

# Hungary: Viktor Orban, Politics and the Refugee Crisis

Monday 11 January 2016, by [PRATT David](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2016).

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HOUSED IN A time-worn but once-elegant villa in Budapest, the Applied Arts Museum collection includes pieces from Iran, Syria and other Middle-Eastern regions. In one room on the top floor, the collection includes two wooden panels from Syria: windows. Folk-art designs cover finely but simply constructed frames, cut and joined out of cedar. Above the window openings are hand-painted scenes of Syrian village life, peaceful and thriving.

If these windows somehow found their way back home today the view outside of them would be of rubble and disintegration. “The road from Aleppo, once one of the most beautiful cities in the world, south to Damascus is littered with destruction. Nothing is left, just piles of debris,” a Hungarian friend who had traveled in Syria remarked.

While similar levels of disintegration have been visited upon untold other peoples, from Ramallah in Palestine to the Mexican countryside, the pace and confluence of forces that have swept Syrians out of their lives is perhaps unprecedented.

Long before Daesh/ISIS appeared, climate change and globalization had shoved over 1.5 million Syrians off the land and out of their villages. Today over eight million have been displaced, along with 1.5 million Iraqis who came to Syria looking for refuge.

And while hardly unprecedented, sadly, the flight of Syrian people from their homes and then from the camps and decreasing support and hope in Lebanon and Turkey is desperate and heroic.

But Hungary’s prime minister Viktor Orban, looking out the windows of his official residence in Budapest at the growing tide of refugees, saw something different: opportunity. With the far-right Jobbik Party gaining support, this would be a chance to shore up his right-wing Fidez Party in a show of defense for Hungarian “values” and borders. It would also be a way to poke away at the dreadful and cowardly liberals — from George Soros to the minions of the European Union in Brussels.

The most visible and memorable image of Orban’s anti-immigrant actions is of course the building of a razor wire fence. The estimated cost of the project, which skirts the border with Serbia and Croatia, is €100 million. The rush to construct the fence made it difficult for Hungary to find sources of razor wire for a period of time. One supplier refused to sell to Hungary on humanitarian grounds.

While the fence itself was an opportunity for the Fidez Party to craft a get-tough stance, it also helped solve a difficulty associated with refugees travelling through the country. While few refugees hoped to make Hungary their final destination — given the far greater potential of opportunity in

Germany or Scandinavian countries — there was the possibility that many could be in transit, in country for some time.

## **Popular Solidarity vs. Reaction**

According to Szabocs Pintér, vice president of Balpart (the Left Party), some 10,000 youth quickly jumped into support and solidarity work for the refugees over the summer and into the fall. While some of this work was launched or absorbed by NGOs, much was taken on by Balpart, the Green Party and other small groups. While the left is small and regrouping in Hungary, any progressive or autonomous activity was an undesirable situation from Fidez's perspective.

Even more undesirable was the potency of images running counter to the narrative of Orban and his oligarch friends — photos of Hungarians providing food and clothing to refugees, with police looking the other way and then, when the fence went up, the image of refugees using metal bars and other building material purposely left behind by the construction workers to lift and move the fence and cross into Hungary.

Orban has worked hard to control images and message by facilitating the control of television stations by his supporters. While this plan recently faltered at one of the large stations, the others steer news and other coverage along the lines that are acceptable to Fidez.

Powerful enough in their own right, these actions and images could also serve in the long run to fuel questions about the many contradictions that are inherent in the Fidez/Orban anti-immigrant position in this time and place.

By the year 2050 it is estimated that Hungary will have one million fewer residents. In recent years over 400,000 have emigrated — free to do so across the open borders of Europe's Schengen zone.

At the same time it is hard to fail to realize that Hungary in many ways has huge potential for development — preferably sustainable, of course. For anyone who has lived in the United States or other similarly hyper-developed countries, a trip through the Hungarian countryside is pleasantly disarming.

Thanks in part to the stagnation of the late years of "state socialism," wild-west capitalist real estate speculation has been virtually nonexistent. Vast tracts of land have yet to be subjected to urban/suburban sprawl, malls, fast food outposts, Chuckee Cheese, entertainment complexes, golf courses and other marvels of advanced western culture.

Urban areas that were central to industrial production, like Ózd in the North, are of course decimated and decaying, much like tiny versions of Detroit. But within its borders Hungary has a high percentage of land that is still tillable, combined with a climate that has yet to suffer the initial throes of global warming.

This situation has of course not been lost on either the Hungarian oligarchs or opportunists from other EU countries.

"There is a land grab underway," Robert Fidrich from Friends of the Earth Hungary explained. The fence of laws that had partially blocked globalization is coming down. Soon anyone in the EU will be able to buy and hold agricultural land in Hungary. "You can buy and pretend to cultivate land and receive subsidies from the EU of one hundred Euros per hectare."

With land plentiful and currently cheap, there will also be tremendous opportunities to cash in down the road as land prices continue to rise.

Orban, preferring that some of these get-rich opportunities fall to his friends and supporters, is proposing the privatization of over 400,000 hectares in the near future. While environmentalists won a major battle and stopped a previous plan to privatize the operation of park land, Fidrich says that the new battle to save that many hectares will be more difficult.

At the same time they are preparing to mount a challenge to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Project (TTIP — the latest “free trade” monstrosity) agreement that would make it possible for the United States to join the feeding frenzy.

## Racist Policies

While Orban sows racism and anti-immigrant sentiment on the national and regional scale, his currently most viable opposition in the Jobbik Party are busy attacking the Roma, currently at least eight percent of the population. They face widespread discrimination in housing and jobs and are largely disenfranchised. Only two Roma are representatives in the National Assembly — one percent of that body.

The newly elected mayor in Ózd, David Janniczak, a rising star in Jobbik, stated that “every person in Ózd has two options — they either live in order and integrity and build the city, or they destroy it. The majority of these destructive people are Gypsies, without whom . . . it would be easier for the city to develop.”

Janniczak’s “peaceful consent” policy has included imposition of new work rules on municipal “workfare” employees, most of whom are Roma. By extending the length of the work day he is forcing Roma to work more for the same tiny stipends. This also means that they have to leave for work in the early morning hours before public transportation starts. They are also being subjected to video surveillance while working.

“This is only about intimidation,” said Bela Biro, a Roma former steel mill worker who works on the city-run farming project. “We don’t dare sit down for five minutes. They said we can’t, even if blood is running from our nose.”

The situation under Fidez policies was little better. Two years ago, Ózd shut down many public water faucets and reduced the flow of water to many others.

Over 8,000 Roma in Ózd live without running water in their homes or garbage pick up by the city. With the public faucets their only source for water for cooking, bathing and other daily necessities, this placed many Roma families in even more desperate and dangerous conditions.

It is unclear to what extent the small Hungarian left can mobilize viable anti-racism initiatives. Szabocs Pintér points out that many Roma align with progressive parties and causes. One sign of the possible lack of support from other sectors of the non-Roma left is the willingness of the center and right to be unabashedly racist.

The Jobbik ranting quoted above is one example among many. Here is a Fidez supporter on immigrants: “The chaos resulting from masses of migrants arriving in Europe,” Lazslo Foldi wrote in June 2015, “has had a destructive effect on the lives of the Europeans. The French are more scarce in Paris. The denizens of Vienna refrain from entering certain districts of the capital; London is

becoming a perfect Babel, where chaos will soon appear ‘normal.’”

A former operations director of the Hungarian Intelligence Service, Foldi is one of many who have built long careers by generating and amplifying fear of chaos and terrorism.

Antisemitism is often in the wings as when Orban frequently rails about George Soros (Soros Gyorgi) and the conspiracy to flood Europe with refugees from the Middle East and Africa. Liberal, at least relative to the oligarchs, Soros is Jewish and can serve as a scapegoat.

Soros does fund NGOs in Hungary and elsewhere, and even these mild organizations are clearly a source of consternation to Orban and his supporters.

Meanwhile the hundreds of thousands fleeing from Syria and Afghanistan in particular are refugees three or four times over — from climate change, from globalization, from the blood-for-oil policies of the United States and its partners in imperialism, and from the lack of political alternatives due to the destruction and decline of the left.

What if those 400,000 hectares being privatized were made available to Syrian refugees for sustainable agricultural development? What if the Ózd steel mills were repurposed to production of solar and wind power components?

These and untold number of other viable measures are of course not on the agenda, or even part of public debate and discussion. Balpart, Friends of Wildlife Hungary and other organizations are on the ground but still relatively small, especially when compared to the crushing weight of global capital and its interests.

In Eger, Hungary a minaret still stands that dates back to the Ottoman years. It is the northernmost minaret in Europe. After the Ottomans were swept away Christians brought together over 400 oxen, hitched them to the minaret and tried to bring it down. They failed and it still stands, silent now but for the footsteps and labored breathing of tourists who dare climb the narrow stairway.

In the wake of Paris, and now San Bernardino, Victor Orban’s once isolated stand on refugees appears — sadly and hopefully temporarily — validated by public opinion. The Trump of Eastern Europe, Orban may now try to achieve what the 400 oxen failed to do, and bring down the minaret after all.

**David Pratt**

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**P.S.**

\* “Hungary: Politics and the Refugee Crisis”. Against the Current n° 180. January-February 2016:  
<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/4546>