations to the content the media produced. We used a dataset that included all relevant articles published in Hungarian online media between 2 January 2015 and 25 May 2019.<sup>7</sup>

As to the basic statistics for Ms. Laszlo's story and – as the context of the analysis – of the story of Röszke, the first question is the adequate selection for the timeframe of the analysis. We arranged the data into a time series (Figure 2.1). The starting point of the main period of our analysis is September 8, 2015 (the day of Ms. Laszlo's incident).

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7. The database was built for the Ceaseval (<http://ceaseval.eu/>) project in 2018 (for a detailed description of the data see Bognár et al, 2018). This dataset was restructured for the purpose of this analysis: we included ten media outlets and selected those articles which contained two keywords (the name of Ms. Laszlo and her profession (camerawoman)). As to the analysis of Röszke, the only keyword we used was Röszke.

**FIGURE 2.1. The number of articles mentioning Ms. Laszlo in September 2015\***

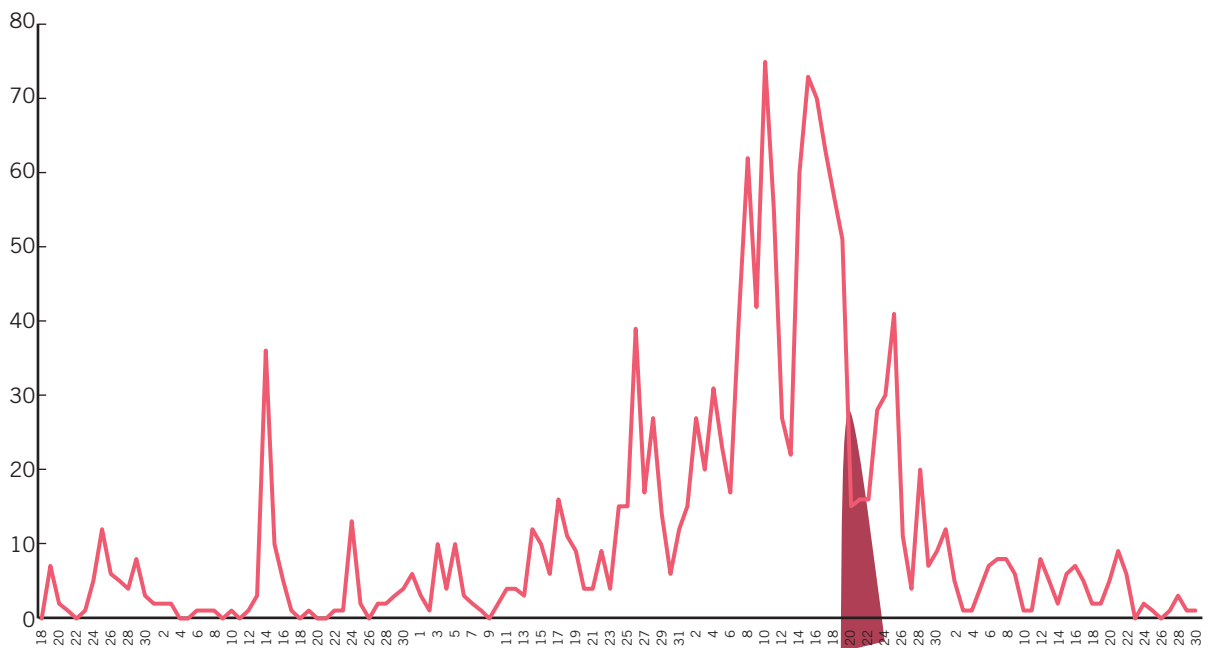


\*The red arrow indicates September 8.

The story in the media reached its peak in the following three days and ended about ten days later. There were minor waves but the story itself received less attention in the media after the first wave. However, the afterlife of the Ms. Laszlo-story is at least as interesting as the main period: new developments of the story found their way and made some traction especially in pro-government media up to late 2020.

As to Ms. Laszlo’s story within the time series of Röscke (Figure 2.2), we see that Ms. Laszlo’s story was part of the first big wave of the story of Röscke (the red cone in Figure 2.2).

**FIGURE 2.2. The number of articles mentioning Ms. Laszlo and Röscke during the entire period of the “refugee crisis” (between 18 June and 28 October 2015)**



As to the differences of the prevalence by media outlets, Ms. Laszlo's story was most visible on *Pestisrácok* and *444*, two media outlets that are the most forthcoming, one pro-government, and the other one independent. The opposite was the case with *Magyaridők*, i.e., an "official" pro-government source, which omitted this "juicy" (but for the MPB a disadvantageous) event. In general, pro-government media was much less likely to feature Ms. Laszlo's story than independent media: only 13% of all the Ms. Laszlo-related articles were published in the otherwise dominant pro-government media outlets.

## 2.4 The qualitative analysis of Ms. Laszlo's story

In this section, we are introducing the findings of a qualitative content analysis of the coverage of Ms. Laszlo's story. In this analysis we have included all articles on Ms. Laszlo (N=119) from the database of four online news outlets (*Index*, *444*, *Pestisrácok* and *Magyaridők*)<sup>8</sup>, and primetime news programs from two national television channels (*M1* and *RTL Klub*). Of these, we consider *Pestisrácok* and *Magyaridők* pro-government and right-wing, *444* liberal, and *Index* centrist. *M1* is the news channel of the public service broadcaster and is considered a government mouthpiece, while *RTL Klub* is an independent commercial channel. When we refer to "pro-government media", *Magyaridők*, *Pestisrácok* and *M1* are understood by it, while *Index*, *444* and *RTL Klub* are considered "independent".

The aim of the analysis is to show the main narratives and frames present in the coverage. In doing so, we are presenting the main characteristics that constitute them, including settings, characters, emotions, labels and symbols present, and the main frames through which they are presented.

### a) Main narratives and frames in online media

We have identified two major plots throughout the lifespan of the story. The most prevalent plot across all news outlets in our analysis is the one that can be seen on Picture 2.1 and 2.2: *Petra László* (Ms. Laszlo), a camerawoman tripped over refugees as they were running from the Hungarian police at Röszk. The other plot that competes with the previous appears at later phases of the coverage of the story, dominant in pro-government and right-wing media (*Magyaridők* and *Pestisrácok*). According to this plot, Ms. Laszlo, is a tired, anxious worker who was unjustly accused by the liberal media while she was acting out of fear and protecting herself from migrants.

Independent media outlets (*Index*, *444*) stuck to the first plot throughout the lifespan of the story, only mentioning the counterplot developing in other outlets ironically. In the case of pro-government media in the first phase of the coverage, the first plot was present, then, as the story developed, the second plot became dominant.

These plots, along with the other characteristics of the coverage, constitute two dominant narratives of migration. According to the first, **migrants (refugees, asylum seekers, fled people) are passive victims** of violence and exclusion in Hungary. According to the second, **'we' are under attack by migrants** and/or the liberal forces that control them and have to protect ourselves. The 'we' in this later narrative covers a wide range of concepts from Hungarians, Christians, non-liberals to Europeans.

The first narrative tells the story of an innocent refugee (Mr. Algahadab) arriving to Hungary after his long plight of seeking refuge with his children, where they are met with open hostility and violence by a local woman (Ms. Laszlo), whose action (kicking refugees, including children in a crowd) is engendered by the Hungarian government's anti-migration campaigns. The second narrative tells the story of an

8. The distribution between the news outlets is the following: *Index*: 27, *444*: 41, *Magyaridők*:9, *Pestisrácok*: 42 The articles were published between September 8, 2015, and November 16, 2020.

innocent woman, a mother of two (Ms. Laszlo) who becomes the victim of a witch-hunt by pro-migration liberal media, twisting her justifiable action of self-defence against a horde of disorderly migrants into an act of aggression with the help of the lying, malicious (or even terrorist) migrant, Mr. Algahadab.

The first narrative does not change significantly throughout the lifespan of the story, though it gets more detailed and articulate over time. In the immediate aftermath of the event, this narrative is widespread and present even in right-wing, pro-government media (*Pestisrácok*, 8 Sept 2015). The second narrative, however, crystalizes and develops over time in right-wing and pro-government media, and changes the interpretation and even the perceived plot of the main event: over time, from ‘camerawoman trips over innocent refugees’, pro-government media gets to ‘innocent camerawoman gets nearly overrun by migrants and gets dragged through the mud by liberal media’. This change of narrative observed in pro-government media, especially *Pestisrácok*, is probably the most noteworthy element of the analysis. We are able to detect the process and the main components of the move from the original, widespread “refugees as passive victims” narrative to the second, “we are under attack from migrants and liberal forces” narrative.

The following sections depict the details of the coverage (formats, settings, characters/actors/voices, emotional tone, symbols and metaphors) and the main frames that characterise these narratives.

### Formats

Most articles in our analysis are straight news articles with some opinion pieces, international press reviews, some news analyses and background, and an interview (with Ms. Laszlo by *Pestisrácok*). Most of the articles are relatively short (from 52 to 373 words-long), authors of the articles are almost exclusively male, white autochthonous persons.

### Settings

The setting of the events is mostly manifest in visual representations (photos, videos, below), there are few verbal descriptions of the physical surroundings of the events in the articles. The geographic location of the event (Röszke, Southern Border of Hungary) is often mentioned, and so is the symbolic and concrete space, the collection point. Otherwise, photos and videos depict the setting of the events: grass field and a railway track, with sporadically appearing journalists, police and refugees. The images taken of the event show a chaotic setting with people running in different directions.

### Characters

Ms. Laszlo, a white middle-aged Hungarian woman is the main character in most of the articles. Her person, actions, identification and image dominate the coverage. She is presented as the perpetrator of an immoral (and later, an illegal) deed in all the media in our sample in the beginning of the coverage. Then, in pro-government media, from perpetrator and aggressor she becomes the victim of the events in the later stages of the coverage. In the immediate aftermath of the events, she appears in every article but the first time she has a direct voice is when she publishes her letter of apology. From that point onward, her voice is heard, especially in pro-government media and when the legal frame is used (see below).

The language used to refer to Ms. Laszlo is very similar in the articles in the beginning of the coverage: she is mostly characterised by her profession (“camerawoman”) and by her deed (“refugee-kicker”). In independent media, her (alleged) political stance is also often mentioned (“radical”, “far-right”, “Jobbik-supporter”) and in some, though rare cases, she is even labelled quite harshly and vulgarly as the “stupid bitch of the year” (444, 9 Sept 2015) in reference to anti-Ms. Laszlo Facebook groups, or as “vermin” (*Index*, 9 Sept 2015). In these articles, Ms. Laszlo is visually represented by the photos of the incident

depicting her kicking towards the refugees, camera in hand as active, in motion. When her identification and origin-story is in focus, her being a mother of two is emphasised. As the numerous legal procedures begin and the legal frame gets precedence, she is labelled as “suspect” and “defendant”, pictured in court rooms with blurred face at times (*Index*, 12 Jan 2017). Later, as the narrative of pro-government media is changing, she is increasingly labelled as the victim of the story with passive language used (‘prey tossed in front of the frenzied’, *Pestisrácok*, 5 Nov 2018), with expressions of solidarity (“our colleague”), and photos expressing the human, sensitive side of *Petra László*, using portraits, black and white photos with the face covered as in pain (*Pestisrácok*, 12 Jan 2017).

The other character that has a significant role in the original events is the refugee, Osama Abdel-Muhsen Alghadab who was allegedly tripped over by Ms. Laszlo with his son in his arms. He is a non-white middle-aged Syrian man. In most of the articles he is presented as the victim of Ms. Laszlo’s aggression, in passive mode ‘refugee who has been tripped/kicked’ or running from the police with his son in his arms, in a state of desperation. He is also often referred to as “the father” who fled Syria with his small son. His Syrian nationality is also often mentioned. The labels “refugee who has been tripped/kicked” are constant throughout the coverage. Interestingly, all, even pro-government media uses the Hungarian equivalent of the term “refugee” in the beginning of the coverage. As the story develops, “migrant” becomes more and more prevalent in pro-government media, later with a proliferation of derogatory adjectives such as “illegal” or “mass of illegal immigrants” (*Pestisrácok*, 30 Oct 2018). Visually, he is represented in these articles by falling to the ground holding a child (his son). When speculations about his background appear (local football coach/hero who was tortured by the Islamic State/terrorist who is responsible for the death of Kurdish people), his Facebook picture is used in articles, showing him and his son smiling to the camera.

**Interestingly, all, even pro-government media uses the Hungarian equivalent of the term “refugee” in the beginning of the coverage. As the story develops, “migrant” becomes more and more prevalent in pro-government media, later with a proliferation of derogatory adjectives such as “illegal” or “mass of illegal immigrants”.**

Typically, while pro-government media gives more credit to the hypotheses that depict him in a negative light, by the end of the lifespan of the story referring to him as a terrorist, the independent media outlets give more space to stories that portray him as a local hero, tortured by the Islamic State, or simply a regular family man who escaped to find peace and a future for his family. When it comes to articles that are concerned with his life after the events in Hungary, two, completely different plots appear. According to the one mostly present in independent media, he is the victim whose life is turned around by the generosity and compassion of the receiving Western communities. These articles show his arrival to Germany and later to Spain where he is hired as a football coach and even meets Cristiano Ronaldo (*444*, 19 Sept 2015). In pro-government media, the focus is on the manipulative nature of his persona and of the liberal culture, and the failure of his integration (he is not the innocent victim but the aggressive illegal migrant who lied about being tripped by Ms. Laszlo, and even though his victim-status put him in a pole position in the naive and hypocritical West, he failed and was fired from his job because he could not even learn Spanish). He appears throughout the lifespan of the story, but he is barely given a voice: articles where he is speaking directly are extremely rare.

There are other characters who appear in articles. These are typically connected to different frames:

- a) NGOs, some public officials (the police, the Prosecutor’s Office, judges), lawyers are often present when the legal frame is used, usually through public statements. They announce or discuss the illegal nature of the alleged deed, speculating on the potential sentences and court proceedings, court decisions.
- b) Media itself is an important character in the coverage: it appears in the first phase as part of the first narrative in the form of reviews of international coverage of the event, showcasing

- the moral outrage over Ms. Laszlo's actions. This includes accounts on the topic's presence on social media. Then, in pro-government media, certain Hungarian news outlets and social media become part of the second narrative, being "responsible" for the "witch-hunt" against Ms. Laszlo. Three news organizations/publishers have been sued by Ms. Laszlo for violating her privacy, and this case is closely followed and supported by right-wing pro-government media outlet, *Pestisrácok*.
- c) Politicians are recurring characters in the coverage of the story, but they are not prominent except when the political frame is used: when the event is interpreted as of political significance. In these instances, mostly oppositional politicians and parties appear (*Péter Juhász* (Együtt), *Ferenc Gyurcsány* (DK)) and blame PM *Viktor Orbán* and his politics for the event.
  - d) Activists are scarce and appear mostly along with politicians when the political frame is used.

### Emotional tone, symbols and metaphors

The story in focus is presented in the first phase in an emotional manner in all media outlets. The language used is of high intensity (using words such as "shock", "disgrace", "shame", "inhumane treatment' of humans", "aggression", "violence", "chaos", "hurt", "fleeing", "vermin" etc.), and so are the images and videos depicting the event, showing motion and confusion. Metaphors express the significance, and in some cases, the absurdity of the event using expressions such as "negative superstar", "*Petra László's* national defence" or comparing Ms. Laszlo to the most famous Hungarian, *Öcsi Puskás* (a football player) in bringing Hungary to the spotlight. These metaphors, especially the sarcastic tone, are present in independent media. In the second phase, with Ms. Laszlo's letter of apology in focus, her emotions dominate the reporting ('I am in a state of shock'/'I was frightened'/'I was afraid'/'something snapped in me'/'I panicked'/'political witch-hunt'/'death threats'), her personal life (being a mother of two, getting unemployed and unemployable) also gaining some attention. Pro-government media outlets seem to accept and convey her viewpoint without much criticism, while other outlets often add some comments, or simply reminders of the event, or even question the sincerity of the confession. When the legal frame dominates the coverage, articles are less emotional, use more neutral, formal language and images of courtrooms. The exceptions are the articles that appear in *Pestisrácok* in the last phase of the coverage: here, emotions run high in spite of the legal frame when in 2018 Ms. Laszlo is acquitted by the Curia, the highest judicial authority in Hungary (*Pestisrácok*, 30 Oct 2018). Language used turns intense, anger and compassion being the dominant emotions, the former directed at the "liberal leftist media" and the "supposed victims from Röszke", and compassion shown towards *Petra László* herself ('a great deal of fear got hold of her as migrants broke through the border and began pouring towards her'):

Our colleague's story provided the Hungarian left-liberal press ample ammunition; she was unable to find employment for a long time after she was let go by her previous employer. At the same time, the manufactured world-wide hysteria has resulted in such consequences as radical jihadists setting a bounty on her head as a result of the alleged victims from Röszke being Muslims. (*Pestisrácok*, 30 Oct 2018).

### Frames

Despite that the story is short and simple, it is remarkable how many different frames it produced over the course of its lifespan. The ones we have identified in the coverage of the news outlets under focus are as follows: **"what happened"**, **"victim/responsibility"**, **"national and international reactions"**, **"legal"**, **"political"**, and **"security/terrorism" frames**. They are combined in some of the articles.

The **"what happened"** frame is concerned with the events as they happened. News items of this frame often contain technological details (whose camera recorded what from what angle), attempting to

clarify the series of actions (who ran from whom, what Ms. Laszlo did with her leg, whom she reached and why they fell), and hypothesising about emotions, state of mind and intent. Videos, photos (in some cases frames from the videos) are an important part of these articles. It is often combined with the legal frame. This frame is often used in the first phase of the coverage, then re-appears in the later phase as the legal case progresses, and as the pro-government media outlets change their narrative of the events.

The **“victim/responsibility”** frame is used in most articles in our analysis. Articles with this frame focus on assigning the role of the victim and the perpetrator (or at least the one who is responsible) in the story and give a moral interpretation of the events. Emotional language is a strong characteristic of these articles, they also often contain visuals (either photos, videos of the events, or portraits of the victim and the perpetrator). Speculations of the identity and background, and also of the afterlife of the main characters are recurring in articles with this frame. In the first phase of the coverage, the victim role is assigned to Mr. Algahadab, and the perpetrator/responsible to Ms. Laszlo, which sets up the “refugee as passive victim” narrative. Pro-government media changes this setup eventually (see below and above), but other outlets stick to it.

The presumed innocence of the victim is a latent expectation in these articles: for Mr. Algahadab to be “deserving” of our compassion, he needs to be a morally unquestionable person: he is shown as a family man, beloved coach of the local football team, even hero who has been tortured by the Islamic State. When it comes to information on the afterlife of the victim, a fairy-tale-like happy end unfolds: Mr. Algahadab and his son reach Germany, then Spain where Mr. Algahadab is invited to coach a football team and they even meet Cristiano Ronaldo. The perpetrator, on the other hand, pays for her crime (by losing her job, having to endure public humiliation, having to apologize and standing trial). Therefore, moral order is restored in the “refugee as victim” narrative by the use of the victim/responsibility frame. Responsibility, in some cases, is extended to politicians, especially to PM *Viktor Orbán* and his political system for constructing an environment in which such immoral action originates.

**The “victim/responsibility” frame is used in most articles in our analysis. Articles with this frame focus on assigning the role of the victim and the perpetrator (or at least the one who is responsible) in the story and give a moral interpretation of the events.**

In pro-government media, most notably in *Pestisrácok*, as described above, this role division changes throughout the coverage: the role of the victim and perpetrator switched, and Ms. Laszlo’s acts are shown as an understandable reaction of a tired, scared woman to the chaotic scene unfolding in front of her (crowd of migrants running towards her). Articles cover Ms. Laszlo’s perspective, her state of mind and emotions during the events, and the suffering she endured because of the “witch-hunt” by the liberal media following the events (losing her job, having to flee from her home, loss of her mother-in-law, being the target of terrorist threats etc.). Mr. Algahadab, the former victim is presented as a liar, a tool used by liberals, a terrorist, and a loser who, even though benefited from the fake victim position, could not even use the situation to his advantage in the long run as he was fired from his job for not learning the local language. In most of these articles, the main culprit is the liberal media that creates the “hysteria” and the “witch-hunt” against the innocent, vulnerable Hungarian mother of two.

Jihadists have set a bounty on our colleague’s head during the darkest period of the hysteria that was blown to international proportions, while the ones causing this hysteria are praising as a warm-hearted refugee an individual - the alleged victim - who has reportedly actively participated in the anti-Kurd genocide in Iraq. (*Pestisrácok*, 11 May 2018)

On September 8th of 2015, several hundred illegal migrants broke through the barrier formed by police unable to contain them, committing a criminal offence and misdemeanor. Petra László, as the camerawoman for N1TV, recorded the events (...). One member of the frenzied, violent, resisting and aggressive crowd pushed her strongly. Petra, facing the crowd threatening to raze and trample her, continued her duties as a reporter and protected herself, while coming into physical contact with two illegal migrants, and stepped away from a migrant who tripped and fell after violently breaking away from police and running with his son in his arms, without ever touching him. This series of events, which does not constitute a criminal offence, was exaggerated to a level of a “world scandal” by the liberal media as part of the campaign to vilify our country, which is also protecting EU borders, stigmatising Petra László, severely damaging her good name and presenting illegal migrants as victims. (*Pestisrácok*, 16 Nov 2020)

The “**international/national reactions**” frame is common in the first phase of the coverage. Media outlets often recount how international media covered the events. These articles point out the unique and symbolic nature of the assault: on the one hand, Ms. Laszlo’s act was so outrageous that it deserved heightened international attention. On the other hand, it is now seen as the act that symbolizes the Hungarian response to the refugee crisis.

Another frame often used in the coverage is the **legal** frame. It appears when the various stages of the legal proceedings are covered (from speculations on the crime Ms. Laszlo allegedly committed through her court case to her suing of media outlets). These articles use formal, legal language, present characters such as NGOs and public officials, and occasionally include photos of courtrooms. It is often combined with the “what happened” frame and the “victim/responsibility” frame.

The police have interrogated the camerawoman who assaulted refugees as a suspect (...). The prosecutor’s office has called for an investigation based on reasonable suspicion of breach of peace. The subsequent proceedings will be conducted by the Szeged Police Department. (*Index*, 11 September 2015)

The **political** frame is rare but present in all media outlets’ coverage in our sample. This frame entails the political interpretations of the events: speculations on which politicians/parties are responsible, and what actions (policy or political) should be taken as a response. They feature politicians, usually oppositional politicians (*Ferenc Gyurcsány*, *Péter Juhász*), and in rare cases activists and NGOs.

*Péter Juhász* strongly criticised the government in his speech. (...) He said that Petra László, as a phenomenon, is “Viktor Orbán’s political product”, this is where the government’s hate campaign leads. (444, 13 Sept 2015)

Finally, though rare, it is worth pointing out that the “**security/terrorism**” frame also appears in the coverage, mostly in pro-government outlet, *Pestisrácok*. Articles that use this frame speculate either on the alleged terrorist background of Mr. Algahadab, or on the alleged terrorist threats aimed at Ms. Laszlo. Some of these articles also describe the scenes preceding the assault as threatening and chaotic, emphasising the illegal behaviour of the crowd of illegal immigrants. These articles use highly emotional, intense language, and usually include Ms. Laszlo’s ordeal and victimhood.

(...) the spokesperson for the Democratic Union Party (PYD) (...) stated recently that the former terrorist who fled to Europe has, on several occasions, participated in the Western-backed Islamist attacks against Kurdish forces, fighting for the Al-Nusra Front, a Syrian organisation viewed as linked to Al-Qaeda. (...) (*Magyaridők*, 22 September 2015)



### b) Main narratives and frames in television news programs

In this section we are presenting the qualitative analysis of two primetime news programs of two national television channels, *M1*, the public service broadcaster, and *RTL Klub*, the biggest national commercial television channel.

*M1* is the news channel of the Hungarian Public Service Broadcaster, part of the MTVA media conglomerate founded in March 2015. The channel is funded from state budget and has repeatedly been found biased in its presentation of events. The criticism regarding its pro-government bias was especially strong during the “refugee-crisis” in 2015 and 2016 as well as in 2017 when *M1* served as a mouthpiece in the government’s national campaigns (*Mérték*, 2021). *RTL Klub* is a commercial station owned by a German media outlet and, therefore, is not dependent on state funds.<sup>9</sup>

As Table 2.1 shows, *M1* almost completely avoided the original Ms. Laszlo event in 2015, while *RTL Klub* broadcasted repeatedly on a series of days showing several aspects of the event.

**TABLE 2.1. Number and length of Ms. Laszlo-related segments on RTL Klub and M1**

	RTL KLUB		M1	
	LENGTH OF SEGMENTS (SEC)	NUMBER OF SEGMENTS	LENGTH OF SEGMENTS (SEC)	NUMBER OF SEGMENTS
September 2015	1005	8	20	1
October 2015	127	1	0	0
<b>TOTAL (2015)</b>	<b>1132</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>1</b>
November 2017	199	2	33	1
<b>TOTAL (2017)</b>	<b>1331</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>2</b>

In *RTL Klub*’s news program, the most dominant part of the presentation of the Ms. Laszlo event in 2015 is the broadcasting of the original video footage recorded at Rösztke. This is followed by three perspectives (in equal length) of the Ms. Laszlo-event. First, Ms. Laszlo’s perspective is presented. Her perspective includes her apology, her explanation of what happened, her narrative of being the victim of a witch-hunt, and her statement that her life is broken due to this event. Second, the “voice of the internet” is presented, including blogs and social media portals claiming that Ms. Laszlo is a “soulless person”. This part also includes the list of other news outlets picking up the Ms. Laszlo-event worldwide. Third, the Spanish reaction of solidarity to the event is shown in *RTL Klub* news. These three perspectives are shown in nearly equal length in the primetime news of *RTL Klub* in 2015.

The coverage of the events by *RTL Klub* is interwoven with a narrative of solidarity. Table 2.2 shows the news titles of each Ms. Laszlo-related news segments, reflecting the changing narrative and the developments of the Ms. Laszlo-story. The news titles contrast the story of Mr. Algahadab which had a happy ending due to inclusion and solidarity of Western societies with Ms. Laszlo’s afterlife, the negative character in the story.

9. We included in the analysis all news segments from the main news program of these two channels that were concerned with Ms. Laszlo’s story. Primetime news, at first, was scanned from 8th September 2015, when Ms. Laszlo first appeared in the primetime news, to 30th September, 2015. After September 30th, we scanned the primetime news program for a week when Ms. Laszlo’s story appeared in online media. As a result, 51 days were scanned for Ms. Laszlo-related segments in the news program of *RTL Klub* and *M1*.

**TABLE 2.2. Ms. Laszlo-related news titles and length of segments on RTL Klub and M1**

RTL KLUB PRIME-TIME NEWS TITLES OF MS. LASZLO		
DATE	LENGTH (SEC)	TITLES
<b>SEPTEMBER, 2015</b>		
8th	50	Tripped a refugee
9th	182	Many people filed charges against the tripping camerawoman
10th	174	Ongoing investigation due to breach of peace
11th	159	The kicking camerawoman was debriefed
12th	35	<i>Petra László</i> has apologized
14th	160	Would have shot in the crowd of refugees
17th	127	The tripped Syrian man is in Spain
21st	118	The son of the tripped refugee is on the field with Ronaldo
<b>OCTOBER, 2015</b>		
21st	127	The kicking camerawoman brings a lawsuit
<b>NOVEMBER, 2017</b>		
21st	161	Cursed on the mother of a Jobbik MP
23rd	38	Horned in, so she was banned
M1 PRIME-TIME NEWS TITLES OF MS. LASZLO		
<b>SEPTEMBER, 2015</b>		
9th	20	Camerawoman kicking migrants may be jailed
<b>NOVEMBER, 2017</b>		
20th	33	Several incidents happened in the Parliament

*RTL Klub* news articulates many perspectives except the voice of Mr. Algahadab. His voice is heard only on two short occasions during the broadcast of the entire Ms. Laszlo-story. First, when he is tripped, and he shouts at Ms. Laszlo and runs away. Second, when he receives the offer from Getafe and arrives to the airport. Then, he says to journalists ‘I am very happy, I am very happy.’ In all other representations, only other actors talk in relation to the Ms. Laszlo-event. As a result, Mr. Algahadab is a completely passive subject of his surroundings, a silent receiver of his host society in which he is the subject of projection, either hate or solidarity, very similarly to the coverage of online media.

Several frames were applied during the story of Ms. Laszlo and Mr. Algahadab. From the frames we identified in online media, we observed the **legal frame, the international/national reactions frame and the “victim/responsibility frame”** in the coverage of *RTL Klub* news.

The question of what happens to victims and perpetrators according to *RTL Klub* news is a central question: Finding and presenting the moral order in the story through the “victim/responsibility” frame is in line with independent online media’s representation of the events.

## 2.5 Social media analysis

In order to determine the impact of the different narratives and actors, we examined the story's presence on Facebook. A keyword search in CrowdTangle yielded posts that have been published on public Facebook pages and had 'Petra László' in the post, or in the description of the shared content.<sup>10</sup>

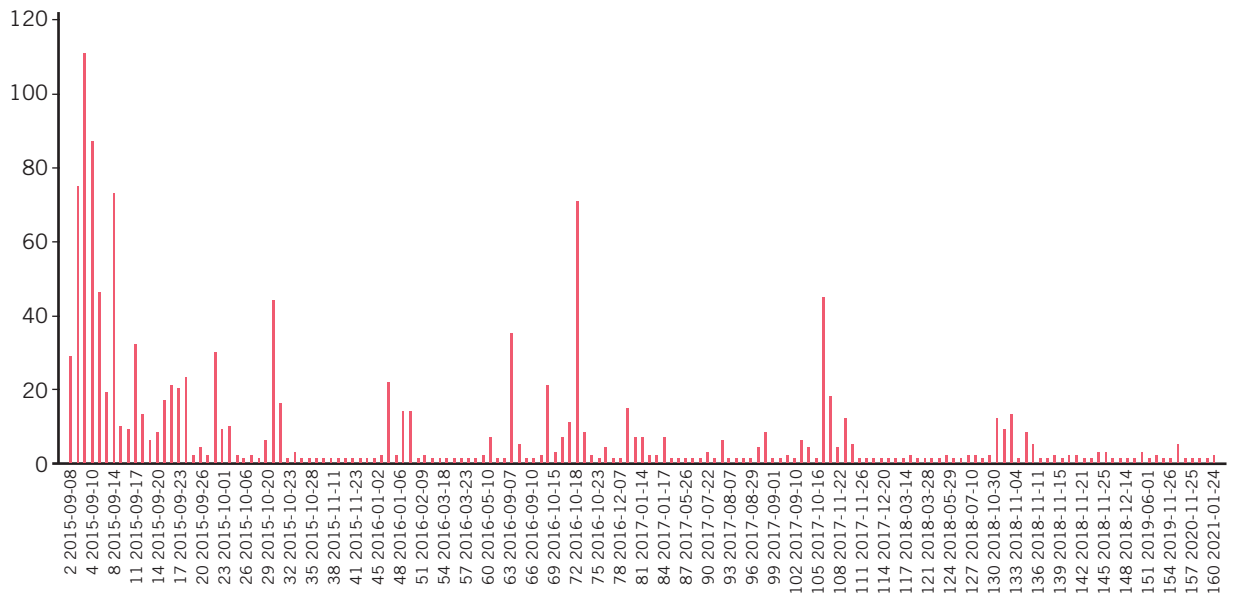
The analysis of social media posts included two levels of analysis: we used basic quantitative methods on the whole database to show the main trends and turning points in the lifespan of the story. Then we created a sub-sample of 101 posts that included the posts with the most interactions.

### *a) Temporal distribution: peaks and lows of activity*

In line with the temporal distribution of media coverage, after the first wave, we observe smaller waves following the developments in the afterlife of the story (Figure 2.3). The highest daily number of posts is 111 on the third day of the story. The number of posts slowly decreases but there is a steady number of posts until the 24<sup>th</sup>. It seems the story is getting less attention when (starting on the 21<sup>st</sup>) news breaks about speculations on Mr. Algahadab's alleged connections with Al-Qaeda (the story has been refuted later). The next peak is on the 30<sup>th</sup>, when an interview is published with Ms. Laszlo presenting her point of view of the events. These last two pieces (later falsified news on Mr. Algahadab's terrorist connections and Ms. Laszlo's point of view) become the building blocks of the slowly developing counter-narrative of events in the pro-government discourse, mostly present in pro-government media and pages. The next wave is induced by the first step in the legal case against Ms. Laszlo (September 7, 2016), followed by another peak in October 2016, when 71 posts discuss the news that Ms. Laszlo has been given a prestigious award for a documentary she worked on. The case practically disappears from Facebook when she, now working as a camerawoman for one of the partisan pro-government outlets appears in a conflict with one of the oppositional MPs. By this time, the public is polarized on the case and the narratives are complete, therefore reporting on this incident is divided by the pro-government/independent line. The last, slight increase in daily posts is when the judgement on Ms. Laszlo's case is published (the high court closed her case with a misdemeanour) in 2018.

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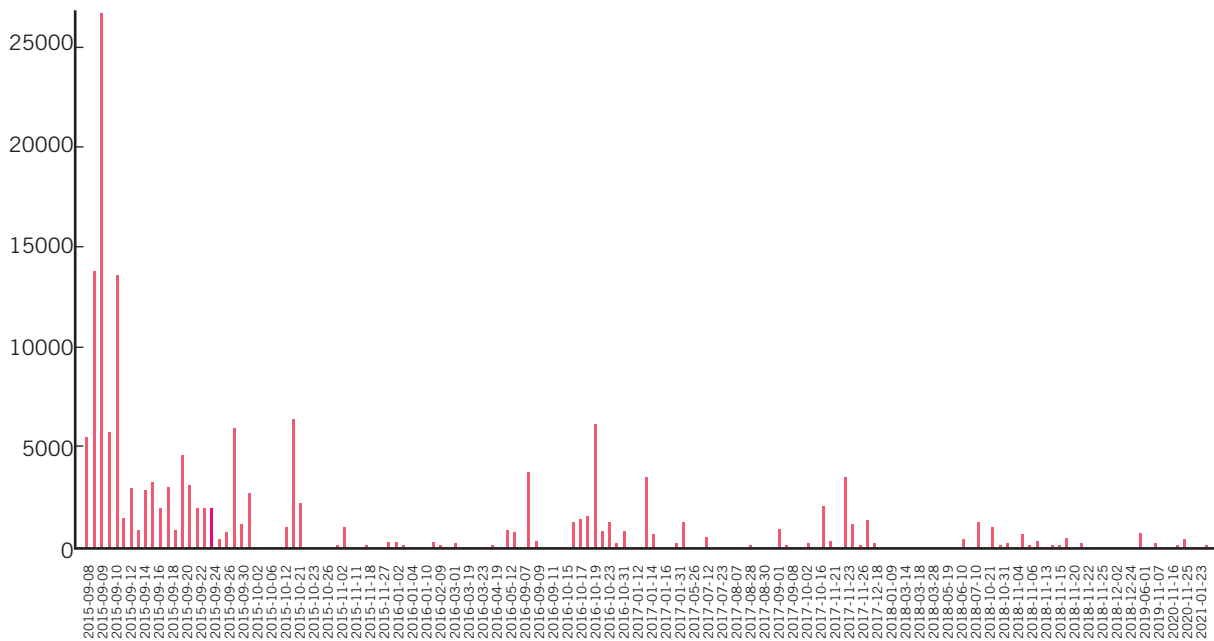
10. CrowdTangle, Facebook's research support unit, provided the posts for the entire period published on public Facebook pages based on keyword search (the keyword is „Petra László”). The database has its limitations: 1. This is a list that was provided by Facebook without transparency in their methods: we do not know if this is indeed the full list of posts or if any posts have been omitted for any reason; 2. We have access only to public Facebook pages, so posts by individuals or posted in closed groups are not included in the sample; 3. The data we received contained the link of shared content (if there was any) but the content itself was not included. We have found 1299 relevant posts for the extended period of the story (between September 8, 2015 and December 31, 2021) for the keyword 'Petra László'. We cleaned the dataset to exclude irrelevant posts.

**FIGURE 2.3. Number of posts per day, 08/09/2015 - 24/01/2021**

The public posts about the story generated 162,268 interactions in our sample (likes, comments and shares). The number of daily interactions follow the same pattern as the number of daily posts, peaking at 26,903 interactions on September 10<sup>th</sup> of 2015. The single most engaging post in our sample received over 4,800 interactions and was posted by an anti-government activist group (*Egy milliőn a sajtőszabadságért*) on September 9<sup>th</sup>. The post shared an article by 444.hu on what happened, including the video recording of the incident.

In the first phase of the story posts receiving the highest number of interactions are typically independent or anti-government, mostly using the “refugees as passive victims of aggression and hostility” narrative. In later phases, especially after 2016, when the counter-narrative is fully developed, posts with this narrative, mostly by pro-government actors take precedence. However, by this time the interest in the story seems to be dying down, so these posts (and this narrative) do not get the same amount of engagement (see Figure 2.4).

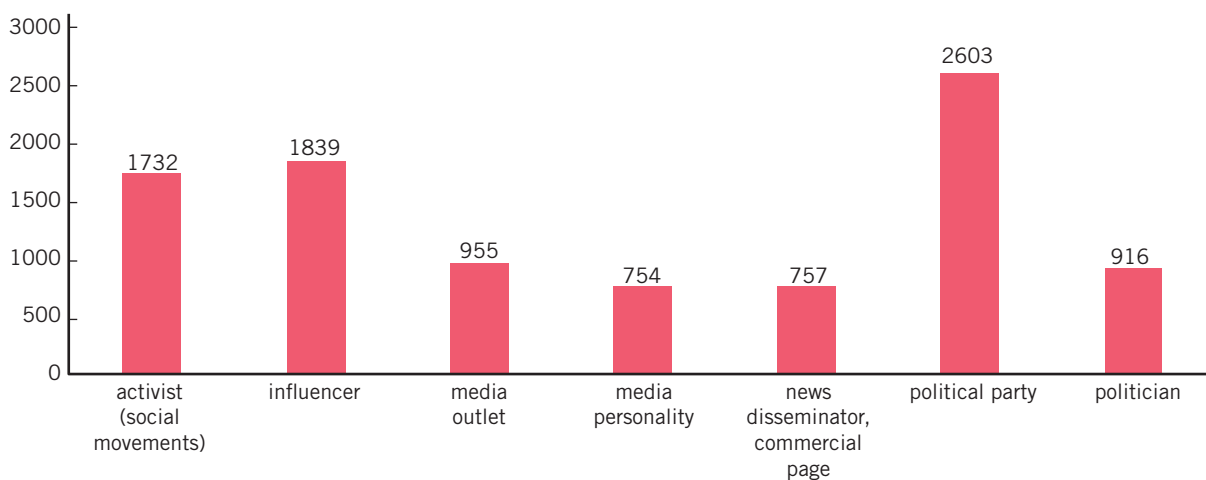
**FIGURE 2.4. Number of interactions per day, 08/09/2015 - 24/01/2021**



**b) Actors**

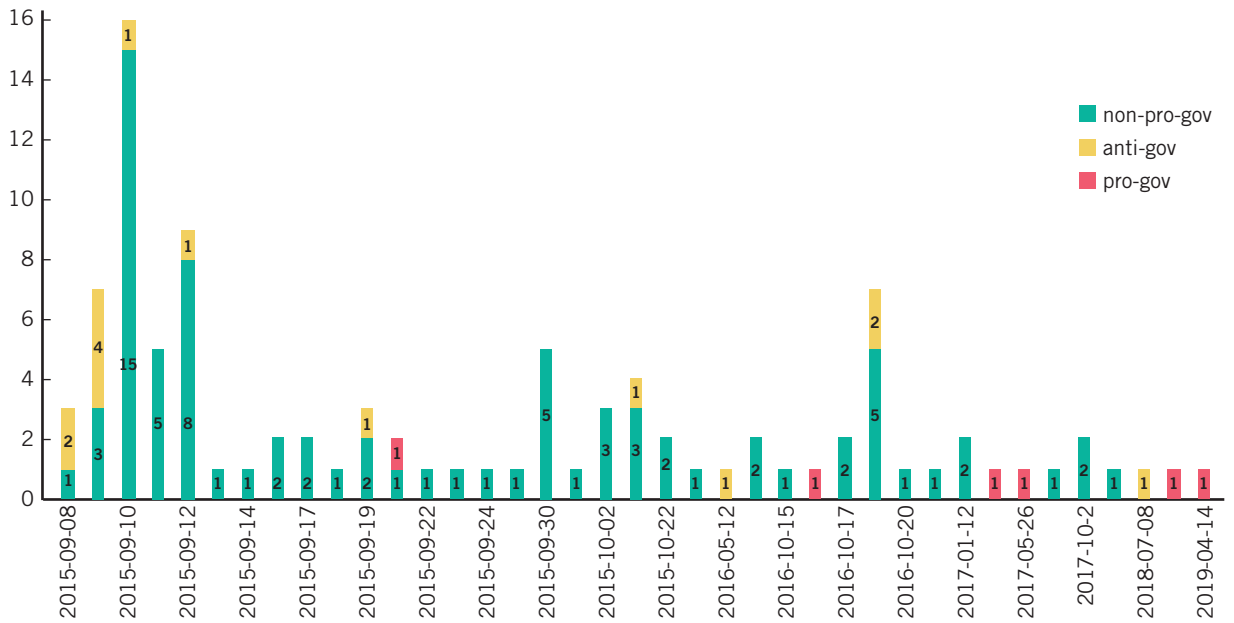
Based on the analysis of the 101 Facebook posts with the most interactions, we observe that most (76) are published by media outlets. Even media personalities', activists' and influencers' posted only an average of 6-7 posts each. Media outlets' posts generated the most interactions by far (74,464 total interactions) but when it comes to the number of interactions per post (Figure 2.5) media outlets are among the least successful: the posts of the political party, influencers and activists generated significantly more interactions.

**FIGURE 2.5. Number of interactions per post per page type (mean)**



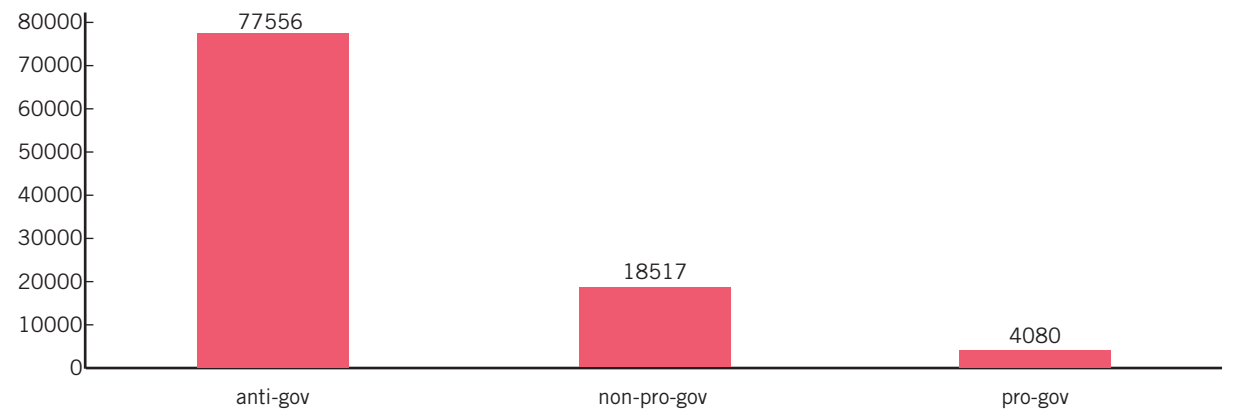
From the 101 posts neutral (or non-pro government) entities were prevalent with anti-government actors lagging behind (with 79 and 14 posts among the 101), and only 6 posts were produced by pro-government pages. These are all partisan media outlets (*888*, *Pestisrácok*, *Echo TV*), mostly in later phases of the story (Figure 2.6). In general, as has been said about online media, pro-government entities refrain from covering the story extensively until the counter-narrative was established. By then however, the attention of the audience evaporated.

**FIGURE 2.6. Number of posts by the page's position toward the Hungarian government**

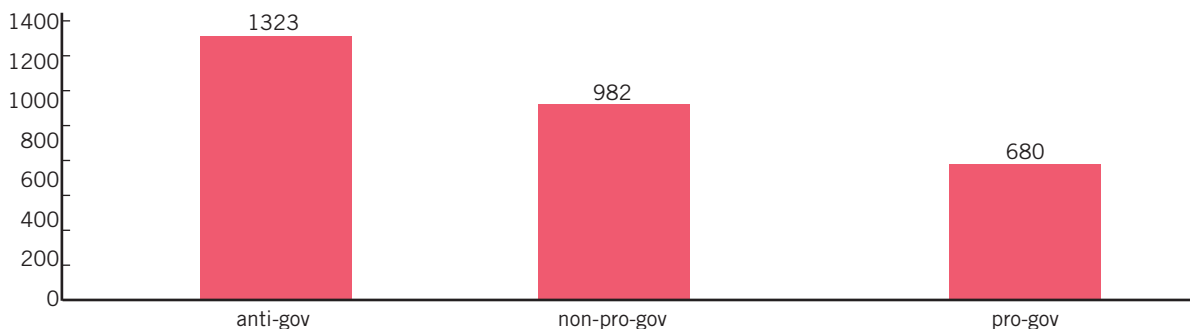


When it comes to the engagement these posts inspired, we see the success of anti- and pro-government actors both in terms of total numbers and in terms of average (per post) interactions (Figure 2.7 and 2.8). Anti-government actors' posts yielded almost twice as many interactions as pro-government actors' posts in average. As long as the number of interactions with a post is an indication of the post's reach, then pro-government actors' messages were much less likely to reach the audience in the case of this particular story.

**FIGURE 2.7. The total number of interactions per page's by the political position of the post**



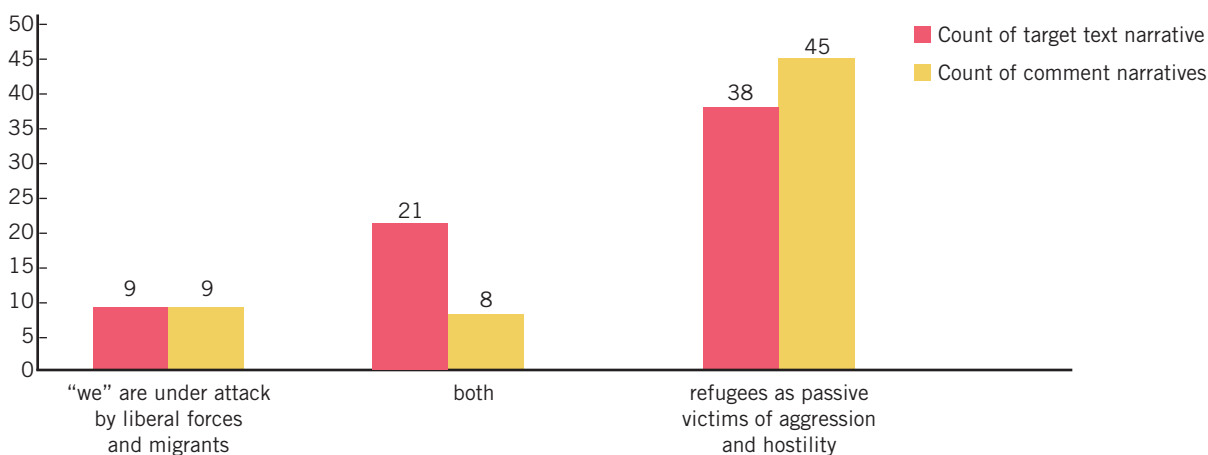
**FIGURE 2.8. The number of interactions per post by the political position of the post (mean)**



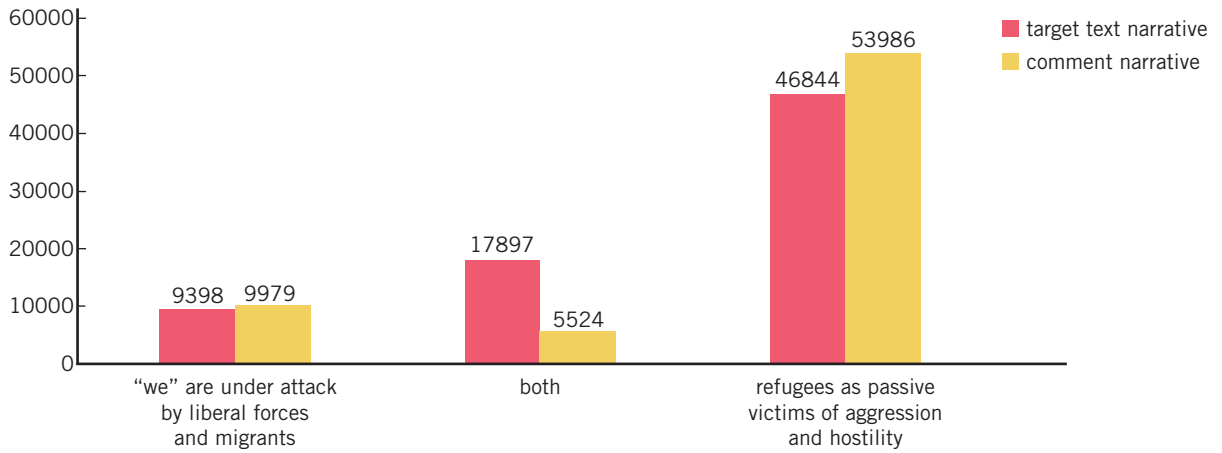
*c) Narratives*

We have demonstrated the composition and genesis of the two main narratives in the media coverage of Ms. Laszlo’s story. We identified the **“refugees as passive victims of aggression and hostility”** and the **“we” are under attack by liberal forces and migrants’** narratives. Now we are looking at the reach of these narratives on Facebook, i.e. which narrative was present in more posts (among our 101 cases), and which narrative generated more interactions? Where possible, we identified the narrative present both in the post itself, and in the content shared (if any). In both cases, the “refugees as passive victims of aggression and hostility” narrative did much better (45 and 38 posts), the second narrative being present in much fewer posts or shared content. Interestingly, the number of posts where both narratives are present is significant, especially when it comes to shared content.

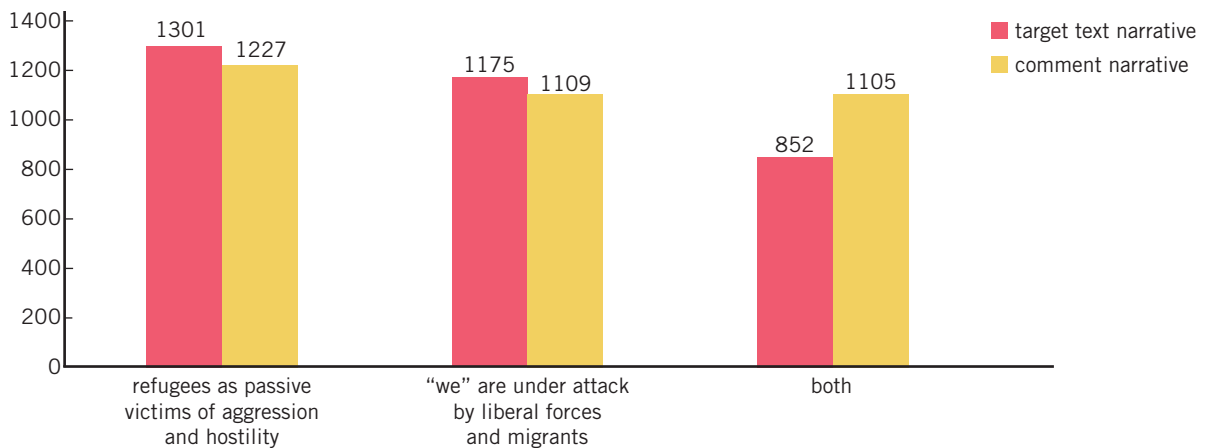
**FIGURE 2.9. Number of posts per target/comment text narrative**



The high number of posts with the “refugees as passive victims of aggression and hostility” results in high number of interactions. Posts in our sample with this narrative in the post itself generated nearly 54,000 interactions as opposed to the less than 10,000 interactions by posts with the “we” are under attack by liberal forces and migrants’ narrative.

**FIGURE 2.10. Number of interactions per narrative**

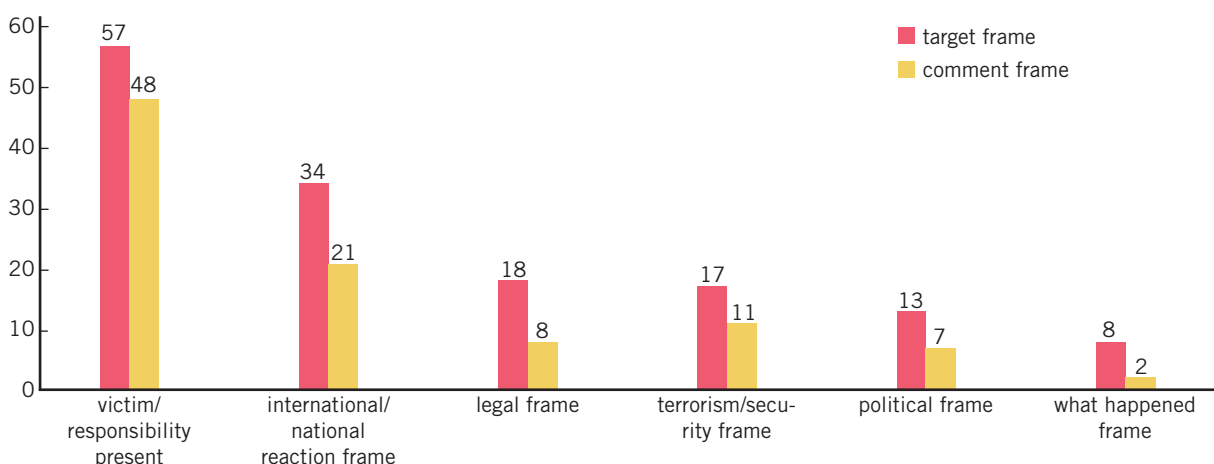
On the next chart, on the other hand, we see that the difference in engagement is mostly due to the higher number of posts, as the difference in the average number of interactions is much lower. Interestingly, posts that share content that include both narratives generate less interaction than those with a single narrative. This may be in line with the general tendency of social media according to which polarizing content gets more attention.

**FIGURE 2.11. Number of interactions per narrative per post (mean)**

#### d) Frames

In Facebook posts the most frequently used frame is the **"victim/responsibility frame"** both in the posts themselves and the shared content: over half the posts in our sample used this frame (Figure 2.12). It is followed by the frame related to the reactions the story was receiving both **nationally and internationally**. The **legal frame, the terrorism/security frame and the political frame** are present in less than the fifth of the articles, while the **"what happened"** frame is almost invisible.



**FIGURE 2.12. Number of posts per the types of frame**

### e) Conclusions

Based on the analysis of Facebook posts, we observed that the story received attention for about three weeks with some fluctuation. After that initial phase, it came into focus when something happened that stirred the public's imagination. With much decreased intensity, but it was still present in the public discourse four years after the incident. Media outlets were the most active actors as far as the number of public posts with the highest interactions are concerned. Independent and anti-government actors dominated the story both in terms of number of posts and in terms of engagement generated. Pro-government pages, very much like pro-government media, seemed to not to involve themselves until the counter-narrative has been formed as the case developed. In line with the previous points, the narrative mostly present in independent and anti-government media, "refugees are passive victims of aggression and hostility", reached much higher engagement than the "we" are under attack by liberal forces and migrants' narrative, both in terms of number of posts, and number of interactions generated.

## 2.6 Narratives and strategies of non-governmental actors – expert interviews

To complete the research and to triangulate the data, we introduced a third pillar to the analysis based on interviews we conducted with experts from different fields: activists, journalists, representatives of Hungarian and international NGOs and informal initiatives, officials and politicians. Unfortunately, pro-government experts and politicians are scarcely represented in the sample.

The so-called "migration crisis" of 2015 has been taking place in a highly contested space and time in Hungary: the government had already started its moral panic inducing operations regarding migration. Important segments of the media, including the public service broadcaster had been under the control of allies of the ruling party carrying government propaganda. Under these circumstances, it is quite rare that the media representation of a migration-related event is dominated by a narrative that is not shaped by pro-government actors. Based on interviews conducted with non-governmental actors: journalists, activists and representatives of NGOs and INGOS, we are reconstructing their strategies and how they interpret the events that happened more than six years ago.

First, interviewees emphasised the straightforward nature of the story: it was a short, simple episode which had been recorded and replayed ample times, leaving little room for interpretation. Therefore, the narrative of the event was not seen as problematic by independent actors. Some attribute the fact that

pro-government actors did not form an alternative narrative about the case to the straightforward nature of the case.

The story was so gross, that we did not have to discuss it internally, it was not a complicated story. A refugee with a child was tripped. (HU\_I\_7).

The other common feature of the accounts of actors was the reflection on the change of narrative on the pro-government side. Again, in the polarized environment of the Hungarian public, the uniqueness of the case was the initial lack of difference in narratives rather than the “our narrative-your narrative” development in the later phase. ‘After the initial universal outrage, all of a sudden, the interpretation of the event diverged, and she [Ms. Laszlo] became the hero of the other side’ (HU\_I\_6).

At first, I didn’t think they [pro-government actors] had a concept of what to do about the situation, then they figured out how they wanted to communicate it. In line with the traditional Orbán-strategy, they decided to use it not to unite, but to divide: to strengthen the image of the besieged castle that is our home... Orbán always thinks in narratives of “us versus them”. (HU\_I\_6)

In each account, the context of the event, Röszke bears great significance. Interviewees hypothesised about the nature of the situation at the border, speculating if the ‘fabricated humanitarian crisis’ was the result of the incompetence of the Hungarian state, or part of a planned operation. Some of the interviewees also mentioned the possibility that the story of Ms. Laszlo may have gained such symbolic significance for being an emotional, simple, easily relatable event that captured the essence of what was happening in the complex environment of migration: the narratives around it captured people’s imagination regarding migration. Many of the interviewees find the significance of the Ms. Laszlo-story in the materialisation of the impact of the moral panic induced by the ruling parties and the government of Hungary. (‘It could not have happened without the hate campaigns. ... There is emotional preparation behind all violations of rights.’ (HU\_I\_2))

Since the event was an unexpected, short episode happening in the midst of what was seen by many NGOs and activists as a humanitarian and policy crisis, they did not want to focus on the Ms. Laszlo-story and regarded the event as a distraction. Other NGOs saw the potential in the case of showing the consequences of acting on dehumanizing instincts, the vulnerability of fled people, the impact of hate-campaigns and the importance of solidarity through the case that received such attention both in and outside of the borders. Journalists had a different approach: they saw the potential in the event to capture many aspects of the tensions around migration and show migration in a strong narrative precisely because this story was so simple and straightforward, but emotionally charged. As one journalist put it: ‘Viktor Orbán has unleashed a disinformation war on us, and we are victims of this war because we are fighting with water pistols as opposed to his weapons of mass destruction’ (HU\_I\_7)

## 2.7 Narrative making and success

On September 8 2015, a video recording surfaced of a camerawoman, *Petra László* kicking in the direction of refugees running towards her, including children and a man with a child in his arms in Röszke, the Southern border of Hungary. As shown by our quantitative analysis, the events received significant attention in Hungary, especially in independent media. The story could be interpreted as the entry point into the larger set of events related to migration that unfolded in 2015 around Röszke, the Southern border of Hungary.

The case of *Petra László* is special: it is one of the few occasions when a migration-related story was *not* dominated by narratives constructed by pro-government actors. As shown in all levels of analysis, in this particular case, independent actors (including media outlets) were active in covering and disseminating

the story, while pro-government media got involved once it found its narrative in later phases. As it has been demonstrated by previous media analysis (Bognár et al, 2018), the power structures in the field of media are such that narratives and voices providing an alternative to that of the government are struggling to reach audiences. What we observe in this case is an exception in that the narrative that is independent from the government dominates. On the other hand, the case also demonstrates the lack of public discussion on migration: before the narrative that fits the government's agenda on migration is constructed, pro-government actors (media outlets, including the public service broadcaster and Facebook pages) cover the story as little as possible.

The analysis of the media representation of the story reveals the main narratives and frames used, and the changes over time in the coverage of various types of media. The first narrative we identified shows the passive, innocent refugee being the victim of violence and exclusion by Hungary. This narrative is prominent in the first period of the reporting, and in independent media. According to the second narrative, which came to being at a later stage in pro-government media, the constructed “we” is under attack by migrants and liberal forces, and in need of protection. In both cases, the use of the victim/responsibility frame expresses the moral implications of the story, but in a completely opposite way: in independent media, according to the first narrative, the innocent victim (the refugee who has been tripped) gets a reward for his suffering in the welcoming West, while the perpetrator (*Petra László*) receives her penance (court case, public outrage, unemployment etc.). In pro-government media, according to the second narrative, the victim (*Petra László*) suffers an unfair punishment (“witch-hunt”), but her truth prevails (she gets acquitted, gets moral support from right-wing public figures and gets a job at a right-wing pro-government outlet, *Pestisrácok*), while the migrant gets unveiled for what he is (terrorist, liar, tool of liberal media) and eventually dropped by the hypocritical West (he has to return to Turkey from Spain).

The common element of these otherwise opposing narratives is the fact that they put an individual (not a system) in the centre of the reactions to migration. In the first, Ms. Laszlo becomes the face of hate and exclusion, in the latter, she becomes the symbol of despised, but justified defence against external threat of migration. The otherwise abstract story of migration and reception becomes highly emotional and familiar with well-known tropes of victimhood, reward and punishment.

As to our original research questions, we found the following:

#### a) *Who?*

Refugees were central in the story of Ms. Laszlo, but they are mostly talked about by other actors. A Syrian refugee, Mr. Algahadab was at the focus of events: he had a name, a face and a story in the coverage, and still, he was barely quoted directly: he became a symbol of migration, though with an entirely different meaning of this symbol depending on the narrative: he is either presented as the passive victim of hostile reactions, a person in need of help, therefore a symbol of the plight of refugees and their dependence on Western generosity. Alternatively, he is shown as a source of threat and the pawn of dangerous liberal forces.

A white Hungarian woman is the other character in the centre. Unlike Mr. Algahadab, after the first few days, she does get her own voice: her letter(s) of apology are directly quoted, later she gives interviews which also get covered by many articles and posts. Her narrative changes throughout the lifespan of the story, along with the development of the narrative put forward in pro-government media. Though, according to this narrative, she was the victim of circumstances and of the vicious liberal media, she has some agency in presenting her narrative of the events (unlike Mr. Algahadab). Otherwise, we see international and Hungarian journalists' voices present, along with members of civil society in independent media. The voices of opposition politicians are scarce, and only present in independent outlets. Pro-government actors' presence is limited to the last phase of the story, when they express their solidarity with Ms. Laszlo, now the victim.

On Facebook, the difference from mainstream media in terms of voices present is the presence of anti-government actors (pages, political parties, influencers, politicians): though they do not seem to bring new narratives or frames to the fore, they tend to formulate them in a more straightforward manner, with culprits and victims pointed out, and in some cases, calls for action included. Otherwise, mainstream media outlets are the sources of the content shared, therefore the same articles appear in the online space, though in some cases accompanied by emotional messages in the posts.

### *b) What?*

We have identified two main narratives in the lifespan of the story: according to the first, migrants (refugees, asylum seekers, fled people) are passive victims of violence and exclusion in Hungary. According to the second, `we` are under attack by migrants and/or the liberal forces that control them and have to protect ourselves. The first one tells the story of an innocent refugee (Mr. Algahadab) arriving to Hungary after his long plight of seeking refuge with his children, where they are met with open hostility and violence by a local woman (Ms. Laszlo), whose action (kicking refugees, including children in a crowd) is engendered by the Hungarian government's anti-migration campaigns. The second narrative tells the story of an innocent woman, a mother of two (Ms. Laszlo) who becomes the victim of a witch-hunt by pro-migration liberal media, twisting her justifiable action of self-defence against a horde of disorderly migrants into an act of aggression with the help of the lying, malicious (or even terrorist) migrant (Mr. Algahadab). These narratives compete, but their prominence varies in different media spheres (the first one more common in independent, the other in pro-government media), and in the different stages of the story (in the first stages the first narrative dominates, in the later stages the second narrative gets increasing presence in pro-government media).

Focusing on the main characteristics of these two narratives, we found that as far as their *cognitive plausibility* is concerned the two narratives omit and emphasize different elements of the story. At first, the story seems quite straightforward, with one line of events and one dominant narrative. As the story progresses, basic facts get questioned: for example, articles that put Ms. Laszlo as a victim of witch-hunt in their focus claim that the physical contact between Ms. Laszlo and Mr. Algahadab was made-up, and Ms. Laszlo was merely protecting herself from the threatening crowd. There is a debate over the past of Mr. Algahadab: stories about him being a hero or having been involved in terrorism. The legal procedure also gives way to different interpretations as the different levels of the court come to different conclusions: actors are able to pick and choose from the facts as it fits their narrative. As we have shown, the second narrative gets developed as elements of the first, straightforward story gets blurred and give space for a different interpretation, with emphasis on later developments of the story (Ms. Laszlo receiving threats, later refuted information on Mr. Algahadab's terrorist past surface etc.).

As to the *emotive appeal* of the narratives, the most important characteristic is the very emotional nature of the story (often referenced by our interviewees). The context (Röszke, see our introduction), the migration "crisis", the easily identifiable characters, the role of children, the abundance of visual elements (videos, photos), and the fact that strong emotions are present in the incident itself, all heighten the emotive appeal of the story. Both narratives evoke anger and revolt, which explains their strong presence and engagement potential. As described above, the language of the reporting on the story is also highly emotional.

As will be described in the second case study and in the introduction, by the time the Ms. Laszlo-story happens, lines between "Us" and "Them" have been drawn by government propaganda with a strong anti-migration campaign. In this context, the first narrative fits with pre-existing attitudes and ideas of most leftist and liberal, but not the pro-governmental actors. This explains the observed avoidance of the story by pro-government media outlets and actors (both in television and online), until the second narrative emerges, which is in line with the pre-existing meta-narrative on migration propagated by the Hungarian government. Other elements that make the narratives adequate as

communicative framing (i.e. their ability to organize experience and guide action) are the intense personal drama of the main characters; the ability of the story to make its audience feel part of the “good side”: each narrative to their own audience, and, as shown in the quantitative analysis, the repetition of the story in the media.

### *c) Where?*

Since the Hungarian media ecosystem is characterised by high polarization and strong governmental control over a significant number of media outlets, including the public service broadcaster, the intra-sphere diffusion of the two narratives is influenced by their coherence with the government line. The first narrative is dominant in non-pro-government media, while the second narrative is present almost exclusively in pro-government outlets. Until this second narrative is developed, the story is scarcely present in these outlets.

When it comes to cross-sphere diffusion, the origin and circulation of various narratives between different channels and platforms, we found that the first narrative originated in mainstream online media: articles published by established outlets were the main content shared and disseminated on Facebook among the most engaging hundred posts. However, Facebook contributed to the success of the narratives in two ways. On the one hand, it provided information and content that fed the narratives in online media and in television news: journalists often found new information on the case on Facebook: the main characters’ Facebook pages were analysed and used, Facebook posts of experts and alleged friends, and Facebook groups set up in reaction to the story were often covered by the media, and therefore shaped the story. On the other hand, Facebook posts tended to add more passion to the narratives, possibly increasing the emotive appeal of the narratives.

### *d) When?*

The context of the story, as often referenced, the migration “crisis”, and particularly, the rising tension as refugees gathered at the border of Hungary and were met with restricted access, as well as the moral panic regarding migration induced by the Hungarian government (see case study three), explains the success of both narratives. As our interviewees pointed out, the story, because of its characteristics (emotive appeal, moral components, straightforward nature etc.) was able to capture in a relatable way an otherwise highly complex situation which made the narratives around it successful, each among their own audience. On the other hand, as often in times of crisis and when an event happens unexpectedly, it took some time for pro-government actors to develop their own narrative of the event, allowing for the first narrative to monopolize coverage in the first stage of the story. This short disturbance in the usually seamless operation of pro-government actors’ dominance over narratives in the public sphere, especially when it comes to migration, is what makes the case of Ms. Laszlo special.

## 3. Case Study No. 2: Narratives of the Hungarian “National Consultation on Immigration and Terrorism” (NCIT, May 2015)<sup>11</sup>

As its title of the national consultation implies, the main message is that immigration and terrorism are intertwined. First we introduce the notion of national consultation in general and in Hungary, questioning whether NCIT fits the definition of national consultation at all. The following sections contain a limited quantitative and a detailed qualitative analysis of the online media, television and social media, followed by a brief analysis of the expert interviews. Finally, the authors conclude.

### 3.1 On the notion of national consultation

There are various forms of public consultation all over the world. These consultations can be conceptualized as various forms of social capital sensitive development actions, in the course which the people who will be the subject of a new policy are informed about it, and are asked to give their opinions, and perhaps make some propositions. The main expectation from such actions is that with all those concerned becoming more knowledgeable of the issues around the new policy that is being proposed, as well as their being given the chance of active participation in its the formation, there is a better chance of finding feasible and sustainable solutions to social problems.

Public consultation has become a widely used tool of governance in the past decades. The rationale behind advocating for opening up the political decision process via such participatory techniques is based on normative ideas of participation and discussion being central elements of democracy (Pratchett, 1999; Schweigert, 2010). Proponents have also argued that enhanced participation can decrease social inequality, strengthen the representation of minorities, increase the legitimacy of decision-making, and make politics more efficient (Catt and Murphy, 2003, p408). Additionally, as many scholars have observed a decline of public trust in the institutions of liberal democracy, new participatory and deliberative mechanisms have been argued for to potentially mitigate widespread political discontent (Schmitter, 2015).

In our view, public consultations can only exist in democratic environments, i.e., in environments in which citizens are able to participate freely in the political process. This condition, however, is rarely made explicit in the literature, perhaps because it is assumed to be trivial. However, many authoritarian states employ various methods of consulting with the public in order to gain legitimacy, produce consensus, contain and neutralize dissenting voices, and even to inform policymaking to some extent (Chen and Xu, 2013; Curato and Fossati, 2020). Thus, while categorizing methods of public consultations based on their stated aims and principles of organization is analytically useful, such approach poses the danger of overlooking the significant variation in how public consultations are employed in “non-democratic settings.”

Before turning to “non-democratic settings,” we should add that except perhaps in textbook democracies various elements of public consultation technology can be – and often are – used for the manipulation of people. For example, public consultations can be used to shape public discourse, produce legitimacy for the regime or a specific political party or politician, and to discredit the opposition and critical voices.

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11. For a more detailed version of this chapter see (Surányi, et al, 2022). The references to the articles and posts in the text are also available there.

A common example for this, frequently used even in democracies, is push-polling. In a push-poll respondents are often presented with false or misleading information about the issue at hand, and the questions are phrased in a manipulative manner, strongly guiding respondents towards answers or views preferred by the initiator of the poll (Streb and Pinkus, 2004).

In non-democratic countries, such as Hungary (or China), adopting consultative mechanisms is always a hoax since central elements of democracy are absent. The consultation is therefore a fake, as citizens are not in fact asked to share their perspectives on the proposed policy but are rather subjected to top-to-bottom discourse framing treatment whose purpose is to create an embedded narrative.

### 3.2 The Hungarian version of national consultation

The government of Prime Minister *Viktor Orbán* is the first government of a non-democratic state of the European Union to have repeatedly employed push-polling – labelling it as “national consultation” – in order to legitimize its policies and degrade criticisms directed against the regime. With this, PM *Orbán* exemplifies a larger trend by authoritarian leaders implementing a variety of ‘innovations’ in their regimes in order to prevent their loss of power, maintain an illusion of democratic legitimacy, and to control social conflicts and changes (He and Wagenaar, 2018; Curato and Fossati, 2020).

In this chapter, we focus on NCIT in 2015. We will illustrate how its framing technique and propaganda techniques were designed to become the beta-test for the development of the moral panic button (MPB, see more about this ‘Hungaricum’ [i.e., something uniquely Hungarian] in Barlai and Sik, 2017), which is the propaganda “technology” employed by Fidesz Party governance since 2015.

As opposed to the official viewpoint, according to which ‘asking people their opinion via such consultations is ‘a tested and well-established practice’ that ‘allows everyone to state their opinions’” (*Katalin Novák* as quoted in BBJ, 6 November 2018), we argue that the Hungarian version of national consultation is anything but a consultation. From a sociological point of view, NCIT is a push poll that pretends to be a public opinion survey, with which in fact it has nothing to do. All of its elements (i.e., the additional leaflets, the questions, the answers, and the explanations attached to them) serve only one purpose: to ensure that an overwhelming majority of respondents will select the government-supported answer, in order to demonstrate that its policies reflect the popular will of the citizens of Hungary’ (The Orange Files).

From a commercial point of view, NCIT can be interpreted as a direct marketing campaign of a concept:

The so-called ‘national consultation surveys’ are direct marketing campaign letters sent to every Hungarian household on behalf of ‘the government of Hungary’. They are supported by a countrywide billboard campaign, with full support from the state and Fidesz-dominated media as well as ads in pretty much every local paper. They supposedly ‘ask the opinion of the people’ but their results are not public, and the questions are rather rhetorical – and often filled with fearmongering and scapegoating. (*FNF Europe, 23 November 2017*)

Using intentionally biased survey technology, reinforced by the manipulative information leaflets and explanations, the Hungarian version of the national consultation intends to create, and not to learn of, the opinion of the public. In other words, it intends to sell the ideas of the government. It is supposed to demonstrate that the Hungarian nation agrees with the government, it creates room for manoeuvre to mobilize the potential Fidesz Party voters, and to legitimize a priori decided legal and political measures.

The questionnaire of NCIT was criticized by experts (Bocskor, 2018) from several points of view, such as:

- The framing of the questions and the answers were designed to manipulate the respondents, and not to obtain valid information in regard to their opinion.
- Question No.3 (see Annex 2 Picture 2) framed the topics of terrorism and migration as inherently related issues, both rooted in mistakes made by one of the main culprits responsible for the refugee crisis, namely Brussels.
- Respondents to surveys generally exhibit “acquiescence bias” – i.e., a tendency by respondents to agree rather than disagree. ‘Some people believe...’ is a way to lead people into agreeing with the stated view, unless it is balanced with a contrary view: ‘others believe that...’ Questions No. 3 and 5 present the government’s line without balancing it by opposing views.
- The order of the questions can also influence the answers because people generally try to maintain consistency with their own earlier answers, and because earlier questions may make certain issues salient. Questions No.1-3 frame immigration in the context of terrorism. This is likely to elicit negative responses toward immigrants in later questions, even if respondents had never previously thought about these issues.
- Respondents had to select their answers from a list of three options: ‘really important,’ ‘important,’ or ‘not important’; this is a completely unbalanced format, since two of the items express agreement, and only one of them disagreement. Moreover, there were no separate neutral or “don’t know” options, so respondents initially unsure of what they thought about the issues were led to express support for the government’s position.

The NCIT contained a separate letter, a foreword written by PM *Orbán* (complete with a smiling photo of the PM, whose goal was perhaps to make the communication more personal and intimate, see Annex 2 Picture 1).

The NCIT documents were sent out to all Hungarian adults (about 8 million people), and the response rate (unaudited and without any analysis) was about 13%. In case of the two key framing questions (questions No.1. and 3.) the proportion of those who expressed agreement with either of the two positive response terms in the official communique was 96,41% and 88,86%.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.3 Quantitative content analysis of NCIT

The following content analysis of online media outlets are only intended to introduce certain aspects of the discourse through which the media approached the topic of immigration and terrorism.<sup>13</sup> We created a dataset of articles containing the term “national consultation” in their body and/or in their title in 2015 (selected from ten online media outlets with the highest readership, N=831) between 24 April and 1 August 2015. The salience of articles during 2015 resembles a bell curve, with the peak in June (Figure 3.1), i.e. when the number of asylum seekers were indeed the most numerous in Hungary.

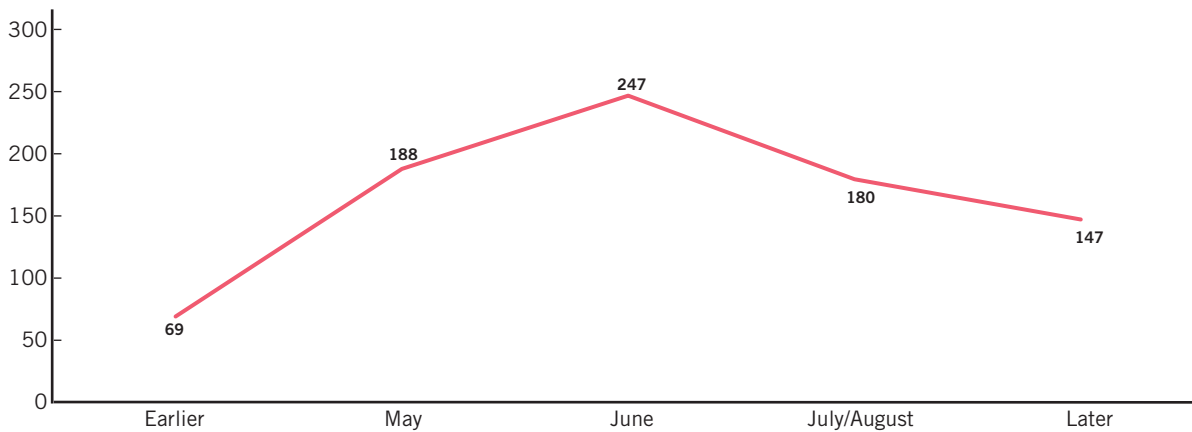
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12. To see the results of NCIT see Bocskor, 2018 p. 564.

13. The most important dates of NCIT see in Annex 3.

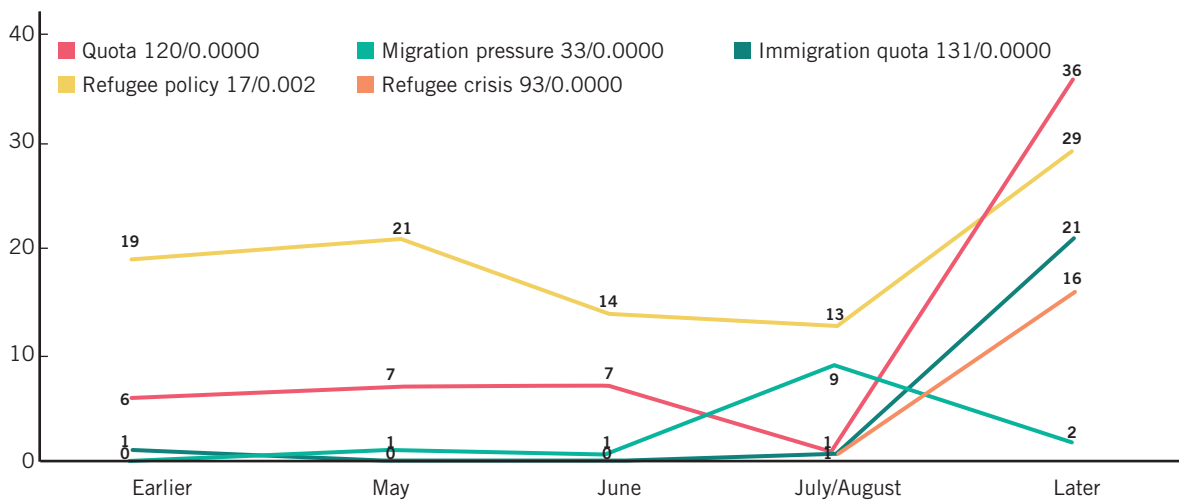


**FIGURE 3.1. The trend of NCIT-related articles**



As for the most often used terms that are closely related to the keywords of the NCIT (Figure 3.2), except for “migration pressure,” which culminated (in July and August), they all became more visible at the end of the period, when- as a result of building a fence along the Serbian-Hungarian border, there were no migrants in Hungary anymore, but when the government’s pressings of the moral panic button became very frequent.

**FIGURE 3.2. The trend of further basic terms of the NCIT by period (% , 2015)**



### 3.4 The qualitative analysis of the NCIT

The qualitative analysis includes the analysis of three online media outlets and primetime news of two television channels. To complete the research, we carried out interviews with experts from different fields: activists, journalists, representatives of Hungarian and international NGOs, public officials and informal organizations.<sup>14</sup>

14. Unfortunately, pro-government experts and politicians declined our requests for an interview.

### a) Main narratives and frames in the online media

Our qualitative analysis of online media outlets included 125 articles from three different outlets: one pro-government (*Magyaridok*), one independent-centrist (*Index*, but more inclined to be critical of the government, with one of the biggest readerships at the time), and one anti-government-liberal outlet (*444.hu*). The period under study is between the first mention of the national consultation (6 February 2015) and the end of the consultation (end of July 2015).

The articles were chosen by their relevance: only those articles have been analysed in which the national consultation covered a substantial proportion of the whole text. The analysis follows the timeline of NCIT (see also in Annex 3 and 4): the announcement of the NCIT, followed by the letters and the questionnaire being sent out to the population, the billboard campaign, and finally the announcement of the results. The focus is on the techniques applied by politicians bringing up their core message: the close connection between migration and terrorism.

#### The periods of NCIT

The events related to the national consultation in chronological order can be seen below in Annex 4. The main events are parliamentary debates; reports and (usually negative/disapproving) comments by international organizations; sharing the preliminary results of the consultation; anti-consultation billboards and their defacement; the results of the survey and speeches by PM *Orbán* in different media outlets (radio, TV etc.).

More than two months passed between the first announcement of the NCIT and the beginning of its first phase, after which it became a constant topic. Most articles analysed were written in May and June 2015. The most frequent topic was the defacement of the billboards, followed by the results of the consultation.

#### The main narratives

NCIT was centred around the anti-immigration and anti-refugee stance/policy of the government. Two main opposing narratives were found in the articles with one or two collateral-narratives on each “side”.

In the pro-government media outlet, the dominant migration narrative was obviously supporting the government’s view, namely migration being an inherently bad thing. As PM *Orbán* said: ‘Economic migration is detrimental to Europe: one cannot think of it as something useful, because it only causes harm and danger to Europeans, so migration has to be stopped, this is the Hungarian point of view’ (Dull and Miklósi, 2015).

The main narrative regarding the NCIT was first that the national consultation was a public opinion survey (the questionnaire) and later that it was part of an information campaign. The goal of the former was to find out what people think about terrorism and migration, with the results being a mandate for the government to act.<sup>15</sup> Sometimes the independent media also used this argument saying that the government only needed the national consultation for backing their decisions, however, they meant it in a sarcastic way.

This narrative was backed by two sub-narratives. First, they were using the method of **fear mongering**: many articles in relation to the NCIT stated that migrants were flooding towards Hungary – significantly

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15. As we demonstrate below, the government did not wait for the mandate, as they had started acting before the results of the NCIT came in.

more compared to the previous years. Or as they put it, many illegal immigrants were being caught at the borders. Fear mongering was one of the reasons why the word “illegal” appeared so often, mostly in pro-government media outlets; in the independent media outlets the term capable of fear mongering usually appeared as quotes from someone working for the government, but the context implied that the reporting journalist did not agree with its message. Here is an example from *Index* in which disagreement is hinted at by the use of quotation marks, plus the whole article gives voice to migration experts who clearly do not agree with the government:

'The spokesperson recalled that the rise in the number of illegal immigrants has been “shocking” high: while last year, authorities registered 42-43 thousand illegal border-crossers and asylum-seekers, in 2015 23 hundred thousand people have applied for asylum in under 6 weeks.’ (Földes, 11 February 2015)

Fear mongering was often accomplished by the use of vocabulary, reminiscent of the way natural disasters and wars are described. For example: ‘Migrants continue to flood’ Hungary (*Magyaridők*, 27 July 2015). People speaking for the government often used language like ‘invasion of immigrants,’ or *Zoltán Kovács* for example saying that: we are witnessing a ‘mass migration of the modern age’ (Herczeg, 27 July 2015).

Since, at least according to the government, there is a need to act upon the “influx of economic migrants”, the second sub-narrative was the **patriotic narrative**: its main message was centred around the right to defend Hungary as opposed to accepting the European asylum policy measures “forced” upon the country. These articles posed the question of whose responsibility it was to defend Europe’s border from the “enemy” and at the same time helping migrants to stay in their countries of origin – which allowed the government to position itself as generous and kind-hearted, without the articles authors having to comment on the government’s exclusionary rhetoric and anti-immigration policies. As PM *Orbán* said, ‘It is not enough to defend Europe’s borders: we need to have a policy that helps those who are running away to stay where they were born’ (*Index*, 24 April 2015).

Furthermore, according to the patriotic narrative it would be better if the EU members could decide how they wanted to handle these kinds of crises. In one pro-government media outlet (*Magyaridők*) they wrote: ‘the Prime Minister confirmed the Hungarian point of view’ (Losonczi, 10 June 2015). However, it is fairly clear that no unified Hungarian point of view existed. The national consultation was a (propagandistic) tool to make people believe that they want what the government wants.

This narrative goes hand in hand with question No. 3 of the national consultation (see Annex 2 Picture 2). The main goal of this question (and the narrative as well) was to demonstrate that Hungarians want to make their own decisions about their country, and therefore the resettlement quota should not be implemented (nor should some other EU policies).<sup>16</sup>

Lastly, the government’s view was that the **left-wing opposition supports immigration and aims to damage the country**, i.e., they are in opposition to national interests. For example, CÖF (Forum for Civil Cooperation, a government-financed organisation) claimed that the ‘so-called left-wing opposition’ had shamefully embraced the illegal border-crossers arriving via the Balkan route (Horváth, 26 July 2015).

For an opposing *opinion* *Ferenc Kőszeg* told at the demonstration against the national consultation: ‘We cannot enter a club [i.e., the EU] that grants us privileges, then try to overthrow it. After some time, disrespectful members like these will find themselves outside of the club’ (Horváth, 19 May 2015).

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16. We can see from our content analysis (Figure 3.2) that the word “quota” appeared quite often.

Independent media outlets represented a socially sensitive approach towards refugees/migrants: refugees should not be looked at as threats, but rather be helped. Translating this into the context of the NCIT, the counter-narrative was that **the NCIT is ‘a tool of political communication directed at mobilization of pro-government sympathizers and to divert the attention from the real (social) problems of the country.** As an example:

Együtt (Together) is outraged that Fidesz and PM Viktor Orbán have begun the divisive billboard campaign about immigration to distract from the issues of unemployment and education. “It is not migrants and migration that interests Viktor Orbán, but the decreasing popularity of Fidesz. (Viktor Szigetvári, cf. Index, 7 June 2015)

The spokesman of Párbeszéd (a liberal leftist party) expressed himself similarly: ‘Such an expensive, stupid, hateful, and evil diversion’ (MTI, 5 May 2015). Others ridiculed it and called it an ‘anti-refugee survey’ (Fábián et al., 2 June 2015), or ‘anti-refugee campaign’ (Német, 4 June 2015), or ‘fake consultation’ (Democratic Coalition, cf. Eleméry, 27 April 2015), or a ‘hate campaign’ (erdelyip, 23 June 2015). *Levente Pápa*, besides calling it a ‘national insultation,’ summed it up rather crudely like this: ‘the rubbish we call national consultation is nothing else but a manipulative attempt to misguide; a populist, hate mongering and lying survey, full of fake arguments’ (dsz, 28 May 2015).

A sub-narrative of the independent side, which can be found in the last quotation was that the NCIT (especially the billboards) incites hatred (hence xenophobia will increase among the population). Interestingly, the government turned this narrative around and used it against them when the opposition started defacing the billboards (see more below).

## Formats

The articles are mostly within “national news” (*Index* and *Magyaridők*), or “politics” (*444.hu*), except when their content was related to the EU, or in foreign language news (e.g., *The Guardian*). Regarding the genres of the articles, they were rather diverse. When there was a parliamentary debate on the subject (either in Hungary or at the European Parliament), it was often disseminated as breaking news or a live report (especially in the case of *Index*, where it was called “Minute by minute”); there were several long analyses about the national consultation itself or about a certain aspect of it (e.g. its costs or whether immigrants are indeed terrorists).

## Voices

NCIT – a push-poll combined with a billboard campaign – gave voice only to politicians and activists but no ordinary people. Focusing on experts and journalists we found that there are not many differences among the online media outlets. Mostly politicians were quoted speaking at press conferences or at parliamentary debates (as was also found by Kiss [2016]). The most prominent figures to appear were PM *Orbán*, *Zoltán Kovács*, and *Antal Rogán*. As PM *Orbán* gives an interview every Friday on public radio, this fact significantly increased his appearance. All three media outlets we analysed quoted both government members and politicians from the opposition (MPs or government officials). *Index* and *444.hu* included the widest variety of voices, experts with liberal views were quoted, such as *Antal Örkény* and *Ferenc Kőszeg*, and there was even an interview with the UNHCR Commissioner on *Index*.

## Emotional tones, symbols and metaphors

Regarding the language, as was already mentioned, we found in several of the articles by *Magyaridők* the expression ‘according to the Hungarian point of view,’ which was typically used to describe a perspective aligned with that of the government. We found plenty of differences among the articles of *Index* and *444*.

hu, as their formats were very different. For example, the tone of long, analytical articles were different from that of the short ones.

*Index* was more neutral but clearly in opposition of the NCIT. We found sentences like ‘There are good solutions and stupid ones. Which one did they choose?’ (Földes, 11 February 2015)—meaning that the refugee crisis could be solved with more rational policies than those of the government’s. We found some sarcastic comments as well ‘You won’t believe it: *L. Simon* also thinks that migration is a grave problem’ (Joób, 16 February 2015).

*444.hu* used openly critical language, even “strikethrough” and/or swearwords, like ‘wtf’ (the abbreviation of “what the fuck”). A few examples: ‘You can fill out the ~~disgusting, untruthful propaganda~~ (sic!) questionnaire of the national consultation online.’ (Király, 31 May 2015) Or: ‘We reported yesterday that *Viktor Orbán*, in his speech at Tuszványos, mentioned that more than a million people had returned the questionnaire concerning immigration and terrorism (wtf?)’ (Horváth, 26 July 2015). The authors of the articles often express their own opinion as well. For example: ‘Trying to attract Jobbik<sup>17</sup> voters as well, *Rogán* repeated that...’ (erdelyip, 6 February 2015). *444* often gives sarcastic or funny titles to the articles, such as ‘Now that there is a pause in the bombardment, I’ll put it here quickly that...’ (ibid.).

### Frames

Table 3.1 summarizes the main frames that appeared in the media and with the sub-theme, if relevant. (The frequencies will be shown together with social media.)

**TABLE 3.1. List of frames and themes (where relevant)**

FRAME	THEME I.	THEME II.	THEME III.
intention	the NCIT is a push-poll (anti-government)	the NCIT is a public opinion poll (pro-government)	
legal	responsibility of the NCIT (both)	refugees should be sent back (pro-government)	
comparison (anti-government)	refugees of 1956	“we can become refugees”	
financial	costs of the NCIT (anti-government)	costs of the migrants (pro-government)	
threat/security (pro-government)	risk posed by migrants	migrants cost a lot for the country	Hungary has to be defended

Starting with the independent media, the first frame we identified was the “**intention**” frame. This goes hand in hand with the narrative that the NCIT is a tool for spreading the government’s propaganda. In these articles they criticize the language of the questionnaire, and concluded:

‘... it is fairly obvious that, similarly to the earlier national consultations, this is not consultation, but anti-immigrant propaganda disguised as a consultation, based on cheap populism, exploiting a lack of information and instinctual fears for political purposes.’ (*444.hu*, by *anarki*, 25 April 2015)

17. A that-time far-right opposition party.

The same view was shared by those opposing the NCIT outside of Hungary:

'According to the European Council's commissioner for human rights, the national consultation regarding immigration incites intolerance, while the Confederation of Trade Unions in Brussels called it perverted, and local social scientists are arguing that it is anything but consultation'. (Index, 8 May 2015)

*Zoltán Kovács*, reacting to these criticisms, also agreed that the NCIT was indeed not a public opinion poll, but rather a 'political questionnaire [...] which asks questions in accordance with the government's political intentions' (Kiss, 2016, p47).

The fact is that the national consultation was a tool for political propaganda rather than an actual questionnaire: the government had known the results in advance—they did not need to wait for the answers to come in. Another fact pointing towards the same conclusion is that construction of the fence at the Southern border had already started before the questionnaires were returned.

The second frame we identified was the "**legal**" frame. This frame came up in relation to two different topics. One is that of the question of responsibility. Whose responsibility was the billboard campaign? As it turned out, not all the politicians in Fidesz supported the idea: *Zoltán Balog* said 'The billboards of the national consultation are not my taste' (10 June 2015, *444.hu*). Another important government person, *János Lázár* said that 'its simplicity is its advantage and disadvantage' (cf. *Magyari*, 12 June 2015).

The other topic is Fidesz's legal position, according to which refugees/asylum seekers should be sent back.

Legal nonsense – said *Antal Örkény*, the leader of *Menedék*, an organization working with migrants. 'Rogán's words cannot be explained either legally or professionally. His words perhaps only make sense in the context of domestic politics. This does not concern in the least those who are coming to us. This is simply the manufacturing of hysteria. Rogán wants to create enemies from migrants by using nationalistic, chauvinistic language'. (Földes, 11 February 2015)

The third frame we identified was the "**comparison**" frame. It means that they drew comparisons with the immigrants' situation. One comparison was that we can become refugees at any point in our lives, that is also why we should let them in. And another more concrete comparison was with the Hungarian refugees from 1956 when approximately 200.000 Hungarians fled the country.<sup>18</sup>

The fourth frame was the "**financial**" frame, with two themes. The first one was about the costs of the whole NCIT. It often came up in the media that the government spent a lot of money on it. Opposition politicians also pointed out how the NCIT was used as a means of financing Fidesz, calling it 'hidden party financing' (*András Schiffer*, cf. *Bohár*, 29 April 2015). One of the articles' titles on *444.hu* 'This is how the government stole 1.297 billion forints from you in 3 simple steps'<sup>19</sup> (*anarki*, 16 June 2015). The financial aspect came up sometimes as an adjective when they just put the 'one billion Forint consultation'. Turning to the pro-government media and narratives, another theme where the financial frame was used was the costs in relation to the deportation and detainment of migrants as well, because the government argued (in the consultation as well) that it costs a lot of money to deal with immigrants (including the costs of deporting and detaining migrants.)

18. In 1956 there was the countrywide Hungarian revolution against the socialist regime, which was quickly repressed by the USSR.

19. The whole process (the sending out questionnaires and the billboard campaign) cost 1.3 billion Forints. It is a well-known fact that there are oligarchs close to the government in Hungary, and the money spent on this "cabaret show" went straight into the pockets of these friends of the PM. (See for example the *Stur, B* (2017).

We identified a fifth frame that we have called the **“threat” or “security”** frame. There are three varieties to this frame, with immigrants being blamed for things common to all three. This is how the government explained why ‘Hungary does not want immigrants’:

They are collecting kilometres of discarded clothing every day, because refugees remove their wet, used jackets, jumpers, personal things, which have to be collected instantly in order to prevent any locals acquiring them, as there is no way of knowing what sorts of disease they may carry. (Joób and Dull, 11 June 2015)

One variety of this frame is communicating the “risk posed by migrants” to the wellbeing of the local population. This was pushed by one of “questions” in the NCIT (No.5, see Annex 2 Picture 2), as well as by sentences such as “If you come to Hungary, you cannot take away our jobs” on the government’s billboards.

Then there is the terrorist variety of the threat frame. The whole NCIT was based on the assumption that migration and terrorism come in pairs. That is also why the word “terror” appears so often in our content analysis (see Figure 3.2).

There is a correlation between immigration and terrorism. Those who arrive in Europe split from their cultural community, and we can see the consequences of this in Western Europe. They can form an unusual subculture that has the potential of becoming a deviant, fertile soil for criminality. (Bence Tuzson, cf. Joób and Dull, 11 June 2015)

A more radical version of this framing by the government’s central media outlet: ‘Economic migrants are frauds. Arsonists. Thieves. Brutes. Spreaders of disease. Terrorists. And the communists like them. Get them out of Hungary.’ (Dull, 20 February 2015) Presenting immigrants in a negative light is not only the practice of journalists working for the pro-government media: it is part of the NCIT as well. ‘Although consultations themselves are important tools of democratic governance, the current consultation is “unacceptable in its content, it spreads hate and intolerance with regards to migrants, who it presents as a threat to Hungarian society.”’ (EU ombudsman, cf. Király, 29 April 2015)

We identified the financial variety of the threat frame as well: migrants cost a lot for the country. We may also see this as the second variety of the financial frame, but here the subject is the migrants, not the NCIT. One of the “questions” in the NCIT pushes this idea (No.10, see Annex 2 Picture 2); however, *Antal Rogán* went further:

Regulations should be modified in such a way that allows the detainment of immigrants illegally arriving in Hungary irrespective of their asylum claims, after which we have to keep them under surveillance until we can determine the legitimacy of their claims. If the claims are illegitimate, they must be deported immediately. (Index, 12 February 2015)

The last version of the threat/security frame focuses on the physical integrity of the county: “Hungary has to be defended” is a recurring phrase in the pro-government articles. This version goes hand in hand with the narratives of “many migrants are coming” and also with the patriotic narrative. One main theme was the fence that was being built during the campaign to stop illegal migration. Another theme was the idea of detaining and returning immigrants back to their home. It was also a question in the national consultation (nr. 9).

There were some other, rather marginal frames from both sides. In line with the independent narratives, they were referring to the **humanitarian values** and **solidarity**, while the articles representing the pro-government narrative cited **Christianity** and the **historical** frame, according to which Hungary is open to people who has lived here for over 500 years but not to economic migrants. Furthermore, the European Union’s values were used on both sides – always adjusted to the main message. For example, in the

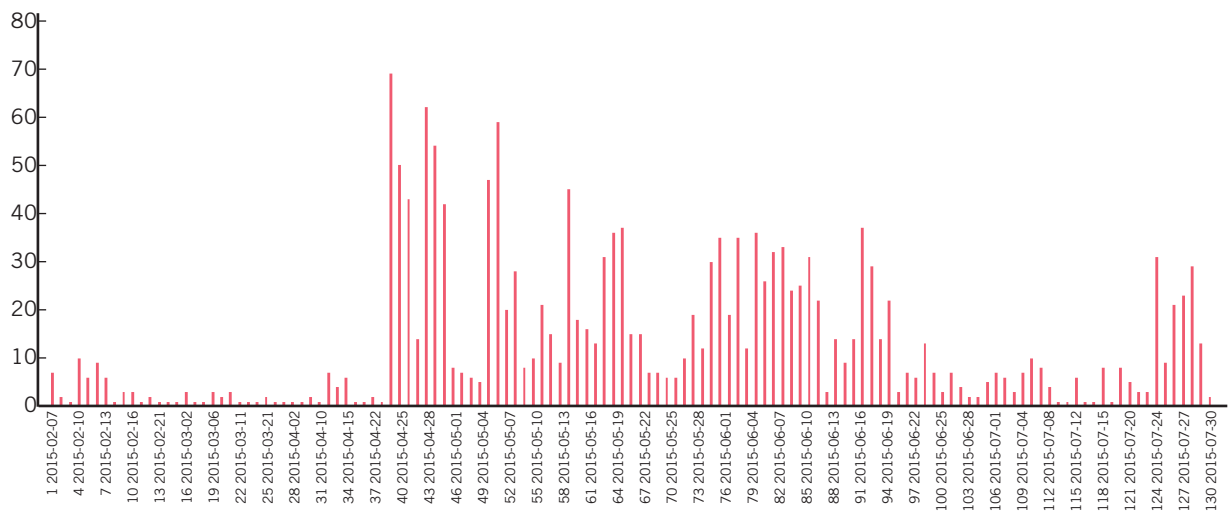
anti-government narrative they emphasized democracy and human rights, while along with the pro-government narrative, they wrote about the sovereignty of the countries.

While in pro-government media we have only found the pro-government narrative, the independent media, by citing the government's spokespersons, repeat and spread the pro-government narrative as well. The frames are mixed regardless of the media outlets' approach to the question, as they do not belong to "sides."

### *b) Main narratives and frames in social media (Facebook)*

Figure 3.3 shows the trend of all Facebook posts with the keyword "national consultation".<sup>20</sup> Prior to 24 April, when the NCIT was officially announced, there were only a few posts per day. Compared to the frequency of the articles in the media outlets (see Figure 2.1), there is a major difference, however, while the number of articles in the media was peaking around mid-June, the number of the social media posts was the highest at the beginning and was gradually decreasing towards the end – with some oscillation in-between. Some of the "bumps" coincide with those with the media peaks in June, which were mostly about the billboard campaign and the subsequent reactions (nationally and internationally) given to it and the building of the fence at the Serbian border (see more in Annex 3).

**FIGURE 3.3. The frequency of posts per day on social media (N=1743)**



For the qualitative analysis we focused on those 104 entries which gained the most interactions.<sup>21</sup> We examined the posts themselves and the shared content.<sup>22</sup> In case of a link, we analysed the article, in case of photos, videos, we analysed their content.

The results slightly differ from that of the media analysis: among the posts there is much more anti- and independent content than pro-government (Table 3.4). One possible reason of it is that the government at that time used social media scarcely.<sup>23</sup>

20. We examined the same period as in the media analysis (between 6 February and 31 July 2015), and the keyword we used for the search was "national consultation".

21. Aggregating the number of likes, shares and comments.

22. Except the comments as they are not visible by the platform we use in the course of the analysis (via CrowdTangle). Since there was another national consultation being planned during this time, we manually cleared the database (comprising of the 100 entry) from those posts.

23. Alternatively, it is possible that since in the media we analysed the top three outlets with the biggest readership (from each



**TABLE 3.4. The share of the post initiators' political positions (% , N=104)**

ANTI-GOVERNMENT	INDEPENDENT	PRO-GOVERNMENT
28	66	6

Among the shared content more than half originated from the Hungarian media outlets, the rest was divided between the other categories, such as YouTube, political parties' pages etc. (Table 3.5).

**TABLE 3.5. The share of the page types (% , N=104)**

INDIVIDUAL / INFLUENCER / JOURNALIST	PUBLIC OFFICIAL/ POLITICIAN	MEDIA OUTLET	NGO	ACTIVIST GROUP/ COMMUNITY	POLITICAL PARTY
5	12	56	3	10	14

The events related to the posts were similar to that of the media outlets (see Annex 4). The only big difference is that many social media posts (which received the most (and usually critical) interactions) appeared at the beginning of the NCIT (when they announced it at a press conference).

### Main narratives

None of the main narratives from the pro- and anti-government sides occurred often in the social media posts and shared contents, but rather the sub-narratives dominated the discourse. From the pro-government side, they were the following: **“many migrants are coming to Hungary”** and **“Hungary has the right to defend itself”**.

Regarding the anti-government narrative: the message that the **“NCIT is a political propaganda”** was present and only one sub-narrative was strong - that it incites **hatred**. Many posts did not have a specific narrative either because it was only a picture or a photo with one sentence or the shared article was very short and written in a sarcastic way, but it was clear that they were criticizing the NCIT.

Those who opposed NCIT demonstrated their disapproval in different ways: on 19 May 2015 they held a demonstration against it where several activists and one refugee (who got his status) gave speeches. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee held two campaigns: the first was asking the population to send back the letter (national consultation) empty as a boycott, and the second – similarly to the UNHCR's campaign – was addressing the topic of successful immigrants who adopted their lives perfectly and drew a comparison with the Hungarian refugees of 1956. One media outlet, the *Kettős Mércse* (Double Standard) also initiated the boycott of the questionnaire: they asked the population to create memes.

The political party, *Demokratikus Koalíció* (Democratic Coalition, (DK)) was collecting the paper version of NCIT and donated the money they got from recycling them, to an opposition radio channel (*Klubrádió*). A politician of the opposition (*Richárd Barabás* from PM) gave a “rubber bone” to the government spokesperson (*Zoltán Kovács*) at the press conference he gave about the national consultation: it meant to be a symbolic action showing that the national consultation is just another rubber bone that politicians could “chew on”.

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side), consequently the smaller (and perhaps more radical) media outlets were underrepresented.

Some people expressed their opinion by defacing the billboards. One activist said in an interview that they sprayed the billboards because ‘they are shameful, and we don’t want them’ (HU\_I\_4). There were two counter-billboard campaigns. First, there was the mockery campaign via billboards run by the Two-Tailed Dog Party and the Thick-Skin Blog financed by crowdfunding. Their sarcastic tone and black humour were aimed to articulate the absurd items of the NCIT billboard campaign. The *Magyar Szocialista Párt* (MSZP, The Hungarian Socialist Party) started a billboard campaign of their own in order to counter the messages of the NCIT billboards.

The government used these actions to talking about the ‘vandalism and horrors of opposition politicians encouraging the defacement of the billboards’ instead of ‘talking about the content of the billboards’. (Magyar, 12 June 2015). Regarding the defacing of the billboards, they said

why does the opposition want to deface the billboards, which is illegal and constitutes breaking the law? Why cannot they express their disagreement through legal means, democratically?... We [the government] condemn the aggression of the Left and call upon them to stop their violent operations! We call upon them to stop inciting the defacement of the billboards and, even if they oppose the objectives of the consultation, to express this through using legal means! (MTI, 7 June 2015)

NCIT received a lot of international attention as well. Franz Timmermans said the following about the NCIT:

A consultation that is built on biased, misleading questions and anti-immigrant prejudice can hardly be considered a fair and objective basis for political decision-making. Discussing migration in the context of terrorism, depicting migrants as threats to people’s livelihood and employment is hateful and wrong. It creates and strengthens negative attitudes towards minorities and heightens tensions between social groups. (cf. *Eurologus*, 5 May 2015)

From the UNHCR’s point of view, the NCIT had the roles swapped:

‘We must not forget that across the world refugees are not a threat: they are the ones threatened’ (UNHCR, cf. Sarkadi, 8 May 2015). Or ‘It fills us with profound concern that the Hungarian government is increasingly vilifying the people who are fleeing from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and other war-torn areas, who are in grave need for security and protection in Hungary. (UNHCR, cf. Index, 8 May 2015)

All these actions pointed in the same direction: to unveil NCIT as a push-poll, and to show that the government used it to divert the attention from real problems, such as corruption, poverty etc. This quotation sums it all up:

We do have to talk about the question of immigration, but this fake propaganda called national consultation is not suitable for creating any kind of dialogue, its only aim is to incite hatred against an imagined enemy and to divert the attention from corruption, poverty, unemployment and the catastrophic situation of health system and education. (Jámbor, 17 May 2015)

### **Frames and themes**

We identified almost the same frames in social media as in the media, but their frequency differed. As Table 3.6 shows, the most often appearing frames on social media were the “financial”, the “intention” and the “threat”. Among the marginal frames were “security”, “legal”, and “Christianity”.

**TABLE 3.6. The frequency of frames on media versus social media (number of documents: articles and posts)**

FRAME	MEDIA	SOCIAL MEDIA
Intention	32	26
Legal	26	4
Comparison	14	7
Financial	24	32
Threat/security	60	22

Many of the most popular social media posts were about the interpretation of the results of the NCIT. While pro-government posts claimed that it was a success and the results authorize them to make decisions based on the answers by saying “the Hungarians decided” (said PM *Orbán* on 25<sup>th</sup> of July), the anti-government and independent pages emphasized that “the ratio of the answers is only 12,5%” (25 July 2015, 444), and that “I don’t think they will analyse the answers, they already have them”, said *Barabás* on the 6<sup>th</sup> of May (atv.hu).

### 3.5 Narratives and strategies of non-governmental actors – expert interviews

The national consultation is nothing but a manipulation technique of MPB. A relatively subtle way of spreading the anti-government narratives was the frequent mention of the counter-reactions. For example, the campaign #Iamanimmigrant initiated by the Helsinki Committee were among the top ten posts with the most total interactions. The expert from the NGO also confirmed that this campaign was very successful. Their communication strategy was to speak out loud and clear against the NCIT. The posts which included the reactions from the UNHCR to the NCIT also received a lot of interactions in social media. Their strategy was to speak out against it but both organizations waited until journalists approached them as opposed to look for publicity.

Another aspect of the measurement of success is the narratives’ impact. Even though in the social media the anti-government narrative dominated, the reality was that the government’s propaganda was more successful. This is underlined by the longitudinal research done by TÁRKI on xenophobia in Hungary (see Sik, Simonovits and Szeitl, 2016). And it was supported by the experts as well. One activist who helped the refugees and now is volunteering within the Roma community, said that Roma are now calling each other “migrant”, which became a “swearword” in Hungary (HU\_I\_5). He believes that the damage the government has done is much bigger than we think: fear has grown and those who were latently xenophobic started hating openly.

The main findings of the interviews are lucidly illustrated by the followings: someone from an NGO said that ‘this was the first occasion that migration was connected to terrorism, which defined the direction of the discourse’ (HU\_I\_2). According to a representative of another NGO dealing with immigrants and refugees, the success lies in the fact that the media prefers to simplify everything into binary categories, and it cannot handle differentiated/sophisticated discourses (HU\_I\_1). Several experts agreed on the fact that there is a need to discuss the immigration issue, but not in the national consultation way, because this is a one-way communication.

### 3.6 Narrative making and success

Having examined the media coverage of the NCIT both quantitatively and qualitatively, it is clear that there were differences, as well as similarities, between the media outlets, the social media posts and the primetime news shows. The two main narratives of the two TV channels we examined represent two opposing positions on the debate, which emerged as the result of the NCIT. While the pro-government narrative articulated a position according to which the actions of the government against migration were legitimate, the pro-immigrant narrative pointed out conflicts and inconsistencies in the NCIT. The narratives we identified in the online media outlets and among the social media posts focused on the role of the NCIT: while the government considered it a public (political) opinion survey to support their actions, the counter-narrative was that it is a political propaganda to divert the attention from the real problems of the country. The sub-narratives were similar throughout the examined data. While on the TV channels the narratives were represented by their “sides”, online media outlets and on social media the pro-government narrative often appeared in the anti-government or independent sites as well through criticism. However, it also increased the visibility of the narrative.

The TV channels, the online media outlets and social media had an overlapping agenda. The NCIT campaign was followed by strong reactions from political organizations and civilians. On the pro-migration side, the most dominantly presented frame—on both platforms—presented these reactions as acts of civil disobedience. On the pro-government side, these reactions were labelled as radical and criminal acts. Another overlapping frame was operational in the presentation of the costs of the NCIT campaign in comparison to the costs of the counter campaign. A major difference between the frames of the TV channels and the online media outlets was how the out-group was presented. While online media outlets seemed to focus more on the analysis of the migrants as defined by pro-government outlets, the independent TV channel (*RTL Klub*) rather showed the interpretation of the Hungarian in-group defined by the NCIT. Furthermore, regarding the representation of the actors, all pro-government outlets exclusively presented politicians. *RTL Klub*, *444* and *Index*, on the other hand, all gave voice to experts and liberal-thinking activists as well. On the whole, both pro-government and independent outlets were dominated by politicians.

While the pro-government TV channel (*MI*) did not put a lot of emphasis on the counteractions against the billboard campaign or the NCIT letter, in online media outlets and in social media we found that most articles did talk about the defacing of the billboards, the arrest of the perpetrators, and the debate about the legitimacy of the subsequent police surveillance around the billboards.

All in all, there were two main opposing points of view: the government’s position, according to which the NCIT was necessary and successful with a high response rate in favour of the government’s actions, and the position according to which the NCIT was an unnecessary, expensive propaganda campaign that incited hatred.

#### a) *Who?*

As we saw in the previous chapters, the representation differs across the different platforms, but not so much when we are looking at the political affiliation. As for the platforms, in the online media outlets, immigrants/refugees, the subject of this study, were only mentioned en masse. Furthermore, journalists in the NCIT-related articles gave voice only to politicians and rarely activists but not to ordinary people. Among the politicians, mostly government officials were quoted speaking at press conferences or at parliamentary debates and sometimes someone from the opposition. In the social media, however, there are several posts among the most popular one where migrants or refugees are represented. Finally, on one of the TV channels under examination we could find representatives from the civil society as well as from political groups. They were also open to give voice to minorities living in Hungary. As for the latter, if we divide the media platforms based on political affiliation, there was only big difference between the two TV channels and less on social media and the online media outlets.

All in all, the representation of immigrants and those who act in their defence (NGOs and in this case some of the opposition) are given little voice in the mainstream media channels. This discrepancy can be explained by several circumstances. First, in Hungary the government dominates the media, and consequently the pressing of the moral panic button (MPB) creates a hegemonic position for its narrative about the immigration issue. Second, immigrants hardly exist in Hungary. Third, the opposition/anti-government media also can be held responsible for copying the “mainstream” vocabulary (e.g., by using the term “immigrant” much more often than “refugee” or “asylum seeker”).

#### *b) What?*

In the case of NCIT, the main narrative almost equals to that of the government's narrative on migration, namely that “illegal migration is inherently bad and Hungary has to defend itself from these people”. Therefore, the measurement of the success of the narrative can be practically captured by the 1) government's success, which has been re-elected already for the fourth time in 2002 with decisive majority, and 2) in the public opinion, which is becoming more and more xenophobic.

#### *c) Where?*

There was little travelling between social media and media outlet news: while it was unusual to have Facebook posts as sources for news articles, the opposite occurred more often: there were several posts sharing news articles. This meant that the marginal voices and actions (carried out e.g., by NGOs defending refugees etc.) did not penetrate the mainstream media narratives.

## 4. Conclusions

We have presented two cases of migration-related coverage by the Hungarian media (mainstream and social). The stories present completely different dynamics: The case of Petra László was a spontaneous incident that put pro-government actors in a reactive position. Since the event itself did not fit the government's pre-existing narrative on migration, articulated in billboard campaigns, the pro-government media minimised the coverage of the event in the first phase of the story. This, however, opened up space for independent and anti-government actors to create the dominant narrative of the event. Pro-government media gave more attention to the case only later when a counter-narrative (which fitted perfectly into the moral panic (MPB) dictated migration discourse) was developed.

The opposite was the case with NCIT. As part of the MPB propaganda it was initiated by the government to create and manipulate public opinion. Consequently, pro-government actors, including pro-government media, from the beginning were in a hegemonic position when it came to creating the narrative and interpretations of the event, putting everyone else in a reactive position - doomed to lose.

There is, however, a common feature of the cases: the lack of any discussion, let alone debate, we otherwise identify with the media's role as a democratic institution.

Below, we are attempting to answer the main research questions based on the empirical findings of the two case studies. We are addressing the question of voices in the coverage: *Who* are the voices that are represented in the media, and what narratives they put forward; the question of *where* these narratives emerge and are present, including the dynamics between mainstream and social media; and finally, *what* the competing narratives' characteristics are.

As we argued in the introduction and throughout the report, the Hungarian media ecosystem is divided into a pro-government and non-pro-government universe often with different facts, narratives and actors dominating the different spheres. Hence, answers to the research questions are rarely straightforward: the two spheres, in most cases, behave in different ways.

## 4.1 Who?

### *a) Access to media*

A common feature of the two cases is that asylum seekers are at the centre of the discussions, but they are almost never present as speakers, they are mostly talked about by other actors. This is a well-documented phenomenon in media studies. In our cases, it is worth mentioning that very different starting points led to the same phenomena: fled people and their experiences becoming abstract symbols.

In the first case study refugees are at the centre of the discussions, but they are mostly talked about by other actors.

In the case of NCIT, “migrants” or “refugees” are only present as a mass, they have no face or name or voice in the media. In social media, however, there are several posts among the most popular ones where migrants or refugees are represented. This was the result of an NGO that deals with defending human rights, and do it by giving voice to them with the “I am the immigrant” campaign to fight the pro-government xenophobic/anti-refugee/anti-migrant narrative.

In the media, refugees become the symbol each actor fills with a meaning of their choice: active threat or passive victim. No matter the starting point, refugees are interesting as long as they symbolize something bigger than their individual idiosyncronicity.

In the second case study migration discourse is dominated by politicians, especially of Fidesz and government representatives. Though oppositional politicians were given a direct voice in the second case, in pro-government media they appear as culprits for pro-vandalism and radicalism. Experts and representatives of civil society appear mostly in independent media.

On Facebook, media outlets dominate the posts with most engagements in both cases. The considerable difference from mainstream media is the visibility of independent and anti-government groups and voices. This is particularly significant in the case of the anti-NCIT campaigns: they are able to create engagements and visibility here without the frames of pro-government actors. Social media, in this instance, played the role of circumventing the power relations of mainstream media, and provide space for voices that would otherwise be scarcely represented.

### *b) Strategies and responsibilities*

It is common for those in weak positions of power (civil society, members of minoritized groups etc.) to struggle to make their voices heard. In the case of NCIT, in the Hungarian media the challenge is even bigger since pro-government media tends to fully ignore actors and narratives that are not in line with the government's position. Independent media may give more space to the narratives of these actors, but their reach is limited, and so is their potential impact on public opinion. These difficulties are recognized by the actors and lead to different strategies: some decide to take on the “radical-political” role to break the silence around them, others stick to the expert role in an attempt to save their credibility. Oppositional politicians and parties find themselves in the position of struggling for their voices and narratives to be represented as well when it comes to pro-government media. Many, especially independent and anti-

government actors turn to social media to get direct access to citizens. Independent and anti-government media outlets sometimes fall into the trap of using the mainstream terminology (using the term “migrant” as opposed to “refugees”, let alone “asylum seeker”) when writing about refugees. In some cases this is a deliberate strategy to resist the complete appropriation of the term “migrant” by the government.

## 4.2 What makes a narrative successful?

In Hungary’s polarized and politicized media environment, the common characteristic of the narratives present in the coverage of the analysed stories is that they can be easily identified by who propagates them (whether pro-government or independent actors). The debate is often reduced to binaries that limits arguments and narratives to “are you for or against” migration/the Hungarian government/Hungarians etc. Stories are understood in narratives and counter-narratives, each with its designated audience. This lack of colours of potential narratives and arguments is the success of the Moral Panic Button used by the Hungarian government: the production of a narrative is part of a larger propaganda machinery which is pushed for so long (already at least for seven years) with such intensity that it cannot be fought. Any attempt at countering it ends up strengthening it by a) adding to its salience by reacting to it and b) providing cases of “attack” against the government. This is because the government has created a meta-narrative which is above all the event-related narratives: according to this meta-narrative, Hungary is a great nation under constant threat by external conspiracies supported by the internal opposition (i.e. anybody who does not agree with it or according to the slogan from socialist times “anybody who is not with us, is against us”). The various pushes of the Moral Panic Button determine the actual targets and nature of threat: whether it is migration supported by the liberal West or LGBTQ propaganda that attacks families, etc. The only constant element of all these conspiracies is that in the shadow there are always international powers and behind them the ultimate enemy – George Soros. Therefore, whenever a counter-narrative to an actual event is formed, it can easily be neutralized by being placed in the meta-narrative as an attack on the nation: “betrayal” or “treason”. This is why the first case of Petra László is especially interesting: as a spontaneous event in the otherwise highly controlled public sphere, it provided (for a short time) some space for independent actors to form a narrative of the events, and therefore of migration, that was not a reaction to the pro-government narrative. What we found was avoidance on multiple levels: pro-government media barely reported on the event until it formed its narrative at a later stage in line with the MPB meta-narrative.

The dominant narrative of the NCIT is almost equal to the government’s narrative on migration as the government (or rather the ruling party Fidesz) is using the public sphere to push their agenda through. We can conclude that the pro-government migration narrative, namely that “migrants are a threat, and we have to defend ourselves” was successful in its pervasiveness (“as the capacity of a certain migration narrative to colonise the communication sphere where (and for which) it was originated and eventually to spill over to other spheres” (Garces and Pastore 2022, p6)). When it comes to the narrative’s transformativity (“a given narrative’s capacity, independently from its sheer diffusion, to actually shape attitudes or behaviours, at the individual or collective level (ibid. p6)), again, the success of this narrative is inevitable: policies have been implemented and/or justified by the government, the population’s level of xenophobia increased (Geró-Sik, 2020), and the government was re-elected twice since 2015.

## 4.3 Where: Success factors related to venues

At the time of the two case studies (in 2015 and 2016), social media, including Facebook, was not in the pro-government actors’ focus. It changed drastically after the local elections of 2019: since then, a pro-government social media universe emerged with its own pages, groups and influencers, and billions of HUF of funding (Nemet et. al. 2021).

In 2015-16, we see the replicate of the discourse in mainstream media on social media, with media outlets being the main sources among the first hundred posts with the highest number of engagements. The main (and highly significant) difference is the lack of dominance of pro-government sources among the successful ones, and the visibility of some of the anti-government actors. In the case of the NCIT this is particularly important as the counter-campaigns (and counter-narratives) have been either ignored or framed as attacks against Hungary's culture and order (in line with the meta-narrative above). Therefore, social media was able to play the role of breaking the hierarchy of access to media, but in a limited way: media outlets' content still dominated the successful posts.

#### **4.4 When: success factors related to timing**

The cases discussed took place under entirely different temporal conditions: the first case was a brief, unexpected event as part of the escalation of a longer crisis at a concrete place and time. The second case was the first pressing of the Moral Panic Button, a well-planned series of actions manufactured by the government since 2015. There are periods, as we have shown, when the government decides it necessary to push the Moral Panic Button, and then the related narratives and topics are on the agenda of the media for a while (depending on the aim, these may take the form of full campaigns).

The only case when neutral (non-pro-government) narratives on migration were able to become visible, or even dominant (at least for a short time), is when the unforeseen nature of the incident left pro-government actors (who are usually dominant in determining the discourse) in a reactive position therefore unable to take immediate control over the narrative. In the second case, some competing narratives gained some visibility, especially on Facebook, but the pro-government narrative(s) dominated the coverage.



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# Annexes

## Annex 1: List of interviewees for the case studies

CODE	COUNTRY	CATEGORY (NGO, JOURNALIST, STATE OFFICIAL)	GENDER	DATE OF THE INTERVIEW
HU_I_1	HU	NGO	M	21 February 2022
HU_I_2	HU	NGO	F	22 February 2022
HU_I_3	HU	INGO	M	23 February 2022
HU_I_4	HU	activist	M	23 February 2022
HU_I_5	HU	activist	M	24 February 2022
HU_I_6	HU	journalist	M	2 March 2022
HU_I_7	HU	journalist	M	2 March 2022
HU_I_8	HU	state official	M	22 March 2022

## Annex 2: Hungarian actors appearing in the case study

*(in alphabetical order, their position at the time of the events)*

Bakondi, György, Lt. gen., head of the National Directorate General for Disaster Management, Ministry of the Interior

Balog, Zoltán– Minister of Human Resources, Fidesz

Barabás, Richárd – member of the Parliament (Párbeszéd (a party of the opposition))

Deák, Dániel – researcher (Institute of XXI Century), pro-government influencer (Megafon)

Deutsch, Tamás – member of the EU Parliament (Fidesz), a founder of Fidesz

Gaudi-Nagy, Tamás – lawyer former member of the Parliament (Jobbik)

Giró-Szász, András - spokesperson of the government, Fidesz

Gulyás, Gergely - Head of the Prime Minister's Office

Habony, Árpád, spin doctor, personal chief strategic adviser of Orbán

Hidvéghi, Balázs, member of the EU Parliament (Fidesz)

Jakab, Péter – Leader of Jobbik, member of Parliament

Hadházy, Ákos – member of the Parliament (independent)

Gyurcsány, Ferenc - former Prime Minister, leader of DK (Democratic Coalition)

Kádár, János – former (and long-time) leader during socialism of the Hungarian Workers Party

Kiszelly, Zoltán political scientist and pro-government influencer

Konok, Péter, a leftist publicist

Kovács, Zoltán– spokesperson of the government, Fidesz

Kőszeg, Ferenc– the founder and president of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee

Kreko, Péter, Director of Political Capital (anti-government think tank)

Lakatos, Béla– Mayor of Ács town, Fidesz-KDNP

Lázár, János– Minister of Prime Minister's Office, Fidesz

Márki-Zay, Péter – leader of the opposition as president of MMM

Novák, Katalin– Head of Cabinet of the Ministry of Human Resources, Fidesz

Orbán, Viktor - Prime Minister (2010-), Fidesz

Örkény, Antal– President of the Menedék Foundation which helps asylum seekers in Hungary

Pápa, Levente– vice president of the party called Együtt (Together)

Puskás, Ferenc (Öcsi) – Iconic football star who emigrated after the revolution in 1956

Ritter, Imre– MP, National advocate of the German minority in the Parliament  
 Rogán, Antal– leader of the Fidesz Parliamentary group  
 Schiffer, András– co-president of the party Legyen Más a Politika (Politics can be different)  
 Simon, László L. - MP, Fidesz  
 Szigetvári, Viktor– president of the party called Együtt (Together) ezt nem értheti egy külföldi  
 Szijjártó, Péter - Minister of Foreign Affairs  
 Trócsányi , László– Minister of Justice (2014-2019)  
 Tuzson , Bence– MP, Fidesz  
 Varga, Judit - Minister of Justice  
 Varju, László – member of the Parliament (Democratic Coalition))

### Annex 3: The letter of introduction and the questionnaire of NCIT

PICTURE 1. The letter and the questionnaire of NCIT

#### National consultation on immigration and terrorism (May/July 2015)



#### Questionnaire and personalized letter from the PM



**Viktor Orbán**

Minister of Foreign Affairs

Dear citizens, I am pleased to inform you that the National Consultation on Immigration and Terrorism is now open. I encourage you to participate and share your views on these important issues. Your input will help us make informed decisions for the future of our country.

Sincerely,  
**Viktor Orbán**

PICTURE 2. The questions of the NCIT (Bocskor, 2018)

*NATIONAL CONSULTATION*  
on immigration and terrorism  
Published by the Prime Minister's Office  
Please complete this questionnaire.

1) We hear different views on increasing levels of terrorism. How relevant do you think the spread of terrorism (the bloodshed in France, the shocking acts of ISIS) is to your own life?  
Very relevant      Relevant      Not relevant

2) Do you think that Hungary could be the target of an act of terror in the next few years?  
There is a very real chance      It could occur      Out of the question

3) 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?  
I fully agree      I tend to agree      I do not agree

4) Did you know that economic migrants cross the Hungarian border illegally, and that recently the number of immigrants in Hungary has increased twentyfold?  
Yes      I have heard about it      I did not know

5) We hear different views on the issue of immigration. There are some who think that economic migrants jeopardise the jobs and livelihoods of Hungarians. Do you agree?  
I fully agree      I tend to agree      I do not agree

6) There are some who believe that Brussels' policy on immigration and terrorism has failed, and that we therefore need a new approach to these questions. Do you agree?  
I fully agree      I tend to agree      I do not agree

7) Would you support the Hungarian government in the introduction of more stringent immigration regulations, in contrast to Brussels' lenient policy?  
Yes, I would fully support the Government  
I would partially support the Government  
I would not support the Government

8) Would you support the Hungarian government in the introduction of more stringent regulations, according to which migrants illegally crossing the Hungarian border could be taken into custody?  
Yes, I would fully support the Government  
I would partially support the Government  
I would not support the Government

9) Do you agree with the view that migrants illegally crossing the Hungarian border should be returned to their own countries within the shortest possible time?  
I fully agree      I tend to agree      I do not agree

10) Do you agree with the concept that economic migrants themselves should cover the costs associated with their time in Hungary?  
I fully agree      I tend to agree      I do not agree

11) Do you agree that the best means of combating immigration is for Member States of the European Union to assist in the development of the countries from which migrants arrive?  
I fully agree      I tend to agree      I do not agree

12) Do you agree with the Hungarian government that support should be focused more on Hungarian families and the [potential future] children they can have, rather than on immigration?  
I fully agree      I tend to agree      I do not agree

## Annex 4: The main events in the quantitative analysis of NCIT

(The numbers refer to the day when there was a peak in the number of news)

- 24 April: Press conference about the beginning of the national consultation and an interview with PM Orbán on the public radio. The message: “Europe’s borders have to be defended”;
- 3 June: the billboard campaign starts with messages for those who want to enter illegally; 300.000 responses for the NCIT came back;
- 5 June: The European People’s Party criticizes the NCIT; the European Parliament will vote about the situation in Hungary (with special regard to the NCIT); PM Orbán gave an interview on the public radio with the main message “Why should we like immigrants?”
- 10 June: European Parliament resolution of 10 June 2015 on the situation in Hungary<sup>23</sup>; the defacementment of the billboards continues<sup>24</sup>; 500.000 responses for the national consultation came back, minister Balog does not identify himself completely with the NCIT (being the first member of the government to do so);
- 18 June: the number of responses for the NCIT reached 610.000; the decision about building a fence at the Southern border became official; a lot of billboards were defaced;
- 1 July: building of the fence starts at the Serbian border to protect Hungary from immigrants; a bill was filed by the government not to have to implement the immigrant quota in Hungary; question of the death penalty stirred the dead water (because PM Orbán mentioned it in an interview); new national consultation was announced; some people were caught who have defaced billboards;
- 16 July: the military joins to build the wall; the NCIT has come to an end, approx. one million responses came back; counter-billboard campaign by the Two-Tailed Dog Party;
- 25 July: results of NCIT announced by PM Orbán in his speech given at Tusnádfürdő<sup>25</sup>; reactions of the opposition parties to the speech;
- 1 August: (weekly) radio interview on the public radio with PM Orbán; defacing of the billboards continues.

# BRIDGES

Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives

**BRIDGES:** Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives is a project funded by the EU H2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation and implemented by a consortium of 12 institutions from all over Europe. The project aims to understand the causes and consequences of migration narratives in a context of increasing politicisation and polarisation around these issues by focusing on six European countries: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. To do so, BRIDGES adopts an interdisciplinary and co-productive approach and is implemented by a diverse consortium formed by universities, think tanks and research centres, cultural associations, and civil society organisations.

**The BRIDGES Working Papers** are a series of academic publications presenting the research results of the project in a structured and rigorous way. They can either focus on particular case studies covered by the project or adopt a comparative perspective.

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