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## A Collaborative International Migration Blog

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### IN AND OUT OF HUNGARY: MIGRATION TRENDS IN A CENTRAL- EUROPEAN COUNTRY

December 20, 2013 · by Rita Sebestyén · in *Culture & Integration, History, Politics & Policy, Public Discourse* · [Leave a comment](#)

A small Central-European country with an isolated language, frustrating historical background and escalating political affairs, Hungary has lately become a territory of constantly rewritten narratives of nation and migration. Although migration is of low intensity in Hungary, the topic itself is likely to become of increasing importance in a country with less than 10 million inhabitants. The subject is sensitive: some processes are emerging in this very moment, and discourses are multiple and often highly subjective. Below I outline only a few of the issues Hungarian society has to face in terms of permanent in and outflow of migrants and asylum-seekers. For a more complex study on policies and trends see [Ilona Móricz](#).

While a couple of years ago, the question of how to approach the difficulties arising from waves of immigrants and refugees was the hot topic in Vienna, now it seems that this issue has shifted East – to Budapest. While Hungary struggles with deep and confusing problems regarding its self-definition, Hungarians outside the borders of Hungary, refugees and asylum seekers from Africa, Afghanistan and, more recently, from Syria, add further complexity. At the same time a growing number of Hungarian citizens are leaving the country: from the controversial cases of Roma refugees in Canada to the very thin layer of highly qualified professionals who move abroad and simply take their chances, hoping to earn a more solid income even as unskilled workers.

Redrawing the map and defining the stranger

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Hungary is bordered by countries that were once part of the **Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy** that ended in 1918. Lands were redistributed to neighbouring countries by the **Treaty of Trianon** in 1920. Over the almost 100 years that has passed in the meantime, Hungarian society has not yet come to terms with the fact that around 75% of its territory went to Romania, Slovakia and Serbia. 33% of the Hungarian population in 1920 suddenly become a minority in the countries mentioned. These communities are still going through a painful process of self-definition both culturally and politically. The fact that this shock has never been subject to a careful and objective analysis, but was tackled by common endeavours of discourse creation by all involved countries is most obviously shown by the recent book of Hungarian philosopher and aesthetician Péter György: *Állatkert Kolozsváron – Képzelt Erdély* (*A Zoo in Cluj – Imaginary Transylvania*). This book approaches the so-called Trianon-trauma through literary narratives, culture and the arts and a reading of real and metaphysical territories. For example, the Vajdahunyad Castle originally in the region on Transylvania, Romania was rebuilt on a smaller scale in the heart of the capital of Hungary. Several other locations have become spots of recently awakened religious pilgrimages now devoid of their original meaning and are gaining a new perspective of the **Greater Hungary** in a religious dream of revisionist designs.

The same way as Trianon was drowned by the emotional narratives of fear and anger of a smaller country and society (the concept of the nation has been questioned, blurred and abused so that I find myself in the position of not using the word), there has never been a deep, transparent and open social discussion on the mass deportation of Jewish and Roma people during the Nazi domination. More than the statistics measuring the in and out flows of migration in Hungary and the reaction of the society and politics to it, Hungarian society would be enriched by a discourse that takes into consideration the frustration and fear of the Other, of the Stranger and that of the boundaries between the Other and Self.

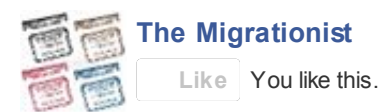
### Problems defining migration itself

When Hungarians arrive in Hungary from neighbouring countries, strangely enough, there is a real and a virtual migration, hard to follow and discern. Political tension around the historical facts has gone through several ups and downs but never reached a common agreement. The **2004 referendum** on the dual citizenship of ethnic Hungarians living abroad failed, but as the former initiator FIDESZ-KDNP rose to power in coalition, they **passed a law on it without hesitation**. The Hungarian government now counts on the loyalty of

Hungarians outside the border to take part in the 2014 elections

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Hungarians outside the border to take part in the 2014 elections. 80,000 people not living in Hungary, but holding dual citizenship, have **already registered for the elections**, mostly from Romania and Serbia.

Real migration of minority Hungarians to Hungary, however, seems to have decreased since a spike in the early nineties. In comparison with the number of ethnic Hungarians arriving in Hungary, a noticeably **smaller number of migrants** arrive from Serbia, Romania and former Soviet Union and China. The number of refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Hungary (mostly from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kosovo, Syria and Somalia) has increased. The country still encounters difficulties even in assuring basic needs and sometimes adopts a **hostile attitude towards asylum seekers**. Despite the fact that since 1997 the authorities have taken over the task of determining refugee status from the UNHCR, the organisation initiated in August a **pilot project** for Central-European states to develop refugee integration programs. From this point of view, the year of 2013 seems to be one of crucial decisions and implementation of actions, including those in response to **refugees fleeing the Syrian crisis**.

## Leaving Hungary

Emigration from Hungary (not officially acknowledged) started in recent years from the brain-drain of the European Parliament itself and the first very slow leakage as EU workforce markets opened to Hungarian citizens. A **considerable proportion of migrant Hungarians** head towards the UK, Ireland and Germany, but also to Canada, USA and Australia – mostly accepting the social position and wage of unskilled workers. Though a relatively narrower layer of highly educated emigrants leave Hungary, the country is seriously affected by **the lack of highly skilled workers' contribution** to social and economic development.

Two outstanding and symptomatic cases of migration – both involving asylum seekers– were in focus in the last two years. Whole Roma communities **sought asylum in Canada from 2011**, after a series of murders committed against Roma people in 2008/2009 in Hungary. Painfully ambiguous **discussions** emerged in the media and broader society. In 2012, almost the same number of asylum claims of Roma people were rejected by Canadian authorities as those accepted, and also about a third of the cases were withdrawn due to a **campaign launched in Ottawa** that warned potential asylum seekers of deportation.

Finally, someone who sought and was granted political asylum in

Canada – a status received for the first time by a Hungarian citizen

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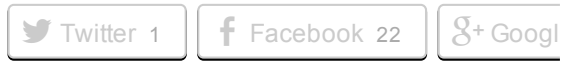
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since the communist regime came to an end – is the writer Ákos Kertész, 80, after his [open letter](#) was published in Népszava in 2011 about the threat of extreme nationalism (which included a statement about Hungary withdrawn by the author). Chased by waves of migration, he arrived in Canada in February 2012, and wrote about it [in Autumn 2013](#)

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