

The referendum in Hungary: Orbán's debatable success

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In the referendum held on 2 October in Hungary, 98% of those who cast valid votes responded negatively to the question 'Do you want the European Union to be able to order the mandatory settlement of non-Hungarian citizens in Hungary without parliament's consent?' However, the referendum is invalid; the turnout was 40%, and at present the constitution requires the participation of at least half of the citizens entitled to vote for a referendum to be deemed valid. The ruling Fidesz party, which initiated the referendum, urged people to vote 'no', maintaining that through this referendum Hungary would express its strong opposition to Brussels' policy. This position was also backed by the far-right opposition party Jobbik. The other opposition parties mostly encouraged a boycott or left voters a free choice. About 6% spoiled their ballot papers, which do not count in the overall turnout. Fidesz announced that despite the invalidity of the referendum, they will propose an amendment to the constitution which would prevent 'the mass settlement' of migrants in Hungary in the future.

Commentary

- Although according to the polls the vast majority of Hungarians are against accepting migrants, Viktor Orbán's government failed to make the referendum an issue which would unite the Hungarian people, despite the mass campaign (estimated to have cost €50 million). Only the Fidesz and Jobbik electorates took part; the turnout coincides almost exactly with these parties' results in the 2014 parliamentary elections. Fidesz has, however, achieved its minimum plan: it has consolidated its electorate, distracted public attention from the scandals surrounding Orbán's team, and by resorting to slogans appealing to far-right voters it has weakened Jobbik, which is currently its main rival. Meanwhile, the referendum has not brought any specific benefits to the left-wing opposition, which remains fragmented, and lacks both leadership and a bold electoral programme.
- The referendum result showed the limitations of Fidesz's strategy of building up support by means of anti-immigrant rhetoric. For the Hungarian public, the migrants' question has ceased to be such a pressing problem, because larger migrant groups have not been entering Hungary for a year now, and the EU/Turkey agreement has significantly reduced the migratory pressure on Europe. In the weeks before the referendum, the European Commission stopped trying to push through the automatic and mandatory mechanism for allocating migrants among the member states, and has placed greater emphasis on

protecting the external borders of the EU. In addition, Hungary did not adopt any migrants on the basis of the decision taken by the EU Council regarding quotas in September 2015, and has challenged the decision in the EU Court of Justice. If the migration crisis does not get any worse, Orbán's government will have to resort to new topics to maintain its current support up until the elections scheduled for spring 2018.

- The end of the referendum campaign, although it is not expected to change Hungary's position regarding the migration crisis, will probably tone down the government's anti-immigrant rhetoric. Orbán will continue to present himself as Hungary's protector against 'the diktats of Brussels', while at the same time avoiding any confrontation with Germany. Hungary will also attempt to improve its relations with Berlin – the top priority in its European policy – which were tarnished by the tone it adopted on the migration crisis.