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The Policy Implications of Divided Nationhood in the European Neighborhood:

Lessons from the Case of Hungary

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This policy memo explores the challenges facing states in post-communist Europe that must increasingly position themselves in relation to a multifaceted set of external populations that can claim national membership, a condition I call “[divided nationhood](#)”. Divided nations navigate long-standing commitments to kin-minorities - communities of ethnic kin living as national minorities in neighboring countries – as well as manage their relationships to diaspora communities generated by earlier waves of emigration and to communities of more recent emigrants within the European Union. The [unbounding](#) of borders through the process of European integration over last 10-15 years in Europe has led to an era of almost unprecedented mobility under conditions of relatively free movement. This has benefited states with external national populations, such as Hungary, by easing and legitimizing cross-border citizenship and support policies aimed at ethnic kin populations in neighboring states, and by opening up access to the external kin-state for members of the national minority communities.

However, this era of mobility shaped by European Union expansion has also brought with it serious challenges. First, it set off waves of increased emigration from [East to West](#) in Europe, generating new and complicated relationships between emigrant communities, the West European states and societies in which they resided, and their divided home states. Second, the increased transnationalism within the European political and social space also generated new fears and inter-group competition made worse through populist discourses and policies of economic protectionism driven by anxieties around mobility, migration, and [demographic change](#). Finally, many of the possible hopes for and benefits of mobility and supranational coordination within Europe have been curtailed by moments in which borders have rebounded and states have turned inwards. These moments of rebounding and retrenchment include Brexit and its impact on intra-European Union migrants who had made their home in the U.K.; the physical closing of borders and the exposed precarity of “[essential](#)” intra-EU migrants and those from [states bordering the EU](#) in response to the Covid-19 pandemic; and the political closure reflected by the failure of the European Union to collectively solve problems endemic to migrant and minority populations within Europe.

This memo highlights the policy implications of these challenges for divided nations, focusing primarily on the case of Hungary's policies towards its emigrants and its co-ethnic kin minorities in neighboring states. These policies matter because they impact the physical mobility, political mobilization, and integration potential of populations living as othered minorities struggling for rights and recognition in their states of residence. Engaging members of the divided nation also has implications for inter-state relations and regional security, as [kin-state politics](#) and [diaspora engagement policies](#) can be perceived as undue influence into the domestic relations of another state.

The memo makes three main observations: 1. Political and policy commitments to one part of the divided nation may impact whether and how a state engages other external populations. In particular, there are often tensions and tradeoffs between kin-state policies towards external kin populations and policies to engage emigrants; 2. Domestic political strategies and priorities both drive and complicate the state's ability to engage and support multiple external populations. We can see this tension clearly in the way that the Hungarian government's move towards [populist nationalism](#) and anti-migrant protectionism has constrained its ability to engage its own emigrants; and 3. There continue to be significant barriers to a broader European approach to integrating and engaging parts of the divided nation. Hungary's ability to assert Hungarian national interests within a European framework may have reached its limits due to border retrenchment, the limited support of European Union for the Minority SafePack Initiative, and the Hungarian governing party's recent rift with the EPP.

### **Emigrant Engagement Policies**

A number of states in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe experienced significant waves of emigration to Western Europe in the years since joining the European Union. This was a logical consequence of joining a highly differential Europe-wide labor market, but also a source of much concern about the [long-term economic and demographic effects](#) of population loss in this region.

Intra-EU emigrants have a number of characteristics that make them uniquely important as an external population, but also uniquely challenging for states to engage. They are the most likely to send remittances home, maintain homeland citizenship and vote in homeland elections, and as well as have strong cultural, linguistic, and family ties to the homeland. Intra-EU migrants often come from younger segments of the labor force, which makes their loss from the homeland labor market greater over the long term and makes them more likely to stay abroad for longer. These emigrants also tend to be workers from either the lower or the higher-skilled ends of the educational and labor markets, leaving difficult-to-fill gaps at home. And these emigrants are politically and [symbolically](#) important, as they represent the failure of the home state to provide opportunities for their own citizens. Intra-EU emigrants are also difficult for homeland states to engage because of their mobility within the European Union, which makes them harder to count, keep track of, and identify organizationally.

Despite these difficulties, many states have attempted to engage emigrant communities within Europe, often taking cues from the playbook of [diaspora engagement policies](#) that seek to establish and maintain social, political, and economic ties to citizens – or their descendants - living in other states, and creating incentives and pathways for possible return migration. The policy responses to emigration, however, have varied greatly. Some states, like Poland or Romania, integrated more recent intra-EU emigrants into existing policy frameworks for engaging older diaspora communities around the world, and have emphasized ties with emigrants along with ties to other external populations, such as ethnic kin communities in neighboring states. Other states, however, have done much less to try and engage emigrant communities, and in fact, have marginalized emigrants within the policy regimes and institutions of transnational engagement.

We see this in the case of Hungary, where the condition of divided nationhood and the policy priorities inherent in the Hungarian government's brand of populist nationalism have combined to significantly limit its responses to the most recent wave of emigration. On one hand, Hungary's [pre-existing commitments](#) to engaging and supporting Hungarian kin minorities in neighboring countries, and the key role those external members of the nation have played in Fidesz's [foreign](#)

[policy](#) and nationalist legitimization, have left little space for the development of effective policies to engage Hungarian emigrants throughout Europe. On the other hand, the Hungarian government's increasing use since the 2015 "refugee crisis" of harsh anti-migrant rhetoric and policies as part of its domestic political strategy has led the government to [downplay the existence of Hungarian emigrants](#). The uncomfortable reality of increasing numbers of emigrants after 2010, corresponding with Fidesz's return to government, and the manufactured panic over a declining flow of migrants and refugees after 2015, led the government to redefine migrants to signify only those coming from outside of Europe. More specifically, migrants could only mean those coming from outside the broader European cultural space, since the government was also encouraging and easing the movement of ethnic Hungarians in non-EU members states (Ukraine and Serbia) to Hungary through its preferential work visa and [citizenship policies](#). Hungarian emigrants, therefore, were refashioned by the government into "young adventurers" or "guestworkers" exploring Europe.<sup>1</sup> Unilaterally separating Hungarians from the category of migrants has made more difficult the development of effective emigrant engagement policies at a time when intra-EU migrants are facing increasing insecurity due to Covid-related travel restrictions, rising anti-migrant sentiment, and the consequences of Brexit.

### **Kin-state policies**

The tensions and trade-offs between domestic political commitments and divided nation policies can also be seen in Hungary's kin-state policies. The governing Fidesz party in Hungary has long staked its nationalist credentials on being the primary defender of the Hungarian minority communities in neighbouring countries, and has repeatedly argued that assimilation and out-migration from those communities are the biggest threats to the survival of the divided Hungarian nation. Yet, Hungary's governing party has arguably made it easier for ethnic Hungarian minorities to leave their homelands by offering them [non-resident ethnic citizenship](#), and has done so during

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<sup>1</sup> A testament to the current sensitivity around associating Hungarians with migrants, a Hungarian journalist was [recently sued](#) by critics close to the government for describing early Hungarian settlers as "migrants" because this "violates the dignity of the nation."

a period of population decline within Hungary. The migration of minority Hungarians from countries neighbouring Hungary can be seen, therefore, as [part of a strategy](#) for Hungary to minimize its own demographic and labour market problems by drawing in workers of Hungarian nationality. At the same time, the Fidesz-led government has massively [increased](#) the scale and breadth of funding for Hungarian national communities in neighbouring countries, including schools, universities, economic development programs, sports and cultural programs, and churches.

The retrenchment of national borders in the European neighbourhood and the Hungarian government's own complicated relationship with the European Union has also revealed some of the limits of transnational and supranational approaches to divided nationhood. The expansion of non-resident citizenship and the funding of minority institutions in other countries by Hungary has [faced pushback](#) from both Slovakia and [Ukraine](#), a state undergoing significant security and state capacity challenges framed by its relationship to another "kin-state", [Russia](#). The Ukrainian government has pushed back on dual citizenship tied to external kin-states and has [targeted](#) domestic minority groups that receive money from foreign governments. The reluctance of the European Union to fully [implement the Minority SafePack Initiative](#) cut off one of the avenues pushed hard by Hungarian minority organizations and supported by the Hungarian government to further a collective rights framework for minority protection in Europe. And Fidesz's departure from the European People's Party (EPP) weakens the prospects for Hungarian [intra-ethnic coordination](#) with the European Parliament. All the major Hungarian minority parties from the region had joined Fidesz in the EPP, giving them the ability to have a relatively strong Hungarian group within the Euro-party. However, with Fidesz exploring new options and Hungarian minority parties in Romania and elsewhere signalling that [they will stay in the EPP](#) for now, the prospects for this kind of supranational coordination as part of Hungary's kin-state strategy appear diminished.

## Conclusion

Divided nations - a category that can describe not only Hungary, but [Poland](#), [Russia](#), Bulgaria, [Turkey](#), Russia, [Germany](#), Romania, and Croatia – lay bare the complex boundaries of identity and belonging that cross borders within and across the European Union and its neighborhood. This memo has highlighted some of the policy challenges particular to divided nations in the European Union’s relatively open transnational political space, a space that has recently undergone a partial retrenchment of physical and political borders. In particular, I have drawn attention to the difficulties such states face in responding to changing transnational conditions while balancing the demands of very different external populations as well as the logic – and sometimes illogic – of domestic politics. We can imagine that the tensions and contradictions in policy responses to the needs of domestic populations versus recent emigrants versus external kin populations in neighboring countries will continue. This suggests that policymakers within the European Union need to do more to take the condition of divided nationhood into account when shaping policies related to mobility, minority rights, and [cross-border membership](#) and [support](#) programs.

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