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Viktor Orbán's Potemkin referendum

Hosting refugees is not Hungary's biggest problem.

by Goran Buldioski

On October 2, Hungarians will vote in a referendum on Europe's plan to relocate refugees throughout the continent. The controversial vote is being heavily promoted by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and perceived similarities to Britain's decision to leave the European Union have heightened interest in its outcome.

And yet, it would be a mistake to give too much weight to Orbán's referendum. The vote is more of a public relations endeavor than an expression of democratic will — an attempt to strengthen Orbán's image as the leader of an emerging populist, nationalistic and regressive Europe.

To begin with, the referendum would not resolve any real policy issue. The ballot question is vague, as well as leading: "Do you agree that the European Union should be able to prescribe the mandatory settlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary without the consent of parliament?" And it doesn't have any bearing on actual EU policy regarding resettlement quotas.

The question references "mandatory settlement," but the EU has proposed only that countries help Italy and Greece cope with large number of arrivals of refugees by processing their asylum claims and deciding whether asylum should be granted or not. In fact, the original proposal included relocating refugees from Hungary, but the government declined the offer.

Even Orbán has [admitted](#) that the referendum can't alter current EU policy. Nevertheless, that fact has not stopped the Hungarian government from [launching an ad campaign](#) on billboards around the country linking recent terrorist attacks in Europe to the influx of refugees on the continent. In meters-high blue and yellow letters, the ads ask: "Did you know that since the beginning of the migrant crisis, more than 300 people have died in Europe in terror attacks?"

Second, unlike the British referendum, where public opinion was almost equally divided, Orbán does not need a plebiscite to gauge how voters feel. When the refugee situation worsened last year, citizens and civil society organizations flocked to the Keleti train station to offer food, water and supplies. But over the past several months, polls have shown overwhelming support for Orbán's more restrictive approach. The [most recent survey by Závec](#) revealed that 75 percent of those planning to vote intend to mark "No," as Orbán has advocated.

The referendum is the best tool Orbán's Fidesz party has to improve its ratings. The party has been battered by corruption scandals and dragged down by the bankruptcy of Questor (one of the country's largest investment companies), and citizens are dissatisfied with the state of public health and education.

In February 2015, Fidesz's approval rating was 27 percent. But after the migration crisis intensified and Orbán cracked down on asylum seekers from Kosovo, the Middle East and Africa, its popularity climbed to 32 percent in January this year and 37 percent last month.

Meanwhile, Hungary has pursued contradictory migration policies. Orbán's government isn't against all immigrants, just the ones whose existence can be used to stir up prejudice and fear. His policies favor economic migrants looking for jobs over refugees seeking safe haven. Since 2013, the Hungarian government has issued 3,649 residency permits to people who purchased Hungarian bonds in the value of €250,000 (now increased to €300,000). Most of those investors are from China, Russia or the Gulf states. This number is three times more than the quota of asylum seekers Hungary was requested to process as part of the EU proposal last year.



A refugee warms himself by a campfire in Roszke, Hungary | Dan Kitwood/Getty

Hungary actually needs migrants, even if it doesn't want them. The Association of Telecommunications, Electronics and IT companies [recently reported](#) a shortage of 22,000 information technology specialists across the country. The public health sector is also lacking personnel, as are others that require skilled labor. Recently, seasonal workers from Mexico were brought in to produce sun shields for convertible cars in a small town called Szügy.

Unemployment among the local population in the town's county is between 20 and 25 percent, but locals lack the expertise required for such jobs. In fact, qualified Hungarians have been leaving the country in droves. The Hungarian Central Statistical Office registered 420,000 departures between 1989 and 2013. According to the [International Organization for Migration](#), 31,000 Hungarians moved abroad in 2014, a 30 percent increase from the previous year. Young people, in particular, are fleeing in search of better opportunities; 7.4 percent of Hungarians aged 18 to 49 lived in another country in 2013.

Hungary's upcoming vote deserves to be in the spotlight, but it should not be used to amplify dangerous xenophobic rhetoric. The question Orbán has posed obscures many others. How can Hungarians improve their economy, their education system or their health care? If those were the questions being asked, the country might realize that migrants — including asylum seekers — could be part of the solution.

Goran Buldioski is director of the Open Society Initiative for Europe.

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