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The Hungarian border spectacle: Migration, repression and solidarity in two Hungarian border cities



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**THE HUNGARIAN BORDER SPECTACLE:
MIGRATION, REPRESSION AND SOLIDARITY
IN TWO HUNGARIAN BORDER CITIES**

Céline Cantat

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INTRODUCTION: AN INVITATION TO THE HUNGARIAN BORDER SPECTACLE¹

One early July morning, I travelled to Szeged with a colleague to meet with one of the organisers of Migszol,² the local pro-refugee movement. Tamas³ had offered to drive us to the border crossing point in Röszke, where the Hungarian government had established one of the transit zones through which asylum seekers and migrants wishing to enter Hungary have been forced to pass since the fall 2015. We drove through open fields of paprika stretching to the horizon, and reached a bumpy road going through a small forest. At the end of the path, we arrived to the border: if it had not been for the barbed wire fence cutting through the grass, I would never have guessed that this was where Hungary stopped and Serbia commenced. And there it was: ‘the zone’. In the middle of the otherwise deserted countryside, a set of containers surrounded by a wire fence stood incongruously, presenting us with a somewhat surreal scene. After a few kilometres of emptiness, we had suddenly reached a site of intense activity: Hungarian army and police were busy surveying the transit zone where a dozen people had been admitted from the Serbian side the same morning, and were now waiting to hear whether they would be allowed into Hungary. A couple of children were running around, looking and smiling at us from behind the wire. On the Serbian side, a makeshift camp of tents and tarpaulins had emerged, as more people arrived on a daily basis than the number let through the transit zone. Tamas told us that the camp had recently reached 600 people and that numbers were expected to keep rising. People were camping at the border crossing point, with no access to cooking or proper hygiene facilities, in the hope of being able to cross into Hungary soon. Around the tents, humanitarian workers and volunteers wearing colourful variations of the same vest were busy distributing water or carrying out medical checks. Some of the police on the Hungarian side were staring blankly at the migrants and their humanitarian supporters across the wire.

“Look”, said Tamas, “this is what they have done here. You can take photos if you wish, but do not photograph Hungarian military or police staff”.⁴ Since the summer 2015, Tamas had been relentlessly working to support migrants passing through Szeged and to document the situation at the border. He had brought numerous journalists and researchers to the Röszke transit zone and had played an important role in allowing the media to reach information about the Hungarian government’s

1 Many thanks to Sara Svensson, Peter Balogh and Prem Kumar Rajaram from CEU with whom some of the fieldwork involved in this research was conducted and to my colleagues at the Centre for Policy Studies for the precious feedback they have provided on the ideas presented in this paper.

2 Full name: Migráns Szolidaritás Csoport Szeged (‘Migrant Solidarity Group Szeged’).

3 The name has been changed for reasons of anonymity.

4 This whole section has been written on the basis of fieldwork notes.

treatment of refugees.⁵ Yet, something felt wrong. Not only did I not feel comfortable getting my camera out to take photos of people stranded in such dreadful conditions, but the simple fact of being there and gazing at the scene seemed improper. We walked a few meters along the barbed wire border and reached a small hill at the top of which two men were smoking a cigarette. One of them was a member of the military who had been sent to Röszke from western Hungary, where he usually lived with his family, to reinforce border surveillance operations. But in the few months he had been there, he had never caught sight of a migrant trying to cross irregularly. He just spent his days standing on top of a small hill, looking at the Serbian fields extending ahead.

It struck me that the scene had been carefully staged. Each person at the transit zone had a clear role to play in a scenario whose plot was simple yet efficient: the state had sent national servants to defend the border and the nation against the disruption and menace represented by the migrants. It had its protagonists and its villains. There was a desirable order of things which had been brought into crisis by the movement of unwanted people and which had to be protected. And like other researchers, activists and journalists, I also had a role in this script – I may have felt little sympathy towards the narrative, yet I was part of the public that made the spectacle possible. The Röszke transit zone told a particular story, with its own morals, in which the Hungarian national community was in need of protection and the state was the protector. The production of refugee vulnerability and muteness is central for this staging to proceed: as silenced subjects, refugees can be attributed whichever role is most convenient to the government's narrative. As such, the narrative requires two simultaneous operations: the systematic silencing of refugees through processes of vulnerabilisation⁶ taking away the possibility of self-expression, coupled with a hyper-visibility of their vulnerabilised presence.

This was what felt wrong: the mere fact of attending the show, of providing it with a public, elicited my complicity in this obscene border spectacle. Any attempt at challenging the narrative put forward by Hungarian authorities first requires acknowledging and engaging with a discourse based on a series of deliberate misrepresentations and exaggerations. The concept of 'spectacle' has been usefully mobilised by critical migration and border studies scholars to refer to dominant representations surrounding migration, and their instrumental role in the consolidation of statist and territorialised politics. De Genova (2015) speaks of the 'border spectacle' in reference to the way in which states stage dramatic scenes of enforcement at/of the border. This, of course, has a purpose: that of displaying the power of state to enforce the politics of exclusion and control on which national authority and sovereignty rely. Rajaram (2003) also examines the 'spectacle of detention' of asylum seekers in the Australian context and argues that such a performance is designed for a public, identified and cohered through the consumption of such spectacle, and that it hence plays a central role in the drawing of the moral and ethical limits of the political community. In both instances, the state produces images and representations of migrants in order to create its desirable public, foster its own agenda of exclusion and further asserts its authority.⁷

5 In this paper, I use both migrants and refugees to refer to people who entered or attempted to enter Hungary in recent years and over the summer 2015. This stems above all from the observation that, whether or not these people were eventually recognised by states as official refugees, their mobilities held more in common than the strict differentiation between those deemed 'migrants' and those deemed 'refugees' in specific applications of the law implies. In particular, at their point of entry into Hungary, all of these people were facing the same illegalisation of their journey and the same border violence.

6 This, of course, is rendered primarily possible through illegalisation and its consequences (deportability, disposability and so on).

7 Such images are also, in turn, widely appropriated by the media which role I cannot examine in greater details here but which is of importance in the circulation and reproduction of these vignettes

This visit of Röszke transit zone stayed with me as I continued researching migration and pro-migrant solidarity in Hungary over the next few months. The uncomfortable feeling of being an unwilling accomplice in the production of a narrative about a ‘migrant threat’ or a ‘migration crisis’ in the country was as powerful as it was paralytic. The issue bore some questions: how may we act in support of migrants in ways that both provide assistance to those needing it and subvert the double-process of silencing and visibilisation through which the border spectacle is produced? Can we step out of the meta-narrative set by the Hungarian government to imagine alternative accounts of mobility, of the ‘national community’ and of the relationship between the Hungarian public and the ‘migrants’? How may we act and speak in support of migrants in the context of the border spectacle?

In this paper, I offer reflections on the possibilities and limitations of solidarity discourses and practices with refugees in the context of the Hungarian border spectacle. I attempt to contribute to the scholarly research on solidarity practices with refugees and migrants in the country, notably through questioning the binary distinction between political activism and apolitical humanitarianism that some of the recent literature on refugee solidarity in Hungary has developed. I start by further examining the spectacularisation processes deployed by the Hungarian state and by assessing their role in consolidating a particular moral, social and political order. I then reflect on the methodological challenges associated with this research and in particular with conducting fieldwork about solidarity actions that had been to a great extent halted by the Hungarian government’s closure of its borders. Finally, I turn to the solidarity practices with refugees that unfolded in two Hungarian border cities, Szeged and Pécs, and reflect on the extent to which they counteracted the dominant narratives set through the border spectacle. I argue that a key way in which pro-migrant movements in Hungary have destabilised dominant framings of migration as an obscene spectacle and a crisis has been through a de-centring of migration. In other words, it is by de-compartmentalising solidarity with migrants and asserting connection between migrant-related struggles and other struggles that volunteers and activists have at times successfully challenged the discourses of crisis and the processes of Othering deployed by the government in relation to migrants and other vulnerable groups.

REINFORCING THE NATIONAL COMMUNITY, ITS PROTECTORS AND ITS OTHERS

At the end of November 2016, still in Szeged, the local district court gave a Syrian man known as Ahmed H. a 10-year prison sentence on charges of ‘illegal entry’ and ‘acts of terrors’. The acts behind these charges dated from 16 September 2015, a day after Hungary closed its borders to migrants and refugees trying to cross the country on their way to Western and Northern European countries. Hundreds of walkers, stranded at the Röszke/Horgoš crossing, where the transit zone mentioned above currently stands, attempted to break through the border fence erected by Hungarian authorities. The response of the police consisted in the brutal use of force, including tear gas and water cannons, to contain people. Ahmed seized a megaphone to try to call on both refugees and the police to remain calm. As clashes intensified, Ahmed was involved in stone throwing, together with other dozens exhausted refugees. He was arrested in Budapest a couple of months later, and held in detention until his trial. Ten other people

present at the border that day were also arrested: they were trialled sentences over the summer 2016 and received of a range of actual and suspended sentences for illegal entry and public disorder. Ahmed was heard separately due to the terrorist charges pressed against him. These were based on the argument that Ahmed had been involved in attempts at intimidating the Hungarian police.⁸

These trials took place a few months after the Hungarian authorities declared a ‘state of emergency’ across the country, in March 2016. The measure was officially taken because of the ‘migrant crisis’, yet it was passed at a time when the number of people transiting through Hungary had drastically declined, due in particular to the barbed wire fences at the borders with Serbia and Croatia. In June of the same year, the government passed a draconian counter-terrorism package, which included a constitutional amendment⁹ and changes to the laws governing the police, national security services and defense forces. The aim of the package was to simplify the process to establish a state of emergency in the country, and to grant the executive stronger ‘counter-terrorism’ powers, with wide scope for restricting rights and increasing surveillance. Indeed, under a ‘state of emergency’ situation, the government can introduce curfews, restrictions on the movement of people and vehicles, a ban on mass events, reinforced border protection and stricter control of Internet and postal communication. The package also established Hungary’s new Counter-terrorism Intelligence and Criminal Analysis Centre (TIBEK). In the name of protecting the national community against an imagined migrant threat, the Hungarian government has justified a series of repressive and restrictive laws with consequences for all citizens.

The passing of this so-called ‘anti-terrorism’ package is to an extent in line with developments at the European level, notably since the Paris and Brussels attacks. Yet it is also an element of Hungary’s ruling party, Fidesz’s political strategy. Since spring 2015, the ‘safety of Hungarian citizens’ has emerged as a key issue in the public and political debate. Fidesz has deployed a range of tactics aimed at affirming a connection between migration and migrants, on the one hand, and the destabilisation of public order and terrorism, on the other. An important element of this strategy was the October 2 referendum calling for people to vote against the EU’s mechanism of refugee relocation. The campaign leading up to the referendum was overwhelmingly focused on enforcing a link between migration and terrorism, with billboards across the country displaying messages such as ‘Did you know that the Paris attacks were carried out by migrants?’ or the distribution of a booklet to over 4 millions Hungarian households containing sentences such as ‘Illegal immigration increases the threat of terror’. These moves have been instrumental to Fidesz in order to maintain its levels of support in spite of corruption scandals, protests from various social groups (most recently, teachers) and growing public dissatisfaction due to the concentration of power and the long-term rule of the party. In this context, it is likely that ‘security’ issues will be one of the key arguments used by Fidesz to attract voters in view of the spring 2018 parliamentary election.

Ahmed’s trial was a particularly striking example of ‘the border spectacle’. It produced a moment of hyper-visibility of both illegalised migration, thereby acting as confirmation of the Hungarian government’s discourse of crisis and threat, and of the authority of the state to enforce exclusion, thereby affirming its ability to provide ‘safety’ to the Hungarian public against such imagined menace. The spectacle portrays a national community whose primary issue consists in the control of ‘illegal’

8 It is also worth noting here that Ahmed had in fact been a legal resident of Switzerland for years and had merely found himself at the Serbian-Hungarian border in an attempt to bring some family members into the EU to allow them to seek asylum.

9 To Magyarország Alaptörvénye, the Fundamental Law of Hungary

migration. It also works to invisibilise the very processes through which such this illegality is produced. As noted by De Genova, while some migrants are deemed ‘illegal’ because they have violated the law, ‘in most depictions of these migrants, there is little if any account of what the law truly is, or of how it came to be so’ (De Genova 2015). Yet, the law has a history. This history is deeply politicised: it reflects a particular reading of reality that in most cases echoes the interests of the powerful. Migrants become illegal when legislative arrangements make certain forms of mobility illegal – in other words, illegalise them. In the Hungarian case, the criminalisation of so-called illegal entry is a recent phenomenon, dating back to September 2015 as part of a series of measures aimed at terminating the so-called migration crisis. Ahmed, and the 10 other people arrested and trialled alongside him, were all made illegal by recent Hungarian legislative measures which, in turn, provided the state with the perfect scene for the demonstration of its ability to enforce the law, punish those who break it and exclude those deemed as illegitimate.

Those who lack the means to impact or contest the making of the law and of legality and illegality – among which migrants feature prominently alongside other marginalised groups – typically become irresistible targets on which states exercise and demonstrate their authority. In his work on border spectacles, De Genova (2015) looks in particular at the ways in which illegalised migrants, while nominally excluded, can become subordinately included through their absorption and exploitation in the market where their labour power is coveted. These labour-oriented dynamics may currently be of relatively little relevance to the Hungarian context.¹⁰ Yet the subordinated inclusion of illegalised migrants is of crucial value not only economically but also ideologically. These two processes of instrumentalisation and exploitation of illegalised migrants are not mutually incompatible and in many contexts the ideological subordination of migrants is precisely what prepares their economic exploitation. In the case of Hungary, structural silencing (through illegalisation and other means) makes vulnerable groups ideologically profitable canvasses on which state power can be projected and displayed.

THE MIGRANT AS GLOBAL OTHER AND HUNGARIAN POLITICS OF NEGLIGENCE

This is not unique to Hungary: the ‘migrant’ has emerged as a key image of otherness globally, and states around the world have mobilised this figure of threat to justify security-oriented and authoritarian measures. These restrictive measures are often aimed at neutralizing domestic social and political tensions and discontent, including those emerging from the mutation of the local state into a manager of global neoliberal capital. In the European context, this process can be observed maybe more strikingly since 2008 and the advent of the economic crisis in Europe. A structural reshaping of the state based on the rolling back of its welfare functions has been led under the banner of austerity with virtually no democratic deliberation. A number of social and political tensions have emerged from this lack of popular consultation, illustrating the increasing connection between the neoliberal states and anti-

10 At present, the Hungarian government has been trying to resolve the contradiction between its capitalist need for a cheap labour and its nationalist agenda against migrant through the coining of the idea of ‘culturally compatible migrant labour’. The specificities of this compatibility were not clarified but implicitly refer to white, Christian, ‘European’ labour.

democratic practices. Importantly, wherever resistance movements and social struggles have erupted to oppose austerity, European states have engaged in intensified repression, including police deployment and the passing of laws criminalising protest.¹¹

Importantly, the borders at which this ‘spectacle’ has been unfolding are not only the Hungarian borders: they also are the external borders of the European Union (EU), of which Hungary has become a ‘guard’ in the context of the Europeanisation of immigration control. While Hungary has been at times pilloried for its ill treatment of migrants by other European leaders,¹² it is worth highlighting that the process of border securitisation in the country has been actively encouraged and supported financially by EU institutions. Indeed, since at least the mid-1990s¹³ and the harmonisation of migration policy at the European level, the increasingly deterritorialised and securitised borders of the EU have been a key location for the production of the forced migrant as a figure of fear (Cetti 2012, Cantat 2015).

In Hungary, the most recent moves towards further securitisation and authoritarianism have been justified in relation to this global figure of the migrant Other, and in the name of preserving the country from ‘outsiders’ and particularly ‘Muslims’. Yet the processes of militarisation, securitisation and criminalisation of the Hungarian society, which have targeted primarily Hungary’s minorities and poor, including Hungarian Roma and homeless people, must be located in longer-term dynamics. Since his arrival to power in 2010, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has rewritten the constitution, curtailed the powers of the Constitutional Court, dramatically restricted media freedom, eroded welfare in favour of enforced workfare targeting primarily Roma and the poor (Szöke 2015) and actively participated in the establishment of an environment within which racist speech and supposedly prohibited far-right paramilitary activities are tolerated, particularly in the villages where the Roma live (Fekete 2016). These developments must also be analysed in the framework of the so-called Europeanisation of Hungary and Central Europe, which have unfolded in the context of a brutal transition from communism to capitalism (from a command economy to a market economy and into an integrated global economy) under the auspices of the World Bank and the IMF, which paved the way and indeed were prerequisite to Hungary entering the EU in 2004.

The spectacularisation of migration and of border confrontation is a process with important implications. Not only does it allow reasserting the legitimacy and authority of the state and conjuring a particular image of the national community, it also enables a process of blame displacement. This reorients the popular discontent and hostility triggered by economic and political difficulties towards those produced as illegitimate in the narratives underpinning border spectacles. This process, which manifests itself at national and regional levels, is a global phenomenon which has worked toward the emergence of the migrant as a global figure of unwanted Otherness. However, these hyper-visibility moments are only one side of the story. The other side of this mediated discourse, or its more discreet continuity, is the way in which a series of measures of neglect and destitution becomes authorised and normalised.

11 See for example AEDH (2014) Spain: repressive laws that also concern Europe. Available at: www.aedh.eu/Spain-repressive-laws-that-also.html or The Guardian (2012) Europe’s day of anti-austerity strikes and protests turn violent - as it happened. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2012/nov/14/eurozone-crisis-generalstrikes-protest-day-of-action>

12 See for instance <http://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/fabius-calls-eastern-europe-s-reluctance-to-receive-migrants-scandalous/>

13 E.g. the 1995 implementation of the Schengen Agreement was correlated by a need for harmonised surveillance of external borders.

In the Hungarian context, such examples of active negligence and the violence they entail are plentiful. Some of the most shocking examples illustrate powerfully the extent to which dehumanising representations may in turn authorise inhuman treatment. In winter 2016, the Hungarian government quietly closed Bicske camp, one of the oldest open reception camps for asylum seekers. While such open asylum detention facilities are far from desirable, what came to replace Bicske proved even worse. Indeed, as an alternative, the government displaced Bicske residents to containers or tent camps close to the borders of the country. This episode took place rather discreetly, in the heart of a draconian winter with temperatures reaching -20 degrees. People found themselves isolated from their previous connections, including those they had established in Budapest where many of the pro-migrant associations and activities of the country take place, and in conditions hardly suitable for human beings. A few months later, in April 2017, the Hungarian government decided to stop providing food to asylum seekers detained in one of the reception camps, which hosts primarily people going through an asylum appeal process. This occurred about a year after the Hungarian government drastically reduced support to asylum seekers (who are simultaneously prevented from working) and cut all benefits specific to refugees on the ground that there should be no differential treatment compared to the Hungarian people.

Acts of everyday destitution are also visible in practices of quiet brutality exercised against asylum seekers in the camp, the longevity of asylum procedures, the fact that migrants are often implicitly and discreetly encouraged to leave the country and to continue their travel westward and so on. These practices differ from the hyper-visible spectacle in that they are either unacknowledged or quite often framed in administrative rather than political terms. They are about the routine and banal way in which mistreatment, neglect and marginalisation is organised, enacted and reinforced. The neglect here is thus not of a benign form. It may amount to forms of physical violence or torture being inflicted onto the bodies of people, yet it is activated through an *active lack* of care rather than acts of violence. In spite of a tendency to frame this in terms of administrative efficiency (or lack thereof in the case of long asylum processes), this neglect is political. It is not the mere result of a lack of resources or structural conditions – it is politicised insofar as it is imposed on particular people or groups of people in particular ways. Here, it is articulated with the production of the figure of the migrant as one of national threat, which relies on a dehumanising set of practices and discourses that not only justifies but fully banalises extreme forms of mistreatment towards migrants.

This raises the question: what are the effects of this double politics of hyper-visibility and quiet neglect on the social space available to migrants and their supporters in Hungary? There is of course the immediate experience of brutality and its many consequences on people's lives. But there is also a maybe less visible and more pernicious effect in the way in which these discourses, images and practices attempt to permanently sap the conditions allowing the emergence of alternative communities and ways of being together beyond racialised differences. In effect, they emerge as structural obstacles constraining the possibilities and horizons of counter-practices and discourses. In the following sections, after proposing some methodological reflections, I will explore migrant solidarity initiatives that developed in two Hungarian cities to analyse the challenges, limitations and possibilities of attempting to produce inclusive political communities and identities in the Hungarian context.

RESEARCHING SOLIDARITY IN THE 'POST-CRISIS' MOMENT: SOME METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

In spite of the active and ongoing process of stigmatisation, marginalisation and criminalisation of migrants and their supporters, there have been important forms of pro-migrant solidarity emerging in Hungary. In particular, over the summer 2015, during which up to half a million people transited through the country on their way to western and northern European countries, large-scale support initiatives emerged at various transit points and at sites where refugees found themselves stranded. This included Budapest and particularly its two main train stations, Keleti and Nyugati. Indeed, the Hungarian government attempted to immobilise refugees who had reached the capital city by preventing them from boarding onto westbound trains. Soon, thousands of people became stranded and started occupying train stations, nearby parks and other public spaces, as they waited to be able to continue their journey. In the face of this situation, hundreds if not thousands of volunteers mobilised across Budapest to provide assistance to refugees. The situation reached its peak in the month of August, during which volunteers engaged in food and clothes distribution but also, at times, in other forms of support including the facilitation of onwards journeys through driving people across borders. While there are a number of older human rights groups in Hungary, including specifically migrants' rights' groups, which provide support primarily in terms of legal assistance and advocacy work, the large majority of the volunteers who participated in solidarity events over the summer 2015 were affiliated with recent organisations that made up loose networks and were coordinated through Facebook pages.

Though limited, scholarly attention has been paid to pro-migrant initiatives in Hungary, including to volunteers' motivations for engaging in support activities and the effects of 'helping encounters' on their understanding of migration (Feischmidt and Zakaria 2016). Questions regarding the tensions and contradictions between different humanitarian and solidarity actors active in Budapest in 2015 have also been raised (Kallius *et al.* 2015) as well as issues to do with the possibilities and limitations of engaging in 'solidarity in transit' (Kallius 2016). However, little research has until now been conducted regarding pro-migrant solidarity in Hungarian contexts beyond Budapest. Feischmidt and Zakaria carried out a large-scale research project with extensive qualitative fieldwork across Hungary which is yet to be published.

This paper aims to contribute to the scholarly research of solidarity practices with refugees and migrants in Hungary through the study of volunteer movements in two Hungarian border cities: Szeged next to the Serbian border and Pécs next to the Croatian border. With over 160 000 inhabitants, Szeged is the third largest city of Hungary. Located in the southern part of Hungary in the Csongrad county, it also hosts one of the country's most important universities, the University of Szeged, which is the largest local employer together with a paprika factory producing mainly for exports. The current mayor of Szeged is László Botka, a member of the Hungarian Socialist Party. Pécs counts around 140 000 inhabitants and is the fifth largest city in the country. Until some years ago, the economy of Pécs relied

greatly on a coal and a Uranium mines, as well as several factories. Yet, changes in the global energy system (e.g. the marginalisation of mining) combined with deindustrialisation during the “transition” process have had a serious impact on the local economy: both mines were closed as well as many of the factories. For a time in the 1990s, foreign investment was directed towards Pécs and multinational companies such as Nokia and the British American Tobacco (BAT) companies established production bases in the city. Nokia plants were purchased by Finnish electronic manufacturer Elcoteq in 2000¹⁴: after downsizing production and laying off local workers in 2009, the Pécs plant was fully closed in 2011. Nowadays, the BAT factory plays a central role in Pécs’ economy and is one of the most important employers and investors in the region. Yet the city suffers from economic marginalisation and has a large unemployed population. Pécs is also of interest in the Hungarian context because of its recognition of a multicultural past. In 1998, the city was given the UNESCO prize *Cities for Peace* for maintaining the cultures of minority groups and for its tolerant attitudes towards refugees from the Yugoslav Wars.¹⁵ Since 2009, the city’s mayor has been Fidesz member Zsolt Pava.

The fieldwork involved in this research was conducted between April and September 2016, namely several months after the so-called refugee crisis in Hungary was terminated through a series of restrictive measures. Researching solidarity with refugees in Hungary past the ‘crisis’ moment involved important challenges: it required identifying actors retrospectively and trying to understand initiatives that I had not directly witnessed. The research presented here relies on a set of formal and informal conversations with volunteers and activists involved in migrant solidarity movements in several Hungarian cities, including but not limited to Szeged and Pécs, as well as with local politicians in Szeged and Pécs and with public figures such as university professors. A total of 18 individual semi-open interviews were conducted, as well as two focus groups featuring respectively five volunteers from Szeged and four volunteers from Pécs. Several interviews were conducted jointly with colleagues researching solidarity in Hungary as part of the H2020 project SOLIDUS. I was also able to share data and reflections with several colleagues from the Hungarian academia involved in related research. Additionally, a number of informal conversations with people engaged in solidarity initiatives over the summer 2015 helped refining and sharpening the analysis presented here.

While researching events that had (to a large extent) ended was challenging, there were also some important benefits associated with this research position. In particular, conducting research several months after the intense summer 2015 allowed gathering longer-term reflections and thinking beyond narratives of crisis and associated practices. This helped reflecting on how the initiatives developed by the Hungarian civil society in 2015 were connected to more lasting dynamics and to opposition practices that both preceded and exceeded the so-called crisis moment. While remaining attentive to the specificities involved in the pro-migrant initiatives of the summer 2015, I was able to de-centre my gaze and to attempt to identify connections and links between solidarity towards migrants and refugees and other forms of social and political activities in Hungary.

An important theoretical implication of this posture, as will be discussed below, was that it encouraged me to critically reflect on the sharp distinction often evoked in critical migration scholarship between humanitarianism and solidarity, conceptualised as two hermetically separated practices. This distinction has usefully shed light on some of the tensions and limitations of support practices that

14 http://www.nokia.com/en_int/news/releases/2000/01/10/elcoteq-acquires-nokias-monitor-manufacturing-unit-in-pecs-hungary

15 See for example: http://www.hetek.hu/hatter/199804/pecs_a_tolerans_varos

sometimes reiterate the dynamics of governmentality and the regimes of representations on which states' framing of mobilities relies. Kallius *et al.* (2016) have applied this reading to Hungarian volunteerism to highlight the persistence of 'a vertical form of politics'. The authors have argued that a majority of volunteers were involved in top-down forms of support, which lacked subversive potential and simply reproduced victimising or dehumanising discourses regarding refugees. While the binary between humanitarianism and political solidarity, and between vertical and horizontal politics, has allowed problematizing some of the tensions embedded in pro-migrant initiatives deployed in Hungary in the summer 2015, a longer-term study of pro-migrant movements in Szeged and Pécs suggests a more nuanced and complex picture. In particular, it evidences that humanitarian concerns featured prominently in volunteers' motivations for engaging in pro-migrant actions, yet in ways that did not preclude political reflections and subversion. It also points to the importance of the local and national context of an increasingly authoritarian state in structuring and articulating refugee solidarity with other political and social grievances.

BORDER SOLIDARITIES: SUPPORTING PEOPLE ON THE MOVE IN TWO HUNGARIAN BORDER CITIES

Over the course of the summer 2015, over 100 000 people transited through Szeged, next to the Serbian border, while up to 5 000 people passed through Pécs, close to the border with Croatia.¹⁶ These border cities constituted some of the first places that refugees encountered as they entered the country. Refugees who passed through Pécs were driven to the city's train station from other border towns by Hungarian police, for reasons that remain unclear. Once fingerprinted and provided with a registration number, they'd be let free in the city with no information as to how to continue their trip. While some claim that people were relocated to Pécs in order to decongest other cities (in particular Szeged), volunteers from Migszol Pécs considered this to be a deliberate, orchestrated move on the part of Hungarian authorities, which, they claim, aimed at provoking hostility towards migrants and refugees by having large number of unassisted migrants in the streets of Pécs – or, in other words, in order to stage yet another form of border spectacle. In response, however, a significant number of people got together to provide assistance to those on the move through overseeing transportation to Budapest and coordinating with groups operating there as well as providing food, clothing, and medical support when necessary.

In both places, refugees would be just arriving into Hungary and trying to make their way to Budapest where they hoped to board on a train that would take them to Austria, Germany and beyond. They would be lacking food, water, sometimes clothes and medication as well as, importantly, information. While, as will be commented on below, local authorities in Szeged and Pécs vastly differed in their approach to the situation of refugees, in both contexts there was no organised and systematic effort to assist people and facilitate the continuation of their journey. In both cases, a group of local residents came together under the name of Migszol (respectively Migszol Szeged or Migszol Pécs) in order to fill in the gap left by the lack of intervention on the part of the local and national authorities. The number of volunteers involved on a regular basis in Migszol Szeged was about 150 people while the

16 These numbers were given as conservative estimates by interviewees, who mentioned real numbers may have been larger.

core group of Migszol Pécs featured around 40-50 people. Pro-migrant activities in Szeged were to an extent facilitated by local authorities, which provided a storage and distribution place – in the form of a wooden cabin located next to the station where the majority of Migzsol activities were taking place. This was possible insofar as Szeged is distinctive in the Hungarian context and has a Socialist mayor who stands as a declared opponent of governmental party Fidesz. In Pécs however, local authorities did not provide any form of support to the civilian group and their rapport has been extremely tense.

In both groups, there was an insistence on the part of the movements' spokespeople to present their initiatives as apolitical and driven purely by humanitarian and solidarity concerns. In particular, both movements showed strong defiance towards any form of party politics. Two anecdotes can convey this reluctance to be associated with any form of mainstream politics. During a group interview, two of the key coordinators of Migszol Szeged told us:

Interviewee 1: *At some point, we had the opportunity to get a donation from the European Socialists. A big amount. (...)*

Interviewee 2: *7 million HUF. That is a really big sum, not something you flush down the drain (...).*

Interviewee 1: *It was a very big dilemma. If it just had been a truck of mineral waters, we could have said no easily, but this is such a sum ... So we talked (with other groups) and we said that if they get out in the media that we get money from the Socialists... (Pause) So we said 'thanks' and we recommended giving the money to the Greeks.¹⁷ We don't want to receive money from any political organisation.¹⁸*

In Pécs, the initiator of Migszol explained how the local Socialist party had helped them by providing a small storage room and some tents, but also how he was worried that this may create reputation issues for Migszol Pécs. One volunteer commented on how this was dealt with by the coordinators of Migszol:

One of the tents ... clearly belonged to the Socialist party because it had the flower on it – the emblem of the Hungarian Socialist Party. And A. and the leaders of this little camp, they were always telling us to put that tent on the bar inside out, not to show that this belongs to the Socialist party, because this is not a political venture, this is not a political activity. They were trying to make it as apolitical as possible.¹⁹

This distancing from party politics, sometimes framed as a reluctance to be political in general, is not unique to the initiatives under consideration. The so-called democratic transition of Hungary has been marked by forms of political instabilities that often resulted in popular disillusion towards political parties. Between 1990 and 2002, for example, Hungary saw three different governing coalitions. At the end of each of their term, the Hungarian public was dissatisfied with the government, and the popular vote swung in the opposite direction. The pattern was interrupted in 2006 with the re-election of the

17 Note: In reference to the Greek crisis.

18 Interview with Migszol Szeged volunteers, Szeged, 16 June 2016, conducted with H2020 SOLIDUS project team.

19 Interview with Peter Remeny, Pécs, 18 July 2016, conducted with H2020 SOLIDUS project team.

Hungarian Socialist Party, but only a few months after the elections the uncovering of the Party's alleged lies during the election campaign and of various corruption scandals led to a series of protests and to a repudiation of the government. Since 2010, national conservative party Fidesz has dominated the Hungarian political scene, leaving little room for opposition. Such repeated disappointment with Hungarian political parties seems to have led to a situation whereby mere association with party politicians is seen as detrimental to social activities. In a context of increasing authoritarianism by party in power Fidesz, this often seems to take the shape of a refusal to consider one's self as political.

Yet, in spite of this insistence on distancing themselves from any political party and specific political identity as a group, interviews with the key people (initiators and coordinators) of both Migszol groups clearly showed that they held marked political opinions and that their activities (during the summer 2015, as well as way before and since) have been shaped in particular by a conflicting relation to the Fidesz-led Hungarian government. In addition to their genuine objection to the mistreatment of people on the move by the Hungarian authorities, their involvement was influenced and structured by a broader and longer-term opposition to the Hungarian authorities and the social, economic and political relational modalities they encourage. Hence, while insisting on the civilian, non-political nature of the overall group, many individual volunteers were moved by anti-government positions and imaginations of a different society and alternative modes of sociality in Hungary.

APOLITICAL POLITICS?

The core group who established Migszol Szeged and coordinated its activities throughout the summer was composed of long-term acquaintances with relatively well-known positions as socially active people in the city. For years, they had run a local alternative radio station. Their radio had to shut down following the Hungarian government's passing of restrictive broadcasting laws in 2010.²⁰ In previous years, they had been key organisers of a number of protests including the Internet tax protest and the teachers' strike. Volunteers whom I spoke to in Szeged often had been in contact with them previous to the summer 2015 and their credibility as socially engaged and reliable people was central to bringing people into Migszol Szeged and building relationships of trust.

Experience of previous joint actions and struggles was also key to the establishment of Migszol Pécs. Again, the group was consolidated by previous encounters and relationships. One of its central members whom I met in Pécs declared she has been involved in workers struggles and trade unionism for the last four decades. At the time when large numbers of migrants passed through Pécs, she was able to solicit support from the local police union, with whom Migszol could establish a functional working relationship, at least at the beginning. Local police would let Migszol volunteers know every time a new group of people was brought into the city, allowing the group to organise support accordingly. The core Migszol group had also been heavily involved in defending other groups of people marginalised and illegalised by Hungarian authorities. A few years ago, as in other Hungarian municipalities, mayor Zsolt Pava criminalised homelessness in Pécs. This had provoked outrage among some of the local residents, who had organised a group to coordinate support to the homeless and poor of the city.

20 See http://medialaws.ceu.hu/public_service_media_more.html

Through this group, they have been organising food and clothes distribution as well as solidarity events such as Christmas celebrations. The people involved in this group became the key figures of Migszol Pécs. Here again, common opposition to the government and local authorities, a shared understanding and rejection of the process through which vulnerable groups are targeted, and previous experience of collective protest were central to building the initiatives that emerged over the summer.

This is important for several reasons. First, it allows developing a more complex reading of the solidarity initiatives that took place in favour of migrants in the summer 2015. As mentioned, scholars have, at times, deemed the forms of volunteerism that emerged in Hungary in 2015 as limited or apolitical. I suggest that looking at the case of Szeged and Pécs can both challenge and complement such analysis in important ways. It can help us developing a more multi-layered understanding of pro-refugee solidarity in Hungary and encourages us to exercise caution when criticising support initiatives towards refugees by deeming them forms of humanitarian or charitable volunteerism with no political awareness.

In both cities, opposition to Fidesz, and its attempts at capitalising on the suffering of migrants and other vulnerable groups for political purposes were repetitively referred to as key motives for involvement. This conflicting – and to an extent dialectical – relationship to Fidesz *preceded* the so-called migrant ‘crisis’. It had been built over years in opposition to the multiple ways in which the Hungarian government has produced internal and external enemies in the aim of stabilising its power and to create a climate of social fear. It is therefore not coincidental if many of the interviewees also referred to other vulnerable groups they have previously extended support. This include, prominently, the Roma, as the national figure of internal otherness whom Viktor Orbán has relentlessly evoked over the last few years as a counterpoint to his vision of an ordered and desirable Hungarian public. But it also extends to groups that have been vulnerabilised in various ways through the neoliberal transition in Hungary – such as the elderly, the disabled, the poor and homeless in general. The connection between these conditions and struggles was most forcefully put forward by one of the coordinators of Migszol Pécs who said:

I hold Viktor Orbán responsible for the death of my mother. She had cancer, and had her leg and breast amputated. They operated her and after the operation ... they threw her out in the street... Now, it is the same thing with my wife: she had a serious brain operation, and they have taken away her ‘pension for disabled people’. We got into such a serious situation, by the way, that officially, I am now homeless. I don’t have a flat... But even with all of these events, we have to keep doing things, because there are people who walk in the same shoes as us, and we try to help them. I can give an example of how on the daily basis they push the homeless out of the city center. They can’t even be there. The police harasses them.²¹

The connections recognised between different forms of marginalisation and inequalities in this excerpt sketch out forms of identity and solidarity that go beyond charity and humanitarianism. Rather, they speak to the recognition of shared material conditions and of comparable positions in front of the state and in front of capital. The forms of exclusion referred to here concern as much the violent discursive and physical segregation faced by migrants and refugees, than forms of economic

21 Interview with Migszol Pécs coordinator, Pécs, 18 July 2016, conducted with H2020 SOLIDUS project team.

relegating leading to situation of poverty, hardship and exploitation. This must also be assessed in light of the story of the city of Pécs. As explained, Pécs was an old industrial and mining centre and has experienced the brutal close down of its industries and mines over the last two to three decades, followed by a brief period of foreign investment that has overall come to an halt, leading to high levels of unemployment and social misery. The interviewee previously quoted explained that he came from a working class family of 14 children, marked by poverty and economic hardship. He positioned himself in material terms and articulated a discourse close to a class positioning that frames and makes intelligible the actions he carries out in solidarity with various groups, including but not restricted to refugees. For instance, at the end of my first day of fieldwork in Pécs in July 2016, a number of Migszol Pécs volunteers explained that they were driving to deliver clothes and food to impoverished Roma communities living in villages around Pécs.

Activists who made up the core group of Migszol Szeged came from rather different class positions. They tended to be university-educated people working in higher education or non-governmental organisations. The motivations they put forward for engaging in solidarity initiatives towards refugees were not about the sharing of material conditions yet they were also articulated around ideas of a common struggle in opposition to the vision of society and of the national community imposed by the Hungarian government. One of the key organisers of the movement explained:

This is not only about supporting people in need, this is about the sort of people we want to be, the sort of countries we want to live in, the sort of social relations we want to imagine. We do not want this narrow nationalism, we never did, ever since Orbán has come up with this way of speaking of Hungary and its history I have fought against it.²²

Here again, the position articulated is one of solidarity where concepts of reciprocity and commonalities are strongly emphasised. The interviewee mentions motivations that may be understood as humanitarian ('supporting people in need') yet he frames such concerns in a way that insists on the mutual interests embedded in pro-refugee actions. He also understands these initiatives as part of a larger struggle against particular political visions of the Hungarian society that were mobilised to justify the mistreatment of refugees in the summer 2015 and beyond, but that also existed before and were previously drawn upon by Hungarian authorities to redraw the boundaries of the national community along narrow socio-cultural lines and to target vulnerable groups.

I would like to argue that it is precisely because such political positionings and reflections existed before the arrival of refugees and migrants in Hungary, that large scope initiatives could be promptly established in cities like Szeged and Pécs. A number of the volunteers who participated in this research understood their pro-migrant stance as a moral and political necessity in relation to the broader context of authoritarianism in Hungary. While the forms of morality involved might have underlying humanitarian tones, they were also articulated politically. Volunteers' and activists' actions were triggered by a wider outrage towards the national and local authorities' ongoing criminalisation and Othering of different groups. They were at times sustained by powerful forms of identification with the circumstances faced by people on the move.

22 Interview with Migszol Szeged volunteer, Szeged, 17 July 2016.

CONCLUSION

Since the ‘crisis’ was terminated through the deployment of aggressive bordering strategies, some of the Migszol volunteers in both Szeged and Pécs have remained socially and politically active or resumed previous activities. In Szeged, the initiators of Migszol have been key in allowing the monitoring and documentation of the situation at the border and in particular at the Röszke transit zone. Some of them have changed career to become involved as professional aid workers with local or international NGOs. In Pécs, Migszol members are continuing their activities in support of homeless and poor people from the city and neighbouring villages. They have also been providing support to the Roma inhabitants of nearby towns. While they frequently discuss their activities in terms that would be broadly understood as humanitarian, their long-term involvement in practices of mutual support and solidarity in the context of a repressive state challenges not only the discourses of crisis and exceptionalism deployed in relation to the mobilities of the summer 2015, but also the ongoing process of nation-building along exclusionary lines deployed by the Hungarian authorities.

These two case studies point to alternative accounts not only of mobility but also of social relations in Hungary. In this sense, these initiatives hold a subversive potential. They create connections and meanings that disrupt the processes of isolation and spectacularisation that underpin the discourses of crisis and exceptionalism deployed by the state in order to justify mistreating migrants and to further assert its authority. In other words, these solidarities reject restrictive representations of a moralised Hungarian public and start imagining alternative communities.

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