

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Hungary's invalid refugee referendum dents Viktor Orbán's anti-EU 'revolution'

October 3, 2016 1.00pm BST



Viktor Orbán speaks in Budapest after the Hungary referendum result. Szilard Koszticsak/EPA

Author



Jan Culik

Senior Lecturer in Czech Studies,
University of Glasgow

Although 98% of Hungarians who voted in a referendum on October 2 rejected a European Union plan for the country to accept a mandatory quota of refugees, the result is invalid as not enough people turned out to vote.

The primary purpose of the referendum was for Viktor Orbán and his ruling Fidesz Party to show that Hungarians rejected an EU agreement through which the country is supposed to accept 1,294 refugees relocated from Greece and Italy. But Orbán also wanted to stoke a cultural and political counter-revolution throughout the European Union.

He proudly sees himself as a pioneer of “illiberal democracy”, which he hopes will spread throughout the European continent and will subvert the liberal values of Brussels. Before the referendum, ruling-party politicians repeatedly emphasised how proud they were that Hungary was the first European country to fight back against what they perceive as an invasion of foreign hordes.

It is a constitutional condition in Hungary that 50% of citizens have to vote for a referendum to be valid. Although 45% of Hungarian citizens came to the polling booths, a high number of votes spoiled by voters – often in various original ways using doodles or by cutting the ballot paper into lewd shapes – meant that only 39.4% of the Hungarian population cast valid votes in the referendum. Orbán had asked Hungarians a vague and wordy question which the Hungarian opposition complained was unconstitutional:

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?

Nasty campaign

Over recent months, the Hungarian public has been subjected to an intensive, brutally racist, anti-refugee campaign disseminated by the media, much of it owned by Orbán's allies. During the campaign, the Hungarian government openly lied to the Hungarian public, asserting that due to culturally incompatible, criminal immigration, there are now dozens of "no-go zones" in Western Europe. The government then spent €16m on a booklet with a map showing where these no-go zones allegedly were. The Hungarian foreign minister Peter Szijjarto was rightly chastised by the BBC for propagating these lies.

In an attempt to achieve 50% participation in the referendum, Orbán even courted the Hungarian Romany population, an ethnic minority normally ostracised and discriminated against in Hungary. A number of Romany voices were heard in Orbán's referendum propaganda campaign warning against refugees "who are raping young Hungarian girls in Budapest".

The brutal anti-refugee government propaganda did have some effect and of those who voted in the referendum, 98% supported the government's position. Despite the invalidity of the vote, Orbán's government hailed the result as a great success, pointing out that a huge majority of those voters who did vote rejected the refugee quotas, "imposed on us from Brussels". Fireworks in Hungarian national colours took place over the Danube in Budapest.

Orbán celebrated the fact that more voters rejected the refugee quotas in this referendum than voted yes in the 2003 referendum about Hungary's accession to the EU. The Orbán government proclaimed: "We sent a message to Brussels! 98% No!"



Counting underway in Budapest. Zsolt Szigetvay/EPA



The Hungarian prime minister now says he will change the country's constitution to remove the necessity for 50% of the country's voters to participate in a referendum for it to be valid.

As commentators have pointed out, much of the reason behind the referendum was to influence internal Hungarian politics. There are rising levels of xenophobia in most European countries, but Hungary seems to be the only European country spending large amounts of taxpayers' money to officially disseminate hate speech against refugees. The result has been to deflect the attention of its citizens from many of the country's unsolved internal political and economic problems.

Lost ground

It is well known that the post-communist member states of the EU, known as the Visegrád group, are extremely hostile to the EU's planned imposition of refugee quotas. Through their rejection of the plans, it looked as though Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland would become a subversive group of nations within the EU, aiming to reduce the influence of Western European liberal values in the EU bloc.

The Czech Republic has a strongly xenophobic and highly popular president, Miloš Zeman, who has made shocking anti-refugee statements. On the same weekend as the Hungarian referendum, Zeman proposed that Muslim economic migrants to Europe should be deported to empty Greek islands or somewhere to Africa, in an interview which the *Financial Times* rated as more extreme than anything the Hungarian prime minister has said to date. Nevertheless, the Czech government of Bohuslav Sobotka (the prime minister) immediately distanced itself from Zeman saying that the president's public statements are not consistent with Czech official policy.

Slovakia and the Czech Republic have already been quietly dissociating themselves from the more extreme regimes of Poland and Hungary. With the failed Hungarian referendum, it now looks as though Orbán's illiberal revolution will not be as successful across Europe as he would wish.

 [Refugees](#) [European Union](#) [Hungary](#) [Migrant crisis](#) [Viktor Orban](#) [Visegrad Group](#)