

Discursive Frames of Migration in Contemporary Politics

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Abstract

This paper offers a multi-layered rhetorical and theoretical analysis of Viktor Orbán's 2025 migration discourse, examining three key speeches that articulate a coherent ideological framework across normative-political, cultural-symbolic, and socio-demographic registers. Drawing on political philosophy, development economics, and cultural theory, the paper demonstrates how Orbán strategically redefines migration as a civilisational concern, transforming it from a domain of administrative governance into a narrative of national survival and cultural continuity. The analysis identifies how rhetorical devices, such as metaphor, personification, synecdoche, and hyperbole, are deployed to frame migration not merely as a policy issue, but as a symbolic contest over sovereignty, identity, and democratic legitimacy. Rather than opposing European integration per se, Orbán advances a model of plural sovereignty rooted in bounded community, cultural inheritance, and anticipatory governance. The paper situates this rhetoric within a broader shift in European political discourse. It contributes to critical debates on the evolving relationship between migration, symbolic politics, and the normative architecture of democracy.

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Introduction

In recent years, migration policy in Europe has shifted from being a mainly technical and administrative issue to a deeply political and symbolic one. Previously, debates focused on practical matters such as border management, quota setting, and asylum claim processing. Today, however, migration is increasingly discussed in terms of national sovereignty, cultural identity, and the future of European civilisation. This change signals a more pro-

found transformation in how migration is understood. It is no longer seen as a neutral topic managed through laws and procedures, but as a morally charged and emotionally powerful issue. As a result, migration now reflects deeper concerns about belonging, shared values, and the definition of national and cultural boundaries. It has become a powerful symbol of broader fears about national autonomy, demographic change, and the future of Europe's cultural identity.

Within this broader ideological shift, Viktor Orbán has emerged as a central figure in promoting an alternative discourse on migration, which rejects humanitarian and universalist narratives in favour of a sovereigntist and civilisational approach. His migration doctrine is anchored in three interrelated principles: national resilience, as a response to internal demographic decline; demographic realism, to address the perceived scale and permanence of external migratory pressures; and cultural sovereignty, defined as the moral right of nations to protect their cultural heritage and way of life.

Although Orbán's approach is frequently described in ideological terms, some of its core premises resonate with established political theories that defend the right of states to regulate migration. One prominent contributor to this line of reasoning is David Miller, whose *Strangers in Our Midst: The Political Philosophy of Immigration* (2016) argues that migration control can be justified as a necessary component of democratic self-governance. For Miller, immigration regulation is not a deviation from democratic norms but a means to preserve the cultural coherence and institutional integrity of political communities.

Miller (2016) challenges the notion that restricting immigration inherently contradicts democratic values. He asserts that communities have a right and a responsibility to manage membership in ways that protect their long-term viability. This must be carried out through participatory, lawful, and rights-based processes. Migration control is not an exceptional measure but a legitimate expression of collective autonomy, particularly relevant in contexts where national borders intersect with broader supranational obligations and humanitarian expectations.

This perspective is particularly relevant in the European context, where the assertion of national border controls is often viewed as conflicting with humanitarian obligations or supranational legal frameworks. Miller's argument challenges this assumption by showing that, under certain conditions, the defence of state sovereignty and the preservation of cultural continuity can be pursued through lawful and participatory means that remain consistent with democratic norms.

This conceptual framework clarifies the foundations of Viktor Orbán's stance on migration, which prioritises national authority, cultural continuity, and opposition to externally imposed measures. His assertion of Hungary's right to regulate entry, protect its Christian heritage, and reject EU-mandated quotas reflects the conviction, closely parallel to Miller's (2016), that decisions over migration must be grounded in the consent of the political community. For Orbán, the durability of democratic governance depends on citizens' capacity to uphold shared cultural references and collective historical consciousness.

From the perspective of development economics, Paul Collier's *Exodus: How Migration is Changing Our World* (2013) offers a systemic, evidence-based analysis that expands the normative debate on sovereignty. Collier argues that while managed migration can produce shared gains, large-scale or poorly regulated inflows, especially from low-income to high-income countries, carry substantial socio-economic risks. Central to his framework are the notions of absorptive capacity and social cohesion, which align with the structural logic underpinning Viktor Orbán's migration policy.

Absorptive capacity refers to a society's ability to incorporate newcomers without eroding institutional performance, cultural continuity, or civic trust. When that capacity is exceeded, the result may be fragmented communities, declining solidarity, and intensified political friction. Rather than treating migration as a universal good, Collier situates it as a contingent phenomenon with definable thresholds, beyond which the stability of even well-established democracies may be compromised. His focus on structural limits recasts migration not as a binary moral question but as a variable to be assessed in light of a society's long-term resilience.

This logic is echoed in Orbán's consistent emphasis on cultural compatibility, integration thresholds, and demographic pacing. His portrayal of Hungary as *a border fortress* and his rejection of *forced relocation quotas* are not simply political declarations but policy applications of Collier's (2013) insight that migration must be managed in proportion to a nation's capacity to maintain cohesion.

Collier's (2013) critique of the binary between open-border universalism and nativist closure provides a conceptual framework that intersects with Orbán's third-way position, which seeks to navigate between humanitarianism and national interest, and between ethical pluralism and civic realism. While differing in emphasis and political context, both perspectives converge on the view that migration policy must balance openness with social resilience. Collier (2013) offers an empirical and normative-economic lens through which Orbán's approach can be interpreted, suggesting that the long-term viability of democratic systems depends on their willingness to

admit newcomers and on their capacity to maintain the social structures that support public trust, equitable distribution, and civic participation.

Douglas Murray's *The Strange Death of Europe* (2018) frames mass migration as a symptom and a driver of Europe's deeper civilisational crisis. He argues that the continent suffers from a loss of confidence, marked by cultural fatigue, self-criticism, and detachment from historical identity. This internal weakening, according to Murray, creates a cultural vacuum into which large-scale immigration enters, not just changing demographics but accelerating the erosion of a shared European narrative. Migration reflects Europe's inability to affirm its values, resulting in diminished cohesion and a lack of civilisational clarity.

Murray (2018) does not place primary responsibility on immigration itself, but on the ideological retreat of Western elites. By prioritising inclusivity and multiculturalism, they have abandoned the defence of core values such as national identity, religious heritage, and intergenerational continuity. Migration has become a visible expression of a more profound crisis, which is rooted more in internal cultural decline than in external demographic pressure.

This framing closely aligns with Viktor Orbán's migration rhetoric, which similarly presents immigration not as a logistical or humanitarian issue, but as a civilisational turning point. Orbán's references to *organised population replacement* and his criticism of Brussels, NGOs, and transnational elites echo Murray's (2018) argument that Europe is being reshaped by actors indifferent to, or even hostile to, its cultural inheritance. While Murray offers a cultural-philosophical critique, Orbán translates that critique into political doctrine, portraying Hungary as *a border fortress* defending Europe's Christian identity.

Although Murray writes as a commentator and Orbán acts as a head of government, both articulate a shared vision that the preservation of civilisational identity requires institutional sovereignty and the moral resolve to uphold historical and cultural foundations. Border protection is not merely about security, but about safeguarding meaning, tradition, and collective identity.

The selection of the three speeches under analysis, delivered at the *Parties for Europe* rally (May 18, 2025), the *CPAC Hungary* conference (May 29, 2025), and the *MCC Feszt* (June 9, 2025), is methodologically intentional and analytically strategic. These speeches serve as *discursive artefacts*, each reflecting a distinct communicative register: *normative-political*, *cultural-symbolic*, and *socio-demographic*. Through them, Viktor Orbán articulates and performs a layered ideological repertoire that integrates multiple theoretical frames into a coherent narrative structure. This structure

functions to legitimise his government's position on migration, national sovereignty, and Europe's civilisational identity.

Normative-Political Logic of Migration

In his address delivered on May 18, 2025, at the *Patriots for Europe* (Orbán 2025a) rally in Paris, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán articulated a calculated and ideologically structured defence of state sovereignty, cultural continuity, and migration control. Often dismissed as populist or provocative, the speech, when analysed within a broader theoretical context, reveals a deliberate engagement with the *normative-political register*. It advances a principled argument for national self-determination, positioning border control as essential to the functioning of democratic authority and the preservation of collective identity.

Orbán frames migration as a normative challenge that touches on the core conditions of democratic legitimacy, namely, who holds the right to decide, what constitutes membership, and how cultural foundations are maintained over time. The speech critiques the role of supranational institutions and transnational actors, presenting them as threats to political autonomy and civic cohesion.

At the core of Orbán's (2025a) address is a categorical affirmation of state sovereignty, not solely as a legal principle, but as the ethical basis of democratic self-governance. His assertion that "*only those receiving permission may enter*" encapsulates the view that border control constitutes a fundamental expression of political identity and collective agency. This phrase operates as a form of metonymy, where the act of granting or denying permission stands in for the broader sovereign authority to regulate membership. It also invokes personification, casting the state as an intentional agent capable of deliberate moral judgment, receiving, granting, and protecting. The border becomes more than a territorial line; it is transformed into a gatekeeper that enacts the will of the political community.

This interpretation supports David Miller's (2016) argument that democracy depends on clearly defined political boundaries. He explains that a community must be able to decide who may enter to protect social unity, plan for the future, and ensure that its laws and institutions reflect the values of its people. Orbán's focus on sovereignty is not simply about keeping others out. It is a way of defending the basic conditions that enable democratic societies to function and make their own decisions.

Orbán's defence of sovereignty is closely tied to his emphasis on cultural continuity. Rather than presenting this as a narrow nationalist claim, he

situates Hungary within a broader European civilisational tradition, anchored in Christianity, historical resilience, and the preservation of shared symbolic structures. His reference to the constitutional commitment to “*Christian cultural identity*” employs synecdoche, using Christianity as a part that stands for a larger cultural whole, and metaphor, framing identity as a fixed inheritance rather than a negotiable construct. This formulation reinforces a political ontology in which identity is understood as something received across generations, deeply embedded in national institutions, and essential to political stability. Culture is not seen as optional or fluid, but as the underlying structure of collective life.

Critics may dismiss such discourse as nostalgic or essentialist. However, it reflects a concern increasingly recognised in comparative migration studies, namely that rapid, unregulated migration can erode the tacit norms and shared understandings essential to social stability. In *Exodus*, Paul Collier (2013) argues that when migration surpasses a society’s capacity to integrate newcomers institutionally and culturally, it risks undermining trust, cohesion, and the legitimacy of democratic governance. Orbán echoes this argument with the statement that “*cultural identity must be protected by all state organs*,” a formulation that employs personification, institutional metonymy, and meronymy. The *state* is animated as a moral agent, its *organs* metonymically representing the broader apparatus of governance. At the same time, meronymy is evident in the use of a part (the *organs*) to symbolise the whole (the *state*). This rhetorical construction elevates cultural preservation from an abstract ideal to a concrete obligation of the state’s institutional structure. It frames cultural integrity not as a symbolic concern, but as a necessary condition for civic resilience and democratic continuity.

Orbán’s use of historical and literary references, such as Victor Hugo, Albert Camus, and the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, is a deliberate rhetorical strategy aimed at embedding Hungary within the moral and historical identity of Europe. His quotation of Hugo, who described Hungary as “*the embodiment of heroism*,” uses metaphor, turning the nation into a symbolic figure that represents courage itself. Similarly, Camus’s phrase “*a trampled Hungary*” employs personification, presenting the country as a suffering, yet dignified, victim of oppression. These allusions (indirect references to culturally significant figures and events) function as intertextual appeals, drawing on the moral authority of respected European voices to reinforce Hungary’s historical role in defending freedom and justice.

Orbán’s reference to the 1956 uprising, “*we persevered to the end, and died by the thousands in the heroic battles against Soviet tanks*,” relies on multiple rhetorical tools. The use of “*we*” is a clear example of synecdoche, in which a part (the individuals who fought and died) stands for the whole

(the Hungarian nation). The phrase “*heroic battles*” intensifies emotional impact through pathos, and the overall sentence adopts the tone of epic narration, evoking a sense of historical grandeur and national sacrifice.

The speech’s discussion of migration and security further consolidates Orbán’s ideological narrative. His assertion that Hungary does not experience riots and that “*there is no violence*” under its migration regime serves both as a factual claim and a symbolic claim. These phrases employ rhetorical contrast and causal metonymy, where the absence of violence stands in for the success of Hungary’s sovereign migration policy. By highlighting calm as a visible effect, Orbán implies effective governance as its cause, thus transforming public order into political validation. This is also a form of evaluative metaphor, in which peace serves as a metaphorical sign of policy wisdom.

Orbán does not call for a withdrawal from the European project, but rather for a redefinition of its normative foundation. His vision centres on the principle of pluralistic co-sovereignty, a model in which nation-states retain juridical autonomy while remaining linked through shared civilisational values. The phrase “*the nations of Europe began to speak the same language: the language of sovereignty and freedom*” draws on a Pentecostal metaphor, functioning as a biblical allusion and allegorical device. It evokes the moment of divine mutual understanding at Pentecost, but repurposes it to signal political harmony without cultural assimilation.

Orbán’s 2025 address in Paris constructs a carefully layered narrative in which sovereignty, identity, and migration policy are reframed as moral imperatives rather than administrative choices. Through a rich interplay of metaphor, personification, and metonymy, the speech elevates Hungary’s national stance into a civilisational argument that seeks to redefine the very terms of European unity. Rather than opposing Europe, Orbán imagines a continental order rooted in reciprocal recognition, historical depth, and normative plurality. This rhetorical strategy legitimises Hungary’s domestic policy choices and positions the nation as an active participant in the remaking of Europe’s symbolic and institutional landscape.

The Cultural-Symbolic Framing of Migration

In his 2025 speech at *CPAC Hungary*, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (2025b) focused on migration as a cultural and civilisational issue rather than a technical or policy matter. The speech belongs to the *cultural-symbolic register*, where migration is used to express deeper concerns about identity, values, and belonging. Orbán presents Hungary’s position as a cultural defence

against what he sees as the decline of Europe's moral foundations. He does not focus on border logistics or legal procedures, but on the risk of losing cultural traditions, shared values, and historical memory. The speech communicates a fear that uncontrolled migration could lead to the breakdown of European civilisation. Migration becomes a symbol of much larger questions about who Europeans are, what they share, and how long their way of life can endure.

Orbán's speech reflects a selective adaptation of ideas drawn from Douglas Murray's *The Strange Death of Europe* (2018), not by merely echoing its themes, but by incorporating them into a politically actionable framework. While Murray offers a cultural diagnosis of Europe's loss of confidence, Orbán transforms this analysis into a call for political renewal. Concepts such as civilisational fatigue and demographic unease are reinterpreted not as abstract cultural trends, but as justifications for concrete national strategies. Orbán moves beyond critique to construct a narrative in which cultural preservation becomes a central task of statecraft.

Orbán declares, "*The people of Europe do not feel safe in their own countries, in their own cities, on their own streets. They have become strangers in places where twenty years ago they were at home.*" This emotionally charged statement uses the metaphor of estrangement to express a perceived breakdown of cultural familiarity. The idea of becoming a stranger in one's environment symbolises more than social change. It signals a loss of continuity between past and present ways of life. "*Home*" represents a stable civilisational identity rather than a physical location. Its disappearance marks a deeper anxiety about the erosion of shared norms, values, and a sense of belonging.

Orbán reinforces his position with the claim, "*This is not integration, it is organised population replacement.*" This statement uses hyperbole to exaggerate the scale and intention behind migration, and functions as an accusation by attributing agency to unnamed actors. The word "*organised*" suggests deliberate planning, implying that population change is not accidental or structural, but coordinated and purposeful. This choice of language shifts the framing of migration away from humanitarian or economic explanations and recasts it as a targeted strategy. Orbán rejects the notion of migration as a neutral or unavoidable process and presents it as a disruptive force, actively imposed to replace existing populations. The result is a transformation of the migration debate, from a policy issue to an existential threat to national and cultural survival.

Murray (2018) offers a parallel critique, arguing that political and cultural elites introduced large-scale migration without democratic consent, fundamentally altering societies without public approval. Orbán echoes this

perspective through statements such as “*we want to take Europe back from migrants*” and his call for “*streets and neighbourhoods without fear*.” These expressions employ metonymy, using migrants not simply as individuals but as stand-ins for broader anxieties about institutional failure, demographic uncertainty, and the perceived loss of cultural cohesion. By substituting a complex set of societal concerns with a single visible category, Orbán simplifies the narrative and concentrates political meaning around emotionally resonant symbols.

Orbán’s 2025 CPAC Hungary speech constructs a culturally rooted narrative in which migration is portrayed as population movement and a test of civilisational resilience. Drawing selectively on thinkers like Murray and Miller, Orbán frames migration as a process with moral, historical, and symbolic weight. His rhetoric redefines sovereignty as a protective responsibility tied to the preservation of cultural order, while contrasting Hungary’s national model with broader European trends. Through metaphor and emotionally resonant language, Orbán transforms migration from a technical challenge into a symbolic lens through which the future of European identity is debated. Rather than rejecting integration outright, the speech outlines a vision of Europe based on differentiated continuity, in which historically grounded nations coexist through the mutual recognition of distinct civilisational legacies.

The socio-demographic framing of migration

Delivered on August 9, 2025, at the *MCC Feszt* event in Esztergom, Viktor Orbán’s speech (2025c) concluded a trilogy of rhetorical interventions that shaped Hungary’s discursive positioning over the summer of 2025, following his earlier addresses at the Patriots for Europe rally (May 18) and CPAC Hungary (May 29). While building on earlier themes, this speech is distinctly situated within the *socio-demographic register*, focusing on population dynamics, institutional resilience, and the long-term viability of national communities. Rather than simply reaffirming Hungary’s migration stance, Orbán deepens his civilisational narrative by invoking demographic realism, generational continuity, and the moral obligation to preserve societal cohesion amid accelerating pluralisation. Positioned between commemorative nationalism and strategic foresight, the address presents migration as a structural variable with lasting implications for public institutions, welfare systems, and cultural reproduction. Despite its symbolic tone, the speech operates as a theoretically informed reflection on the demographic and institutional dimensions of sovereignty in a changing European landscape.

Orbán's statement, "*we won the migration battle. We defended ourselves, and today Hungary is a migrant-free country,*" functions as a strategic assertion within the socio-demographic register, where population control is framed as essential to long-term national cohesion. The claim draws on the logic of anticipatory sovereignty, in which a state's legitimacy rests on current administrative performance and its capacity to foresee and prevent future threats to social and cultural stability. The phrase "*migrant-free*" is not a literal demographic description but an instance of strategic hyperbole, used to affirm institutional strength and civic preparedness symbolically. It also functions as a synecdoche, where the absence of a specific group stands in for broader ideals, such as effective governance, demographic control, and the protection of cultural identity.

The speech intensifies its socio-demographic logic through a rhetorically saturated passage, "*they wanted to turn Hungary into a migrant country, to re-educate our children with their gender activists, to abolish the thirteenth month's pension, to make us pay horrendous prices for utilities, and to take Hungarians' money out of Hungary.*" This sequence fuses diverse policy concerns into a unified narrative of existential threat. The pronoun "*they*" employs personification, collapsing abstract institutions (supranational bodies, NGOs, or foreign governments) into a singular, intentional adversary endowed with coherent agency and hostile intent. The phrase "*migrant country*" operates as metonymy, where the demographic descriptor stands in for the perceived erosion of cultural identity and societal homogeneity. "*Gender activists*" similarly functions as metonymy, symbolising broader ideological imposition and perceived cultural reengineering. The word "*re-educate*" is a loaded evaluative epithet, connoting coercive indoctrination rather than educational reform, and thereby eliminating interpretive neutrality. The phrase "*horrendous prices*" constitutes another evaluative epithet, heightening emotional response by amplifying the economic grievance. The cumulative list of actions attributed to "*they*" represents hyperbole, exaggerating the scope and coordination of policy threats to produce an overwhelming sense of siege. By compressing disparate domains, migration, education, pensions, utilities, and capital flight, into a single cascade of threats, the passage creates an affectively charged rhetorical synergy that positions Hungary as a besieged moral community.

Orbán's phrase "*our borders will be invaded*" uses a militarised metaphor, transforming migratory movement into an act of hostile aggression, and thereby activating the semantic field of warfare and national defence. This metaphor amplifies the stakes, casting migration not as a social phenomenon, but as an imminent geopolitical assault.

Orbán's address at the MCC Feszt event represents the strategic culmination of his summer 2025 rhetorical campaign, advancing previous narratives toward a demographically anchored vision of national resilience. Rather than merely restating prior positions, the speech redefines migration as a structural factor with enduring consequences for institutional integrity, cultural preservation, and sovereign policymaking. Through a deliberate use of rhetorical strategies, such as hyperbole, personification, metonymy, and metaphor, Orbán constructs a unified discourse centred on anticipation, defence, and continuity. Migration is positioned as a proxy for broader societal pressures, allowing population control to serve as a reference point for economic stability, educational sovereignty, and collective identity. As such, the speech functions symbolically and pragmatically, proposing a form of anticipatory sovereignty in which political legitimacy is measured by the state's foresight and capacity to manage demographic risk. Sovereignty extends beyond legal or territorial boundaries to encompass the long-term coherence of the national community in an increasingly complex environment.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper has demonstrated that Viktor Orbán's migration discourse operates as political rhetoric and a multi-register ideological framework that strategically integrates normative, cultural, and socio-demographic dimensions. Across the three speeches analysed, migration is consistently redefined from a technical policy matter into a civilisational lens through which questions of sovereignty, institutional legitimacy, and cultural survival are refracted. By drawing upon political theory (Miller), development economics (Collier), and cultural critique (Murray), Orbán constructs a layered narrative in which migration is a border issue and a symbolic battleground for the future of democratic self-determination and European identity.

At the normative-political level, sovereignty is framed as a legal right and a moral necessity, grounded in the democratic community's prerogative to regulate membership and preserve cultural coherence. The cultural-symbolic register transforms migration into a marker of existential anxiety, associating population flows with a broader loss of civilisational confidence. In the socio-demographic register, Orbán articulates a strategic logic of anticipatory governance, whereby population management becomes a tool for institutional resilience and generational continuity.

The implications of this analysis extend beyond Hungary's domestic policy. Orbán's speeches function as discursive prototypes for a growing transnational discourse that reframes migration through registers of cultural

defence, moral obligation, and demographic foresight. This discursive model challenges prevailing European integrationist paradigms by proposing a vision of plural sovereignty anchored in civilisational specificity. This model raises critical questions for future research and policy development: How can migration governance balance democratic consent with humanitarian responsibility? What are the risks and consequences of symbolically over-coding migration as a threat to national identity? Moreover, how should the EU engage with member states whose rhetorical strategies redefine the normative foundations of integration?

By unpacking Orbán's rhetorical repertoire through a scientific and interdisciplinary lens, this paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how migration debates are being reshaped across Europe. It calls for continued scholarly attention to the symbolic, structural, and ethical dimensions of migration discourse, especially as they influence public trust, institutional cohesion, and the legitimacy of democratic governance.

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