

Immigration in Budapest

I visited Budapest on 22nd September 2015 to take part in a debate at the Eotvos University on what were the costs and benefits of immigration.

I last visited Budapest in May before the immigration crisis became serious and, in fact, I used the Kaleti railway station three times and, although there were plenty of backpackers there, I did not see any obvious migrants at that time.

This time I did not visit Kaleti but I was told that, two weeks ago, it was indeed full of migrants sleeping there.

Yet, in central Budapest this time I never saw a single distressed migrant, despite the presence of literally thousands of Chinese, American, Australian and European tourists in the streets, in the restaurants and on the river Danube.

This brings home one important observation. There can be a major crisis going on in a country and, indeed, there are still major migration flows in and around the Hungarian borders, but the central district of politics, culture, fashion and money, can be quite serene. So, in the UK, suburbs of old industrial towns can be demographically transformed while Islington, Hampstead and Kensington are unaware of what's going on. Thus the political and donor classes are often quite detached.

I had been briefed about the Hungarian character; that it was reclusive, cautious and undemonstrative, at least in politics. This has its roots in the disastrous result of the First World War when the Treaty of Trianon led to the loss of two-thirds of traditional Hungarian territory to Slovakia, Russia, Poland, Serbia and Croatia. It was reinforced by the fairly benign dictatorship of Admiral Horthy following a short-lived 'Red' Terror under the government of Bela Kun and Tibor

Szamuely and the Arrow Cross-Nazi occupation of 1944/5. Disasters for the Hungarian army on the Eastern Front and the transportation of much of Hungarian Jewry to Auschwitz in 1944 followed.

Then came the Communist tyranny and, finally, the revolt of 1956, after which some 2,000 people were shot and 200,000 Hungarians left the country. All this is chillingly displayed at the 'House of Terror', a much visited building which housed the Gestapo and the NKVD and is a must-see for visitors.

Presently, the Hungarian government, led by Viktor Orban, is a nationalist conservative one but it is harried by Jobbik, which can be described as an ethnic nationalist party. Left wing views are still put forward but were, on the whole, muted at the university.

The content of the debate was interesting but hardly novel and was, of course, heavily influenced by the current migration crisis. I was paired with an excellent German Professor, Dr. Weede, who was highly critical of Mrs. Merkel and opposed by two Hungarian professors.

As everybody else on the platform was a professor I was also called professor and did not contradict those who used this term!

Yes, Hungarians in this audience were restrained, cautious and undemonstrative. They were concerned about immigration from Asia and Africa, although it was not visible to the casual observer. There was certainly no enthusiasm for the EU and Dr. Weede was scathing about the behaviour of Merkel, leaving the Eastern European states to carry much of the cost for her 'virtue-signalling'.

Yet, like the other Eastern and Southern European states, the Hungarians do get benefits from the EU and they don't want to lose the economic benefits of EU membership and the ability to travel and migrate for work offered by Schengen, (Hungary is

not in the euro) and the EU Treaties.

However, there is no enthusiasm for the EU. It is a 'transactional' relationship. Few seem to want any migrants but most Hungarians have still not been confronted by the actuality of mass migration. Certainly, the real nature of EU membership is now being noticed.