MEANING MAKING AND THE FIGURE OF THE MIGRANT

The Use of Humor in Rural Hungary

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Abstract

This thesis explores how Hungarian young adults living in rural areas construct the figure of the migrant, taking into account government propaganda, media representations, and interpersonal information exchange. I chose this age group because they are currently of voting age and were teenagers during the pivotal moment of the 2015 Refugee Crisis. The central focus of the research is the use (or rejection) of humor in shaping the image of the migrant, and how this relates to broader themes of European integration and identity in contemporary Hungary. The study draws on in-depth interviews with seven participants, supplemented by observations from an unplanned focus group, which provided insight into the natural flow of political conversation among peers.

Following the interviews, I transcribed the recordings, coded the data thematically, translated relevant segments, and compiled a data table of approximately 200 entries. The findings reveal that, contrary to literature from other contexts (e.g., the United Kingdom or Greece), there is no unified pattern in how Hungarian young adults who took part in the research use humor when discussing migration. Instead, their engagement with political topics and the figure of the migrant is shaped by their personalities, interaction styles, and social positioning. I identified several types of humor, including mocking (used to entertain close peers), irony (often involving self-reflection), and sarcasm (frequently as a coping mechanism for distressing political news). Ultimately, participants' responses were closely tied to the identity they sought to present towards me as the interviewer and toward each other, echoing Goffman's (1959) theory of the presentation of self.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Bernadett Borbála Kis, candidate for the MA degree in International Relations declare herewith that the present thesis titled "Meaning Making and the Figure of the Migrant" is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 01 June 2025

Bernadett Borbála Kis

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Introduction

The 2015 Refugee Crisis in Europe has been researched widely, from various perspectives, including its impact on the political behavior of young adults in the affected countries. Within the broader body of scholarship, a narrow stream of literature specifically addresses the personal responses of individuals to government rhetoric about migrants. However, most of these studies tend to focus on measurable behavior (such as voting patterns or public protest), leaving unexplored how the rhetoric is internalized and navigated in more private or informal settings. For example, a recent study has found that young voter behavior in Greece shifted perceptibly from pre-crisis positions in response to the government communication about the Refugee Crisis as the general perception of migrants among young voters veered toward the two extremes, manifesting either greater empathy or increased fear (Dinas et al. 2024). In another recent study, it was demonstrated how migrants in the United Kingdom were depicted by official propaganda as non-human actors (i.e., monsters) that were coming to prey on the legitimate citizens of the country (Tyerman and van Isacker 2024). Although the study found broad public acceptance of this portrayal in the UK (Tyerman and van Isacker 2024), a nuanced look at generational differences by another study revealed a behavioral divide between younger and older generations stemming from the former's resistance to any propaganda that constructed a presumptive image of the migrant (Pich et al. 2018).

Official rhetoric in Hungary during the Refugee Crisis, similarly to that in the UK, commonly relied on dehumanizing representations of migrants; showing immigrants as either passive victims, or people with the intent of attacking Hungarian citizens (Bognár et al. 2023). These visual and discursive constructions of "the migrant" have been largely accepted or echoed in Hungarian public discourse, but how young people interact with this image in less

overt political acts, such as humor or linguistic framing, has been scarcely studied. This thesis argues that a key way Hungarian young adults process, engage with, or reject government narratives about migration is through informal, often ambiguous, social performances such as joking and using linguistic alignment. If we take into consideration that self-identity is tied to the existence of how we perceive the identities of "others" (e.g., immigrants) (Hall 1992), these practices are significant indicators of how individuals construct meaning around "the migrant figure" and signal belonging or dissent within their social environment. My preliminary observations before starting the work on this thesis, which led to my interest in the topic, showed that when young Hungarians interacted with the media depictions of the migrant, they tended to make jokes using the stereotypical image of the migrant created by the government. For example, in unstructured conversations, they talked about the narrative that immigrants are coming to Hungary to take jobs, or to commit sexual assault, with the tone and non-verbal cues (such as scoffing, grimacing) that indicated their message being intended as humor.

The phenomenon of responding with jokes or mocking governmental communication is not entirely unique in the broader literature. In a related study, Wedeen (1998) observed that jokes and mocking of the official rhetoric was the indirect way of resisting the authoritarian propaganda, which they often recognized as absurd. However, this phenomenon may constitute a new focus for academic research in the context of the migrant rhetorics. Humor may mean private acceptance or rejection of state narratives, but it may also be an indicator of other interpersonal relationships and personal opinions, which could reveal a less concrete political answer and suggest an indirect structural effect of propaganda. Jokes about the same topic, in this case, immigration, may have different connotations based on the context and their social import. In-depth analysis of the particular statements and terminology used by young adults in Hungary in everyday conversations in response to government anti-immigrant propaganda

offers an opportunity to examine the intersection of humor, political engagement, and social belonging.

This thesis makes an original contribution by applying a microsociological lens, drawing on Erving Goffman's (1959) concept of the presentation of self, in order to explore how young Hungarians navigate migration discourse. Rather than treating opinions about immigrants as fixed ideological positions, I examined how they are expressed, negotiated, and sometimes contradicted in small-scale interactions, in the form of in-depth interviews and a focus group. By focusing on joking behavior, linguistic choices, and interpersonal dynamics, this thesis argues that the figure of the migrant is not passively consumed through media or propaganda, but actively re-shaped in everyday performances of identity and social positioning, with some young adults being more likely to adopt speech patterns, jokes, information, and even opinions than others, largely based on their personality, for which the deeper reasons are beyond the scope of this research.

This approach matters for broader politics around migration in both Hungary and Europe, because it reveals how narratives can take root not only through state-led coercion or persuasion, but also through social diffusion, complicity, and normalization within peer groups. I also aim to focus more closely on the subtle and performative ways in which political meaning is made, beyond formal political engagement. In this thesis I consider meaning-making around migration not only as a top-down imposition but as a dynamic and socially situated process (Massey 2005).

The structure of the thesis is as follows. Chapter one first reviews the literature on key concepts related to the ways the figure of the migrant might be created and interacted with through humor, such as concepts of belonging, resistance and self-presentation, with Chapter 1.2 focusing on the different types of humor that have been identified in political discourse in earlier literature, which have been used to resist or reinforce larger narratives. The works

mentioned in these section informed my understanding on the sociological and political processes related to the creation of an image (like that of "the migrant") in different contexts, and the way humor is used in everyday language, which informed my analysis of the interviews. Chapter two details my methodology, which relies on in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, and includes the themes I identified as the cornerstones of my research, as well as a table containing key information on interlocutors to rely on when they are referenced in other chapters. The focus of Chapter three is on social belonging, the four sections analyze this going from the scope of Europe (perception of European belonging) in Chapter 3.1 to interpersonal dynamics in Chapter 3.2, after which political opinions and ideology are discussed with reference to belonging in Chapter 3.3 and my analysis of the interlocutors' self-positioning through humor concludes the argument in Chapter 3.4 through the use of humor during both the interviews and as described by the research participants. Chapter four is focused on interaction, with Chapter 4.1 detailing international exchange and perceived judgement from the larger European community, Chapter 4.2 analyzing in detail the role of joking in self-presentation, with clear differences between they communication styles of the interlocutors, and Chapter 4.3 focusing on the smallest scope of specific word uses and meaning-making, relating these back to the previous sections' findings. Finally the thesis concludes.

1. Literature Review

To put the question into context, I reviewed literature on broader concepts of identity creation as well as studies on how this can manifest in specific contexts. Then, I reviewed the literature on humor being employed in political discourse specifically.

1.1 Key Concepts: Belonging, Migrant Figure, Resistance, and Self-Presentation

My thesis builds on works that explore the social, cultural, and political construction of the figure of the migrant, particularly in contexts where humor serves as a site of acceptance, negotiation, or resistance to the government's anti-immigrant sentiments. Jokes about migrants are not merely reflective of existing attitudes but can actively shape how young Hungarians understand concepts like belonging and threat (Hall 1992), or "otherness" (Said 1979) in everyday life.

According to Van Ramshorst (2019), humor creates emotional spaces where geopolitical power relations can be reimagined or displaced. Sara Ahmed's (2004) analysis of emotion highlights how political discourse mobilizes feelings like fear and disgust to produce boundaries between "us" and "them." Similar feelings have been provoked recently, as shown by Brito (2024) and by Tyerman and van Isacker (2024), who observed how immigrants in Europe are often represented through animalistic and monstrous imagery (i.e., as dangerous monsters hunting "us", or as animals to be hunted by "us"), separating European societies and the suggested foreign threat. Such emotional strategies have been employed in Hungary as well, especially since 2015, to solidify the image of migrants as existential threats to national identity. These portrayals can contribute to a deeply racialized and dehumanized figure of the migrant, setting the emotional and symbolic stage for a potentially mocking type of humor among young adults.

Humor can both reproduce and challenge dominant norms as shown in Rebecca Adler-Nissen's (2014) work on stigma management. Joking allows one to find meaning in stigmatized identities, and for these identities to be negotiated and normalized in subtle ways, often masking additional power dynamics within sub-groups (friend groups, high school peers, family) in society. Humor can also serve as a way to show one's own identity as belonging to the dominant group. However, private expressions of dissent can coexist alongside public performances of compliance through "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990), and humor allows people to navigate spaces of political tension without revealing private opinions when they would prefer to keep those hidden.

On one hand, humor allows for "everyday resistance" when marginalized groups subtly resist dominant power structures through non-confrontational means (Scott 1985). This approach is supported by Wedeen's (1998) analysis of political performance under authoritarianism, where citizens under Assad's regime used humor and irony to push back against absurd state narratives without using direct and/or violent methods of resistance. On the other hand, humor can also be deployed as a mode of self-expression and a way of showing belonging to a social group in situations when the jokes could have also been understood as a political statement without understanding the context (Greengross and Miller 2008). This could suggest in the context of my research that Hungarian young adults may not openly reject dominant or official state narratives even in cases when their opinion does not align with the dominant political narrative. Their use of joking may be connected more readily to how they define their place in society than to an expression of resistance. This social belonging, in turn, might be informed by their preferred way of being perceived by peers or members of their social groups.

Drawing on Goffman's work, particularly his concept of the "presentation of self" (1959), in this thesis I understand political talk as a form of social performance; rather than treating

interviews or everyday conversations as direct indicators of personal belief, Goffman's work encourages attention to how individuals manage impressions, adapt to context, and present themselves strategically in interaction. This approach is particularly relevant when analyzing humor and language use, where tone, audience awareness, the perception of "insiders" and "outsiders," and the social context play key roles in shaping meaning.

For these reasons, l pay particular attention to the language used in jokes, and during private interviews, to assess how definitions and jokes are used in everyday language, whether young adults accept, resist, or disregard the government-narrative, and what that means for how the figure of the migrant is conceived in relation to the research participants' own self-image.

1.2 Humor in Everyday Interactions with Political Narrative

To better understand the subtexts behind young adults' jokes about migrants, it is necessary to distinguish between different types of humor and their potential functions. Humor is not a uniform phenomenon: it can signal subversion, complicity, disengagement, or negotiation, depending on its form and context. This thesis explores whether irony functions as a distancing mechanism for young adults or whether it reflects more meaningful forms of disengagement or disbelief.

Among the most relevant types of humor for this thesis are mocking, sarcastic, and ironic humor. Mocking humor is often used to ridicule political figures, narratives, or social groups, and has been shown to serve both as a tool of critique and as a means of reinforcing group boundaries (Billig 2005). In the Hungarian context, mocking the stereotypical government portrayal of migrants might appear subversive, but it could also trivialize or normalize the very images it reproduces.

Sarcastic humor functions as a form of indirect criticism, relying on tone and contradiction to imply disapproval or disbelief (Attardo 2000). In everyday political

conversations, sarcasm can serve as a protective strategy, it allows speakers to voice controversial or resistant opinions under the guise of detachment. When young Hungarians make sarcastic remarks about migration campaigns, the question becomes whether this signals resistance, apathy, or subtle alignment with dominant narratives.

Closely related is ironic humor, in which speakers say the opposite of what they mean to expose absurdities or contradictions (Booth 1974; Hutcheon 1994). Irony can be useful in both authoritarian and post-authoritarian settings, where overt dissent is dangerous or discouraged. It creates space for critique, but often requires a shared interpretive community to be effective.

While these three forms are central to the analysis, other humor types provide further nuance. For example, satirical humor, often seen in political media, aims to systematically critique institutions through exaggeration (Gray et al. 2009). Self-deprecating humor, meanwhile, can deflect stigma or build social rapport, especially in politically sensitive conversations (Holmes 2000; Greengross and Miller 2008). Finally, dark or gallows humor, parody, and absurdist humor reveal how individuals cope with fear, uncertainty, or perceived absurdity in political life (Critchley 2002).

The literature reviewed provides a conceptual and analytical framework for understanding how humor operates as both a social and political act in the lives of Hungarian young adults, and how different types of understanding "others" (Said 1979) can influence larger political discourse, which, in turn, influences the microsociological processes that I am analyzing. The literature shows how humor, language, and self-presentation function as tools for managing belonging, negotiating group identity, and navigating the emotional and ideological boundaries set by dominant migration narratives, and provides a basis on which my thesis relies for the detailed analysis of a previously not researched sub-section of the field.

2. Methodology

This thesis uses qualitative methodology through thematic analysis of interviews to explore how Hungarian young adults understand and discuss the figure of the refugee and migrant, with special emphasis on how they use humor. The research focuses on young adults in rural Hungary who were in high school during the 2015 Refugee Crisis, a formative period shaped by the Hungarian government's intense anti-migrant campaign. This methodology enables a deeper understanding of the communication styles (e.g. joking during interviews or using exclusively official language) of the interview participants. The semi-structured interview format allows them to highlight the topics they consider most important, which, in the context of this thesis, revealed the aspects of identity formation each participant emphasized and the types of communication tools they used in that process.

2.1 Data Collection

I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven Hungarian young adults, all of whom were teenagers during 2015, and all of whom attended high school in Hungary. Due to limited access to data, I conducted a limited number of interviews. I chose interlocutors based on initial informal conversations unrelated to the topic of my thesis, and contacted them through social media. I sent them the Hungarian translation of the consent form, which I also read out loud in the beginnings of the interviews. The interview questions were open-ended, and relating to their experiences, memories, and views regarding refugees and immigrants, as well as their memories of their communities (e.g., family, town, high school class, friend group). I paid particular attention to moments when respondents used or referred to humor or jokes, especially the types of jokes, as these instances provided insight into both social dynamics and attitudes towards immigrants. In some instances humor was used spontaneously during the interviews,

which provided further insights into the way young adults employed it to connect and communicate.

In addition to the individual interviews, I unexpectedly observed a spontaneous 'focus group' discussion involving multiple young adults discussing immigration as a topic, and responding to my research being centered around humor. Although unplanned, this encounter offered valuable data on group dynamics, including how participants' opinions and styles of expression were influenced by peer presence, group consensus, and receptiveness of the individual. Valuable data can emerge from unplanned, informal moments during fieldwork because they reveal how people construct meaning in everyday life and offer methodologically rich insights that formal data collection might miss (Fujii 2015).

2.2 Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic coding, to allow interpretive work, considering that the data was not intended to be generalizable due to the smaller amount of in-depth interviews. The transcribed interviews include filler words and pauses, as these demonstrate the speech patterns and thinking processes of the interlocutors. Initial codes were informed by the research questions, including references to humor, social inclusion, political fear, and language. Emergent themes were then refined iteratively. The following thematic clusters were inductively identified:

2.2.1 Social Belonging and Interaction

The first theme explores how participants positioned themselves and others in social circles, and how much the opinions of other people in those circles influenced them. Interlocutors were asked about their communities, and about interactions in those communities, especially regarding the discussions of political topics.

2.2.2 Humor and Joking

Humor was examined through different types of jokes, including those mentioned during the interviews and humor used within the conversation itself.

2.2.3 Fear of Political Topics

I observed hesitation, avoidance, and disclaimers of no political affiliation when politics-related questions were brought up with some interlocutors, as well as caution from many respondents to show themselves in specific lights (for example, as someone who does not interact with politics, or as a liberal). These instances informed my understanding on the interlocutors' communication styles, and were in line with the reported frequency of joking, with less political jokes, but more general jokes being made by those avoiding sharing their political opinion. Thus, this observation is relevant in the contexts of the other themes too.

2.2.4 Terminology

Special attention was paid to the specific terms used to describe refugees and migrants for example, "migráns," (migrant) "bevándorló," (immigrant) "menekült" (refugee) and the connotations these terms carried, as well as the inclination of the interlocutors to use the same term that I did, or to correct me when the term I used was not what they thought of. The terminology highlights how language use in both everyday conversations and during interviews is socially and politically charged, revealing the discursive environment and interactive dynamics. Furthermore, I noticed differences between how likely some interviewees were to use the same terminology that I did, and how likely others were to use other words or to correct my use of those. While the data is limited, as it can be seen in the annexed thematically organized table, even in this data corpus certain regularities can be seen if one follows the colors, which show which interlocutors tend to pick up vocabulary and which interlocutors stick to their own terms.

2.3 Interviews Table

The following table contains information on my interlocutors' interviews for reference.

Interviewees	Date	Sex	Age
Interviewee 1	29/03/2025	F	23
Interviewee 2	02/05/2025	F	24
Interviewee 3	05/05/2025	M	25
Interviewee 4	24/04/2025	F	25
Interviewee 5	22/04/2025	F	26
Interviewee 6	30/03/2025	F	27
Interviewee 7	17/04/2025	M	22

2.4 Positionality and Reflexivity

As a Hungarian young adult myself, my shared background with the interviewees shaped the research process in multiple ways. While this insider status helped build rapport and trust, it also introduced certain limitations. Respondents were aware of my political orientation and, in some cases, appeared to tailor their responses to align with what they assumed were more socially acceptable or 'correct' views, with some respondents specifically making jokes during the interviews that worked as part of my rapport and some participants seemed to desire to appear more knowledgeable or reflective. According to Schaffer's (2023) study on interpretivist interviewing, self-presentation by both interviewer and interviewee is integral to interview dynamics because interviews are not neutral data-gathering tools, but social encounters shaped by mutual meaning-making. Each party brings assumptions, identities, and strategic performances that influence how questions are posed, how answers are framed, and what is said or left unsaid, which resonates with Erving Goffman's (1959) concept of the "presentation of self," in which individuals manage impressions in face-to-face interactions, performing roles

based on context and perceived audience. These dynamics were taken into account during analysis, particularly when assessing tone, hesitation, and performativity in responses.

During the interviews conducted for this research, participants from rural Hungary have been asked questions that focused on their memories of social interaction while discussing political topics, which has led to them revealing aspects of the structures of their social circles. This chapter discusses how young adults place themselves in the larger context, and how that is shaped by both social belonging and interaction between members of the same circle and with those not belonging to the same social group (for example, between classmates, and between the class and a teacher). Their notion of belonging can be linked to how they relate to and see the figure of the migrant, and their use of humor can indicate both their own sense of belonging, and the way they think about 'otherness' (Said 1979).

3. Social Belonging

3.1 Perceptions of Identity in Society

While all of the participants self-identified as Hungarians at the time of interviewee selection, during the interviews they only referred to Hungary as a geographic location and to the general Hungarian public in terms of the latters reactions to immigration-related propaganda. Other aspects of their "Hungarian" identity were not emphasized. In some cases, they focused on their role in a smaller group, or the situation in their own town, or their European mindset, which they expressed either directly, or through their political statements. When emphasizing their European mindset, they also expressed fear of not being accepted by the European community in light of the policies enacted by the Hungarian government, despite their personal beliefs and expressed their understanding of the nuance in European and Hungarian discourse around migration:

> Obviously, the European immigration crisis was something that stirred the whole world and changed European politics itself perhaps more than almost any other event since the founding of the EU. And many people conveyed certain views about it, and if not only… Well, in Hungary, one particular view on immigration pretty much dominated the topic early on, which was mainly supported by the government. (Interviewee 7)

Based on the interviews, while most interlocutors had a sense of understanding of how Hungarian young adults (and even other generations) think about the topic of immigration, they were either more comfortable, or more knowledgeable when they were asked about the opinions of their specific communities, which they also showed a deep agreement with.

As Goffman (1959) highlighted, social interaction is based on roles, and playing those roles in a way that is expected of the individual. In some cases, the interlocutors seemed more focused on that role than on the topic that was discussed in their group:

> the structure of the class, in terms of prestige, was divided into: the [city name] locals, the commuters, and the dorm students. That's how the structure of the class was built. And I was a commuter, […]. And the locals were considered the most 'select' group, so to speak: the children of well-known local entrepreneurs, municipal representatives, etc., etc. […] For example, as a commuter, I was considered the best student in the class, and the ones who were from [city name] had a really hard time tolerating that the top student

> wasn't one of them, but rather someone from a socially lower 'caste,' let's call it that. And because of this, I had a lot of conflict, and I didn't really know whether it was better to hold myself back and try not to make it so visible, I mean, I never really flaunted it anyway, or whether I should just not care and stand up for myself (Interviewee 6)

The interlocutor, throughout the interview, focused on the relation of each question to the structure she explained (above), and she connected the joking behavior in class to the level of intellect she perceived; she claimed that since she went to a prestigious school, joking about migration would not have been proper, and that her class only had formal debates in political topics in class, which is in accordance with the structure that she described. Her descriptions about the way belonging worked in her class was also similar to the larger scale; she said that she was often only contacted when something had to be organized in class, but excluded from parties and outings. Later in the interview, she expressed fear of Hungary being excluded from the European community (referring to the opinions of Europeans, not the European Union) based on the position of Hungary being both 'in' and 'out'.

This stance can be connected to the idea of Hungary being on the semi-periphery of the Liberal International Order (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021), which in turn influences the way Hungarian politicians talk about the 'West', and the policies of the 'West'. Other interviews revealed similar sentiments with those interlocutors who prioritized their image being created through a lens that focuses on their intelligence (discussed in detail in Chapter 4.1.1, Perceptions of Exclusion and Legitimacy), as two other people expressed that their belonging was highly dependent on their peers' statements about Western ideals (which they often called liberalism, suggesting that the word 'liberal' means the opposite of a Fidesz supporter), and they highlighted that their sources (which they trust) are all 'liberal sources'.

3.2 Interpersonal Dynamics in Relationships and Close Friendships

Many social situations were described by the interlocutors as conditional; their willingness to interact being dependent on the identity of the other person in the given

community. One respondent described this in a way that suggests the existence of a safe space within political discourse; “if you were up to date on what was going on, you could feel like, okay, that was a remark against the government, and that this is a safe space” and stressed that it is not only safer, but also more comfortable to be involve in discourse with those who have similar views;

> With those who I know, and I know their point of view, I gladly talk. Especially because then they can share their opinion. With that, I don't know, I will become a bit more open, and what I think. But, yeah, carefully, so not really [talk to others about migration]. [...] If I don't know their opinion, I don't really talk. So I don't talk to them. I won't change my opinion, but depending on who they are, I will choose my words, because then I know whether I will offend the person, or not. (Interviewee 1)

The same person described her way of getting informed as dependent on those around her, especially her boyfriend, and her male best friend, both of whom she recognized as trustworthy authority based on their interest in consuming online (mainly social media) material on political topics. Her opinion-forming was described throughout the interview as connected to that of others, suggesting that her community (in this case, a very small circle of close people, mainly men) was the most dominant force in her life, which can be put in contrast with another respondent’s answers, who claimed that she cannot be moved by anyone else’s opinion:

> I have such a rock-solid opinion about all this that I can't be, well, okay, sure, I can be influenced, I’m not saying I can’t, but if I’ve decided something’s going to be a certain way, then I hold on to that in every possible way, like, this is how it’s going to be, and I have a really hard time letting go of that, about anything, really. (Interviewee 4)

Interviewee 4 is dating a person, however, whose process of dealing with political information and forming an opinion she described as highly dependent on her (the interlocutor’s) earlier statements, thus suggesting that the personality of the individual is what leads to them either following their partners’ (or friends’) opinions, or themselves influencing others.

Interlocutors’ willingness to express political opinions, especially around those they do not know was closely tied to their perceived confidence in their views, however, their preference did not match this observation, for example, Interviewee 4 strongly dislikes talking

about any heavy topic, including politics, which she sees as a separate process form her opinion formation.

3.3 Identity and Collective Political Opinions

As it has been shown, close people influence the individual's process of forming an opinion, and interacting with that of their peers, and the personal urge to represent oneself through an image during the interview also plays a role. However, there is another layer, one in the middle that has become relevant through the interviewing process. One interlocutor stressed several times that they saw it as their own responsibility to choose their friend-group in a way that excludes those with traditional political views (where the interlocutor was also using the word 'liberal' to represent one group of people, and conservative to represent the 'other side'):

> And that was a rather liberal stance. Of course there were those who were thinking in a more conservative way, but they were not in my friend group, my company, and I didn't hear very extremist conservative things, I think. So, this atmosphere, that was in school, was leaning more towards liberalism [socially accepting, not referring to economy], usually. […] But at the same time I have to add that I obviously didn't really hang out with those from who I could have heard them [harmful jokes], because I chose my friend group and company that way, or with those people with whom I shared my opinion from that political sense. (Interviewee 2)

Statements like these show that the view of the individual is not only dependent on the group, but the choice of the group is also (when both possible and desired by the individual) dependent on the individual's already existing opinion and perception of 'good company'.

3.4 Humor and Belonging in Social Settings

Among the participants, joking emerged as a frequent tool of engagement, particularly during interviews. While the topic of immigration is often treated as serious, also among some of the interlocutors who rejected the idea of joking about the topic; "[...] I don't remember to have them [jokes] about this. I think everyone comprehended that this is a serious topic […], or not a thing to joke with", it was striking how often humor was mobilized - at times subtly, through ironic comments or sarcastic remarks, and at times more overtly. Moments when humor was used during the interviews themselves seemed to be motivated by being able to engage

with me (as the interviewer), or other members of their group (during the accidental focus group's conversation). Their humorous remarks also often reflected the respondents' assumptions about my own political leanings and were crafted accordingly - playing to an imagined audience that is 'in on the joke.'

Humor was most often used by those who did not voice concern over Hungary's perceived exclusion from a European identity, which further suggests that their focus was on being accepted within their immediate social environments rather than aligning with broader geopolitical narratives; these interlocutors seemed to be influenced by their immediate environment more, and, as it will be discussed further (Chapter 4.3.2, Language as Ideological Positioning), they were also more likely to pick up others' (their group's or mine) vocabulary when talking about immigration. In contrast to others who spoke of Europe highly, and feared Hungary's distancing from it, the joking respondents expressed less concern with international belonging (excluding one person, Interviewee 1), emphasizing instead interpersonal cohesion.

During the unplanned encounter with a group setting, where I became part of a spontaneous focus group, joking became a central aspect of communication. Humor was not only frequent but became a way to cement social dynamics: individuals echoed each other's remarks, with humor growing increasingly coordinated. What began as individual expressions quickly evolved into a shared language of joking, reinforcing group identity and cohesion. This group dynamic suggests that joking is not necessarily a reflection of belief, but a mechanism through which social bonds are negotiated and performed.

Ultimately, these instances reveal that humor, while often overlooked in traditional political discourse, can be a key indicator of how people position themselves socially. It operates not only as a way to lighten the subject matter, but as a socially embedded practice through which individuals seek connection, assert identity, and navigate the roles expected of them.

4. Interactions

Building on the theme of social belonging discussed in the previous chapter, this section turns to interpersonal interactions as instances through which research participants positioned themselves within personal, national and transnational social spheres. These interactions, described in interviews and observed in the accidental group setting, were occasions for constructing identity and negotiating perceived boundaries between "us" and "them", where the figures of the "insiders" and "outsiders" were continuously created and recreated, without a constant definition being in place. Whether discussing encounters with peers, family members, foreigners, or reflecting on Hungary's international position, participants used interaction to clarify their role in a shifting political landscape, with some interlocutors describing environments where humor was heavily used, and others highlighting the importance of taking migration-related questions seriously at all times (even though government responses were still described as matters to joke about). This way of establishing one's role can be seen as performative, signaling a desire for social recognition, group inclusion, or distance from dominant narratives.

Three key dimensions of interaction emerged: (4.1) expressions of international belonging and perceptions of Hungary's place in Europe, (4.2) the use or rejection of humor as a political and social signal, and (4.3) the choice of specific terms to describe immigrants (or migrants) and refugees, with some interlocutors highlighting the legal statuses of people in different cases. These elements provide insight into how participants evaluated their surroundings and located themselves within broader moral and ideological communities.

4.1 Interactions and International Belonging

4.1.1 Perceptions of Exclusion and Legitimacy

Some participants referred to how Hungary is perceived from abroad, drawing a distinction between themselves and the general Hungarian public. These comments often reflected a sense of international exclusion, marked by feelings of embarrassment or frustration regarding Hungary's reputation within the European Union, and by fear of Hungary potentially not staying a member state of the EU. Such statements echoed the dynamics described by Brito (2024), who highlights how national shame can be reframed as personal disidentification, where individuals reject the state's actions while trying to maintain international credibility. Such shame had been expressed during the interviews, especially when interlocutors talked about potential steps that Hungarians, as individuals, can take to ensure that the European community sees their disagreement with the Hungarian government:

> Yes, but I think that it improves our international reputation if… okay, they won't reduce taxes… but the world sees that Hungarians are not satisfied with what's happening. So, a protest has a kind of meaning like that, but in terms of exerting pressure to bring about some kind of real change, I don't think it has that kind of effect. (Interviewee 6)

Interlocutors who talked about the importance of maintaining the company of those who shared their political values (as discussed in Chapter 1, Identity and Collective Political Opinions), connected these to Europe in a way that largely equates "Europe" with terms such as "the West" or "the liberal world". Such sentiments can be explained through Hungary's position as that of a country on the semi-periphery of the liberal international order (Adler-Nissen and Zakarol 2020). These interlocutors also reported not having made jokes about immigrants, but said that when jokes were made, they were directed at the Hungarian government, or other left-wing political bodies, describing such jokes as a way to deal with the mental toll of reading international news that they were unhappy about:

> We made a lot of jokes at a time when worse things were happening… For example I remember that around Trump's election [2016] this was the topic a lot, and then this humor as a distraction and coping mechanism, that shined through a bit. (Interviewee 2)

Reflections on the perception of the Hungarian public by Europeans, and on jokes made about international news suggest the presence of an imagined transnational audience, against which participants evaluated their national identity and social legitimacy. For many, maintaining a positive connection with "Europe" required distancing themselves from local political developments, which were often framed as regressive or embarrassing. In this sense, they engaged in boundary work that established a more aspirational "us" (progressive, European, critical thinkers) and a "them" (uninformed, provincial, complicit in propaganda).

4.1.2 Everyday Social Navigation

Other interactions described by participants took place in more intimate or familiar settings, such as among classmates or family. These were less explicitly political but still revealed dynamics of alignment and distance. Rather than challenging views directly, many participants described avoiding conflict or responding indirectly. These strategies, such as silence, sarcasm, or performative agreement, functioned as low-risk methods of navigating political difference while maintaining social harmony. Interlocutors who talked about avoiding political conversations, or specific conversations about migration, often added that they were willing to talk about these topics, but only in cases when they knew that the other person agreed, or when they had information about the opinion of the other person, as it has been discussed (Chapter 3.2, Interpersonal Dynamics in Relationships and Close Friendships). However, other interlocutors pointed out that the reason for not engaging with the topic can also lay with the individual's mental distancing from it:

> Very much [the Refugee Crisis is relevant in today's discourse]. I think… many… right, because… what I said, okay… I heard about it, or we talked about it at home, but like I didn't feel like it would be my problem. And for that there was a distance in me, because I thought, of course, this could be related to me being younger, but I had a feeling that this is not my problem. (Interviewee 3)

There is a link between the refusal to talk about politics, and the willingness to announce one's political standing, which can be seen in the data table (attached). Furthermore, the unplanned focus group I observed also demonstrated how group dynamics shape individual positioning. Humor, repetition, and mirroring were common, and early contributions often set the tone for the rest of the discussion. This aligns with Butler's (1997) theory of performativity, in which identity is constructed through the reiteration of norms, gestures, and expressions. In this group setting, participants' repeated alignment with each other served to reinforce shared perspectives and foster group cohesion, even when discussing sensitive topics such as migration, and the level of participation was clearly established from the beginning of the conversation, with one young man often acting as a representative of the group. Since the focus group was formed due to one of the interlocutors (Interviewee 6, whom I had interviewed two days prior) mentioning the topic of my research in a café, which is at a central location, members of the group made statements that can be interpreted as an effort to account for the group's behavior. For example, they pointed out that while they do make jokes about immigration, they do not wish harm on anyone who arrives to Hungary through legal means. Their attempt to explain their behavior may indicate that they were concerned about an imagined critical outsider's view of them (since they were not accused of wishing harm on immigrants), not unlike what has been observed regarding the imagined opinion of the European community (as seen in Chapter 4.1.1), but on a smaller scale. We can, however, observe a difference in the response to the perceived opinion of the larger European community and to that of an individual outsider (me). The reason for the difference was that this group treated me as both an outsider and a semi-integrated member, as they were aware that I and my family were from the area, but I have not been part of any friend group in the city in the past decade.

4.2 Joking and Self-Presentation

4.2.1 Seriousness as Social Capital, Joking as a Coping Mechanism

Across the interviews, a clear divide emerged between those who presented themselves as politically serious and those who did not (i.e., those who refuse to engage with political topics). Participants who emphasized their engagement with political topics tended to reject humor in discussions about immigration, framing such conversations as "too serious" (Interviewee 2) for jokes. These individuals often described themselves as having been politically aware from a young age and characterized their own peer discussions as analytical or debate-oriented (with the exception of Interviewee 1, who made the most jokes, and also pointed out that while there were many debates among her peers, she did not take part in these). This rejection of humor appeared to function as a form of moral and intellectual distinction for some, however, it was specifically the rejection of joking about those who they described as victims, which was also shown through their vocabulary when talking about the factors compelling escape in the refugee crisis, with one interlocutor emphasizing her change of perspective:

> there was a big wave when the war [in Ukraine] started, they were war refugees. […] That was my first experience with people coming in, and wanting to go and help them. That was maybe the first situation in my life then with an adult brain I understood what is happening, and I wanted to change it. (Interviewee 3)

And another interlocutor arguing for a shift in the tone of discussing immigration: "That people from war-caused emergency, or natural disaster, or any kind of emergency, are escaping, then the conversation shouldn't be mainly about how the host country will be overturned, but how we can help them" (Interviewee 2).

Those interlocutors who emphasized that they find it distasteful to joke about immigrant not only used language that showed that they researched the topic and connected terms to definitions, but they also clearly separated which social media platforms they use for serious

discussion and gathering information, and which platforms they regard as recreational or mentally less taxing:

> It is sure that it is easier to digest [the jokes], I think this political satire and political humor, these are surely easier to consume, especially when it comes to news that are heavy, and which invoke fear in people, then humor is surely a classic coping mechanism, and it [...] has community-building power, too, that you see that okay, others also feel bad because of this [bad news], and others also think the way you do. (Interviewee 2, on political jokes available through social media applications such as TikTok)

An alternative mode of response can also be observed in which interlocutors expressed their complete rejection of joking even when using social media. Namely, they emphasized their ability to take part in intellectual debate, and the importance that intelligence played in their life. The data shows that in the case of Interviewee 6, who drew a politically active narrative similar to that of those who consume humorous media while staying politically active and informed (Interviewees 2 and 3), the interlocutor focused more on the description of their own social circle, and minimized statements about immigrants that would showcase empathy towards them, using neutral terms and definitions based on the legal statuses of the immigrants in question instead.

This pattern is in line with the argument that individuals manage impressions through their behavior and language choices (Goffman 1959). In this case, political seriousness was presented as a form of social capital, marking the speaker as responsible and informed. As Mudge (2008) notes in her discussion of neoliberal rationality, the self-presentation of competence is often key to one's inclusion in perceived "expert" or "elite" groups. Rejecting humor, in this sense, allowed participants to construct a version of themselves aligned with rational discourse. However, embracing humor was mentioned in the specific context of community building by rejecting the dominant narrative, and in order to deal with the mental toll of receiving news that they were unhappy with. This shows that the interlocutors who did not reject joking completely separated the people they joked about based on whether they

perceived them as victims (as some did with immigrants) or the causes of unwelcome events (as the same interlocutors did with right-wing governments and/or politicians).

Research participants who described themselves as apolitical or disengaged were more likely to reference the use of humor, often as a way to avoid confrontation or deflect deeper conversations, but with less specific focus. These interlocutors also tended to adjust more readily to the vocabulary and framing used by others, including to mine during the interviews. Their interactions were more shaped by context and perceived expectations, suggesting a higher degree of relational adaptability or susceptibility to influence. The strategic use of humor in these cases served to maintain inclusion and avoid vulnerability. Interlocutors often made statements about not remembering certain events, with one person (Interviewee 5) claiming not to remember any history classes at all, and they also tended to make lighthearted remarks, such as using nicknames for politicians, with one interlocutor mentioning that her choice in politicians she enjoys hearing about is dependent on the tone of the news she hears:

> I really love Kari Geri [nickname for Gergely Karácsony, the current Mayor of Budapest]. I think he is [very] funny, he puts up memes, like these little boomer memes. But he is cute, he tries to keep up with the trends […] He is harmless. (Interviewee 1, on social media content she currently enjoys)

This can imply that those who were less interested in politics, and those who find it too taxing to keep up with the news, would prefer to interact with less seriously worded posts and articles, while those who are trying to engage with politics often use the same types of posts on social media as a relief. However, it is important to note that some interlocutors belonged to neither category, with Interviewee 1 often mentioning that she wishes to know more, even though it is hard to keep up with the news, and she prefers to rely on the people around her.

4.2.2 Types of Humor: Irony, Sarcasm, and Mocking

Not only did Interviewee 1 fall between the categories of those rejecting political discourse and those actively seeking it out, but she also demonstrated several types of humor

through the interview. On one occasion, she made a joke about being irritated with conservative people:

> Not specifically about migration, but for example someone who's really hardcore Fidesz-supporter, or really hardcore pro-Trump. Like, those people piss me off, and I'll end up in prison if I talk to them within 20 minutes. I don't want to start killing people, but you know... Stupid assholes, whatever. (Interviewee 1)

After which she pointed out the irony of her own statement, when criticizing one-sided political thinking, thus demonstrating not only the nuance of representing one way of political thinking or the other, but also that of finding paradoxes in one's own statements:

> They're absolutely not open to what's on the other side, and for them there's only one truth, and they're sure of it, and you're the idiot. And honestly, it's totally possible that I sounded the same just now, with my little joke about going to prison, but I think human rights are not a debate topic. That's a fact. (Interviewee 1)

The styles of humor participants used or described were not uniform. Irony was often used to highlight contradictions or to subtly critique dominant narratives, particularly around migration or government rhetoric. Sarcasm, while similar, had a sharper tone and was more directly oppositional, often indicating frustration with mainstream discourses, and within the limited data pool of this research, it was mostly referenced by those who seek out political discourse actively. Mocking, on the other hand, was frequently directed at others, like family members, classmates, or public figures perceived as uninformed, as well as immigrants in some cases.

Following Billig's (2005) theory of ridicule and social order, these distinctions are significant. Irony and sarcasm allowed participants to express critique while preserving ambiguity, whereas mocking placed them in clear opposition to others. Each of these forms of humor acted as a boundary-making tool, reinforcing divisions between those "in the know" and those on the outside, for example, Interviewee 1 referred to some of her classmates as more informed, and others (Fidesz-aligned classmates) as less likely to understand:

> Yes, absolutely, my group of friends did [notice]. I'm not sure about everyone in the class, because I think there were a couple of Fidesz supporters among us, and there was one girl who was just completely lost when it came to understanding the world, so I don't think she picked up on it. But the three or four people

> I was really close with, I think they definitely did. I remember we'd sometimes glance at each other or just nod or something, it was absolutely like that. It felt like an inside joke, a shared reference. (Interviewee 1)

Jokes also provided a way for participants to manage discomfort or uncertainty without engaging in direct conflict:

> So I definitely think it [humor] is an important part of interacting with politics, and this is not a new thing, it's not that TikTok came up with it […], but [jokes about politics] exist since politics exists, so this is also a community-building tool that allows us to keep our sanity. (Interviewee 2)

4.3 Terminology and Meaning-Making

4.3.1 Framing and Influence

The language participants used to describe migrants and refugees reflected both internal belief systems and interactional dynamics. In many cases, participants adopted the exact terms introduced by me, often without modification. In others, they changed the framing, introducing alternative terms or clarifying distinctions they found important (e.g., differentiating between economic migrants and refugees fleeing war).

These patterns of alignment or resistance were consistent across individual interviews. Participants who mirrored my terminology also tended to describe themselves as less politically engaged and were more likely to use humor in their narratives. Conversely, those who insisted on their own vocabulary, often correcting or refining my phrasing, were typically the same individuals who rejected humor and emphasized their political awareness. This consistency suggests that responsiveness to external influence was not random but linked to broader self-presentation strategies.

4.3.2 Language as Ideological Positioning

Terminology also carried clear ideological implications. In the Hungarian media landscape, terms like *migráns* (migrant) have become loaded with negative connotations. Choosing to use or avoid such terms was therefore assumed not to be just a linguistic decision, but a political one. In certain cases, however, based on the data collected, interlocutors were

more consistent regarding the level of individuality in the terms they used than with the terms themselves. Participants who chose words like “refugee of war” signaled a more empathetic or internationally aligned perspective, and they were more insistent on their own terminology, while those who accepted others’ terminology reflected either alignment with or uncritical repetition of the narratives of others (including mine). Schaffer’s (2023) work on interpretivist interviewing emphasizes that such linguistic choices are shaped by the interview context, where participants respond not only to questions but also to the perceived values and expectations of the interviewer. These choices can be understood as a form of impression management, where language becomes a tool for performing belonging, alignment, or resistance. Drawing again on Goffman (1959), these moments of linguistic performance serve to construct a particular social identity for the duration of the interaction. The distinction between adopting and resisting the interviewer’s language reveals not just political orientation, but also the strategic considerations involved in self-presentation during a politically sensitive conversation.

Conclusion

This thesis has investigated how young Hungarian adults respond to government narratives about migration, with particular focus on the role of humor, language, and social interaction in everyday conversations. Through qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews and an accidental group encounter, the research has shown that responses to state-led anti-immigrant propaganda are neither monolithic nor overtly oppositional. Instead, they unfold in nuanced, often ambiguous ways through jokes and word choices, which reveal how interpersonal dynamics, and self-presentation strategies work in individual cases. Rather than measuring resistance through explicit political statements, I have focused on how meaning is generated and negotiated in everyday performances of identity, drawing on Erving Goffman's (1959) approach. This allowed for an in-depth understanding of how individuals engage with political discourse not only intellectually or ideologically, but socially, emotionally, and performatively, and how the figure of "the migrant" is created as part of the creation of the self-identity of the interlocutor.

Humor and terminology function as socially embedded tools through which young people respond to political questions. These tools reflect individual opinions and they are shaped by the presence and expectations of others, as well as the desire to maintain group belonging or performative identities. During the interviews, humor emerged not as a uniform sign of resistance, but as a flexible communicative strategy that could signal discomfort, complicity, critique, or social bonding. The same joke could carry different meanings depending on who told it, to whom, and in what context. Some participants made jokes to connect with me as the interviewer, sensing (or indicating) a shared ideological ground. Others used humor within peer groups to assert their place in the social hierarchy or to avoid deeper political engagement altogether. Another use for humor was present when participants were discussing the mental toll of learning about political events, referring to satire as a tool one could use to process news.

The terminology participants used to refer to immigrants and refugees revealed another aspect of meaning-making. Whether respondents adopted, tolerated, or resisted my word choices (terms like *migráns*, *bevándorló*, or *menekült*) was not incidental. It often aligned with broader self-presentation strategies: those who mirrored my vocabulary tended to be less politically assertive and more socially adaptive, while those who insisted on their own definitions typically expressed a stronger awareness of the ideological stakes embedded in language. This suggests that even minor linguistic choices are socio-politically significant and these can signal both broader affiliations, and attempts to manage impressions in socially sensitive interactions.

The interview data revealed the centrality of social belonging in shaping how young people talked about migration. Participants frequently positioned themselves in relation to their close-knit communities, like classmates, family members, romantic partners, and friend groups. These social groups served both as sources of information and as filters for political discussion. The degree of political engagement and the style of discourse were often depended on whether the participant felt that their environment was safe and comfortable, or unsafe and potentially repressing them. For example, some participants only spoke openly when they were sure about others sharing their political opinions, while others described withdrawing from political discourse altogether to avoid conflict or judgment, or in fear of being perceived as less knowledgeable.

The accidental focus group encounter provided additional insight into the performative nature of these interactions. In this group setting, humor was not an individual expression but a collectively shaped language through which group dynamics and social roles were enacted. These findings resonate with Judith Butler's (1997) theory of performativity and further affirm the role of humor as a tool for both conforming to and subtly challenging dominant narratives.

Another important observation was made about the interplay between perceived international legitimacy and national belonging. Several participants expressed anxiety about Hungary's image in Europe and distanced themselves from the government's anti-immigrant rhetoric by identifying with "Western" or "liberal" values. This created a layered form of identity performance, in which some interlocutors sought to maintain an internal sense of belonging to Europe by presenting themselves as rational, empathetic, or politically informed, often through rejecting joking about immigrants or using carefully chosen terms that conveyed humanitarian concern. Conversely, those less concerned with Hungary's international perception appeared more focused on cohesion within their immediate social environment and were more likely to adopt a humorous or less formal tone when discussing migration. A few instances during the interviews did not fit into either category above, representing a middle ground, where specific ways of joking were rejected (for example, joking about refugees), but other types of humor were described as welcome (like jokes about the government, or policies that the research participants found comical or absurd).

Overall, this thesis argues that public opinion around migration is not only shaped by top-down narratives or media framing but it is constantly reconstructed in informal social settings. In these moments political positions are performed and refined, often strategically. Participants present, adjust, and change the ways they present their opinions depending on who they are speaking to, what they are trying to convey about themselves, and how they interpret the expectations of their audience.

Today, when migration remains one of the most polarizing political issues in Hungary and across Europe, it is important to understand how opinions are formed, and how they are shared, altered, and restructured.

The limitations of this thesis include the limited data pool and time spent with each interlocutor, as well as the information that the research participants had on me, as the

interviewer. For these reasons, further research would be recommended with more participants and both known and unknown interviewers, preferably with several interview sessions, and planned focus groups for the data collection. To strengthen the relevance to Europe further (although Hungarian participants are not assumed to be significantly different from potential interlocutors from other European countries), the research could be repeated in different rural and urban settings in multiple European countries.

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