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The cynical thinking behind Hungary's bizarre referendum

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Orbán is on a high after the Brexit vote. EPA/Olivier Hoslet

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Encouraged by Brexit, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has decided to run a vote of his own. He isn't asking to leave the EU, but on October 2 his country will go to the polls in what can only be described as an anti-EU, anti-refugee referendum.

The Hungarian people will be asked whether they are willing to accept EU quotas for resettling refugees coming to Europe. The final quotas have not yet been agreed, but Hungary will vote on whether to accept or reject 1,294 refugees.

The first thing to note about this vote is the question on the ballot paper. It is so biased and misleading, it's hard to imagine how it was even allowed:

Do you want the European Union to be entitled to prescribe the mandatory settlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary without the consent of parliament?

The European Union is not forcing Hungary to accept mandatory settlement of refugees. Brussels is only requesting that Budapest should process their applications and to decide whether they are eligible for asylum.

But this vote is perhaps not a totally surprising development. Orbán has been vocal about his view that his country is too poor to take people in. He also presents refugees as a cultural threat. And the Hungarian government has, for some time, been running a billboard campaign linking refugees with terrorism in Europe.

Unwelcome guests

When large numbers of refugees started coming into central Europe from Turkey via Greece, Hungary found itself directly in their path. During the summer of 2015, tens of thousands of refugees travelled through Hungary to Germany and Sweden, with very little help from the Hungarian government. It ignored the provisions of the 1951 Geneva Convention, which requires all countries to assess applications for asylum and to grant it to those whose lives are genuinely threatened.

The refugee crisis laid bare major cultural differences between EU member states in the west and those in the east. While every government except Germany showed reluctance to help, the so-called Visegrad group – the former communist states of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic – assumed an openly hostile attitude towards them.

For most of the past two centuries, the historical cultural narrative of these four countries has been based on defensive nationalism and on the notion of victimhood. The notion of defending pure, small, vulnerable national communities from foreign influence has been potent. Much more than in Western Europe, a narrative was quickly constructed that framed the refugees from the Middle East and from Africa as an outside menace.

A brutal response

Central European politicians have quickly discovered that the wave of Islamophobia which has seized their countries is a very useful political tool for deflecting attention away from the unsolved problems of their societies.

Leading politicians in the four Visegrad countries have been shamelessly using the strong anti-refugee feelings in their countries for their own political aims. Orbán has been the most brutal in his approach.

In direct defiance of the Geneva Conventions and EU refugee policy, Orbán had a razor-wire fence built on the southern border to prevent refugees from entering Hungarian territory. Of 177,135 asylum applications to Hungary, only 146 were approved last year. Anyone seeking to enter illegally is prosecuted.

The excesses of the Hungarian authorities have recently included the placing of frightening masks made of root vegetables on the Hungarian border fence in a bid to deter new arrivals.



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Some more scarecrows at the #Hungary-an border fence, put out to frighten #migrants. Source:

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When Syrian refugees amassed in horrible conditions at the Budapest main railway station last summer, many individual Hungarians tried to help. This displeased the

government, which went as far as to order state TV not to broadcast images of refugee children. Many saw this as a move to discourage sympathy for the stranded people. Months on, the sustained propaganda is working. Anti-refugee feeling has grown.

Political opportunism


Over the past few years, Orbán and his ruling Fidesz party have had a paralysing effect on Hungarian democracy. He has recently declared that Hungary “will not be a colony” and won’t “live according to the commands of foreign powers”. He declared that he intends to build an “illiberal democracy” more akin to China, Russia, Turkey or Singapore than an EU member state.

However, this vote is not a vote to leave the EU. Orbán knows Hungary would not make it on its own. He wants all the economic benefits of EU membership but does not want to follow the democratic EU rules. He knows that, when it comes to the refugee crisis, the EU is essentially helpless as there are no mechanisms to force him to follow the rules.

He has limited the powers of the judiciary, purged the civil service and public service media of those who are not his ardent supporters. He uses his defiance of the European Union in the refugee question in order to boost his flagging popularity at home. And it works.

At the beginning of 2015, before the refugee crisis, Fidesz’s approval rating was 27%. After Orbán’s crackdown on refugees, its popularity has now grown to 37%. According to a recent opinion poll in Hungary, up to 75% of Hungarians intending to participate in Orbán’s referendum will vote “No” – according to his wishes.

The mood of rebellion continues in Europe, buoyed by Britain’s vote to leave. And while Orbán won’t go so far as to hold a referendum on Hungary leaving, he can’t resist the opportunity to use the populist momentum to his own political advantage. So why not whip up a political frenzy with a referendum, sit back, and watch your approval ratings soar?

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