Criticized Abroad, Hungary’s Orban Gains Support at Home With Migrant Crackdown

Move to seal border, shut out migrants marks Hungarian prime minister’s latest clash with EU

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BUDAPEST—Searing images of Hungarian riot police shooting water cannon at migrants from behind a razor-wire border fence have put Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his anti-migrant crackdown in the sights of critics in Europe and beyond.

But the abrupt closing of Hungary’s 110-mile border with Serbia this week have also turned the premier into one of few European leaders to have bolstered their popularity at home amid the continent’s migration crisis. Outside Hungary, Mr. Orban has also become a hero to anti-immigrant activists, such as protesters in Poland who during a recent demonstration waved Hungarian flags.

The polarizing effect of Mr. Orban’s crackdown has been on full display as Hungary’s use of water cannons and tear gas on migrants Wednesday drew fierce condemnation from neighboring governments, multilateral
organizations and opinion leaders. Serbia’s prime minister assailed Hungary for what he called “brutal treatment” of migrants. U.N Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he was “shocked” by Hungary’s actions, calling them unacceptable.

While Mr. Orban may have regained control of the border, “it’s a Pyrrhic victory,” said Judy Dempsey, a senior associate at the Carnegie Europe think tank. “What does winning mean when you close the border and there are queues of traffic? What does it mean for trade and the movement of capital? If this is the kind of win Orban wants, it’s going to be terribly damaging for Europe.”

Since Tuesday, there has been little traffic across the southern border, as riot police, backed by helicopters, man a recently erected 11.5-foot fence. Crossing illegally is now a criminal offense punishable by up to three years in prison.

The 52-year-old Mr. Orban, a conservative populist who has been in office since 2010, insists he is doing what most people want, but other leaders are afraid to do because of today’s pervasive political correctness. “You can see that we live in a hypocritical world, and in this department we are hundreds of years behind others,” he said in a recent talk to members of Hungary’s diplomatic corps. He went on: “In most European countries—I could honestly say in 90% of European countries—there is a gap between the opinion of the people and the policy pursued by the elite.” Polls show Mr. Orban’s anti-immigration policies have helped him gain support in
recent months and blunt the momentum of a far-right opposition, which has emerged as the second largest political force in Hungary.

In an interview published Wednesday in the German daily Die Welt, Mr. Orban argued that the very future of Europe was threatened by the migrants, most of whom are fleeing the war-torn Middle East and Afghanistan. Mr. Orban referred to “a competition of cultures” between Christianity and Islam. “It’s clear that Christians will lose this competition if one allows many Muslims to come to Europe,” he said.

Muslim societies, he added, “put more weight on family, children, social cohesion. And for this reason, eventually there will be more of them than us. That’s simple mathematics.”

Before the crisis, Mr. Orban had crossed swords with Brussels over a series of laws the EU said undermined Hungarian democracy by expanding his government’s control over the media, the judiciary and the electoral process. “The dictator is coming,” European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker could be heard saying jokingly on an open television microphone when Mr. Orban arrived at a summit in May.

But criticism from other European capitals has become much more heated amid the migrant crisis. Hungary has obligations under international law to allow the entry of political refugees, EU leaders say.

Officials in Budapest, though, insist that the overwhelming majority of the migrants are seeking economic opportunity and thus aren’t covered under
refugee law. In any case, since most of them entered the EU in Greece, they should have stayed there as mandated by EU asylum rules, they argue.

When, earlier this month, the Orban government tried to ship some migrants to a refugee camp while making them believe they were headed for Austria, Austria’s chancellor likened the move to deportation programs carried out by the Nazis. Hungary responded by summoning Austria’s ambassador and accusing the chancellor of conducting a smear campaign against it.

This week, as Mr. Orban rolled out his border clampdown, Romania’s prime minister criticized Hungary, saying “aggressive laws, prison and brutality will not resolve problems.” Croatia’s prime minister said “barbed wire in Europe in the 21st century is not an answer, it’s a threat.”

At home, such deluge of criticism may even be helping Mr. Orban, analysts say. “It builds his ego and strengthens him politically,” says Andras Laszlo Pap, a specialist on law and human rights at Central European University in Budapest. “After all, you have to be doing something significant to be making international headlines when you are prime minister of a country of 10 million with few natural resources.”

The majority of Hungarians seemed to be backing the prime minister. Some 82 percent of Hungarians surveyed by Hungarian think tank Szazadveg in early September said the government should pursue stricter migration policies.
“It’s not politically correct to say this, but Central and Eastern Europe has been a nice place because it doesn’t have unintegrated neighborhoods like some large Western European cities where the local language is not spoken at some places,” Gabor Varkonyi, a 30-year-old economist.

He added: “Let me ask the only question: where is the end of all this influx? It’s endless. I agree that we have pulled the plug from the bottle and the genie is out.”

Janos Kassai, a 54-year-old security guard in Budapest, said: “Mr. Orban is perfectly right. We have to defend our culture. There’s a threat that people who are undesirable, who would do bad things to Hungary, such as terrorists may land here.”

Before the shutdown of the border, the surge of migrants—and the Orban government’s hostility toward them—had provoked a stirring of social activism among some Hungarians who took a more welcoming view. Thousands organized themselves on social media to set up aid stations for migrants. Mr. Pap, who participated in the aid effort, said it was a transformative experience for many Hungarians. The challenge now, he added, is to turn it into a permanent social movement that can serve as a counterweight to Mr. Orban, but that won’t be easy.

For some analysts, Mr. Orban’s strategy could backfire in coming years. The continent’s slowing birthrate means migration will be important to Europe’s future, whether politicians like it or not, said Westy A. Egmont, director of the Immigrant Integration Lab at Boston College.
“Germany is not foolish saying they need more workers as older workers age out,” he said. “Hungary will starve itself and suffer consequences not in the courtroom but in the boardroom and in the market place, as well as in the moral realm of how it’s perceived in history.”

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