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Hungarian anti-migrant campaign picks up speed ahead of vote



In this Aug. 13, 2016 picture a person on motorbike passes a government poster promoting the Oct. 2 referendum against any EU quotas to resettle migrants. reading “Did you know? The Paris attacks were carried out by immigrants.” in Budapest. A month ahead of a referendum seeking popular support for its opposition to European Union migrant quotas, the Hungarian government’s relentless anti-migrant campaign is inescapable and shows no sign of letting up. (Pablo Gorondi/Associated Press)

by Pablo Gorondi

BUDAPEST, Hungary — A month ahead of Hungary’s referendum on European Union migrant quotas, the government’s relentless anti-migrant campaign has become inescapable and shows no sign of letting up.

Anti-migrant messages cover the country on billboards and in ads on state television as Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his Fidesz party seek popular support for their opposition to the quotas, which would distribute migrants between the EU’s member states. And soon pamphlets about the referendum will be delivered by mail to all voters.

The billboards and TV ads tell Hungarians things like “Did you know? Since the start of the immigration crisis, over 300 people in Europe died in terror attacks” or “Did you know? Just from Libya, nearly a million immigrants want to come to Europe.”

The government says the resettlement in Hungary of large numbers of migrants would destroy Hungarian communities and culture, while critics say the “hate campaign” is bringing out the worst in Hungarians.

The Oct. 2 referendum question is — “Do you want the European Union to prescribe the mandatory settlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary even without the consent of Parliament?” The government says voting “no” favors Hungary’s independence.

Experts say the migration issue has been a bonanza for Orban and his anti-migrant Fidesz party, which has avoided the downturn in the polls usually suffered by Hungarian governments midway through their four-year terms.

“Orban is seeking to mobilize voters and keep them faithful to Fidesz,” said Nick Sitter, professor of public policy at the Central European University in Budapest. “He has managed to avoid the massive drop in popularity thanks to the refugee crisis.”

Sitter said the migration issue also allows Fidesz to fend off challenges from the far-right Jobbik party, a key opposition group, “by proving itself sufficiently nationalist and anti-European.”

The government already organized an anti-migrant billboard campaign last year, when nearly 400,000 people passed through the country, coming up north on the route through the Balkans, on their way west to Germany and other favored destinations. The number of migrants and refugees dropped drastically after the construction of razor-wire fences on the borders of Serbia and Croatia.

Hungary is also beefing up its police force with 3,000 new “border hunters” to tighten control at the fences and introduced controversial legislation which allows officials to return migrants to Serbia if they are caught within 8 kilometers (5 miles) of the border.

As with the earlier billboard campaign, the strongest and maybe most effective counter-campaign is being carried out by the Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party, which uses comedy and satire to ridicule the government billboards.

With some \$100,000 received from 4,000 donors, the group is setting up 1,000 of their own “Did you know?” billboards across the country with messages like “An average Hungarian sees more UFOs in his lifetime than migrants,” “There is war in Syria” and “Most crimes of corruption are committed by politicians.”

Two-Tailed Dog Party President Gergely Kovacs said the vast amounts of money spent on the campaign by the government — which won’t say how much until after the referendum — have been effective.

“The amount of wickedness the government has been able to draw out of people is absolutely damaging,” Kovacs said. “The hate campaign has worked.”

The strong anti-migrant sentiment has seeped deeply into the country and even Pope Francis has become a frequent target of criticism among Fidesz supporters for his message of acceptance and charity toward refugees.

Zsolt Bayer, a columnist and Fidesz party member said the pope was either “a demented old man who is totally unfit to be the pope or a scoundrel” because he spoke in the same breath about acts of violence committed by Catholics and Muslims, while documentary filmmaker Fruzsina Skrabski said the pope’s statements on refugees and migrants were not “sufficiently thoughtful.”

There seems to have been little coordination between opposition parties about their stance on the referendum, which, experts said, was par for the course.

“There is no united strategy on the part of the opposition which is obvious since their interests are different,” said analyst Kornelia Magyar of the Magyar Progressive Institute.

While the far-right Jobbik supports the government position against the migrant quotas, the Socialist party, the largest left-wing group, has pronounced itself against the referendum but said it would back the government against any EU quotas.

About 4 million citizens will have to cast valid votes to exceed the 50 percent minimum turnout that is needed for the referendum to be valid.

The Two-Tail Dog Party’s billboards carry a uniform slogan at the bottom — “A stupid answer to a stupid question: Vote invalidly!” — as they are one of several groups, including the Hungarian Helsinki Committee and the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, urging voters to cast invalid ballots by, for example, putting an “x” in both the “yes” and “no” boxes.

Three small opposition parties, meanwhile, will also launch a more modest campaign with up to 400 billboards from Sept. 15, showing a man and a woman sitting on a couch, raising their middle fingers to a government referendum ad on their TV screen.

“We are trying to counterweigh a hate campaign. We are being provocative because we want to make very clear what our answer is,” said Viktor Szigetvari, president of the Together party, which, along with the Modern Hungary Movement and the Dialogue for Hungary party, is urging voters to boycott the referendum.

Even if turnout fails to reach the 50 percent threshold, “no” votes are expected to be in the overwhelming majority, benefiting Orban and Fidesz.

“If Fidesz can get more votes now than in 2014, they can say that the government’s support has grown and they will be able to turn the result of the referendum, even if it is invalid, in their favor,” Magyar said.

Fidesz got 2.26 million votes in 2014, when it secured a two-thirds parliamentary majority, since lost in by-elections.

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