

The political logic and practical dilemmas of Hungary's immigration policy

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Abstract. Since the European refugee crisis, Hungary has constructed a immigration policy system centered on national security, aimed at consolidating its electoral base and reducing the costs of social integration. However, this tightened approach contradicts the increasingly open demands of the labor market. This paper examines the mechanisms behind the formation of Hungary's immigration policy and the political considerations driving it, analyzing how securitization logic shapes policy decisions and exposing the tensions and dilemmas between these policies and economic realities. The results show that Hungary's immigration policy embodies a persistent tension between political controllability and economic needs, offering new insights into the governance challenges faced by Central and Eastern European countries within the EU framework.

Keywords: hungary, immigration policy, political logic, labour market

1. Introduction

Since the 1950s and 1960s, large numbers of migrants have flowed into Europe, transforming it from a traditional region of emigration into one of immigration [1]. After entering the 21st century, accelerated globalization, intensifying regional conflicts, and the deepening of EU integration have further pushed migration issues onto Europe's political agenda. Especially since the 2015 European refugee crisis, the EU has adopted systematic policy responses, including the introduction of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and the Relocation Mechanism, attempting to address the challenges brought by large-scale inflows of refugees and migrants through institutional measures and to distribute responsibilities for asylum applications and reception among member states.

However, as a member of the European Union, Hungary did not follow the mainstream, but instead adopted a tough anti-immigrant policy and political rhetoric, becoming one of the representative countries that openly opposed the Relocation Mechanism. After the outbreak of the crisis, the Hungarian government built border fences, declared a "state of crisis due to mass migration", and continuously reinforced the narrative link between "immigrants and security threats" in political and media discourse. This policy orientation, centered on national security, social order and cultural identity, constitutes a typical logic of securitization, in which the government elevates immigration issues from social issues to national security issues, thereby justifying more stringent policy measures [2].

It is noteworthy that in the decade following the crisis, Hungary's immigration policy was not relaxed with the deteriorating situation in Europe, but rather tightened further. Even today, the "state of crisis due to mass migration" remains unresolved. On a political level, this continuation reflects the solidification of the security discourse; however, on an economic level, it contrasts sharply with the reality of a labor shortage in Hungary. This contradiction between politics and economics, policy and reality, constitutes the current dilemma of Hungary's immigration policy: on the one hand, the government strengthens xenophobic policies in the name of national security and cultural sovereignty; on the other hand, the economic structure urgently relies on the influx of foreign labor.

Therefore, this paper will try to explore the formation mechanism, policy orientation and underlying political considerations of Hungary's immigration policy from the perspective of "political logic", analyze how the logic of securitization shapes policy decisions, and reveal the contradictions and dilemmas between it and economic reality. The aim is to provide a new explanatory path for understanding the policy disagreement and political games of Central and Eastern European countries under the EU framework.

2. A comprehensive analysis of the policy

2.1. The formulation logic of hungarian immigration policy

Looking back at history, Hungary is a relatively homogeneous country in terms of ethnic composition and has not long had an organized tradition of immigration [3]. During the Cold War and for a considerable period afterward, the number of immigrants to Hungary was limited, with most coming from neighboring countries and predominantly of Hungarian ethnicity. Due to the small scale and similar ethnic backgrounds, immigration was not considered as a major political or social issue [4].

Discussions on Hungary's immigration policy only began to take shape after the 1990s. These discussions primarily focused on the following issues: first, the interaction between labor market conditions and migration flows; second, the impact of demographic changes on the migration process; third, the role of the Hungarian diaspora in the national migration agenda; fourth, the social integration and cultural adaptation of immigrants; and fifth, institutional considerations related to refugee reception and asylum protection [5].

During this period, while scholars and policy practitioners engaged in international migration research continuously called for the development of a systematic and comprehensive national immigration policy framework, such efforts progressed slowly. Until the early 2010s, Hungary had not yet established a dedicated administrative body responsible for coordinating and implementing immigration policy, and related policy areas lacked unified strategic planning and institutional support [6].

In August 2013, the Hungarian government released the "Migration Strategy of Hungary (2013)", seemingly aiming to build a more systematic framework for immigration governance and open up legal immigration, but in reality emphasizing "high-standard protection" and "security coverage". It can be said that, with rising regional instability and external pressure, the Hungarian government has begun to incorporate immigration issues into a security framework, laying the foundation for subsequent politicized discourse.

Since the outbreak of the refugee crisis, Hungary has rapidly become one of the main transit countries in Central and Eastern Europe. According to Eurostat, approximately 175,000 migrants and refugees entered Hungary between January and September 2015 alone. This unprecedented population movement directly drew Hungary into the crisis of Europe, triggering strong social and political upheavals. At the outset of the crisis, Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary stated, "We have to stop immigration; this is the opinion of Hungary." In April of the same year, his "National Consultation on Immigration and Terrorism" further linked immigration with terrorism and social issues at the societal level, securitizing and politicizing the issue, thus giving it a negative portrayal.

2015 can be considered a pivotal year for Hungary's immigration policy shift, marking a move from relatively neutral administrative management to a policy model primarily driven by political and security logic.

Interestingly, a public opinion poll conducted in the autumn of 2015 showed that support and opposition to the EU's mandatory relocation mechanism were almost evenly split among the Hungarian public. Of the 53% who opposed it, only 45% expressed strong opposition [7]. This indicates that from the beginning of the refugee crisis, Hungarian society did not exhibit strong opposition to this issue, and was even more moderate than other countries in the region. In other words, it was actually the Hungarian government that was more resistant to the solutions proposed by the European Commission.

Viktor Orbán delivered numerous speeches, clearly expressing his anti-immigrant stance on various domestic and international political occasions. The Hungarian government portrayed immigrants as a threat to employment opportunities, its culture, and public security. The Hungarian government favors a strictly anti-immigrant policy, with nationwide campaigns including slogans such as "If you come to Hungary, you must respect our culture!" or "If you come to Hungary, you cannot take away the jobs of the Hungarians!" [8]. Orbán began to distinguish between "immigrants" from the East and those from other regions (particularly the Middle East and North Africa) in his rhetoric. His cultural references in his speeches suggest that he viewed Muslim immigrants as the primary enemy. Under this political discourse, the association between immigration and negative consequences has intensified [9]. A November 2015 survey by the End of the Century Research Institute demonstrates this: just two months later, 65% of respondents opposed the quota system. This undoubtedly demonstrates the effectiveness of the Orbán government's immigration policy.

2.2. The evolution of immigration policy: from crisis response to structural tightening

Between 2016 and 2020, the Hungarian government gradually institutionalized its temporary crisis-era policies. Asylum application procedures were significantly tightened, requiring applicants to submit their requests at Hungarian embassies abroad, effectively bringing the domestic asylum reception system to a standstill. Simultaneously, the government continued to strengthen and deepen the relationship between immigration control and national security, opposing the EU-led refugee quota system. These practices have repeatedly drawn criticism from international human rights organizations and have repeatedly led to conflicts with EU law.

By the mid-2020s, with the passing of the acute refugee crisis, a structural adjustment in policy focus occurred: on the one hand, Hungary continued to maintain strict asylum restrictions and border controls, resulting in an extremely low number of asylum applications; on the other hand, the government began to implement more refined and tiered management of the entry and residence of “third-country nationals”. This shift was marked by Act XC of 2023 (on the entry and residence of third-country nationals), passed in 2023 and effective in 2024. The new law abolished the old “single permit” system and established several specialized permit categories (such as the “Hungarian Card” for highly skilled workers and the “Guest Worker Permit” for specific employers). It also imposed stricter restrictions on low-skilled workers, family reunification, and permanent residency rights in many provisions, such as requiring applicants for permanent residency to pass a Hungarian language proficiency test.

Accompanying this legal restructuring is a series of implementing decrees and administrative regulations: for example, several government decrees issued in 2024 explicitly restrict the range of occupations for foreign workers, employer responsibilities, and the quota system; between 2024 and 2025, the government adopted a more restrictive quota and employer-led mechanism for foreign recruitment and permit issuance, emphasizing the principles of “protecting domestic employment” and “limited importation.”

These measures reflect a dual official intention: on the one hand, acknowledging the economy’s need for foreign labor; on the other hand, hoping to maintain control at the political and social levels. It means that the government selectively introduces immigrants who directly contribute to the economy only under controllable conditions, while minimizing the integration costs at the social and political levels.

However, there are exceptions. Hungary chose to accept Ukrainian immigrants who were affected by the 2022 Russia-Ukraine conflict. After Russia launched its war against Ukraine, the phenomenon of refugees appearing on the eastern border became commonplace within days. Contrary to previous policies, the Fidesz government has acted as an aid provider in accepting refugees from Ukraine [10]. Since the outbreak of the war, over 60,000 Ukrainian refugees have registered for entry into Hungary, with the government, businesses, and even individuals offering assistance.

Overall, the evolution of Hungarian immigration policy since 2015 exhibits several distinct trends: first, a shift from emergency measures to a more regular and stringent approach; second, a change in policy tools from general exclusion to conditional and selective acceptance; and third, the securitization and sovereignty of political discourse have played a central role in legitimizing the policy.

3. Current status and challenges of the labor market

3.1. Current status

According to data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH), Hungary’s employment rate has steadily risen from 64.6% to around 75% over the past decade, while the unemployment rate has remained at a low level within the EU, reaching as low as 2.9% in 2019 and stabilizing between 4.0% and 4.5% since 2023. While a low unemployment rate is often seen as a positive economic indicator from a traditional macroeconomic perspective, in Hungary’s reality, this “full employment” status reflects more of an excessively tight labor market, with a structural shortage of labor supply.

The Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH) predicts that by 2024, there will be an average of 65,000 job vacancies nationwide. With the number of job vacancies remaining high, large companies, even in the face of an economic slowdown, tend to adopt a “labor hoarding” strategy (OECD, 2024). This phenomenon stems in part from companies’ expectations of a deteriorating future demographic structure: with accelerating aging and a continued decline in the working-age population, various industries are generally concerned that recruitment difficulties will further intensify in the future.

Overall, the coexistence of low unemployment and high job vacancies in the labor market indicators reflects the ongoing structural contradiction of a long-term labor shortage in Hungary.

Regarding the relationship between immigration and the labor market, the importance of foreign workers to the Hungarian labor market is becoming increasingly prominent. In the spring of 2025, approximately 104,600 foreign citizens were employed in Hungary, primarily concentrated in the industrial and construction sectors. Proximity to European markets and foreign direct investment - particularly in the electronics, automotive, and battery industries - have made Hungary an assembly plant, with these companies favoring foreign workers for competitive reasons. At the same time, Hungarian workers themselves feel increasingly insecure. Struggling with daily material difficulties, insufficient income, and unstable working conditions, Hungarian workers fear that their bargaining power will decline as manufacturing employers increasingly employ foreign workers [11]. Therefore, to protect local workers’ employment opportunities and wage levels, the Hungarian government imposed restrictions on the employment of foreign workers in 2025: no more than 35,000 new work-related residence permits could be issued, significantly lower than the approximately 55,000 quota in 2024.

3.2. Practical dilemma

According to the OECD Economic Surveys: Hungary 2024, the market needs an influx of fresh labor, but political rhetoric and anti-immigration policies are exacerbating resistance. On the one hand, businesses' demand for new labor has been rising steadily in recent years, with long-term job vacancies in manufacturing, construction, and service sectors, demonstrating the economy's real dependence on external labor input. On the other hand, since 2015, the government has consistently reinforced the framework of "immigration threatening national security and social stability" in its political narrative, highly securitizing the immigration issue. This rhetoric has deepened societal anxieties about foreign labor and provided a political justification for the government to implement stricter foreign worker entry regulations.

Driven by this dual force, a structural contradiction has formed between policy tightening and labor shortages: the more the economy relies on supplementary labor, the tighter the policies become due to securitization logic, further reducing the actual available labor force for businesses and exacerbating the market supply-demand imbalance. More importantly, anti-immigration policies not only restrict the entry of potential labor but also weaken societal willingness to accept foreign workers by constantly emphasizing cultural, identity, and security risks, thus perpetuating the tension in the labor market at both the institutional and social levels. To break this cycle, a new regulatory mechanism needs to be established between economic reality and political discourse, so that labor imports return to a policy logic centered on economic needs, rather than being dominated by a narrative of securitization.

4. Conclusion

Since the 2015 refugee crisis, Hungary's immigration policy has shifted from an emergency response to institutionalized tightening, clearly demonstrating the dominant role of political logic in immigration governance. This analysis shows that Hungary, within the framework of national identity and cultural security, has highly securitized the immigration issue, thereby constructing a policy system centered on an inward-looking narrative of sovereignty. This securitization discourse not only shaped policy direction but also reshaped public perception of immigrants at the societal level, transforming immigrants from potential labor resources into symbols of political risk and cultural challenge.

Simultaneously, Hungarian labor market trends present a reality that clearly contradicts this political logic: multiple industries have long suffered from structural labor shortages. In this sense, Hungarian immigration policy exhibits a typical "political-economic paradox": the xenophobic political logic at the national level and the open demands at the economic level create a persistent tension, making it difficult to balance governance goals between security and growth.

This study reveals that the key to Hungarian immigration policy lies not in the asylum system or labor policy itself, but in the political logic and narrative mechanisms behind the policies. Securitization consolidates the government's political legitimacy by shaping a "threat." However, this logic also exacerbates the structural dilemmas in the labor market, making it difficult for policies to effectively respond to external labor demands.

In the future, if Hungary hopes to establish a new balance between safeguarding national sovereignty and maintaining economic competitiveness, it needs to re-examine the dominance of the securitization narrative at the political level, making immigration governance a policy framework based on economic and social needs. For Central and Eastern European countries, the Hungarian case provides an important window into the interaction between regional political changes, social sentiments, and the multi-tiered governance of the EU, and also offers further analytical pathways for understanding the long-standing divisions within the EU on immigration and asylum issues and their structural roots.

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