

Resurgent racism and the radical right: Hungary and the new European norm?

The recent proposal by the Hungarian government to hold a [referendum](#) on October 2nd 2016 on the authority of the EU over the numbers of migrants that member states must take has drawn predictable criticism from political elites across the EU. [Luxembourg's](#) Foreign minister has declared that Hungary should be suspended from the EU for violating the spirit of the Union, for example. The targeting of Hungary since the election of 2010 by EU officials and mainly left-liberal politicians is by now a familiar story across much of [Europe's media](#) with the Fidesz government held up as being outside the acceptable parameters of EU politics. Whilst there is no doubt that Fidesz have adopted an authoritarian nationalist politics built around a conservative ideology of family, nation and god, we need to be cautious in singling them out as an exception to the European norm. Resurgent nationalism and the rise of the [far-right](#) are factors taking place across the EU (and across the world) with powerful movements now found in most members states, and the current [Polish government](#) adopting authoritarian and illiberal policies similar to those introduced by Fidesz. As should be well understood, right-wing nationalism, the far-right and fascism are as much a part of European political culture as a commitment to human rights and democracy. The legacy of European political thought has always been polarised.

The referendum proposal is worded so as to incline voters towards supporting it, asking '[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?](#)' And this has brought out the anger of Hungary's left-liberal political parties as well as EU politicians more generally. But again one needs to be cautious on this issue. Referendums are not *necessarily* tools of democracy but more often mechanisms used to try to mobilise voters towards accepting a position desired by the government of the day. The EU has a poor track record on this issue, as do many of the EU's national governments, choosing to ignore referendum's that have rejected policies that EU and national political elites [supported](#). More recently, of course, the EU and its dominant member states (Germany, France, Italy and the UK) chose to ignore the decision of the Greek electorate to reject the horrendous austerity policies imposed upon them by the '[troika](#)' (the European Central Bank, the IMF and the European Commission). On this point the recent EU referendum which saw the UK vote to leave the Union was one framed overwhelmingly by right-wing political parties, [whether it was to leave or to remain](#). The leave vote only gained substantial momentum when it began to campaign primarily on the issue of migrants into the UK, embracing a [racist rhetoric](#) designed to instil fear and resentment amongst the voters, very similar in fact to what is happening in Hungary right now. There was no powerful progressive case made in the Brexit referendum for either leaving or remaining in the EU, so loud had the reactionary voices become in the debate.

That the EU faces an existential crisis is not in doubt and in the wake of the Brexit vote is openly [commented](#) on by politicians across the Union. That crisis is

reflected in events in Hungary, a marginal player in EU politics but one which has been plagued by economic and social instability since the abandonment of communism in 1990. The transition to capitalism and democracy has created in Hungary the most [open](#) economy in Europe and one which is utterly dependent on satisfying the needs of foreign capital at the cost of the social needs of its [domestic population](#). It is against this backdrop of neo-liberal reforms, [rising inequality and poverty](#) that the rise of the radical right and neo-fascism has to be understood and it is part of a story that can be read across the EU. It is the policies of the EU that have, willingly embraced by many member governments, which have created the conditions under which these groups have emerged and grown in strength, from UKIP in the UK to Fidesz and Jobbik in Hungary. Without a commitment by the EU and its dominant national governments to reversing the inequalities that its policies have promoted across the Union, its crisis of legitimacy seems set to continue. Fidesz referendum is but one important symptom of the way in which racism towards migrants has become normalised as part of political discourse in mainstream EU politics. The remedy to this must be for Europe to recover its alternative political voice, one which emerged in the Enlightenment and argued for universal human rights and respect for all peoples. A commitment to universal social equality requires social movements and governments to turn away from the policies that have sowed division and racism across the continent and embrace a model for development that places universal human needs at the forefront of social policy. The health of the EU can be measured in the way in which it treats its poorest and most marginalised groups, from [Roma](#) to migrants and refugees. On this test it has failed completely.