

# Europe at a crossroad: addressing the refugee crisis by solidarity or moral panic

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## 1. „An average Hungarian meets more UFO-s during his lifespan than immigrants”

This sub- title refers to one of the posters in the Hungarian poster-war before the referendum of 2016 October. This poster was displayed by a 'joke-party', but had a serious meaning, making it clear that the government is misusing the migration crisis, arteficially distorting reality, increasing anxiety, paranoia and rejection of asylum seekers: the referendum was initiated by the government, calling people „to protect Hungary from illegal migrants”, „to prevent the forced settling of foreigners to Hungary”. The EU-quota, what Orban – the Hungarian prime minister – opposed, was supposed to distribute (and not settling) asylum seekers (and not illegal migrants) among EU countries in order to speed up the review of their asylum request.

The treatment of the migration issue, including the referendum, clearly served the political interest of the ruling party, which was dramatically losing popularity because of corruption cases, cronism, social insensitivity.

When last summer a wave of refugees and migrants crossed the border of Hungary, the government created a situation which aggravated the problem even more, pushing the crowd to the center of Budapest, not providing any information, assistance or service to the people, then letting them walk along the highway toward Austria (it was clear that these people do not want to stay in Hungary, just to cross the country). Hungarian civilians – seeing the suffering of people – organized themselves quickly and provided food, private shelters, medical service to them.

Orban – using this shocking situation – realized the political potential of the crisis, presenting himself as the only one who can protect Hungary (and more and more Europe) from this modern migration flow.

He ordered to build a barbed-wire fence around the country and initiated the referendum.

The referendum was publicized personally by Orban himself on the day, when another referendum-initiative (potentially risky for Orban, submitted by an oppositional party) was prevented illegally, by physical force of a neo-Nazi group.

Since the ruling party controls all public media and more and more the private television channels and newspapers as well, they started to overwrite the image of asylum seekers.

Refugees (called 'illegal migrants') were pictured as 'potential terrorists', 'sexually harrassing our daughters', 'taking our jobs', 'occupying our country'. The image - displayed in public television in every 15 minute- was an endless flow of a faceless crowd of young men, with dark skin and dark hair, walking along the roads. It was also said that another one million people are waiting to follow them.

Hungarians could not see suffering women and children anymore, just this threatening, endless crowd, invading Europe.

During the three month preparing the referendum, the whole country was decorated with giant posters, with the same messages, calling people to vote „no”, choosing between Budapest (having the right approach) and Brussels (forcing Hungary to host these violent ,dangerous people). People also got the message, that Hungary is also protecting European Christianity (with the implicit message, that God is also on our side, legitimizing government's approach).

The cost of the campaign was three times higher than an average national election-showing the stake of the government in the issue.

The effect of the campaign was clearly reflected in the result of the referendum: 98 % of the votes were „no”, with a 40% turnout.

But the real effect is the growing xenophobia – the fear of migrants is the highest in Hungary among all EU countries, despite of the fact, that practically no asylum seekers and migrants are staying in Hungary.

### **1. The political use of moral panic**

What we see around us, is a moral panic- a reaction which goes beyond rationality and calls very strongly for our psychoanalytic understanding.

We speak about moral panic if there is a social reaction that is „irrational'. If there is an ambiguous situation, media mostly has a role giving a shape for it. But moral panic can be employed by politicians as well, and used strategically, in order to divert attention from other problems, to channel social anxieties (Rohloff & Wright,2010).

Although moral panics are short term episodes, they have their longer term effect as social processes.

Moral panics mostly end up with some legal changes – mostly repressive ones. These legal changes are serving the mitigation of social anxieties, and not so much the solution of the situation. As moral panics are „irrational”, their solution is also „irrational”.

The treatment of the migration issue in Hungary meets all of the criteria of a moral panic employed strategically by the political elite.

Anxiety was clearly and enormously growing among Hungarian citizens as the consequence of the strong, overwhelming message about the potential threat caused by the migration flow.

When uncertainty grows, people are more ready for primitive defense mechanisms, like splitting, projecting negative self- and object-aspects.

The faceless, threatening crowd of young men, as migrants were pictured in the media, are very much an appropriate surface of projections.

The stronger is the splitting and projection, the „Other” becomes more and more threatening, and more and more protection is needed.

Orban's barbed-wire fence was a perfect physical expression of these psychological defense mechanisms: creating an impermeable barrier between the „good”( Hungarians protecting Christianity) and the „evil Others” (the migrants). The fence is not just a simple protection, but shows the gravity of fear: it is regularly killing animals trying to cross it.

Just illustrating the cruel and politically motivated character of the governmental reaction: while the EU's request - to take over transitionally 2000 asylum seekers - was refused and the borders were hermetically closed for refugees and migrants , several thousands of long term residence permits

were sold to those who were able to pay a lot for it, including a Saudi billionaire – with an international arrest warrant for sponsoring terrorist organizations, now making business with the family of the Hungarian prime minister .

### **1. The civilization process and the decivilizing effect of moral panic**

Norbert Elias in the *Civilizing Process* (2000) writes about the relationship between long term changes of behavior and the processes of state formation: in the modern world there is an increasing interdependence because of the growing population and increasing division of labour.

The democratization process requires a growing self-restraint and reiterated mutual identification: people are expected to discipline themselves, to suppress their drives (aggression, sexual desire), to give up any open expression of aggressivity directing to others.

In psychoanalytic terms: throughout the civilization process, the repressed sexual and aggressive drives can turn into socially positive elaboration, or - in times of crisis (which can be real or perceived) - a large group regression might appear with earlier (and more primitive) defense mechanisms.

Europe is characterized by the repressed sexuality – as a consequence of the civilization process, and has an ageing society. The endless crowd of young male refugees and migrants represent a dynamic, young large-group, a strong masculinity, provoking ambivalent and envious feelings about the perceived superior sexual potency, expressing the forbidden sexually aggressive drives. They are the representatives of father and son at the same time, with their destructive aspects. They are objects of desire, as men and object of fear as well.

News on sexual harassment cases (reflected very strongly in the media) and the related raping fantasies showing this ambivalence, projected to these young men. (Cohen, 2002)

The civilization process is not linear, as Norbert Elias describes – decivilizing process occurs from time to time, and moral panics are episodes of decivilization, based on an increased level of danger .

In moral panic there is just a perceived increase of danger, with perceived failure of state to reduce those dangers. During moral panic, civilized conduct may be affected and state monopolization of means of violence is also decreased.

One of the most symbolic example of this decivilization process was the behavior of a journalist, reporting about the refugees crossing the Hungarian border : this young woman was tripping and kicking fleeing refugees, including a father, carrying his son. The international media picked up this video, showing the decivilization consequence of the moral panic, the provoked hatred against those who are not considered human beings anymore, carrying all of the projected bad aspects.

### **1. Globalization and the growing reactive nationalism, preparing the soil in Europe for a moral panic**

Hungary was the first country calling for a referendum to deny asylum for refugees, legitimizing also the barbed-wire fence around the country.

Hungary's prime minister was the first in Europe to recognize that refugees are the most „appropriate” group to point to as scapegoats, the „best target” for redirecting anger based on dissatisfaction with the government.

But Hungary is just the first and most visible one among the European countries, moving to the same

direction, and therefore it is important to discuss the psychological aspects of this process and also to understand more how to prevent it elsewhere.

Looking at the European perspective of the refugee-crises, it is true, that the terrorist attacks, killing innocent civilians, as well as the more than one million refugees and migrants, crossing Europe from the Balkans to Germany and the Scandinavian countries, have been a shock for Europe.

Although the crisis in the Middle East goes back to several years, Europe failed to react adequately to the challenges (or even contributed to the aggravation of the problems) as long as the consequences haven't reached directly the continent in the form of the refugee crisis, mass migration and terrorist attacks, breaking one of the dominant collective defense mechanisms - the denial - of Europeans.

In the globalised world social bonds are weakened as a consequence of individualisation and isolation; complexity is causing anxiety and insecurity. While seeking certainty, people look for new identification in the national society, differentiating themselves more strongly from foreigners who belong elsewhere, and who are identified as threatening „Others”.

Populist and extreme right movements offer political programs recalling the lost paradises, when the world was secure, simple. They are providing an illusion, that by keeping out refugees, the chaos of globalization can be kept out as well.

The new form of nationalism seems to offer a new identification, cohesion and virtual certainty. But the new bond between the individual and the nation, the increased cohesion has a price, a narcissistic investment in the Ideal-Self.

As Vamik Volkan rightly writes about: in times of crisis, people give up their multiple identities and more mature defense mechanisms, stick together under a „giant tent” of their large group, unified in using primitive defense mechanisms of splitting, projection, externalization, leading to paranoia. Through this process they feel more secure together and look for a strong leader to provide safety and certainty. The unconscious needs of the potential leader, and the unconscious needs of the large group are reinforcing each other, nurturing also the narcissism on both sides. (Volkan,2014)

In the case of Hungary we clearly see this regressive large group process and its interplay with the leader's psychological (and political) needs. Orban - the leader - is using moral panic to increase large group cohesion, by aggravating fear of migrants. People are looking for a „savior” in this threatening situation, and he offers this protection. The process - the large group regression - helps the externalization of all bad aspects (including the bad aspects of the leader), projecting them to the „enemies”- the „illegal migrants”- clearing the way for an undisturbed emotional unification of the leader and his followers.

### **1. How to overcome the regressive large group processes in Europe?**

Europe is proud of its fundamental values as human dignity, equality, non-discrimination, freedom of religion, etc. These values are in a strong contrast with the regressive large group processes calling for a clear distinction between „Us” and the „Others”, creating a distance and more and more physical barriers to protect our Ideal-Self and the illusion of security. We have two ways to overcome this controversy, and Europeans are quite divided in their choices for seeking solution:

- one of the possible – but very dangerous – way is to further dehumanize refugees in order to legitimize their discrimination and the situation where we are stinting them of shelter, food and human dignity. The risk is, that we sacrifice our fundamental values, giving up our own freedom by building fences, deepening the large group regression, looking for omnipotent leaders without

- controlling them, and by and large giving up rationality and live in a distorted reality,
- the other choice is an active solidarity and identification with those escaping from a war situation, making efforts for social integration (reintegrating also our bad self- and object-aspects), trying to overcome the regressive large group processes, tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty. If we want to prevent the spreading of the moral panic and the „irrational” reactions, we have to recognize it and help people to know about it, not allowing the emergence of omnipotent, nationalist and populist leaders as „saviors”.

Terrorist are also building their politics on the uncertainty and fear of people, hoping that the reaction will be disproportionately big, and restrictive measures will destroy the essential aspects of our culture: tolerance, freedom and trust. If some of the European leaders are unconsciously or consciously supporting the intention of terrorists, fulfilling their wishes, then mission accomplished. It is a shared responsibility to resist this trend....

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