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Enemies of the Nation: Understanding the Hungarian State's Relationship to Humanitarian NGOs

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Abstract

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) occupy a very ambiguous role in society. Historically, NGOs have been both heralded as democracy in action and criticized for being complicit supporters of neoliberalism. Now, in certain contexts, they are rendered as enemies of the nation. In this article, we examine the evolution of nongovernmental organizations in Hungary, a nation where this transformation is exceedingly clear. Hungary provides a pertinent case example to explore the manner in which civil society as an amorphous, ill-defined category becomes a stand-in for whatever the state needs to protect its interests. The current discourse on NGOs in Hungary plays out during and in the aftermath of what has been dubbed the “refugee crisis” of the summer of 2015. Therefore, in this article we explore how the civil sector evolved in Hungary following the end of the Soviet era, the nongovernmental response to the refugee crisis, and the manner in which NGOs and individual volunteers have been characterized in political discourse as “enemies of the state,” due to the government’s anti-migrant stance. As a result of public rhetoric and policy changes, the civil sector in Hungary has no choice but to either shrink considerably or reframe their activities as decidedly anti-government.

Keywords: Hungary, civil society, nongovernmental organizations, migrants/refugees

By way of introduction to his organization, the director and founder of nongovernmental organization Open Hearts, Attila,¹ explained, “The government does not like us, and we do not like the government” (personal communication, March 2016). The government he refers to is the Hungarian government under the leadership of right-wing, populist Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Although Orbán and his party, Fidesz, seemingly enjoy public support, they are widely critiqued among certain members of Hungarian society and the European Union community for curtailing the freedoms of the press and working to suppress civil society. Attila is one of the founders of Open Hearts, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) which opened in 1989 to help individuals and families left behind during the era of transition from Soviet rule to democracy. Over the years, Open Hearts has expanded to include homeless shelters, soup kitchens, a free clinic, a nursery school and education programs, and youth athletic clubs and events. Services are provided to two of the country’s most marginalized groups—the homeless and members of the Roma ethnic minority. Additionally, when asylum seekers entered the country in unprecedented numbers in the summer of 2015 (Migszol, 2016), Open Hearts dedicated one wing of their shelter to refugees, opened their kitchen to allow volunteers to prepare hot food for asylum seekers awaiting transport in train stations and parks, and took donations of food, clothing, tents, and sleeping bags to the border. Their mission is to “support the financial, in-kind and spiritual support of the needy people in the periphery of the society, and in the interest of raising public awareness and solidarity.” Since their establishment in 1989, the purpose has not changed but expanded. Their role in society, however, has changed significantly. As many scholars have pointed out, cultivation of the nongovernment sphere of activity in Hungary (as elsewhere) was part of a larger project of “privatization” wherein which the rights and responsibilities of the state were transferred to the civic sector, the people (Kamat, 2004). Open Hearts filled this niche well. But in recent years, the same mission that made them necessary for state functioning has now made them an enemy.

In this article, we explain how aid-giving NGOs have been recast as threatening foreign agents via the legislative and rhetorical work of the current administration in Hungary. We speculate on the meaning of such reframing for the future of civil action in Hungary and similar locales. The transformation of civil society has not been a blatant attack but rather a calculated, nuanced campaign. And of course, not all NGOs are targeted. Rather, such recasting is restricted to those organizations that, by indiscriminately giving aid to those in need, are determined by the government to threaten the security of the nation. The process of turning an aid-giving organization from friend to foe is a convoluted one. Exploring the manner in which Hungary has transformed so quickly from a nation dependent upon the actions of the civil sector to one that is seeking to push those elements away makes clear a range of possibilities in the ways the state may (re)orient itself to NGO efforts.

In the case of Hungary, the process began with creation of a “public opinion” constructed through a government-sponsored national survey and billboard campaign, orchestrated to portray any foreigner coming into the country as a potential threat to the nation (Timmer, 2017b). Government officials and those sympathetic to Fidesz’s aims augmented this narrative by first conflating asylum seekers/refugees and economic migrants, and secondly, migration and illegal migration. In so doing, all migration is thereby represented as illegal and brings with it the threat of terrorism or, at least, a destabilization of the nation. In the second step of this process, targeted individuals and groups were posited by political actors as agents

working to undermine the nation's interests. Currently, Hungary's scapegoat is Hungarian-American billionaire George Soros who is presumed to work in conjunction with the European Union to open all borders, allow free migration, and forcibly settle migrants in all EU countries. With those two pillars in place, the third step is relatively simple: vilify any person or group associated with migration and/or Soros. In this way, in the past year the Hungarian government has been able to pass legislation that threatens to close Central European University and, more recently, put incapacitating regulations on NGOs, leaving organizations like Open Hearts particularly vulnerable.

Steps taken in the process described above are clearly the work of the current government under the right-wing party Fidesz and populist leader Viktor Orbán. As we will discuss, the government under Orbán has used the threat of migration and influx of outsiders to create fear among the populace and ensure their continued dominance in the political leadership of the country. And this strategy appears to be working. Despite a concentrated effort on the part of the opposition and a large voter turnout, Orbán easily won his third consecutive term as prime minister and Fidesz secured a two-thirds majority in the Parliament. In a press conference held shortly after the April 8, 2018, election, Orbán made clear that he took his victory as a mandate to protect the country from outsiders and rid the country of those who would oppose this goal. "The Hungarian voters," he claimed "have designated the most important topics: immigration and the topic of national security. Hungarians have decided that they want to be the only ones who will decide who can live in Hungary" (Walker, 2018). He thusly promised to pass the "Stop Soros" legislation brought before the Parliament about a month prior to the election. The bill is intended to prevent humanitarian organizations that would aid refugees, migrants, and other foreign groups from working within Hungary. As he asserted, "The reason we submitted this package before the elections is in order to allow the Hungarian voters to cast their vote knowing our intention of this. This has happened, and we believe we are mandated by this election to pass this law."

Less than a week after the election, Figyelő, a publication supportive of the Fidesz government, published a list of mercenaries allegedly paid by Soros to "topple the government," providing clear evidence of the intentions of Orbán and his ruling party (Gorondi, 2018b). Included on this list were members of organizations such as Amnesty International and Transparency International, refugee advocates, investigative journalists, and faculty at Central European University, the Budapest-based university founded by George Soros in 1991. Orbán has been intensifying his attack against the civil sector throughout his time in office; therefore, his speech and the publication of the list are not unexpected. However, this shift in Hungary is somewhat of a surprise given that following the end of the Soviet era through EU accession, Hungary was generally regarded as one of the most liberal transition countries (Molnár, 2016; Timmer, 2017). In light of such a dramatic shift, we pose the following question: how have NGOs and civil groups, once seen as the bastions of democracy and lauded for their good works, come to be vilified as enemies of the nation?

Observing the Hungarian Response to the "Refugee Crisis"

Data for this analysis come from ethnographic research conducted in Hungary during brief² research trips to the country conducted between June 2015 and March 2017. During these trips, the lead author conducted 35 interviews with volunteers, NGO workers from 12 organizations, journalists, and government officials, as well as participant observation at NGOs,

border zones, and refugee advocacy and aid events. Open Hearts, the organization introduced in the introduction, serves as an analytic exemplar of many of the challenges Hungarian NGOs face, but it is not the only organization represented in this analysis. Given the current political climate, we want to ensure that none of our informants can be identified and are therefore purposefully vague when it comes to respondents and the organizations they represent.

The primary focus of these trips was to assess the manner in which NGOs were responding to the “refugee crisis” as it has been dubbed. Beginning in June 2015 and continuing through the following September, hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers fled across Hungary’s southern border. They came mainly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq and most were attempting to get to Germany, where borders were open to refugees at the time. Thousands of asylum seekers came into the country daily. Hungary was an important pass-through country because for those traveling from the Mediterranean Sea through the Balkans (the Balkan route), the nation borders the Schengen region of the EU through which free travel is allowed. The Dublin Regulation mandates that asylum seekers be processed in the country through which they first arrive in the EU. Greece abandoned this policy and Germany chose to overlook it for a time, but Hungary adhered to it and in so doing created a backlog of refugees waiting for their claims to be processed.

Hungarian civil society mobilized quickly and en masse to respond to the needs of asylum seekers. The government took a decidedly different approach. Throughout this analysis, we explain how the civil sector in general, and nongovernmental organizations in particular, have changed in scope and role in Hungary in the past few decades, largely in response to the changing political landscape. Against the backdrop of these longer-term changes, the Fidesz government used the refugee “crisis” of 2015 to create fear of an unknown “Other” to recast those who seek to help refugees as criminals. Anti-NGO propaganda was spread largely through state-sponsored media. One of the first actions Orbán took when first elected prime minister in 2010 was to gain tight control of the media (Bajomi-Lazar, 2014). Thus, the media came to be the voice of the ruling party. In addition, government-sponsored billboards around the country spread the message of anti-immigrant and anti-NGO fear (Gall, 2017; Timmer, 2017). As we will explain, the refugee “crisis” was not at all a crisis and proceeded with relative calm with no reported incidences of violence or attacks on Hungarian life. Arguably, then, the fear of the other is unwarranted. Ultimately, Fidesz chose to vilify migrants because it was politically expedient to do so. Orbán rightly assumed that playing into xenophobia would persuade the voting public, and, given more global shifts towards populism and protectionism, his strategy has proved successful.

Ultimately, the refugee crisis mobilized the civil sector. However, over the span of unfolding events associated with the refugee “crisis,” the NGOs examined by the lead author during fieldwork experienced no significant shift in their mission and activities, yet the government’s xenophobic policies and rhetoric served to recast them as radical, anti-state, and criminal. We contextualize the Hungarian state’s reframing of humanitarian NGO efforts below via an exploration of existing scholarship on the nature of the relationship between governmental and nongovernmental bodies.

Transition and the Role of the Civil Sector and Nongovernmental Organizations

The changing landscape of the NGO sphere of activity is readily demonstrated in Hungary and therefore provides a good case example, in that associated changes represent a

microcosm of more global shifts. Anthropological inquiry into NGOs began in earnest post-1989 with the dissolution of Cold War era policies and practices being just one of the many events which sparked academic interest. Early scholars drew inspiration from the work of important theorists such as Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, Karl Marx, and Alexis de Tocqueville and focused on the role of civil society in nurturing public action, keeping the state's power in check, and providing an arena in which people could regulate themselves without government intervention (Calhoun, 1993). In this body of research, "civil society" is regularly associated with modernity or good governance (Tandon and Mohanty, 2002), increasing democratization (Keane, 1988), or following Gramsci, a reaction to hegemonic political and private spheres (Colás, 2002; Gramsci, 1971; Van Rooy, 2004).

The optimism in this line of scholarship was short-lived, however, as scholars increasingly noted that NGOs were more often than not complicit in the neoliberal agenda of the state. Later research demonstrated the ways in which NGOs tend to mirror the hierarchies found in the neoliberal states, function through elitism, are unaccountable except to their donors, and may be distanced from those they seek to help and protect. David Harvey (2005: 177) calls NGOs "Trojan horses for global neoliberalism" because they further the withdrawal of the state from social provision and, therefore, promote the expansion of the neoliberal agenda into new arenas. As Sangeeta Kamat asserts, "...the agentic role prescribed to NGOs is not an innocent one but one that foretells a reworking of democracy in ways that coalesce with global capital interests" (2002: 156).

However, whether NGOs are "doing good" (Fisher, 1997) or bolstering the neoliberal state, they are difficult to separate from the day-to-day functioning of the state. Indeed, NGOs are seen as a part of democracy, whether they help or harm. Given the amorphous nature of the relationship between the state and the nongovernmental sector, the current situation in Hungary and elsewhere poses a challenge to the researcher. What is the role of NGOs? Is it to fill a void left by the state or to actively oppose the state? Are NGOs to work themselves out of existence by "solving" the problem they exist to cure, or are NGOs to maintain their own institutional structure and presence? These are both empirical and normative questions, but there are few satisfactory answers primarily because the NGO is not a fixed entity. Lewis and Schuller (2017) refer to the NGO as a "productively unstable category," which implies that the term "NGO" is a site of contested meaning where further interrogation promises a sharpening of analytic categories and claims.

When the era of Sovietism ended in 1989, a wealth of civic and humanitarian organizations emerged to aid the Warsaw Pact countries in the transition from state-sponsored socialism to market-economy democracy. Many onlookers regarded this increase in civic activity as a sign of a global democratic shift and the beginning of the end of authoritarianism. Optimistically, Fukuyama asserted that "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period in post war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (Fukuyama, 1989, p. 4). Although not without his critics, Fukuyama was not alone in his sentiment that liberal democracy had won. Economist Amartya Sen writes, "While democracy is not yet universally practiced, nor indeed universally accepted, in the general climate of world opinion, democratic governance has now achieved the status of being taken to be generally right" (Sen, 2001, p. 5). Thus, 1989 is a watershed moment in history when democratic governance became the *right way* to govern.

The transition in Hungary is illustrative of these broader global shifts. Before the regime transition, the role of civil society was to oppose dictatorship and tyranny (Bozóki, 2008) or was comprised of neighborhood or worker organizations meant to support the Communist regime (Haney, 1995). After the transition, growth of the civil sector and strong democratic government became synonymous (Kuti, 1996). “People,” Éva Kuti explains, “who wanted to act as citizens instead of being subordinates, established nonprofit organizations in order to exercise some control over social processes, decision making, and the provision of welfare services” (1996: 8). The number of registered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) tripled from 1989 to 1993, a figure that provides insight into the burgeoning strength and vibrancy of the civil sector in Hungary. Funding and support were widely available to these NGOs as a robust, growing civil sector was deemed vital to the process of transitioning the country from Soviet dictatorship to democracy. Interest, however, waned and moved elsewhere after 2004 when Hungary joined the European Union, assumedly completing their successful democratic transformation. András Bozóki (2011) describes this era of transition as follows: “The last twenty years were far from being unproblematic ... But still, what we all experienced was a genuine liberal democracy. Governing parties lost elections. The media aggressively criticized politicians. Democracy was consolidated, and the country successfully joined the European Union.”

Since 2004, the role of the civil sector has shifted again to assist marginalized peoples often left out of the democratic project. Organizations sought to aid vulnerable populations such as asylum seekers and refugees, the homeless, and the Romani ethnic minority, a further sign that the era of democratic transition was successful and complete. As Virág Molnár (2016) explains, this assumption was so widely accepted that the recent shift towards populism was seen as evidence of a weak civil society. Civil society, an amorphous concept, is generally regarded to be synonymous with liberal democracy, “its health ... considered vital to ensuring the legitimacy of democratic political institutions” (Molnár, 2016, p. 167). Thus, when a liberal democracy such as Hungary elects a populist leader who boasts a movement towards “illiberalism,” observers are wont to assume a breakdown in civic organizations. Conversely, Molnár argues that “rather than working exclusively towards strengthening and complementing liberal political institutions, [the civil sector] has also provided fertile soil to the spread of right-wing populism, radicalism, and xenophobia” (2016: 166; see also Nagy, 2017). Molnár’s analytic claims are evidenced by the existence of several civic organizations which support the government’s agenda including militias guarding the border (Falola, 2016), interest groups (Molnár, 2016), and Christian and women’s groups (personal communication, 2017). Humanitarian NGOs, on the other hand, are summarily targeted as enemies and foreign agents.

For the purposes of our analysis, the evolution of the organization Open Hearts illustrates important elements of the transition in Hungary. The faith-based humanitarian organization opened in 1989 with a mandate to help people who had been left out of communist aid schemes; namely, single individuals without family support. Their mission, however, changed fairly quickly when the communist era came to an end. Beginning in 1990, Open Hearts switched their focus towards aiding homeless populations. When communism ended, the means of production that fueled the communist government closed down. People who had been working in the factories lost their jobs, but, more importantly, they also lost their homes as they had been living in dormitories created for factory workers. NGOs during this period of transition helped lead the country in transition by offering aid to vulnerable populations. Open Hearts chose specifically to offer shelter to the homeless.

When Hungary began seeking accession to the European Union, a spotlight was shone on Roma issues. According to political scientist Robert Jenkins (personal communication), the “Roma issue” became a point on which the prospective member states could be measured and critiqued. Jenkins asserts that Hungary was in a good economic and political position in 2004 and the only issue on which they lagged was the treatment of the Roma minority (see also Jenkins, 1995). As such, Hungarian NGOs similar to Open Hearts turned their focus to the Roma and offered job training and afterschool education programs. In so doing, they allowed the government to continue their policy of no-policy toward the Roma minority (Timmer 2017a).

The role of the civil sector in Hungary changed again in 2015 when hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers began entering into the European Union through the Hungarian-Serbian border. Humanitarian and nongovernmental organizations mobilized to meet the refugees’ immediate needs (Kallius, Montrescu, and Rajaram, 2015). The government, on the other hand, took a xenophobic and isolationist stance and has blocked further entrance into the country through the construction of a border fence and enactment of anti-immigrant legislation. NGOs, then, who continue to advocate for refugee rights have become explicitly called out as enemies of the state. As such, organizations such as Open Hearts, now see themselves as actively fighting against fascism. In other words, while their activities have not changed substantially, their role in the eyes of the government and their position in society has shifted.

Since 1989, the civil society in Hungary has largely been funded through the philanthropic efforts of Hungarian-American billionaire George Soros. Today, a large number of NGOs dedicated to work on issues of inequality and social justice are funded in part from Soros’ foundation, the Open Society Institute (OSI). As such, the name George Soros has come to be synonymous with democracy in Hungary (as well as throughout Central and Eastern Europe), and in this moment this is bad news for the octogenarian.

Orbán and his associates have, with increasing vehemence, rejected the principles of open society and liberal democracy, adopting the rhetoric of a paranoid leader (Hofstadter, 2008; Timmer, Sery, Connable, and Billinson, 2018). The conservative party Fidesz originally formed in 1988 as a liberal party for young democrats seeking recourse and protection from the persecution of the Communist Party. They shifted to a conservative ideology in 1994 and won the 1998 parliamentary elections, at which time Viktor Orbán won his first term as prime minister. Thus, Orbán has largely been responsible for shaping the party to his liking nearly from its beginning. When Fidesz, and thus Orbán, lost the 2002 elections, he began mobilizing civic activity through the creation of Civic Circles meant to “return politics to the masses” (Molnár, 2016, p. 171). Fidesz won back control of the national parliament with a supermajority in 2010 and Orbán recaptured his role as prime minister and has remained in power since. Since gaining control of the parliament, Fidesz has made several controversial constitutional changes which, most notably for our analysis, consolidated media control and placed limits on the freedom of the press. As a result, Orbán has managed to take control of the national discourse through control of the media, has put a number of xenophobic policies and practices into place, and has called for the creation of an illiberal nation, rejecting the liberal democratic foundation built during the period of transition. In a 2014 speech given in Băile Tușnad, Romania, the prime minister proclaimed, “... [the] Hungarian nation is not a simple sum of individuals, but a community that needs to be organized, strengthened and developed, and in this sense, the new state that we are building is an *illiberal state, a non-liberal state*” (Orbán, 2014, emphasis added).

As this brief history indicates, Hungary’s political climate has shifted dramatically in the past decade. Hungary is not the only country to experience this shift and, indeed, the right-wing

populist shift has reverberated throughout Europe and the United States (Fukuyama, 2018; Mudde, 2016). Many social and political scientists have attempted to answer the question of *why* this shift is occurring (Hochschild, 2018). French philosopher Etienne Balibar, for example, cites certain failures of the European Union. The idea for the EU came to being following World War II, whereby the institution was understood to serve as a political and economic union that would prevent future warfare. However, unification has not benefitted all member nations equally, and, as a result,

identity feelings which, traditionally, were mutually hostile and incompatible, tend to merge into a common hatred of the Other, the construction of a ‘public enemy’ of all European peoples, whose specter amalgamates all sorts of ethnic, cultural, religious differences inherited from colonization and imported through immigration—with now an added component: the “refugee problem” ... (Balibar, 2017).

In other words, when the historic enemy is, by the power of the Union, now deemed a friend, hatred and fear are directed outward leading to a political vacuum a populist leader can fill. While this explanation is appealing and useful for our analysis, it is not our intention to delve further into the question of why this political shift is occurring. Rather, in this article, we focus specifically on the manner in which NGOs in Hungary—once considered the heralds of democracy—have increasingly come to be seen as enemies of the state despite no inherent change in their daily functioning.

Recounting the “Refugee Crisis” of 2015

Throughout the summer of 2015, international audiences saw the images of Budapest train stations seemingly overflowing with migrants. Upon entering the country and making their asylum claims, these would-be refugees were assigned to a refugee camp and given a train ticket to travel to an assigned camp. Most would then attempt to use that ticket or purchase a new one for passage to another Western European country, most notably Germany. Migrants thereby found themselves barred from travel and thus were immobilized in Hungary. In their recount of the summer’s activities, Kallius, Monterescu, and Rajaram (2016) point out the irony:

Many of the people immobilized at Keleti [train station] had likely made it past Syrian or Turkish border guards known to have shot migrants, across the treacherous Mediterranean to the Greek island of Kos, whose police were reportedly casually violent, and then through a gauntlet of tear gas and stun grenades in Macedonia to finally confront the Hungarian state’s stunningly indifferent bureaucracy (which later turned violent). Now, in a Schengen Area member state and with their destination in sight, the migrants were not going to give up. “Let us go! Let us go! Let us go! Freedom! Germany!” the migrants shouted in English, holding up the international train tickets they had bought (2016:25).

As one volunteer, Dori, explains, this situation of immobility came later in the summer. When she first began volunteering, part of her role was to accompany asylum seekers to and from the station to the immigration office. Upon claiming asylum and while their case was being investigated, migrants were given a piece of paper that would allow them free train travel within a certain time period. This paper would allow them to get to the refugee camp or welcome center to which they were assigned. However,

after a week it turns out that the camps are not really capable of taking them which was, I mean it was the case like ten years before but there was a huge amount of people in there now and it spread quickly so after a few weeks they knew that Western Europe was an option, but they can't sign up. And even those who went to the camps decided to come back to the city" (personal communication, March 2016).

As Dori explains, the few refugee camps that existed in Hungary were quickly overrun and the system overtaxed. Those awaiting refugee status in Hungary could not find a place for themselves in the camps and returned to the train stations to seek passage to Western Europe. Very quickly, staying in Hungary was seen as a viable option by neither migrant nor volunteer. Getting on a train bound for Western Europe, however, was a more difficult matter. The papers migrants received did not allow for international travel, they were sometimes barred from buying tickets, and, in some instances, the train stopped.

Kallius, Montereau, and Rajaram's (2016) ethnography captures the tensions and chaos of the time as well as the humanitarian spirit that was also incited. Hungarian citizens in the cities of Budapest and Szeged (and, to a lesser extent, Pécs) came out in droves to respond to the needs of those asylum seekers coming in through the southern border (Szeged). Migrants crowded into train stations waiting for word that they would be able to move on or camped out in parks near train stations biding their time. The lead author interviewed a number of volunteers who had responded to the crisis. Some brought food, clothing, and shoes to the train stations and parks. Others organized Facebook groups to keep fellow concerned citizen apprised of the situation. Still others formed grassroots organizations to donate items and advocate for the right of asylum seekers who waited in limbo in Hungary. It was a time of heightened civic activity, and volunteers remember it as a time of relative peace—somewhat ironically, given the state-sponsored anti-migrant campaign, couched in a rhetoric of fear, that would soon come to dominate public discourse (which was, in reality, government-created propaganda).

When asked of any negative encounters with hate groups or police, Dori could not remember any. She recalled one time when she was warned of an extreme right-wing demonstration, but she could not confirm that a protest had occurred. She also could not recall any tense or negative interactions with police officers, but attributed this to the fact that "there weren't any incidents when the police had to do anything." The asylum seekers, she claimed, were always respectful and patient "which for me is amazing even though they were humiliated and deprived and all this hatred—when we walked or took public transportation with them, they were always always so patient" (personal communication, March 2016).

Sophie, another volunteer, had a similar experience. She was at the train stations daily and even took her children with her. In all of her stories, she did not recount any instances of violence or hatred from migrants, protestors, or police, and did not express any fear on her part. For example, she relates the story of one man who was apparently experiencing a mental break. He was getting agitated and

so we had to call the police. The [volunteers] had to call the police and they really helped. They took the guy aside to kind of see if he had been drinking or was he unstable and slowly, very quietly escorted him to—I don't know where, but they were kind to him. Apparently, he'd been there for weeks. He hadn't moved on with everyone else on the train....Anyway, I just wanted to share because of the police. For letting all this happen and reacting so well (personal communication, March 2016).

Another volunteer, for example, tells of an encounter with Hungarian anti-migrant protesters. As she recounts, the protestors were able to see that the migrants needed help and ended the meeting with a friendly “good luck.” In short, though chaotic, the situation in the train stations in the summer of 2015 was far from a “crisis.”

The volunteers, however, did face the problem that months prior, the government had taken a strong unequivocal anti-migrant stance. In January 2015, Fidesz was losing support and had a low approval rating. The leadership had been trying various strategies to increase approval. At about this time, the Charlie Hebdo attacks occurred in Paris. Although a conclusive link cannot be made, it appears as if these attacks inspired Orbán to use fear of migration as a strategy for garnering support by making a statement warning against economic migrants. Following this, in April and May 2015, the government initiated a national push-polling survey. The survey consisted of very biased questions constructed to “prove” the populace was concerned about migration. One question, for example, asked “Did you know that economic migrants cross the Hungarian border illegally, and that recently the number of immigrants in Hungary has increased twentyfold?”³ The flawed results of this survey were used to justify a nationwide anti-migrant billboard campaign. Blue billboards with white block letters scattered the countryside, ostensibly sending messages to migrants that they should stay away, not take Hungarians’ jobs, or, if they come, follow Hungarian law. As the messages were written in Hungarian, however, it was clear that the intention was not to send a message to those trying to come into the country, but rather to incite fear of an Other among Hungarian nationals (Timmer, 2017b).

What is particularly interesting about the survey and the resultant billboard campaign is that the migrants in question were not from Syria or Afghanistan. As one media scholar in Hungary explained:

It’s quite obvious that if you look at it thoroughly they were aiming at a different group of migrants ... at the time, the main source of immigration was Kosovo and the Balkans and some Albanians and this whole campaign because they did not come because of actual fear for their lives but for a better life. And so this campaign did not actually fit the type of crisis that happened and they had to change the narrative a little bit (March 2016, personal communication).

One of the ways in which Fidesz changed the narrative was to frame asylum seekers—those with a legitimate claim to seek refuge—as economic migrants. The difference is important. An asylum seeker must make their claim in the country in which they gain asylum, and they are *required* to cross a geopolitical border to ensure their legitimacy, whereas economic migrants must make their claims through different channels and therefore are committing an illegal act if they cross a border. To be clear, during the summer of 2015, there were a mix of migrants. Syrians, Afghanis, Iraqis, and Kurds came to Europe fleeing the violence of the aftermath of the Arab Spring rebellions and civil wars, but other migrants arriving better fit the definition of economic migrant. Nevertheless, most came with stories of fear and violence and sought safety. By recasting asylum seekers as migrants, Fidesz sought to paint the actions of *all* border crossers as illegal and punishable, thus rendering all who sought refuge as criminals.

The process of turning an asylum seeker into an economic migrant is largely rhetorical. Governmental officials have removed the word refugee (*menekült*) in favor of migrant (*bevándorló*, *emigráns*, or *migráns*) from official communication. However, in practice, they have also put into place measures that deter or even criminalize asylum seekers. As an EU member country, Hungary has to adhere to established asylum procedures (via the Common European Asylum System) as follows: Asylum seekers make their claim at the border where they

are then to be interviewed. While the decision is being made by the immigration authorities, the claimant must be given a safe place to stay. The decision-making process should take a couple months, at the end of which the claimant will either receive refugee status, subsidiary protection (ability to live, work, and be educated in Hungary but unable to bring over their family), humanitarian protection (one year status), or a negative decision. Hungary has not abandoned the asylum process but has put into place certain policies and practices that make a negative decision much more likely. Most notably, they declared Serbia a “safe country.” As such, asylum seekers entering from Serbia (i.e., most of them) are sent back on the basis that they cannot provide evidence that they have fled a dangerous country to which they cannot return. As such, most refugee claims are denied, which is then presented as further evidence that economic migrants, not refugees, are flooding the borders.

The result of this procedural and rhetorical campaign was a rapid and definitive push towards border security. The government mandated the construction of a fence which began in July 2015. In September of that same year, the fence was closed at the Hungarian-Serbian border. In October, the fence was closed at the Hungarian-Croatian border. Before the closing of the border fence, volunteers continued to provide refugees in the train station with food, clothing, tents, charging stations, and Wi-Fi access. Meanwhile, the government’s position on the criminal status of migrants extended from migrants themselves to humanitarian volunteers. As the spokesperson of the government explained:

Is it an act of volunteerism or help or is it contributing to the self-treating mechanism that’s actually desired by the government, by the agencies, authorities trying to cope with this? If you give free Wi-Fi at Keleti train station, everybody is going to go there.... it’s against the law” (personal communication, June 2016).

To be clear, no volunteer was ever arrested or under threat of arrest, but the government treated the migrants as criminals, and thus helping them was ultimately deemed a criminal act.

Hungary continues to accept refugees. Last year, almost 1,300 refugees were accepted, representing approximately one-third of total applicants: 580 from Afghanistan, 385 from Syria, and 190 Iraqis. According to government propaganda, however, the closed border and strong anti-migrant policies and sentiment have been successful in keeping outsiders out. Thus, the government has a strong vested interest in keeping actual immigrants and refugees invisible while maintaining their hyper-visibility through the created fear of the “migrant threat.” Migrants have been effectively barred from entering the country, have received the message not to enter the country, have passed on to other more desirable locations, or are quietly going about their lives in Budapest. Thus, in real terms, migration is no longer a “problem.” This fact has not stopped it from being a top agenda item for the governing party. According to a Hungarian analyst, “As long as migration is top of the agenda their [Fidesz] popularity goes up. They have to keep up the momentum” (Howden, 2016). Fear of migrants was the primary platform item for Fidesz in the recent election. In a campaign speech, for example, Orbán proclaimed

[an unidentified] they want to take our country away from us. Not with one stroke of a pen as 100 years ago in Trianon⁴ but within a few decades. We will be forced to give up the country to strangers who don’t honor our laws and our culture. What they want is that from now on not we and our descendants live here, but others.”

As discussed previously, this tactic appears to have worked. However, in the absence of visible outsiders, the government must create a new enemy. This new enemy has become the nongovernmental and humanitarian organizations who either provide direct aid to refugees and migrants or are by their nature empathetic to the plight of migrants. The framing of humanitarian

aid as an inherently criminal act has continued within the country as a strategy to further xenophobic policies and to bolster support of the ruling party and its leader. Thus, in the absence of migrants, humanitarian organizations who offer aid to migrants transform into their stand-ins and become the unwitting target of fear and ire.

Lex NGO and the “Stop Soros” Plan

Like the original anti-migrant campaign, the crusade against civil and nongovernmental organizations began with a speech by Orbán. In his 2016 State of the Union address⁵, he stressed that his main task in 2017 was to defend Hungary from five major attacks including: 1) Brussels’ plan to make Hungary roll back its public utility fees cut scheme, 2) migration, 3) “the increased activities of international organizations,” 4) efforts to keep tax regulation, and 5) implementation of job creation. To address the second and third points, the government rolled out a national consultation on NGOs (similar to the consultation on migrants described above), launched a billboard campaign maligning Soros and any organizations related to Soros through funding and/or mission, and proposed new legislation. In June of 2016, Hungary passed the “Law on transparency of organizations funded from abroad” (also known as Lex NGO) with overwhelming support from the parliament. According to this law, civil sector organizations receiving more than 27,000 EUR in funding from foreign sources are required to register themselves as “civic organizations funded from abroad” and put this label on all publications. The stated purpose of this legislation is to protect the nation against financial corruption and international terrorism. However, opponents have pointed out that under policies enacted in 2011, nongovernmental organizations are already required to identify funding sources and submit to auditing.

Thus, Lex NGO creates additional administrative barriers to organizations that could be detrimental to their overall functioning. This legislation is reminiscent of Russia’s foreign agent law which has resulted (directly or indirectly) in the closure of 30 organizations since its passage in 2012. As Amnesty International (2017) stated, “In reality, the impact of the law will be the targeting of NGOs that carry out functions such as promoting the rule of law, protection of the rights of refugees, migrants, and other marginalized groups, and providing social and legal services not sufficiently offered by the state.” As such, they claim that the “foreign” label is an effort on the part of the Hungarian government to “discredit their work and turn the people against them” (Amnesty International, 2017).

In January 2018, those organizations seeking to provide aid to migrants and refugees were presented with additional regulatory restrictions when the bill dubbed the “Stop Soros” law was proposed that would require organizations deemed to be assisting “illegal migrants” to also re-register and pay a tax on foreign funding. Supporters of this law argue that it is necessary because of clear (undocumented) instances of (unnamed) aid workers helping migrants cross the border. Since his recent victory in the April 2018 election, Orbán has reasserted his goal to purge Hungary of “large predators like George Soros and his organizations” who are attempting to “influence Hungarian politics, in secret with foreign money” (Spike, 2017).

Media coverage of a recent European Court of Justice (ECJ) case brought forward by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, a NGO that is affected by the legislation discussed above, is illustrative of the current sentiment towards NGOs in the country. In April 2016, a Nigerian man seeking asylum on the basis of sexual identity was subjected to a series of psychological tests and on the basis of the results from these tests, his claim was denied. The Helsinki Committee

objected to the use of psychological tests and ECJ ruled in their favor claiming that “an asylum seeker may not be subjected to a psychological test in order to determine his sexual orientation” because “the performance of such tests amounts to a disproportionate interference in the private life of an asylum seeker.” Coverage of the court ruling in government-sponsored media outlets gave the members of the Helsinki Committee the moniker “human rights fundamentalists,” mischaracterized their actions as aiding all asylum seekers regardless of the veracity of their claim, and justified the need of the Stop Soros action plan because “to defend against the activities of the Soros organization and to counter migration pressure further changes in the law will presumably be necessary.”⁶ In short, it is a difficult moment to be a humanitarian in Hungary.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the manner in which Soros has come to be the scapegoat for Hungary⁷, but the intention is clear. Soros is a symbol of the principles of an open society—one that supports relatively open borders and prioritizes global interests over national ones. Thus, in attacking what Soros symbolizes, the legislation clearly targets those organizations who aid the “undesirables” of society such as the poor, the Roma ethnic minority, and, most notably, migrants. As mentioned above, even prior to the “crisis” of 2015, the Hungarian government had done significant political and rhetorical work to cast asylum seekers as economic, and in many cases illegal, migrants. This allows them to skirt the European Union regulations that require countries to hear asylum cases. Under their current functional policies, there are few to no asylum seekers to Hungary, but migration remains cast as a problem, and even more so following the April 2018 elections. Moreover, again, official government communication and state-sponsored media outlets routinely conflate migration and illegal migration. For example, in reference to the new legislation, government spokesperson Zoltán Kovacs, stated that NGOs “which deal with *illegal migration or the issue of migration* will follow the law and indicate to authorities ... that they are doing this activity” (Gorondi, 2018a, emphasis added).

The legislation discussed here is just one of many recent measures undertaken by the current government in Hungary under the logic of protecting the nation-state from an influx of illegal migrants, which in fact serves to create paranoia and fear by demonizing asylum-seekers. The Hungarian Helsinki Committee identifies five “lethal blows” to the civil sector: 1) the laws will diminish funding for essential services, 2) trust in the civil society and willingness to seek assistance will decline, 3) sanctions and taxes required under the law will divert resources away from NGOs, 4) NGOs will be silenced, and 5) the law could serve as a model to thwart civil sector activity in other nations. Arguably, the primary goal of the legislation is the fourth point above.

To counter these threats to humanitarian work, the Helsinki Committee, the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, and 12 other organizations are launching a challenge against Lex NGO. These organizations previously lodged a complaint with the Hungarian Constitutional Court that has not been heard, and therefore they have now brought their case to the European Court of Human Rights. They claim that the law violates NGOs’ freedom of association and expression, unnecessarily and disproportionately discriminates against NGOs that receive foreign funding and therefore discourages donations, and that the “act is not fit for its alleged purpose, as it contributes neither to the transparency of NGOs nor to fighting money laundering; these issues are covered by other, more suitable national laws” (helsinki.hu)⁸.

The future is, of course, unclear. Currently, civil organizations remain active and employees and volunteers continue to work and advocate, but the nature of the work has shifted.

Some aid workers have abandoned their work while others have remained active, while shifting their focus to helping vulnerable populations within Hungary or engaging in more active political advocacy. A few brief vignettes from some volunteers in Hungary illustrate these outcomes. The four humanitarians profiled below provided aid in the train stations and were involved with grassroots organizations that either emerged in response to the crisis or existed prior to 2015 but were mobilized during the summer.

Ágnes and Csilla were both involved in updating a Facebook group and coordinating volunteer efforts. Ágnes even traversed parts of the Balkan route so she could better help the asylum seekers and inform other volunteers. She continued to advocate for refugees by keeping an active Facebook group in which she posted relevant news stories to alert others to the plight of refugees. She drew attention to the violence they faced in their home countries in an attempt to cultivate sympathy. She advocated for helping asylum seekers leave Hungary. In a 2016 interview, she spoke of the oppressiveness of her country:

We are not success based, we are not joy based, we are not happiness based—no, we are fear based. Anyone asks you, “Don’t you fear? Are you not afraid?” The people are afraid of unspecified stuff. Like, you know they are always looking to cover themselves because they are always afraid—because of the secret police, because of the boss, because of the teachers, because you can be harmed. All the feelings we are getting from government are you can be harmed by anybody” (personal communication, June 2016).

She cited this fear as an explanation for why Hungarians were not willing to do more to help.

Like Ágnes, Csilla coordinated volunteers online and also kept an active Facebook page to inform volunteers and those who wanted to help where the need was. Csilla spoke of late nights spent reading news stories, updating routes of refugees, and making sure supplies and volunteers got to where they were needed. She explained that as a mother of two small children, she did not feel comfortable going to the train stations with them and therefore found this work as a way to be involved and do something. Both Ágnes and Csilla have since abandoned much of their work, though their activist spirits remain strong, and they have moved from Hungary. As mothers, both thought that other locations offered better futures for their children.

Other humanitarian volunteers, on the other hand, have become more involved. Annuska and Juli, for example, were both involved in grassroots organizations providing advocacy and aid for migrants. Annuska quit her corporate job to go to graduate school and is now employed full time with an aid/advocacy organization. Juli completed her undergraduate degree and is now also pursuing graduate school with the goal of making a career in advocacy and policy reform. As Juli explained, for example,

I mean it sounds a bit like a cliché but people really reach everything if you are working very hard, like extremely hard. Also, it just gave back my faith in the Hungarian society kind of. So it gave back my faith, but I also lost it with the others. It was nice, I am studying Political Science so it was just seeing politics in action. I think it was the biggest lesson (personal communication, March 2016).

Both Annuska and Juli have turned their activism into careers. Neither has any intention of giving up their work and neither want to leave Hungary. Generally speaking, the crisis incited people to become involved. When it ended, many went back to their daily lives unchanged, while others felt compelled to continue their work. The latter group represents the presumed threat to national security.

When Orbán reifies nongovernmental workers and entities as enemies of the state, one of two things are bound to occur—they will either die or they will be emboldened. Open Hearts, for

example, has at this point taken the latter option. They have strengthened their efforts and redefined themselves in opposition to the state. However, many individuals have admitted defeat and have abandoned their activism.

The attack on civil society is neither new nor unique to Hungary (Golan & Orr, 2012). However, the transparency with which this assault has been launched and its increasing ubiquity in heretofore democratic nations presumably dependent on a robust civil sphere of activity is deeply troubling and should be seen as a disturbing sign of the times. Nongovernmental organizations that promise a move towards a more vibrant, full, and participatory democracy by offering legitimate assistance for populations left behind by the state (“the vulnerable”) may become targets in political climates where elites are making bids at power by explicitly seeking to refashion the state in an exclusionary, “illiberal” manner. In this regard, NGOs may serve as “canaries in the coal mine,” as the civil sector may be the first sector of society to be attacked or experience a downturn when liberal democratic institutions are in flux. A scrutiny of the current situation in Hungary requires researchers to challenge the heretofore accepted straight-line trajectory of development to a democratic state and democracy as the end-all, be-all, “end of history.” In a sense, what we provide here is a cautionary tale. The civil sector is not the panacea for societal ills. Rather, it is exceedingly susceptible to attacks from increasingly “illiberal” states. Shifts such as these have obvious consequences, not only for citizens, but all for those who fall outside of the net of citizenship (“Others”), as well as those who dedicate their efforts towards serving those Others.

Notes

¹ All names of people are pseudonyms. Pseudonyms are also used for smaller organizations (such as Open Hearts) but not for larger, international organizations which are generally well known.

² The lead author has been working in Hungary for several years, but the data used for this article was collected over the course of one informal and three formal research visits conducted between June 2015-March 2017 for a total of five weeks of ethnographic data collection.

³ The full text of the survey can be found at:

www.kormany.hu/download/9/a3/50000/Nemzetikonkonzultacio_mmkorrel.docx.

⁴ The Treaty of Trianon in 1920 reduced the landmass and population of Hungary by about two-thirds.

⁵ Full text of the speech can be found on the government’s website (<http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-state-of-the-nation-address>).

⁶ A summary of the media response to this court case can be found at the English language blog “Hungarian Spectrum” (<http://hungarianspectrum.org/tag/stop-soros-bills/>).

⁷ Soros was also the subject of a billboard campaign obviously meant to arouse fear and suspicion of him or anyone who is linked to him (Gall, 2017).

⁸ The full text of the claim can be found at

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1HhLHEeJd2UJHOs_OWbak_DmNmQxO0cq/v.

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