

Hungary's anti-refugee referendum fails after low turnout

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Hungary's referendum on the distribution of refugees within the European Union (EU) has been declared invalid. According to the Hungarian electoral authority, only 39.9 percent of the 8.3 million eligible voters took part on Sunday, well short of the 50 percent required to give the vote legal authority. With almost all votes counted, 98.3 percent voted in favour of the position put forward by the right-wing Fidesz government and against the EU's refugee quotas.

The vote was preceded by an extremely nationalist and xenophobic campaign by the Fidesz government of Prime Minister Viktor Orban. The question was, "Do you want the European Union, without the consent of parliament, to be able to impose the compulsory resettlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary?"

Even if the referendum had been successful, it would have had no immediate legal consequences. It followed an EU one-off decision last year, according to which 160,000 refugees would be distributed throughout the member states. The Orban government filed a complaint, together with the Slovakian government, against this with the European Court of Justice but officially declared it would await the legal ruling and accept it.

In Brussels, the distribution of refugees had already been abandoned as hopeless in any case, after Slovakia and Hungary were joined in their opposition by the other Visegrad states, Poland and the Czech Republic. Then at its recent summit in Bratislava, the EU in effect adopted the anti-refugee policy of the right-wing Eastern European governments.

The "Bratislava declaration" urged the strengthening of fortress Europe, denied refugees from war zones the right to asylum and, like Orban, demands the mass deportation of refugees. The section titled "Migration and external borders" calls for the "complete exclusion

of last year's uncontrolled flow of migrants and [a] further reduction of the number of irregular migrants," as well as the "securing of complete control over external borders."

The Hungarian referendum is the high point to date of a political campaign waged by Orban and the EU for some time. Hungary has taken the lead in the EU in deterring refugees, who are fleeing war and the destruction of societies. To this end, a border fence was erected on the border with Serbia and asylum laws restricted significantly. Human rights organisations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have drawn attention to systematic violations of the human rights of refugees in Hungary and in the border region with Serbia.

Reports in the media shed light on the reactionary climate created in the run-up to the referendum. Austrian daily *Die Presse* cited a Jordanian who has lived in Hungary for 30 years: "It is propaganda, a hate campaign." He did not want to give his name out of concern for reprisals. "We are fearful," he said, "fearful of potential acts of violence on the streets. Fearful of posting something political on Facebook." Some of his acquaintances, even those married to Hungarians, did not dare "to even raise the issue within the family... All of those who work here in the city centre" would not "dare" to discuss the referendum.

In its attempt to mobilise at least half of the electorate, Orban's Fidesz relied on its entire party apparatus. Municipal employees and ministerial officials were obliged to call a list of eligible voters and persuade them to take part and "act for the fatherland." Poorer municipalities were threatened with the cutting of social welfare assistance if the referendum was lost and Hungary compelled to accept the refugees.

In citizens' offices set up by the government, weeks-

long openly racist and Islamophobic campaigns were organised. A nationwide placard campaign spread claims that refugees would bring disease, rape women and increase the terrorist threat. “Islamic hordes” were responsible for the “decline” of Europe’s peoples, was the message propagated everywhere. Prime Minister Orban initiated the campaign’s tone. He commented in a recent interview that the refugees who came to Europe were a “poison” which he “will not drink.” Hungarian writer Rudolf Ungvary subsequently accused Orban of “racist demagogy.”

A central role in Orban’s despicable campaign was played by the fascist Jobbik Party, which also called for a “no” vote. It mobilised its ultra-right gangs to support the government’s anti-refugee campaign. Since the last national election, which saw Jobbik emerge as the third strongest party, Fidesz has closely collaborated with the openly fascist party.

This sharp political shift to the right was strongly motivated by domestic political considerations. The Fidesz government confronts growing opposition from the population and is doing everything to direct it into extreme right-wing, nationalist channels. In the health and education sectors, tens of thousands demonstrated in late 2014. The Fidesz Party lost a number of important local elections and its two-thirds majority in parliament. Economic and social conditions are worsening dramatically. Hungary is among the poorest countries in the EU and has the highest rate of child poverty, according to UNICEF.

The EU is deeply hated among the population. Joining the EU in 2004 brought no improvements for workers and young people. Wages remain at the same level as before Hungary joined and in some regions are even lower.

Some restrained criticism came from Brussels. President of the European Parliament Martin Schulz (Social Democrats, SPD) criticised the referendum as a “dangerous game,” according to *Die Welt*. He also threatened to cut financial aid to Hungary. Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn recently even raised the possibility of expelling Hungary from the EU. He also called for sanctions against Hungary.

These comments reflect growing tensions within the EU, but have nothing to do with a more progressive or humane refugee policy in Brussels. In reality, Orban’s policies are only the most right-wing example of the

EU’s policy as a whole, which is directed against refugees with increasing brutality.

Referring to Sunday’s referendum, Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz (Austrian People’s Party, ÖVP) cautioned against a condemnation of Orban’s policy. The EU should, notwithstanding existing agreements, no longer insist on the distribution of refugees across all member states, Kurz told *Welt am Sonntag*. Prior to this, Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern (Social Democrats, SPÖ) expressed a similar view. He is also an avid supporter of a strict sealing off of “fortress Europe’s” external borders.

This perfectly sums up the EU’s refugee policy. At the Vienna refugee conference at the end of September, the complete sealing off of the so-called Balkan route was agreed so as to reduce the number of refugees reaching Europe to as close to zero as possible. Repatriation agreements along the lines of the dirty deal between the EU and Turkey are to be concluded with other states in North Africa, and Afghanistan and Pakistan. For his part, Orban demanded at the Vienna meeting the establishment of a massive camp on the Libyan coast and the deportation of all refugees arriving in Europe there.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel also made clear at the Vienna summit what her “welcoming culture” is all about. At the Vienna conference, she complained that in spite of the closure of borders along the Balkan route earlier this year, 50,000 refugees had still used this route to reach Germany. This had to be stopped through a major deployment of security forces. “Our goal must be to stop illegal migration as much as possible,” according to Merkel. Prior to this she said that “repatriation, repatriation and again repatriation” were the most important tasks of the coming months.



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