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Hungary heads for a vote that could flout E.U. order to accept migrants

Brussels weighs steep financial penalties for nations that don't comply

by [James McAuley](#)

PARIS — In a blatant slap at the European Union's authority, Hungary's Supreme Court on Tuesday paved the way for a referendum defying an E.U. order to resettle tens of thousands of migrants among member states.

The proposed popular vote has long been pushed by Viktor Orban, Hungary's hard-line prime minister, whose outspoken anti-immigrant platform and distaste for E.U. leadership are well documented.

The referendum would be a direct affront to Brussels bureaucrats and to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who have been pushing for a permanent system of mandatory migrant quotas across the European Union.

The Hungarian vote is expected to be held this year, and its results will be valid if voter turnout exceeds 50 percent.

When they vote, Hungarians will answer the following question: "Do you want the European Union to prescribe the mandatory settlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary even without the consent of parliament?"

This is ultimately a policy question, but Orban has said before that voting "no" is a vote for something far bigger: Hungary's independence.

As the E.U. continues to grapple with the migrant crisis, such challenges also raise the question of how the organization deals with renegade member states that openly defy directives from Brussels.

In response to insubordination like Hungary's proposed plebiscite, the E.U. may levy heavy penalties for governments that do not comply with directives for the resettlement of migrants.

There have been reports that these fines could be as steep as 250,000 euros (about \$288,000) per migrant, but E.U. officials would not confirm the exact amount to The Washington Post. Details are scheduled to be revealed in Brussels on Wednesday.

In a Europe already ridden with internal divisions over what to do with migrants, many fear the consequences of a financial penalty clause.

“It’s going to create as many problems as it tries to solve,” said Marc Pierini, a former career E.U. diplomat and Brussels-based policy analyst. “It will build up recrimination against the E.U. — ‘against Brussels,’ as they say in other capitals.”

“I don’t see it as a very sound piece of policy. In my view, it’s no more than an additional sign of extreme nervousness.”

In the end, the referendum in Hungary is only the latest grievance against the European Union.

After years of economic stagnation across the continent and a wave of terrorist attacks in 2015 whose execution largely depended on loopholes within the European security apparatus, many member states grew frustrated with E.U. bureaucracy even before more than 1 million migrants arrived on the continent last year.

Most notably, perhaps, Britain will vote next month on whether to exit the European Union altogether, a move commonly referred to as “Brexit.” The June 23 vote is the culmination of a long campaign of British dissatisfaction with European bureaucracy and leadership.

Whether it succeeds or fails, Brexit has ultimately established a precedent that many in Brussels view as dangerous: the option of saying goodbye.

In an already fraught climate, the migrant crisis presents another massive problem for Europe to solve collectively in the months and years ahead — and one that will require significant financial and material investment to solve.

The plans that E.U. leaders will announce Wednesday are, in theory, a road map out of the migrant crisis. But they are also an attempt to maintain control of an increasingly unruly, and even unwary, continent.

“It’s a very tense moment in the commission,” Pierini said Tuesday, referring to the European Union’s executive body. “Tomorrow is the day when you have to put down on paper the price for handing off the refugee crisis.”