



## The Case of Emergency: How Does COVID-19 Influence Nationalism Development In Hungary?

### Prípád núdze: Ako funguje COVID-19 Ovplyvňuje vývoj nacionalizmu v Maďarsku?

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#### Abstract:

*Following COVID-19 outbreak has served for the activation of national movements all over the world. While the pandemics and viruses themselves are not new phenomena for humanity, scholars have recently started to investigate the connection between pandemics and nationalism.*

*This article aims to investigate nationalism and the impact of the coronavirus on the development of nationalism in Hungary. The main research question imposed: are some minorities and migrants victims of prejudice and xenophobia among Hungarians and if so, to what extent is COVID-19 a contributing factor? The overall results obtained through the survey with the use of nemo-graphic method showed the inability of COVID-19 to fuel nationalism. However, it identified some possible 'sensitive' groups and raised new questions.*

*Although the main interest of the researcher is found in the case of Hungary, this article may serve as the thought-provocation for other countries.*

**Keywords:** *populism, nationalism, migrants, Hungary, COVID-19*

#### Abstrakt:

*Po vypuknutí epidémie COVID-19 slúžilo na aktiváciu národných hnutí po celom svete. Aj keď samotné pandémie a vírusy nie sú pre ľudstvo novými fenoménmi, vedci nedávno začali skúmať súvislosť medzi pandémiami a nacionalizmom.*

*Cieľom tohto článku je preskúmať nacionalizmus a vplyv koronavírusu na vývoj nacionalizmu v Maďarsku. Hlavná položená výskumná otázka: sú niektoré menšiny a migranti obeťami predsudkov a xenofóbie medzi Maďarmi, a ak áno, do akej miery je faktorom COVID-19? Celkové*



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*výsledky získané pomocou prieskumu pomocou netnografickej metódy preukázali neschopnosť COVID-19 podnietiť nacionalizmus. Zistila však niekoľko možných „citlivých“ skupín a nastolila nové otázky.*

*Aj keď hlavný záujem výskumníka je v tomto prípade Maďarsko, tento článok môže slúžiť ako myšlienková provokácia pre ďalšie krajiny.*

**Kľúčové slová:** populizmus, nacionalizmus, migranti, Maďarsko, COVID-19

## Introduction

The new decade has begun with the COVID-19 outbreak. However, humanity has been challenged by unpredictable viruses before. Among the most dangerous viruses, the following can be found: HIV/AIDS (1981- present day), SARS and MERS (2002-2003), Avian Flu or HPAI (2003), SIV (2009), Ebola (2014-2015), MERS-CoV (2015); and the most recent, COVID-19, has ascended to the level of a present day pandemic.

It's hard to believe that a correlation between a virus and nationalism exists. However, it has more in common than one can mention. Much like COVID-19, nationalism spreads faster in masses than the flu and while a virus can be cured over time, there is still no vaccine for nationalism. However, even in spite of the temporary nature of either a virus or a pandemic, it can be emphasized that both phenomena constitute a critical societal event and disruption that subsequently results in both societal and institutional change.

It should be noted that COVID-19 has become a trigger and fuel in inciting a new wave of nationalism worldwide, marked by the rising of anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments in many states in the background of a series of political, economic, and social crises. Whilst one can argue about the nature of the old or new nationalism wave or the virus itself, calling it a highly political or biological submicroscopic infectious agent, the need for integrated research is a call to action.

Scholars previously hypothesized that nationalism tends to rise globally in times of crisis. Vogel claims that even despite the smaller scale compared to some of the other epidemics, COVID-19 has a greater impact on the states, including the collapse of health systems and the silent rise of nationalism worldwide [25].

Moloney states that nationalism competes against globalization with further examples of multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union, which are unable to cooperate united accordingly in response to the crisis and choose to respond as principle actors that follow their national interest over [17].

Goode, Stroup and Gaufman approached the problem of nationalism more specifically during COVID-19, trying to understand the nature of banal nationalism during a pandemic through their daily routine, believing that the roots of nationalism rise lie in unsettled and unsecured moments of the past [11].

It's generally accepted that the rise of nationalism during a pandemic is directly related to the fear of death; at this time, a group mobilization of individuals takes place in order to protect the nation and national interests (anthropologically, the tribe and tribal interests) [1, 21]. In the macro picture, the state plays an important role in promoting its own interests in the national movement [27].

Among all the analyzed works on the connection of coronavirus and nationalism, Su and Shen approached theoretical background innovatively, connecting manifestations of behavioral nationalism with terror management theory (TMT) [22].

However, the criticism of these works is seen in knowledge limitation due to the novelty of the phenomenon and the global response; in the gap in the literary review and commonality in building up both hypotheses and theorizing them for a solid research basis; and in the complexity of the problem and the inability to analyze individual country cases.

Thus, this work aims at analyses of a specific case of Hungary since it hypothetically justifies the mentioned background. It's also important to note the localization of nationalism in Eastern Europe on the basis of regionalism and post-Soviet past that has impacted the political environment of a country, so this study can lay a further basis for the analysis of nationalism during a pandemic in other countries.

What would happen if a virus of animal origin is introduced and integrated into a socio-political entity? It could be a cross-disciplinary study based on evolutionary biology and political science. However, in this article, it is proposed to narrow the research topic down to extremely accurate results that can be obtained in a research experiment on the case study of Hungarian migrants' crises and nationalism that perhaps have been amplified in the coronavirus outbreak.

According to recent studies "...some populists and autocrats have blamed minorities or migrants and other so-called outsiders, creating a link between the disease and specific population groups [2, p.6]". Based on this assumption, the following research question imposed:

*Are some minorities and migrants - victims of prejudice and xenophobia among Hungarians and if so, to what extent is COVID-19 a contributing factor?*

This work is part of a macro study of nationalism in Hungary. The interest of the work lies in the analysis of the hypothetical manifestation of nationalism in the non-standard conditions of the pandemic.

## **1. Measure the Scale of Problem Through Methodology and Theory to Practice**

The purpose of this article is to analyze the correlation between nationalism and the possible impact COVID-19 has had on it in Hungary. Suggested hypotheses for this study are **COVID-19 either fuels nationalism in Hungary (H1); nationalism and coronavirus are not correlated in Hungary or they exist as two separate phenomena (H2). In Hungary, there is no obvious nationalism, and therefore, no correlation between coronavirus and nationalism can be established, and as a result of this, COVID-19 as a phenomenon can't influence nationalism in Hungary (H3)**. To check the followed assumptions, a survey consisting of ten questions was created. The target group of this study is ethnic Hungarians living in the country, regardless of age, level of education, and professional activity. Variables are defined within theories and previous studies about nationalism in Hungary by Antal Orkeny [18]. Nationalism is determined as the independent variable and COVID-19 as a dependent one. The logical framework of the survey is built on the overall final

results of the respondents and helps to determine the connection and relationship between the two variables and identify the most sensitive possible minority or immigrant group in Hungary. However, the survey delimitation is seen in the inability to give accurate results on particular xenophobic views towards one or another group due to the different purposes of this study.

It's important to note that the study was conducted and proceeded during the outbreak of the second wave and contains the recent up-to-date results that have been achieved by mixed methodological tools that included "netnography" or digital ethnography is the research practice that makes data collection and analyses easier and ensures the compliance with research ethics [15].

The survey was created and conducted by the author with the use of a theoretical framework. It doesn't contain representative samples, is free from bias, and hasn't been sponsored by any of the parties.

## **2. The Outbreak of Nationalism: From State Emergency to Populism**

The first two official cases of coronavirus in Hungary were two students from Iran. One of them was enrolled in a course at Semmelweis University [8] and the other one Szent István University [19], Hungary. The third case was a 69-year old British man that worked between Debrecen and Milan, although the article doesn't mention the ethnicity of the patient [6][9]. Further news confirms more cases are traced and spread among Hungarians. Remarkably, that two first students and further on, thirteen more Iranian students, were expelled from Hungary due to the quarantine rules violation and non-cooperation with the Hungarian state [7][4].

On March 11, 2020, a state of emergency is declared by the Hungarian government, and the first major restrictions announced to the public [5]. According to the rules, a state of emergency usually lasts for 15 days and after must be renewed. However, on March 30 the National Assembly granted Prime Minister to rule by decree and enabled an indefinite state of emergency due to the pandemic [16]. On the one hand, that allows governments to act promptly and readily within the pandemic situation to protect a state, citizens, and residents. On the other hand, the rule by decree is primarily used by autocrats and dictators since it allows the ruler to arbitrarily rescind and enact laws without the legislative approval of other parties.

Two major articles written on the interconnection between nationalism and the effect of the global pandemic suggest different but similar points of view. Bieber claims that "the pandemic and government responses will not necessarily trigger the increase in exclusionary nationalism that both far-right politicians and observers have noted [2, p.1]". However, the rise of authoritarianism may have an effect on some 'sensitivities' associated with the pandemic that can lead to deglobalization socially and institutionally. Woods et al. note that COVID-19 has a devastating affect and leads to populist nationalism that "extends this pure people-nefarious elite dichotomy to a framing in which all "others" pose an essential threat to the pure nation and its ordinary people [26, p.10]".

These assumptions raise other questions such as can ethno-symbolic nationalism [20] regress to the biological and cultural primordia list nationalism [10, 24] or can it be transformed and migrated to populist nationalism which is a politically based form?

On this matter, Koller proposes a post-national identity-net model based on the multiple loyalties of individuals: “it can be imagined as a net made from Christmas tree lights. The lights at the junction points of the net light up alternatively. It may be that they shed more or less intense light in different time periods. It may also be that either many of them or only a few are sparkling [14, p.143]”. Based on that model an individual can change collective attachment due to the situation and time. Perhaps, the net-model can be applied to classification and types of nationalism since it can be changed within the identity variable.

In this article, I would like to refer to a major study of Hungarian national identity that analyses the timely changes in collective identification and nationalism development in Hungary. Orkney uses terms of economic, political, and cultural nationalism to show the complexity of the case influenced by different factors, including the importance of ethnocentric sentiments but not its determination of nationalism definition [18].

The developed concept of ‘net-model’ can be also used in analysing immigrants’ perceptions in Hungary. According to the study, “Hungarian respondents held that immigrants contributed to increased crime and deprived others of job opportunities and that aliens did not provide any economic or cultural gains for the country [18, p.9]”. These allegations must be examined by division of Hungarian nationalism into economic and cultural. From a political function, immigrants could be seen as a political counterweight to undemocratic actions and a kind of response to possible populism, given the same emotional sentiments of immigrants to Hungary and their integration, participation in society. However, it also depends on the Hungarian perception of immigrants in current circumstances and terms of coronavirus outbreak, and political and economic instability.

### **3. Survey Results**

Analysing approaches on immigrants, two bipolarities can be accurately distinguished, namely ‘pro-immigrantionists’ and ‘anti-immigrantionists’. Several debates on the immigration approach create some questions such as, shall a host country allow immigrants in, and if so, can all immigrants be accepted or can be selected? If immigrants are allowed in, do they have an obligation to assimilate with local culture, and if so, how far should it go? If immigrants assimilate with local culture, should they be treated as first-class citizens? Are both sides willing to accept this deal or there should be some other terms? [13]

Those questions were taken as one of the bases of the survey to understand if possible nationalism can be related to cultural (language element based) or political and economic links. The initial study involved forty ethnic Hungarians living in Hungary. The first five questions were aimed at a respondent validation, confirming the ethnicity, gender, age group, education, and professional affiliation. Among the respondents, 65% were women and 35% were men aged

- 25-34 years (51%),
- 35-44 (28%),
- 45-54 (18%)
- 65+ (3%).

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All respondents work or study, have a bachelor's degree (35%), master's degree (52.5%), Ph.D. (2.5%), and something else (12.5%).

Hogyan viszonyul a magyarországi bevándorlókhoz? What is your attitude towards immigrants in Hungary?

Answered: 40 Skipped: 0

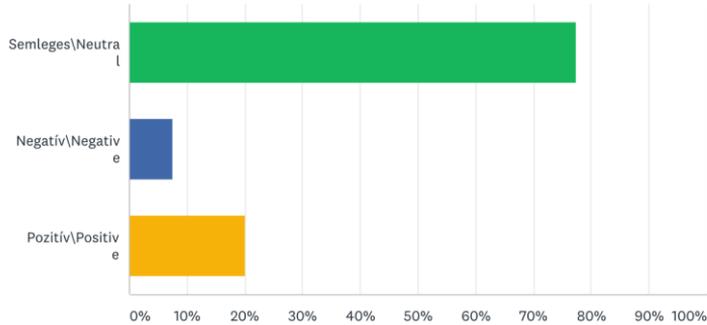


Fig.1. Attitudes towards immigrants

Source: author's own compilation

The majority of Hungarians responded that they have 'Neutral' immigrants' perception and it changes to 'Positive' if an immigrant speaks Hungarian. These trends show an absence of pronounced xenophobia towards immigrants, but don't exclude the presence of some cultural nationalism, which is shown in the Fig.2, where 'Neutral' changes drastically to 'Positive'. That would also mean that assimilation with the local culture could change the perception of immigrants by Hungarians.

Mi a hozzáállása egy magyarországi bevándorlóhoz, ha a bevándorló magyarul beszél? What is your attitude towards an immigrant in Hungary, if the immigrant speaks Hungarian?

Answered: 40 Skipped: 0

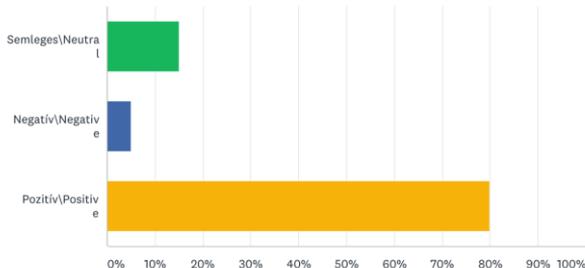


Fig. 2. Linguistic aspect in nationalism

Source: author's own compilation

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The followed set of questions aimed at the determination of the possible ‘sensitive’ immigrants’ groups and identification of the possible linkage of nationalism and COVID-19. Respondents were asked to rank the least and most favourable list of possible next-door neighbours from the given list of ethnicities and nationalities. The list offered to choose among Romani (Roma) due to the historically formed hostility of the Hungarians to this ethnicity; Jewish logically mentioned due to the previous historic events and broad community in Hungary; Russians in connection with the Soviet period and possible post-political nationalism after the Soviet Union dissolution; Chinese and Iranian ethnicities are closely related to populism-nationalism in response to COVID-19 events enforced by a government; Hungarians have also been listed as a counterbalance and hypothetically reversed rational kinship and adjustment to biological nationalism.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	TOTAL	SCORE
Kínai\Chinese	16.67% 6	33.33% 12	16.67% 6	19.44% 7	2.78% 1	11.11% 4	36	4.08
Zsidó\Jewish	0.00% 0	18.92% 7	18.92% 7	24.32% 9	29.73% 11	8.11% 3	37	3.11
Roma\Roma	67.57% 25	10.81% 4	8.11% 3	8.11% 3	2.70% 1	2.70% 1	37	5.24
Orosz\Russian	5.41% 2	8.11% 3	21.62% 8	21.62% 8	40.54% 15	2.70% 1	37	3.08
Íráni\Iranian	5.41% 2	27.03% 10	32.43% 12	13.51% 5	13.51% 5	8.11% 3	37	3.73
Magyar\Hungarian	8.11% 3	2.70% 1	0.00% 0	10.81% 4	13.51% 5	64.86% 24	37	1.86

*Fig.3. Ranking from ‘the least’ to ‘the most favourable neighbour’*

*Source: author’s own compilation*

The poll showed that ‘the least preferable next-door neighbours are Romani (67,5%). It is worth noting that among the range of offered ethnicities the Romani is the most assimilated one from a linguistic point of view that according to the pole should have changed the perception of immigrants. Although this question is not applicable in this article, it still can provoke thought about the semi-assimilation of Roma people in Hungary.

The second and third places in ‘the least preferable neighbours list were given to Chinese and Iranians. Based on this data, one could surmise that populism nationalism is present and active in Hungary, but this would not be logically justified due to the lack of additional information. The next two questions build a logical framework and bring the case study to its logical conclusion.

The question was to choose a neighbour from the given list with the possible options:

1. A person who has COVID-19 but the most favourable “neighbour” from your list
2. An immigrant who has NO COVID-19 but it’d be the least favourable “neighbour” from your list
3. It doesn’t matter

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### 4. Other

Ha választhatna az alábbi opciók közül, melyiket választaná? If you could choose from the options below, which one would you choose?

Answered: 39 Skipped: 1

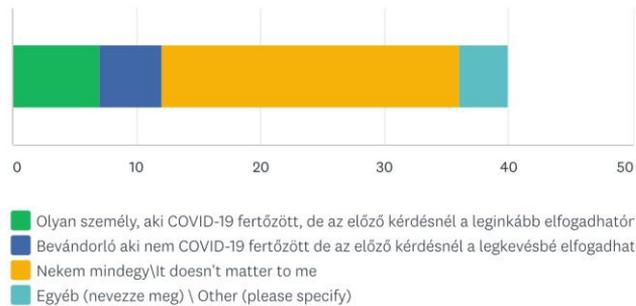


Fig.4. COVID-19 variables and changes in attitude

Source: author's own compilation

The majority responded neutrally. Some specified answers reflected to the goodwill and absence of a criminal record of a neighbor. The final question examines the possible COVID-19 and nationalism linkage.

Véleménye szerint elsősorban a bevándorlók bűnösök a Magyarországon elterjedt koronavírusban? \ According to your opinion are immigrants primarily guilty for coronavirus spread in Hungary?

Answered: 40 Skipped: 0

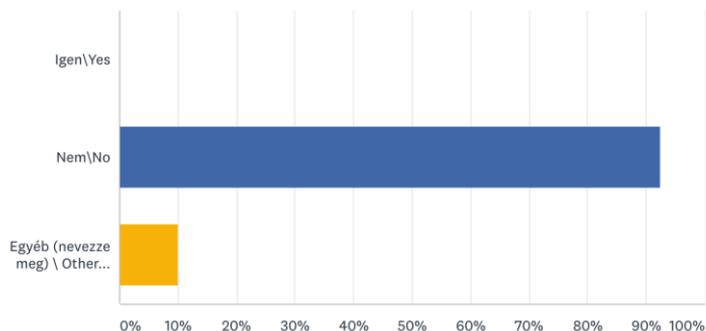


Fig.5. Immigrants and coronavirus spread in Hungary

Source: author's own compilation

The majority of respondents (92,5%) find the immigrants haven't influenced the spread of COVID-19 in Hungary. Others (8,5%) specified that virus' spread happened

due to a public lack of compliance with the government measures, excessive traveling, and conspiracy theory.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The overall results of the study deny the influence of nationalism development in Hungary by COVID-19 (**H1**). However, it argues between **H2** and **H3** since the survey couldn't fully justify the bases of one or another and requires additional data and studies.

At the beginning of the article, hypotheses were formulated based on theory and practice, which initially associated the appearance of the virus in the Hungary with immigrants. Given the presence of anti-migrant sentiments in Hungary, it could be assumed that the rise of nationalism and its extremism may be associated with the coronavirus crisis.

However, the analysis showed that in most cases the virus doesn't bind to immigrants, which proves a certain static nature of nationalism or its latent nature. In another case, it can be assumed that it is ambivalent, which would warrant additional research.

In the long-term, run one needs to remember to keep nationalism in check [23] since any kind of crisis, including a pandemic one brings institutional disruption as the aftermath. If the consequences of the coronavirus also bring political and economic destruction, this will activate an even greater need for a national movement against globalization [3,12].

The really important competition is vaccine contribution. Who will be the first to defeat the virus? Who will be the first to deliver it to the world and how will this affect the world order and nationalism in political conditions?

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