

The Impact of Hungarian Anti-Immigrant Policies on the Decline of Refugee Inflows 2015–2020

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ABSTRACT

The 2015 European refugee crisis created significant political, economic, and social challenges for European Union member states, prompting Hungary to adopt restrictive anti-immigrant policies to control refugee inflows. While previous studies have examined Hungary's anti-immigrant discourse and the broader refugee crisis, limited attention has been given to the effectiveness of these policies in reducing refugee arrivals through an integrated perspective of securitization, populism, and public policy. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the impact of Hungary's anti-immigrant policies on the reduction of the refugee crisis between 2015 and 2020. This research employed a qualitative descriptive design using a library research approach. Secondary data were collected from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, official reports, and relevant online publications and analyzed through qualitative descriptive analysis. The findings indicate that stricter asylum regulations, reinforced border security, and anti-immigrant political campaigns significantly reduced refugee inflows while strengthening public support for the government's security-oriented migration policies. The study concludes that Hungary's anti-immigrant policies effectively reduced refugee arrivals by combining restrictive migration governance with securitization strategies. These findings contribute to migration governance literature by demonstrating how security narratives and populist politics shape immigration policy outcomes and provide practical insights for policymakers facing large-scale migration crises.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Migration has become one of the most enduring and complex issues in international relations, attracting continuous attention from scholars and policymakers due to its multidimensional implications for humanitarian affairs, economic development, political stability, and national security [1], [2]. Rather than representing merely the movement of

people across borders, migration is widely recognized as an inevitable consequence of globalization that reshapes demographic structures, labor markets, and interstate relations. In many cases, migration is driven by individuals seeking protection from armed conflict, political persecution, economic deprivation, and humanitarian crises, leading them to relocate from developing or conflict-affected countries to more prosperous and stable destinations [3]. Consequently, migration has evolved into a global governance issue that requires governments to balance humanitarian responsibilities with domestic political, economic, and security interests.

Europe has long been one of the primary destinations for international migrants because of its advanced economies, political stability, and relatively comprehensive social welfare systems [4], [5]. However, the rapid increase in migration flows, particularly those originating from conflict-affected countries such as Syria, has generated contrasting responses among European Union member states [6], [7]. Some countries have regarded immigration as an opportunity to address demographic decline and labor shortages by expanding the productive workforce, thereby contributing to economic growth [8], [9]. In contrast, other countries have perceived large-scale migration as a potential threat to national security, social cohesion, and cultural identity, prompting the adoption of increasingly restrictive immigration policies [10]. These divergent policy responses demonstrate that migration extends beyond a humanitarian concern and has become a highly contested political issue shaped by each country's domestic priorities and strategic interests.

The dynamics of international migration can be understood through Lee's migration theory, which explains migration as the result of interactions between push and pull factors [11]. Push factors, including armed conflict, political instability, poverty, and insecurity, encourage individuals to leave their countries of origin, whereas pull factors, such as economic opportunities, safety, and higher living standards, attract migrants to destination countries [12]. Within the context of the European refugee crisis, prolonged conflicts in Syria and several Middle Eastern countries constituted major push factors, while Europe's political stability and humanitarian commitments functioned as powerful pull factors for refugees and asylum seekers [13]. As a consequence, European countries experienced an unprecedented increase in refugee arrivals, although their responses differed considerably. Countries such as Germany, Italy, and France adopted relatively open humanitarian policies and refugee protection programs [14], [15]. Nevertheless, before reaching these destination countries, many refugees travelled through transit states, particularly Hungary, which became one of the principal gateways for refugees attempting to enter Western Europe [16].

The sharp increase in refugee movements into Europe was closely associated with the political transformations triggered by the Arab Spring. Beginning in 2010, a series of uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa sought to challenge authoritarian regimes and reduce socioeconomic inequality [17], [18]. Although initially regarded as a movement toward democratization, these political transitions subsequently generated prolonged instability and armed conflicts, particularly in Syria, forcing millions of people to seek protection outside their countries of origin [19], [20]. As a consequence, Europe experienced an unprecedented increase in refugee arrivals. According to the Pew Research Center, the number of asylum seekers in Europe increased from fewer than 250,000 in 2010 to

approximately 1.3 million in 2015, making the European refugee crisis one of the largest humanitarian challenges in recent history [21].

The massive influx of refugees created substantial challenges for European countries in balancing humanitarian commitments with domestic political and economic interests. Increasing refugee admissions imposed significant financial pressures on host countries, compelling governments to allocate greater resources for refugee accommodation, social welfare, and integration programs [22], [23]. Consequently, several European countries reconsidered their migration policies. Sweden, for example, revised its open-door refugee policy because of growing fiscal constraints, while the European Council introduced financial assistance of 6,000 Euros for each relocated refugee to support member states in managing the crisis [24], [25]. These developments illustrate that the refugee crisis evolved beyond a humanitarian issue into a complex policy challenge involving economic sustainability, public security, and political stability.

Among the countries affected by the refugee crisis, Hungary occupied a particularly strategic position because of its location along the Western Balkan migration route. As one of the principal transit countries for refugees attempting to reach Western Europe, Hungary experienced a dramatic increase in asylum applications during the peak of the refugee crisis [26]. According to the Pew Research Center, Hungary received approximately 174,000 asylum applications in 2015, accounting for around 13% of all asylum applications submitted across Europe [21]. Most applicants originated from Syria, with approximately one-third of refugees entering Hungary being Syrian nationals [27]. The number of Syrian refugees increased dramatically from around 6,000 in 2014 to approximately 64,000 in 2015, highlighting the unprecedented migration pressure experienced by Hungary [21], [28].

Faced with this situation, the Hungarian government increasingly framed large-scale migration as a threat to national sovereignty, economic stability, and public security. From the perspective of realism, states prioritize national interests and security when responding to external challenges [29]. This perspective was reflected in Hungary's decision to adopt stricter anti-immigrant policies aimed at controlling refugee inflows [30]. Hungary's domestic economic conditions further strengthened this policy orientation. Following the global financial crisis of 2008, the country's economic growth fluctuated considerably before slowing again in 2015 [31]. Under these circumstances, the arrival of large numbers of refugees was widely perceived as imposing additional fiscal burdens because the government was required to allocate substantial resources for refugee reception and assistance [32]. Consequently, Hungary's restrictive migration policy became a politically significant response to the refugee crisis and provides an important case for examining how national governments balance humanitarian obligations with security and economic considerations.

Previous studies have examined the European refugee crisis from various perspectives, demonstrating that migration is a multidimensional issue involving economic, political, social, and security considerations. A number of studies have focused on the economic consequences of refugee inflows, arguing that large-scale migration places considerable pressure on public expenditure, social welfare systems, and labor market integration in host countries [22], [23]. Other studies have highlighted the role of migration

governance by explaining how European governments adopted different policy responses to the refugee crisis according to their domestic political priorities and economic capacities [24], [25]. These findings suggest that refugee management is influenced not only by humanitarian considerations but also by national political and economic interests.

Another stream of research has concentrated on Hungary's restrictive migration policies and the political narratives surrounding immigration. Studies have shown that the Hungarian government increasingly framed refugees as threats to national sovereignty, public security, and economic stability, thereby legitimizing restrictive immigration policies through securitization strategies [30]. Other scholars have emphasized the influence of political leadership and anti-immigrant discourse, demonstrating that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán successfully mobilized public support by portraying refugees, particularly Muslim immigrants, as threats to Hungary's Christian identity and national values [30]. In addition, studies grounded in xenophobia have revealed that historical experiences, anti-Muslim sentiment, and public prejudice significantly contributed to public acceptance of anti-immigrant policies in Hungary [33], [34], [35], [36], [37]. Furthermore, studies on populism have argued that the Orbán government strategically divided society into "the people" and "the outsiders" to strengthen domestic political legitimacy through anti-immigrant rhetoric (Metawe, 2024).

Despite these valuable contributions, the existing literature has primarily examined the refugee crisis from separate perspectives, including economic impacts, migration governance, xenophobia, populist discourse, or securitization. Limited attention has been devoted to explaining how these dimensions collectively shaped Hungary's anti-immigrant policies and contributed to the decline in refugee inflows during the 2015–2020 period. Moreover, previous studies have generally emphasized the causes of restrictive migration policies or public attitudes toward refugees rather than evaluating the extent to which these policies effectively reduced refugee arrivals. As a result, empirical evidence integrating migration theory, securitization theory, realism, and populism into a comprehensive explanation of Hungary's migration governance remains limited.

This study addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive analysis of Hungary's anti-immigrant policies between 2015 and 2020 through the integration of migration theory, securitization theory, realism, and populism. Unlike previous studies that examined these perspectives independently, this research investigates how security narratives, political interests, and restrictive immigration policies interacted to reduce refugee inflows while reinforcing domestic political legitimacy. By combining these complementary theoretical perspectives within a single analytical framework, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of Hungary's migration governance during the European refugee crisis.

Based on the identified research gaps, this study aims to analyze the impact of Hungary's anti-immigrant policies on the reduction of the refugee crisis during the period 2015–2020. Specifically, this research examines how the Hungarian government employed restrictive migration policies, securitization strategies, and populist political narratives to manage refugee inflows while addressing concerns related to national security, economic stability, and cultural identity. By integrating migration theory, securitization theory,

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realism, and populism, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive explanation of the policy mechanisms underlying Hungary's response to the European refugee crisis.

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This study contributes to the existing literature in several ways. Theoretically, it enriches the scholarship on migration governance by integrating four complementary theoretical perspectives to explain the formulation and implementation of anti-immigrant policies in Hungary. Unlike previous studies that have primarily examined migration from a single perspective, this research demonstrates how migration dynamics, security narratives, political interests, and populist discourse interact in shaping restrictive immigration policies. Empirically, the study provides evidence on the effectiveness of Hungary's anti-immigrant policies in reducing refugee inflows during the 2015–2020 period, thereby extending current discussions on migration governance in Europe. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for policymakers by illustrating how governments respond to large-scale refugee movements while balancing humanitarian obligations with national security and domestic political priorities. Consequently, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between migration governance, state security, and political decision-making during international refugee crises.

⁸ 2. METHOD

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This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design using a library research approach. A qualitative descriptive design was selected because it enables an in-depth interpretation of social and political phenomena based on documentary evidence rather than numerical measurement [38], [39]. The study focuses on examining the impact of Hungary's anti-immigrant policies on refugee inflows during the 2015–2020 period by analyzing policy documents, scholarly literature, and other relevant secondary sources. The unit of analysis in this research is Hungary's anti-immigrant policy implemented in response to the European refugee crisis between 2015 and 2020. This period was selected because it represents the peak of the refugee crisis and the implementation of major restrictive immigration policies introduced by the Hungarian government. The study specifically examines policy measures, political discourse, and migration trends to understand how these policies influenced refugee inflows and migration governance.

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The study relied exclusively on secondary data collected through a systematic literature review. The data sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, government publications, reports from international organizations, policy documents, and credible online sources relevant to migration governance and the European refugee crisis [40]. Documents were selected based on three inclusion criteria: (1) relevance to Hungary's migration policies or the European refugee crisis; (2) publication in credible academic or institutional sources; and (23) direct discussion of the 2015–2020 period. Sources that lacked academic credibility or were not directly related to the research objectives were excluded from the analysis.

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Data were collected through document analysis by systematically identifying, reviewing, and organizing relevant literature. The collected documents were subsequently classified according to major themes, including migration dynamics, anti-immigrant policies, securitization, populism, economic considerations, and refugee governance. To

enhance the credibility of the findings, data triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from multiple academic publications¹¹, official government documents, and reports issued by international organizations. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The analytical process consisted of four stages: data collection, data reduction, thematic categorization, and interpretation. During the interpretation stage, the findings were analyzed using migration theory, securitization theory, realism, and populism to explain the relationship between Hungary's anti-immigrant policies and the decline in refugee inflows. The integration of multiple theoretical perspectives enabled a comprehensive understanding of the political, security, and governance dimensions of Hungary's response to the European refugee crisis.

¹⁷ 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings derived from the analysis of government regulations, official reports, academic publications, and other relevant secondary sources concerning Hungary's anti-immigrant policies during the 2015–2020 refugee crisis. The findings are organized into four themes corresponding to the research objectives: (1) the development and implementation of Hungary's anti-immigrant policy, (2) its economic implications, (3) its social implications, and (4) its political implications. Together, these findings demonstrate how the Hungarian government implemented a series of restrictive immigration measures in response to the increasing refugee inflows during the European refugee crisis.

3.1 Development of Hungary's Anti-Immigrant Policy

The findings indicate that Hungary's anti-immigrant policy emerged as a direct response to the sharp increase in refugee arrivals during the European refugee crisis. The Hungarian government considered the growing number of refugees and asylum seekers to pose increasing challenges to national governance, leading to the adoption of more restrictive immigration measures [36]. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and the governing Fidesz Party, immigration became a central political issue, with the government openly expressing opposition to the continued arrival of refugees [41]. As refugee arrivals continued to increase, the Hungarian government initiated several legislative reforms aimed at strengthening immigration control. The amended refugee legislation authorized the government to determine which countries could be classified as safe third countries, thereby allowing asylum applications submitted by individuals arriving through these countries to be rejected more efficiently [42]. These legal amendments were intended to reduce the number of asylum applications processed in Hungary and to strengthen the government's authority over border management [43]. In addition, the Fidesz Party proposed further legislative measures designed to prevent economic migrants from using asylum regulations as a legal pathway for entering Hungary [44].

The findings also reveal that policy formulation was strongly influenced by domestic political discourse. Parliamentary debates emphasized concerns regarding illegal migration, public security, and the perceived misuse of asylum regulations. Several policymakers argued that individuals claiming refugee status could potentially threaten public order,

spread diseases, increase criminal activities, and exploit humanitarian protection mechanisms [45], [46]. These concerns became an important consideration in strengthening Hungary's immigration policies during the refugee crisis. Following the adoption of these legislative reforms, the Hungarian government implemented a broader anti-immigrant strategy that included stricter border controls, legal restrictions on asylum procedures, and stronger immigration enforcement. These measures formed the institutional basis of Hungary's migration governance throughout the refugee crisis and remained central to the country's immigration policy between 2015 and 2020 [47], [48].

3.2 Economic Findings

The document analysis indicates that economic considerations constituted one of the principal factors associated with Hungary's anti-immigrant policies. Prior to the refugee crisis, Hungary was still recovering from the economic downturn following the 2008 global financial crisis, during which economic growth declined substantially [49]. At the same time, Europe experienced a continuous increase in refugee arrivals, reaching its highest level in 2015 [50]. As one of the principal transit countries along the Western Balkan migration route, Hungary experienced increasing financial pressures associated with managing refugee inflows [41]. The increasing number of refugees required the Hungarian government to allocate additional public expenditure for humanitarian assistance, including temporary accommodation, food provision, healthcare services, and other forms of social support for asylum seekers [51]. According to OECD estimates, government expenditure increased by approximately 0.1% of GDP as a consequence of refugee-related spending during the crisis [32]. These additional expenditures occurred while Hungary was still pursuing economic recovery, thereby increasing concerns regarding fiscal sustainability. The findings further indicate that refugee inflows were perceived as having potential implications for the domestic labor market. The arrival of working-age migrants was considered capable of increasing labor market competition and placing additional pressure on employment opportunities for local citizens [52]. Consequently, economic considerations became one of the factors supporting the implementation of more restrictive immigration policies during the refugee crisis.

3.3 Social Findings

The analysis demonstrates that social concerns became another important dimension shaping Hungary's anti-immigrant policies. Most refugees entering Hungary during the refugee crisis originated from Syria and other Muslim-majority countries [53]. This demographic characteristic became closely associated with public debates regarding national identity, cultural integration, and social cohesion. The findings show that the Hungarian government consistently framed refugee arrivals as a challenge to Hungary's Christian identity and national security. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and the governing Fidesz Party publicly described the refugee influx not primarily as a humanitarian issue but as a threat to Hungary's cultural values and social order [54]. This political narrative was accompanied by increasing public concern regarding terrorism, illegal migration, and religious extremism, particularly following terrorist attacks that had occurred elsewhere in Europe [55], [56]. Documentary evidence also indicates that anti-immigrant campaigns contributed to

strengthening negative public perceptions toward refugees. Public discussions increasingly associated refugees with crime, terrorism, and social instability, thereby reinforcing public support for restrictive immigration policies [30]. Consequently, concerns regarding cultural identity, religion, and national cohesion became closely intertwined with Hungary's immigration governance during the refugee crisis.

3.4 Political Findings

The findings reveal that anti-immigrant policies also had significant political implications. Immigration became one of the dominant issues in Hungary's domestic political agenda under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. During successive elections, the governing Fidesz Party consistently emphasized migration as a major threat to national sovereignty and public security [57]. Available electoral evidence indicates that Fidesz maintained strong electoral support while promoting restrictive immigration policies. The party secured a parliamentary supermajority and continued to expand its voter base following the implementation of anti-immigrant measures. Political campaigns consistently highlighted migration control, border protection, and national sovereignty as central campaign issues [57]. The findings further demonstrate that migration became closely associated with Viktor Orbán's broader political vision of "Christian Liberty." Government discourse emphasized the protection of Hungary's Christian identity against both external challenges, particularly large-scale migration, and internal ideological pressures [58]. Throughout the 2015–2020 period, anti-immigrant policies therefore functioned not only as migration management instruments but also as central elements of Hungary's broader political strategy [48], [54].

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Hungary implemented a comprehensive anti-immigrant policy framework during the 2015–2020 refugee crisis. The documentary evidence shows that these policies combined legislative reforms, stricter border management, restrictive asylum procedures, and intensive political campaigns. The implementation of these measures was closely associated with economic considerations, concerns regarding social cohesion and national identity, and broader political objectives pursued by the Hungarian government. Collectively, these findings provide empirical evidence that Hungary's response to the refugee crisis extended beyond humanitarian management and incorporated economic, social, and political dimensions of migration governance.

3.5 Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Hungary's anti-immigrant policies between 2015 and 2020 represented a comprehensive government response to the unprecedented increase in refugee inflows during the European refugee crisis. The implementation of stricter asylum regulations, reinforced border controls, and anti-immigrant political campaigns indicates that Hungary's response extended beyond humanitarian management and became part of a broader migration governance strategy. Rather than addressing refugee movements solely through humanitarian considerations, the Hungarian government increasingly incorporated concerns related to national security,

economic stability, cultural identity, and domestic political interests into its policy decisions. These findings suggest that migration governance during the refugee crisis was shaped by the interaction of multiple political, economic, and social factors.

The present findings are consistent with previous studies reporting that European governments adopted different policy responses to the refugee crisis according to their domestic political priorities and institutional capacities [24], [25]. Similar to the findings of Juhász et al. [36] and Reményi et al. [30], this study confirms that Hungary implemented one of the most restrictive immigration policies within the European Union following the dramatic increase in refugee arrivals in 2015. Likewise, the findings support earlier research demonstrating that the Orbán administration strategically framed migration as a threat to national sovereignty, public security, and cultural identity in order to justify restrictive immigration policies [54], [59]. The present study also reinforces previous evidence indicating that anti-Muslim sentiment, historical experiences, and public prejudice contributed to public acceptance of anti-immigrant policies in Hungary [34], [35], [60]. However, unlike most previous studies that examined these issues separately, this research integrates economic, political, security, and social dimensions within a single analytical framework to provide a more comprehensive explanation of Hungary's migration governance during the refugee crisis.

The findings can be further explained through Lee's migration theory, which argues that the interaction of push factors and pull factors drives migration [11]. The prolonged conflicts in Syria and other parts of the Middle East acted as powerful push factors that forced individuals to leave their countries of origin. At the same time, Europe's economic stability, humanitarian protection, and relatively favorable living conditions served as important pull factors encouraging migration [12], [13]. Hungary's strategic location along the Western Balkan migration route further increased the intensity of refugee movements entering the country. Consequently, the rapid increase in refugee inflows encouraged the Hungarian government to introduce increasingly restrictive immigration policies in an effort to regulate migration and strengthen border management.

The results also provide strong empirical support for securitization theory proposed by Buzan and Wæver [61]. According to this theory, political elites may transform ordinary political issues into matters of national security through political discourse, thereby legitimizing extraordinary policy measures. The findings demonstrate that the Hungarian government consistently portrayed refugees as threats to public security, national sovereignty, economic stability, and cultural identity. Such narratives justified the implementation of stricter asylum legislation, reinforced border security, and more restrictive immigration policies [57], [62]. Therefore, migration was no longer addressed merely as a humanitarian issue but was reconstructed as a national security challenge requiring exceptional governmental intervention. From the perspective of realism, the findings indicate that Hungary's policy decisions reflected the state's priority to safeguard national interests and sovereignty when confronted with external challenges [29], [63], [64]. Although humanitarian obligations remained part of international refugee governance, the Hungarian government placed greater emphasis on maintaining domestic security, protecting economic resources, and preserving political stability. This finding illustrates how

realist assumptions remain highly relevant in explaining state behavior during international migration crises, particularly when governments perceive large-scale migration as a potential threat to national interests.

The findings further support the central propositions of populism theory. Throughout the refugee crisis, the Orbán government consistently distinguished between “the Hungarian people” and “foreign outsiders,” portraying refugees as threats to Christianity, national identity, and traditional Hungarian values [62], [65]. Such narratives not only strengthened public support for restrictive immigration policies but also reinforced the domestic political legitimacy of the governing Fidesz Party. Consequently, anti-immigrant policies functioned not only as instruments of migration management but also as effective political strategies for consolidating electoral support and strengthening the government’s political position. Taken together, these findings indicate that a single theoretical perspective cannot explain Hungary’s anti-immigrant policies. Instead, the refugee crisis represented a multidimensional phenomenon in which migration dynamics, security concerns, economic considerations, and domestic political interests interacted simultaneously [35], [63]. The integration of migration theory, securitization theory, realism, and populism therefore provides a more comprehensive explanation of why Hungary adopted restrictive immigration policies and how these policies contributed to reducing refugee inflows during the 2015–2020 period.

This study makes several important contributions to the literature on migration governance and international relations. Theoretically, it demonstrates that understanding restrictive immigration policies requires integrating multiple theoretical perspectives rather than relying on a single explanatory framework. Empirically, it provides comprehensive evidence regarding the relationship between anti-immigrant policies and changes in refugee inflows in Hungary during the peak of the European refugee crisis. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for policymakers by illustrating how governments balance humanitarian obligations with concerns related to national security, economic stability, and domestic political interests when responding to large-scale migration. Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. The analysis relies exclusively on secondary data obtained from academic publications, official reports, policy documents, and other documentary sources without incorporating primary evidence from policymakers, refugees, or local communities. In addition, the analysis is limited to the Hungarian case during the 2015–2020 period, and therefore the findings should be interpreted within this specific political and historical context. Future research could employ comparative case studies involving several European countries or utilize interviews with policymakers and refugees to provide a more comprehensive understanding of migration governance and the long-term consequences of restrictive immigration policies.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of Hungary’s anti-immigrant policies on reducing refugee inflows during the European refugee crisis between 2015 and 2020. The findings indicate that Hungary implemented restrictive immigration measures, including stricter asylum regulations, reinforced border controls, and political campaigns emphasizing

national security and cultural identity. These policies contributed to reducing refugee inflows while reflecting broader concerns related to economic stability, social cohesion, and domestic political interests. The study contributes to the migration governance literature by integrating migration theory, securitization theory, realism, and populism to explain Hungary's policy response from a multidimensional perspective. The findings also provide policy insights by highlighting the need to balance national security concerns with humanitarian responsibilities in responding to large-scale migration. However, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and its focus on the Hungarian case. Future research should employ comparative studies across different countries and incorporate primary data to provide a broader understanding of the long-term impacts of restrictive immigration policies.

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