

Orbanism at its limits? Hungary's referendum has exposed the first cracks in Viktor Orban's rule

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On 2 October, Hungary held a referendum on whether it would accept proposed EU quotas for the resettlement of refugees. Around 98 per cent of voters who participated in the referendum rejected the quotas, but the turnout fell below the 50 per cent threshold required for referendums to be valid.

***Abel Bojar** suggests the result constitutes one of the first cracks in Hungary's semi-authoritarian regime, whose powerful get-out-the-vote machinery failed to produce the required level of support. He argues that Viktor Orban's success has been built on four distinct types of control, and that his control over at least one of these areas – the political arena – may now be slipping away.*



Yet another weekend and yet another nail in the coffin of the EU's moribund plan to resettle refugees from the frontier states throughout the bloc. Though the Hungarian referendum on the quota system failed to reach its 50% validity threshold, the overwhelming majority backing a No vote prompted the government to proceed with a constitutional amendment underscoring Hungary's rejection of any sort of burden sharing arrangement within the EU whatsoever.

I do not intend to provide here an overall summary on the background of the referendum, nor do I intend to predict what it entails for the future of the EU's common asylum policy. What I will argue instead, is that the referendum outcome marks the first serious crack in the great edifice of 'Orbanism'.

The essence of Orbanism

The semi-authoritarian (or hybrid) regime that the ruling Fidesz party has built up in Hungary over the last six years of Viktor Orban's premiership has been characterised through different lenses in the western media. While some see in Orban a brutal and cynical violator of human rights, others stress his economic nationalism and portray him as the unspoken leader of the EU's Eurosceptic moment (and movement).

All these observations are doubtless part of the story. However, an encompassing account of Orbanism must concentrate on various domains of control over society. These forms of control, individually taken, stop short of the kind of excesses that characterise fully-fledged authoritarian regimes – such as the use of physical violence by the state or outright electoral fraud – lending Orbanism a minimum degree of international respectability. Taken together, however, they have rendered any prospect of electoral defeat all but impossible, providing the government an aura of political invincibility that Hungarian society and Hungary's EU partners have grudgingly come to accept.

Control over resources

The *first form of control is financial*. Orban's long-standing goal, while in opposition, was to create and entrench a group of friendly business allies that he could bank on for political survival. Upon coming to power in 2010, he wasted little time in channelling state resources to this designated group through various means, including selective legislation, EU funds via public procurement, and preferential credit from state-owned banks. When he sensed that someone **grew too powerful** in this privileged circle, he did not hesitate to turn the state apparatus against them, making it clear that direct political influence (and most importantly, political dissent) was beyond their reach.

Neither did he hesitate to cement his ties to the new economic elite through his personal and family network. One of the new (and youngest) members among these so-called oligarchs is his son-in-law; another, **older protegee**, is the mayor of his rural hometown, originally an owner of a small gas-repair business, now one of the wealthiest people in

the country. Parts of this immense transfer of wealth have been illegal even by the regime's standards; more often, however, the law was adjusted to the needs of the beneficiaries of the day.

Control over ideas

One of the most important beneficiaries of Orban's largesse – through government ads and campaign spending for instance – has been his friendly media empire concentrated in the hands of some of his closest allies. This leads to the regime's second form of control: the *control over ideas*. Always careful to bring his policies under a grand political narrative – whether it is fighting a “war of economic independence” against Brussels or protecting the EU's “Christian borders” – this media empire has allowed his narrative to remain unchallenged.

Dissenting voices have been given little or no coverage, opposition media outlets have been financially starved and a newly established [Media Council](#) has been tasked with enforcing the principle that no-one should step beyond a red line of acceptable criticism. To all this can be added an unprecedented assault on the public broadcasting company that has turned some of its outlets into a coterie of sycophants and channels of government propaganda. As a result, Orban's control over the political agenda has become all but complete.



Viktor Orban, Credit: European Council (CC-BY-3.0)

Control over institutions

But it is not just the media where the regime has extended its grip. The 2010 electoral landslide was soon followed by a capture of nominally independent institutions of the state, leading to the third form of control: the *control over institutions*. The Constitutional Court, the Public Prosecutor's Office, The Electoral Commission and other institutions were staffed with party loyalists and their proxies, reducing the formerly (more or less) independent institutions of the state to instruments of party control. Just to provide a typical illustration: whenever a government ally is accused of abuse of public funds (see above), the regime regularly retorts by pointing to the Public Prosecutor's Office as the safeguard against such abuses. In truth, that safeguard is as effective as the Maginot Line in the nuclear age.

Control over the political arena

Ultimately, however, what matters most for the regime's stability is *political control*. Orban's strategy for dominating the party-political arena comes down to three D's: divide, diffuse and duplicate. First, by crafting the political agenda in a way that fragments its left-wing opposition (by keeping the much reviled former Prime Minister, Ferenc Gyurcsany, in the forefront of political debate, for instance), he has managed to turn natural allies into bitter opponents. A disciplined left-liberal resistance to his regime has proven difficult to organise, let alone maintain, as a result.

Second, voices of dissent coming from civil society – the spontaneous mass protest against a proposed Internet tax in 2014 being a prominent example – have been successfully diffused by tactical retreats, smear tactics and delegitimisation. Thirdly, the regime has confronted its rising threat on the right from the ultra-nationalist Jobbik party by duplicating the latter's policy content: social conservatism at home and nationalism and Euroscepticism abroad.

What the result of the referendum might imply for the regime's future

The above outlined four elements of control allowed the regime to achieve a perception of invincibility in the collective mind: elections are foregone conclusions, significant change from within ("Orbanism with a human face") is impossible, resistance to policies on a piece-by-piece basis is futile. This sense of invincibility has been underscored by a series of electoral landslides in parliamentary, local and European elections, a continuous lead in public opinion polls and an ever dwindling number of and turnout at protest rallies.

However, behind the surface of this stability, one must recognise how these layers of control link together. If one is shaken, the veneer of stability can quickly turn into a cascade of events that the regime may struggle to control. For instance, if control over financial resources evaporates, it also weakens the regime's grip over the media which in turn may also have repercussions in the party-political sphere which may also (partially) free some of the institutions from the party's dominance. Alternatively, if control over day-to-day politics is lost, an electoral setback may force the regime into institutional opening and a reassertion of media pluralism.

It is in the last sphere, the control over political events, where the first domino fell on Sunday. For the first time, the regime seriously miscalculated its firepower. The final turnout of 40.4 per cent, almost a million short of the validity threshold, left some party bigwigs baffled and put them on the defensive. Months of [xenophobic campaigning](#) at record expense in an atmosphere of fear – and in all fairness, in a rather [receptive social environment](#) – bore little fruit.

For all the talk of an unprecedented display of national unity, the sense of desperation on referendum day was palpable. The public TV channel reached a new low by implying that a renewed influx of refugees can be expected from the Serbian border, should the referendum remain invalid. Orban himself made a desperate U-turn by suggesting that the turnout didn't matter when in fact everyone (even himself) knew that it was the only thing that really did. In a nutshell, the regime's powerful get-out-the-vote machinery let down its creators and control over the political arena now risks slipping away.

Of course, this need not imply that Orbanism is about to collapse. Whether the momentary loss of control over the political arena will spiral into a broader opening depends on a great number of factors: the opposition's strategy, the response by civil society and external events. What is certain is that one of the four layers of control holding the regime together has been dealt a serious blow and there is an unprecedented chance for change.

According to the most optimistic scenario, the left-liberal opposition forces may find a new source of self-esteem after their surprisingly successful (and generally well-coordinated) call for a boycott of the referendum. Should they find common ground for cooperation, Fidesz' electoral dominance may weaken, possibly prompting the regime into coalition bargaining after the next parliamentary elections in 2018. Some form of power sharing may then become possible, releasing some of the country's institutions from Fidesz' deadly embrace.

Some of the most egregious cases of misconduct could then be investigated, and an era of complete impunity may then come to an end. Loyal business allies may then begin to hedge their bets and diversify their political portfolios like they generally did in the pre-Orban era. A greater degree of media pluralism can then be reestablished, bringing a wider spectrum of voices to larger audiences. Ultimately, with all the imperfections and scars left on it, Hungarian democracy may find its way back to its pre-2010 state.

If this all sounds like naive wishful thinking, perhaps this is precisely the time for it.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

Abel Bojar – *LSE, European Institute*

[Abel Bojar](#) is LSE Fellow in Political Economy of Europe at the LSE's European Institute.

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