

The Economist
October 1, 2016

Hungary's anti-migrant vote

Boundary issues

A refugee referendum is mostly about showing Brussels who is boss

BUDAPEST



HUNGARY will hold a referendum on October 2nd. (Such things have become a fad in Europe.) The question is: “Do you want the European Union to be entitled to prescribe the mandatory resettlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary without the consent of parliament?” (Note the neutral wording.) The referendum was prompted by the EU’s Emergency Response Mechanism, adopted in September 2015, under which 160,000 of the migrants who began surging into

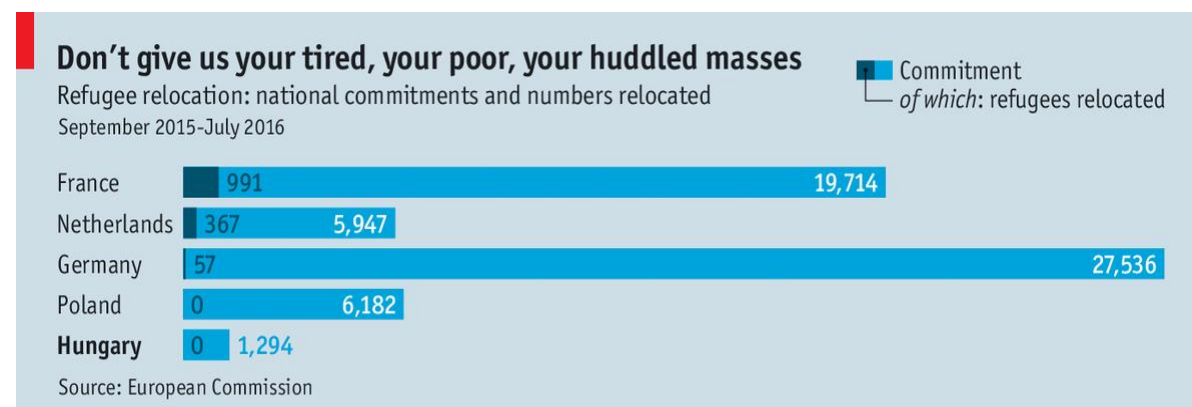
Europe last year are to be shared out between member states according to quotas. The decision passed in the EU’s Council of Ministers by majority vote, but four countries voted against it: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania and Hungary. Hungary and Slovakia have challenged the system in the European Court of Justice. It is “unlawful, unworkable and dangerous”, says Zoltan Kovacs, a government spokesman.

The referendum is largely a popularity ploy by Viktor Orban (pictured, right), Hungary's populist prime minister, and will have no legal effect. It is also a challenge to the authority of Brussels and the leadership of Germany's Angela Merkel, who champions the relocation scheme. Mrs Merkel sees accepting refugees as a European commitment whose burdens must be shared. Mr Orban, who has clashed with the EU over his government's illiberal media and economic policies, wants to stop the EU from issuing shared rules on asylum and much else. He wants the union to be a trading bloc of sovereign countries that keeps out of matters like migration and human rights. With sympathetic governments in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland, Mr Orban thinks his vision for the future of Europe will prevail.

The government is leaving nothing to chance. It has plastered posters calling for a "no" vote across the country. "Did you know that Brussels is planning to relocate a town's worth of illegal immigrants in Hungary?" asks one. (In fact, asylum applicants are not illegal immigrants, and Hungary's quota is a mere 1,294.) A leaflet sent to millions of homes claims that immigration has created "hundreds" of "no-go zones" in London, Brussels and Berlin. Britain, Belgium and Germany issued protests. Tension is rising. On September 24th a bomb exploded in downtown Budapest, injuring two police officers.

Polls predict a comfortable majority of voters will choose "no". Outside Budapest and the major cities, Hungary is a conservative and insular country, where many people speak no foreign languages and have little experience of those with different skin colours or faiths. But more than 50% of Hungary's roughly 8m eligible voters must turn out for the result to be valid, and they may not. An invalid result would be seen as a failure for Mr Orban and his ruling Fidesz party, says Peter Kreko of Political Capital, a Budapest think-tank.

One reason for the government to worry is that people have grown more sanguine about migration. At the height of the crisis in August 2015, thousands of migrants poured across the Hungarian border every day. Since then the government has built razor-wire fences along the frontiers with Serbia and Croatia. Of the handful of migrants who still enter, most are caught and expelled. The government, say critics, is diverting attention from issues such as corruption, health care and education.



The reduction in migration has been purchased with cruelty, say human-rights groups. A report this week from Amnesty International claims that asylum-seekers in Hungary, including unaccompanied children, suffer abuse, violence and unlawful detention. “Orban has replaced the rule of law with the rule of fear,” says John Dalhuisen, Amnesty’s Director for Europe. It is almost impossible for asylum-seekers to assert their legal rights, says Gabor Gyulai of the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, a watchdog. The government has “intentionally destroyed” the asylum system for political reasons.

Officials dismiss these claims as “sheer lies”. Hungary is simply protecting its border as required under Europe’s Schengen agreement, says Mr Kovacs. Legitimate claims for asylum, he insists, will be processed. Yet since the start of 2015 Hungary has received 203,898 asylum applications, and granted only 880 people any form of protection, according to the government.

It is not clear how anti-migrant the public is. A poll in September by Publicus Research found that just 37% thought Hungary should accept as many refugees as it could, but 64% felt that “it is our duty to help refugees.” In any case, the referendum campaign faces little organised opposition. The Socialists and some smaller parties have called for voters to abstain. And it seems to be helping Fidesz, whose support climbed in a recent poll to 37%, while the ultranationalist Jobbik party fell to 12%.

The most spirited resistance has come from a fringe group called the Two-Tailed Dog Party. Together with a number of NGOs, including the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, the party is calling for voters to spoil their ballots. It has crowd-funded advertising posters satirising the government’s “Did you know?” campaign. “Did you know a tree may fall on your head?” asks one. Falling trees or no, if the opposition’s biggest achievement is to keep voters away from the polls, it is not clear whether anyone will hear it.

Correction (September 29th): The original version of this article said that the relocation scheme was approved by the European Council; it was approved by the EU's Council of Ministers. The article also implied that the referendum was a vote on the EU's current relocation scheme. Rather, it concerns whether any future relocation schemes should be allowed. The article has been corrected.