

Introduction

From a methodological point of view the birth and death of a regime (institution, tradition) can be considered as a “natural experiment”, i.e. a situation when the independent variable is not artificially manipulated, rather but occurs naturally, so that these alterations can be used to monitor its effect upon the dependent variable.¹ Such a natural experiment occurred in Hungary when a Hungarian refugee system was created from nothing in 1988.

Due to historical causes Hungary in the late 1980’s was an introverted and homogenous world having borders difficult to pass, taboos restricting talk about ethnic and Diaspora issues, and a single party system ruled by “soft methods” that (we now know) was about to collapse.

It was this context into which “refugees” came in 1988 – unexpectedly and in a concealed manner. The use of inverted commas is part of the essence of the story for two reasons. First, neither politicians, academics and journalists – nor even the migrants themselves – knew how to describe their exact legal and political status. Second, for better or worse, within a period of weeks, this had become the generally accepted term used to describe them.

Partly due to this “mild crisis”, partly due to the unusual political environment, and last but not least partly due to the activity of some unusual persons, for some months “everything was possible”, *contra legem* and *contra* formal ideological frames.² From the refugee system’s point of view this enthusiasm, the ruling Party’s experiment for a new

¹ List, John A. *Field Experiments: A Bridge Between Lab and Naturally Occurring Data*. 2007 www.nber.org/papers/w12992

² Sik, Endre: Innocence lost – Hungarian Refugee Policy between 1988 and 2004. In: Kósa, Magda – Pető, Andrea (eds.) *Balance Sheet*. Napvilág – Táncsics, Budapest, 2007. 259–271.

identity, and the lack of a crystallised bureaucratic system led to all elements of a natural experiment being in place.

This was the “era of innocence”³ when Hungarians could hardly have been xenophobic and when many offered assistance to the “refugees” because they felt sorry for them and/or were inspired by patriotic feelings or to desire to do something against communism. Public officials showed a human face, the border guards (when they were not busy deporting people) acted as social workers, the Hungarian parliament voted for a special Fund to assist migrants, the Party headquarters (when not directing the secret police) tried to channel these “popular initiatives” towards new forms of ruling.⁴ The churches undertook organisational work and assistance spanning the borders; the county governments joined forces with the local branches of the Red Cross to direct charity and voluntary work and to divide up central government funds⁵; newly-formed and more established “alternative” organisations distributed gift parcels, administered official affairs, lobbied, and used their personal contacts to offer support⁶.

Sociologists were given a unique opportunity to go “instant research”⁷ politically inclined persons could act “freely”, and legal experts could devise completely new frames. The results were several fresh analyses of the situation and those involved in it (migrants, organisations, legal instruments). What these analyses could not cover were the invisible (hidden, secret) aspects of this process, for instance, i.e. the role of the international community and secret services. This selection of papers is the first attempt to outline these processes.

This new and extended research was possible not only from support of the European Commission (6th Framework Research Programme,

³ Sik, Endre – Tóth, Judit: Loss of Innocence – The Sociohistorical aspects of the Hungarian Refugee Policy. *Migration*, 1991/11–12: 119–132.

⁴ Sik, Endre: Transylvanian Refugees in Hungary and the Emergence of Policy Networks to Cope with Crisis. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol.5, 1992/1: 25–39.

⁵ Sik, Endre – Tóth, Judit: Governmental and Non-governmental Refugee Policy in Hungary. In: Adelman – Sik – Tessenyi (eds.) *The Genesis of a Domestic Regime: The Case of Hungary*. Toronto, York Lane Press, 1994. 65–72.

⁶ Francia, Gyula: A Menedék – Migránsokat Segítő Egyesület és a magyarországi menekültügy bizonytalanságai. ELTE PPK, 2004 szakdolgozat (thesis)

⁷ Sik, Endre – Tarjányi, József – Závecz, Tibor: Aus Rumänien nach Ungarn: Die Siebenbürgen-Flüchtlinge 1987–1989. *Journal für Sozialforschung*, Vol.30, 1990/1: 81–116.

Challenge project, 2004–2009) but also from the disclosure of archives and documents of the Party, secret services and ministries. Although this limited publicity protects confidential files and numerous eyewitnesses, actors of refugee story and administrations are nevertheless living with us, and the interviews with them, archive data, materials and memories together would ensure a basis for historical analysis for academics.

Finally, the dilemma of ethnic preferences in reception of refugees vs. commitments on human rights and international obligations are playing the best emblematic role in the refugee policy that is clearly visible in these papers. This debate started in 1988 between the NGOs and governmental organisations as well as later between academics and the ruling power⁸ whether receiving refugees and persons in need of protection would be justified and approached on the ground of ethnic proximity and kin-state policy⁹ or not. The refugee issues belong to the whole political community - but it has been out of interest for decades, while xenophobia and exclusion attitudes are growing, regardless of the (limited) number of applicants, effective or impotent authorisation or integration policy. Summing up, the 1989 accession to the 1951 Geneva Convention, while opening the borders for eastern German citizens some months later without refugee context, is loudly solemnized in 2009, and it remains a silent 20th anniversary. This academic attempt of “contemporary Hungarian history” is pioneering research, and we hope it gives an impetus for others.

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⁸ Fullerton, Maryellen: Hungary, Refugees and the Law of Return In: From Improvisation toward Awareness? Contemporary Migration Politics in Hungary. Sik – Fullerton – Tóth (eds.) *Yearbook of the Research Group on International Migration*. Institute for Political Science, H.A.S. 1997. 131–146.

⁹ Jungbert, Béla: Comments on M. Fullerton’s study. In: From Improvisation toward Awareness? Contemporary Migration Politics in Hungary. Sik – Fullerton – Tóth (eds.) *Yearbook of the Research Group on International Migration*. Institute for Political Science, H.A.S., 1997. 147–150; Világosi, Gábor (1997): A Politician’s Reflections on Hungary’s Migration Policy. In: From Improvisation toward Awareness? Contemporary Migration Politics in Hungary. Sik – Fullerton – Tóth (eds.) *Yearbook of the Research Group on International Migration, Institute for Political Science*. H.A.S., 153–156