



**REFERENDUM BRIEFING NO 4
THE HUNGARIAN EU ACCESSION REFERENDUM
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Key points:

- The Hungarian referendum on EU accession was the third of nine to be held among the candidate states due to join the EU on 1 May 2004.
- The pro-accession camp scored an overwhelming victory, with 84% of those voting backing EU membership, and only 16% voting against.
- At 45%, turnout was much lower than expected. This was due to: a sense that a 'Yes' result was inevitable; a failure by citizens to perceive individual benefits from accession; and partisan effects among right-wing voters as regards attitudes towards both the EU and the left-liberal government.

Legal framework and precedents

There has been provision for the holding of referendums since the beginnings of Hungary's post-communist politics. Two types of referendum were envisaged: those called as a result of the mass collection of signatures and those called by political elites. However, only one successful signature-backed referendum has been held, in 1989 (over the timing of presidential elections), when the poll was a key factor in the transition to full competitive democracy. All other signature-backed referendums have either been blocked on political or legal grounds, or failed to reach the 50% turnout required by the 1989 referendum law.

The post-1989 legal framework had many gaps and inconsistencies even regarding elite-driven referendums. This prompted a reform in 1997. Under the new framework, referendums can be initiated either by elite actors or via a signature-collecting campaign, as before, and must ultimately be called by parliament. The legislature also decides whether the referendum is binding or consultative (although any poll backed by over 200,000 signatures is automatically binding). Only issues falling within parliamentary competence can be put to

a referendum; the list of such issues that cannot be put to a direct vote was clarified as part of the 1997 reform. Most importantly, the previous 50% turnout requirement was replaced with the provision that a valid result in a binding referendum must only be backed by 25%+1 of the electorate, regardless of the overall turnout. Among the accession states, this lack of a separate turnout requirement places Hungary alongside the Czech Republic and Slovenia and contrasts with the 50% turnout required in Poland and Slovakia.

The Hungarian Socialist Party, the social democratic reform communist successor party, had promised a referendum on NATO membership. After the Socialists took office in 1994 and Hungary had received an invitation to join NATO, all parties supported the idea of such a referendum. However, bitter political conflict was provoked when the right-wing opposition insisted, ultimately successfully, that the poll be binding rather than consultative. Crucially, the referendum was held after the 1997 reform had abolished the turnout requirement. In the November 1997 poll, the second valid national referendum since 1989, 48.63% of voters cast a valid vote, of whom 85.33% (41.50% of the electorate) backed NATO membership, with 14.67% opposed. Until Slovenia's poll in March 2003, Hungary was the only post-communist state to hold a referendum on NATO entry.¹

The EU issue: political background

The NATO referendum set a precedent for the handling of the EU issue in several respects. All major parties had long backed the holding of a referendum on EU entry, and when faced with the details, all of them agreed that the poll should be binding. However, the prospect of a referendum received little attention among the political elite before the April 2002 parliamentary elections. This reflected:

1. The elite's concentration on simply getting an EU membership invitation for Hungary.
2. Uncertainty over the timing of the final stages of the accession process and, therefore, of the referendum, contributing to a sense of the EU poll as a distant prospect.
3. A well-founded assumption that the poll would - like the NATO one - deliver an easy 'Yes' result. From lower levels in the mid-1990s (as economic transition and austerity hit hard), public support for EU membership recovered by the latter part of the decade to become the highest among the states set to accede in the next enlargement wave. If anything, public support rose through the early part of the new decade, unmoved by developments during the accession negotiations and exceeding 70% by spring 2002. Meanwhile, the 'No' camp remained relatively small. Strong public support for membership meant political elites saw few incentives to seek electoral advantage by politicising the issue, or to provide greater public information about accession. Confidence in a strong Hungarian 'Yes' led the four Visegrad states to agree in 2002 that Hungary should hold its referendum first, in the hope that it would have an impact on the more doubtful-looking Czech, Polish and Slovak polls.
4. A lack of politicisation of EU accession. All major parties supported the policy. Accession was treated as foreign policy, which traditionally enjoys cross-party consensus; or, at most, as an integral part of the transition from communism. Hungary has a bi-polar party system, and accession tended to be seen on the mainstream left as an anchoring of democracy and

¹ For the Slovenian case, see: Danjan Lajh and Alenka Krašovec, 'The Slovenian EU (and NATO) Accession Referendum(s), 23 March 2003', Opposing Europe Research Network Referendum Briefing No 3.

economic modernisation and on the mainstream right as a return to Hungary's cultural and political roots. However, all the major parties also backed the economic gains that were expected from EU membership. Opponents of accession were confined to the extreme left and right, where they had an incentive to play down the issue in the interests of alliance-building with the major parties. There was less contestation or even discussion of the EU than in some other candidate states, such as the Czech Republic or Poland, and there was a general belief that cross-party consensus and high public support were themselves helpful in dealings with the EU. Such contestation as took place focused on how to get Hungary into the EU as soon and on as good terms as possible. Detailed accession preparations tended to be seen as a 'technical' issue for non-political specialists.

This approach to the EU contrasted with the increasingly polarised and confrontational nature of Hungary's general party politics. The bi-polar party system generates a pattern in which exclusive left-liberal and right-wing coalitions alternate in government and 'oppositions oppose'. As the April 2002 parliamentary elections approached, the incumbent right-wing prime minister, Viktor Orbán of FIDESZ-Hungarian Civic Party, introduced a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' EU accessions and suggested that the continuation of his government's domestic policies was required if Hungary was to achieve a 'good' accession. However, the two elite camps are also divided more deeply, by material interests and by different approaches to Hungarian history and nationhood. Polarisation reached its peak so far in the 2002 parliamentary poll, which saw Orbán make an increasingly nationalist/anti-communist/economic populist appeal against his domestic Socialist and liberal opponents, designed to attract even those voters previously supporting the extreme right Party of Hungarian Justice and Life. The contest was bitter, tightly fought and utterly absorbing for the political elite, and also saw unprecedented mass mobilisation. In the end, the Socialist-liberal coalition narrowly defeated the right-wing government.²

Pre-referendum politicisation

With most of the legal issues clarified by the 1997 reform, the greatest procedural problem when the political elites came to consider the referendum after the 2002 parliamentary elections was that the holding of the poll would require a constitutional amendment. The existing text made no provision for the legislature to transfer or share Hungary's sovereign powers in the way required by EU membership. As referendums can be held only on issues within parliamentary competence, the legislature had to give itself the power to transfer sovereignty before being able to call a referendum on the issue.³ The constitutional amendment process was, in turn, shaped by: the polarisation inherited from the parliamentary elections; the requirement of the right (now in opposition) to find a new issue; the approach of the local elections in late October 2002; and the requirement that constitutional amendment needs the support of two-thirds of all MPs, effectively giving the main opposition party FIDESZ a veto over the process.

In mid-September 2002, when launching FIDESZ's local election campaign, Orbán announced that his party was setting conditions for its support for the constitutional amendment. This marked a sudden politicisation of the EU accession process. FIDESZ's conditions shifted over time. Firstly, developing the position he had articulated in office,

² On the 2002 parliamentary elections, see: Agnes Batory, 'Europe and the April 2002 Hungarian Parliamentary Elections', Opposing Europe Research Network Election Briefing No 1.

³ The necessity to share sovereignty would have required a constitutional amendment even if no referendum had been planned.

Orbán tied FIDESZ's support to the implementation of domestic policies (support for farmers and small businesses; higher wages) which he claimed would protect Hungary against otherwise unavoidable disadvantages of accession, including higher prices and the failure of many small firms. Subsequently, FIDESZ focused on the content of the constitutional amendment and arrangements for the referendum. Two issues in particular were contested:

- Sequencing. The new Socialist Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy saw the referendum as authorisation to sign the accession Treaty and thus wanted it held before the 16 April signing ceremony. This replicated the sequencing of the NATO referendum but overturned previous thinking on the EU process, which had been for a referendum only after the Treaty signing. Claiming voters' right to know exactly what they were voting on, the opposition saw the referendum as a retrospective poll on Hungary's accession terms and therefore wanted it held only after the signing of the Treaty. Partly underlying the argument was the fact that the later the constitutional amendment was passed (and, therefore, the referendum held), the longer FIDESZ would retain leverage.
- Sovereignty. FIDESZ refused to support any text under which Hungary would 'transfer' sovereignty to the EU. Instead, under the text finally passed, the exercise of Hungary's sovereign powers may take place 'jointly' with other member states or 'independently via the EU's institutions'. This represented the first mainstream, high-profile political argument about the principle of sovereignty in relation to EU accession.

Finally, and even after the constitutional amendment was passed in mid-December 2002, Orbán bitterly attacked the EU and the government for what he claimed were the poor and damaging accession terms negotiated at the Copenhagen summit, principally as regards agricultural and other financial transfers.

Throughout, however, Orbán continued to state that FIDESZ supported Hungary's EU accession, despite its negative aspects. In September 2002, the party signed a cross-party commitment to accession and to pass the required constitutional amendment by the end of the year, and the party's blocking of the amendment never appeared a serious prospect. Orbán's stance was driven primarily by the hope of domestic political gain, plus a genuine sense of grievance among some right-wing elites about the EU's treatment of Hungary. However, given Orbán's proven ability to change position and to shape and mobilise mass opinion, the need to 'keep FIDESZ on board' came to affect the government's practical and political handling of the referendum and accession-related matters. As well as the compromise wording of the constitutional amendment, for example, it was agreed that a Hungarian translation of the accession Treaty would be made public as soon as possible before the referendum,⁴ and that the poll would be held on 12 April - before the Treaty signing, as the government had wanted, but the latest possible date before it, when even FIDESZ agreed that the terms of the deal could not change.⁵ All matters on which no agreement could be reached between FIDESZ and the Socialists were left for the future, such as detailed regulation of parliament's role in the post-accession handling of EU matters. The need to bind all parties into a single deal meant that even the referendum date and question were inserted into the constitution.

⁴ Although, owing to the size of the Treaty, this could be done only via Internet publication, thus drastically limiting the accessibility of the text in the Hungarian context.

⁵ Three days had to be left for all possible legal procedures relating to the result, and the government also wanted formal post-referendum parliamentary authorisation to sign the Treaty.

However, Orbán's stance during the autumn had two longer-term effects going into the referendum campaign:

1. Public opinion. Public support for EU membership fell and opposition rose significantly, particularly after the Copenhagen summit. A January 2003 opinion poll showing the 'Yes' camp down to 56% of the electorate came as a shock to the pro-accession political elite.⁶ Moreover, a significant difference had for the first time opened up between the views of Socialist and FIDESZ voters (liberal voters had always been more enthused even than Socialist ones). More FIDESZ voters now saw accession as disadvantageous than advantageous (47%-42%), although the party's electorate on aggregate still planned to vote 'Yes'.

2. Right-wing alliance-building. Relatedly, Orbán's handling of the accession issue highlighted and exacerbated the strains involved in building a single right-wing political force, including former extreme right voters, as Orbán had been seeking to do since the 2002 elections. FIDESZ's small junior electoral partner, the conservative Hungarian Democratic Forum, did not support all of FIDESZ's 'Eurorealist' positions. On the other hand, Hungarian Justice and Life and some other radical right elements which had come to support Orbán by the time of the 2002 elections now broke with him again, disappointed at his continued support for accession.

Referendum campaign

The 12 April date put the referendum exactly a year into the government's four-year term. Although the new administration's honeymoon was over, FIDESZ's EU-related stance had not reversed the party's post-loss-of-office fall in support. After a clear win in the October 2002 local elections, the main governing Socialists went into the referendum campaign with a solid opinion poll lead.

By the time of the campaign, the 'Yes' camp comprised: all four parliamentary parties, the governing Socialists and liberal Alliance of Free Democrats, and the opposition right-wing FIDESZ and Democratic Forum; the (weak) right-wing president; the Budapest city administration; the major employers' and business organisations and trade unions; the major churches; mainstream left- and right-wing intellectual elites; all the mainstream press and media; and the main organisations representing Hungarians in neighbouring states. European Commission President Romano Prodi, Enlargement Commissioner Günter Verheugen and European Parliament President Pat Cox all visited Hungary to boost the 'Yes' camp. Many of the other organisations and institutions involved held their own EU-related events, but the 'Yes' campaign involved three principal sets of actors:

1. The Foreign Ministry. This put its long-running, EU-backed information campaign into a new phase, with a new website and telephone hotline. It also facilitated media and press coverage. Officially, the Ministry was providing information rather than campaigning, but its pro-accession stance was clear to all.

2. Political parties. The four parliamentary parties ran a joint roadshow of public meetings, as well as individual campaigns. All of them stressed general economic development prospects and accession's historic nature. The Socialists' campaign was the most general, associating a

⁶ Szonda Ipsos poll, see: *Népszabadság*, 23 January 2003.

'Yes' vote with: 'Europe', success and the future as well as higher incomes and living standards, greater life opportunities, EU transfers, greater Hungarian influence and closer links with Hungarians in neighbouring states. The Free Democrats focused on democracy and rights issues. FIDESZ became more positive than in late 2002, using many of the same themes as the Socialists, but laying more stress on dialogue with the voters. With his domestic constituencies in mind, Orbán also often played down the significance of the 'Yes or No?' choice, continuing to focus on the longer-term domestic policies he claimed would be needed to make accession a success, and not saying explicitly that prospective 'No' voters were mistaken. FIDESZ was explicit, however, that the referendum was not to be used as a vote on the government's performance, although this position represented a reversal of the 'us or them' tendency of the party's recent politics.

3. The EU Communication Public Foundation (EUKK). This was an agency created and funded through the Prime Minister's Office to run a 'Yes' campaign. The aim was to avoid the campaign being associated only with the government. A respected academic economist headed the EUKK Board and it also included senior non-party figures associated with both left and right, plus prominent business figures. However, the change of government and then an apparent tussle for control of the government campaign between the Foreign Ministry and the Prime Minister's Office meant that the EUKK was established only in November 2002. With much of its activity then contracted out to commercial advertising/public relations firms, the EUKK campaign only started in early February 2003.

The campaign included direct mailshots to all households; the operation of another telephone hotline; the organisation of cultural and other events which principally associated accession with a 'feel good' factor; and a media, press and billboard advertising campaign. Here, the immediate pre-referendum phase featured sports and entertainment personalities known to be rivals pictured together enjoining a 'Yes' vote. Earlier, the ads had featured a series of questions all answered with a prominent 'Yes' or 'No' with one sentence of explanation. Some of these addressed high-profile issues ('Will Hungary keep its independence?' 'Are we safe from speculative land purchasing?'). Others, however, were acknowledged as attention-grabbing but criticised (even by pro-government voices) for being inappropriate to the historic nature of the accession choice and missing spectacularly the issues most important to average voters. For example, questions included: 'Will I be able to open a cake-shop in Vienna?' 'Are the girls cute in the EU?' 'Can you really only get one size of condoms in the Union?' and 'Will we still be able to eat poppy-seed cake [a national speciality]?'⁷

Anecdotal reporting of the telephone hotlines and public meetings confirmed the longstanding evidence of opinion polls: that voters were concerned mainly about the impact that accession would have on jobs, wages, prices and pensions. However, these are issues where the EU has only an indirect impact, at most, and, moreover, where the impact cannot be guaranteed or immediate. The campaign seems to have calmed some of the fears which were prevailing on these issues especially as a result of Orbán's warnings. Polls reported the 'Yes' camp growing back to around 65% of the electorate. However, the campaign did not dispel all of the doubts, and did not offer a concrete, positive individual-level stake in the EU accession process.

⁷ This last became a national joke, to the extent that the official celebratory event organised for the day after the referendum was advertised as 'the world's biggest poppy-seed cake party' and duly took place with a 134 metre-long specimen! But the country's biggest daily newspaper had chosen to launch its weekly EU-related page with the poppy-seed problem, which is linked to fears about the impact of EU regulation of the commercial use of opium; see: *Népszabadság*, 21 October 2002.

Another problem was the apparent assumption of a 'Yes' result. Government plans to continue the public information campaign post-referendum were well-founded, but they contributed to an impression that voters were not being asked to make an informed decision, with time left once the 'Yes' was secured for them to be fully prepared for accession. Similarly, practical arrangements - such as the advertising of celebratory events and discussion of plans for the accession Treaty signing - suggested that a 'Yes' result was being assumed. Little attention was drawn to the referendum's binding nature and implicit turnout requirement (the 25%+1 provision).⁸ The campaign did not engage seriously with the prospect of a 'No' vote nor with the 'No' camp itself, and overall seemed most suited to mobilising existing 'Yes' voters or those with only mild doubts. Officials were aware that a campaign targeted at encouraging turnout *per se* would increase the share of the 'No' vote, since polls had shown consistently that those most likely to vote were also more determined to vote 'Yes'.

On the 'No' side, the small far-left Workers' Party dropped its opposition to accession, deciding that its wish for a radically different EU could best be pursued from inside. This left the 'No' camp confined to the extreme right: the Party of Hungarian Justice and Life; the diasporic World Federation of Hungarians; and a number of smaller groupings, some new and some better-known, especially from their activity during the 2002 parliamentary elections. 19 of the anti-EU groups organised themselves into a 'Movement for a Free Hungary'. The 2002 parliamentary elections had proved that none of these groupings was attractive to a broad mass of the electorate. Hungarian Justice and Life is in receipt of only small amounts of state funding following its failure to enter parliament in 2002, and no other public funding was available for the 'No' camp. This was a key source of resentment (with the Irish Nice Treaty and Swedish accession referendum campaigns cited to underpin the claim to public funding). The 'No' campaign therefore operated mainly via flyers, rallies, the Internet/email and the radical right press and media. At least one 'No' event featured EU opponents from Austria, Denmark and Poland.

The Hungarian 'No' campaigners were explicit that they did not reject 'Europe' but rather the EU's current form and/or Hungary's accession terms and/or the timing of Hungary's entry given the country's current state. There were complaints that the referendum question - 'Do you agree that Hungary should become a member of the European Union?' - left no scope for the expression of such doubts.⁹ Many also found the government 'Yes' campaign offensive and patronising, particularly the failure to engage with the 'No' camp and the apparent implication that opponents of accession must prefer 'the Balkans' instead. Many compared the government's campaign to communist-era 'agitprop' and the EU to the Soviet Union.¹⁰ However, it appeared that some were advocating a 'No' principally *because* the 'Yes' vote was being promoted most unreservedly by the Socialist-liberal coalition. Furthermore, EU-related issues were sometimes wrapped into campaigning on general radical right themes, including, variously: anti-(global)-capitalism, anti-immigration, anti-Semitism, and anti-Americanism. This latter was boosted by right-wing opposition to the war in Iraq, an event which overshadowed the referendum campaign more generally. Overall, the 'No' camp was

⁸ In March, 54% of the electorate knew that the referendum was binding; Szonda Ipsos poll, see: *Népszabadság*, 3 April 2003.

⁹ Although the question was not as loaded as in the NATO poll, when voters were asked, 'Do you agree that Hungary should ensure the country's security by acceding to NATO?'

¹⁰ Cf: www.nyet.hu

disparate, did not formulate any clear alternative to EU membership in 2004, and did not increase its support during the campaign.

The results

The referendum delivered a clear ‘Yes’ result: 83.76% of those who voted supported EU membership, with only 16.24% opposed. However, the turnout was only 45% - equal to the lowest turnout in any valid national vote in post-communist Hungary (the second round of the 1990 parliamentary elections) and the lowest in any EU accession referendum to date. While the low turnout was mainly responsible for the high ‘Yes’ vote, it also meant that accession was actively supported by just 38% of the electorate. Assuming that the non-voters included all those who were uncertain or had always reported an intention to abstain, rough calculations suggest that something over half of those previously registering as ‘No’ voters and something under half of those previously showing up as ‘Yes’ voters decided not to vote. In terms of absolute (if not relative) numbers, the low turnout therefore principally reflected a failure to mobilise ‘Yes’ voters. This is supported by the fact that pre-referendum polls had shown the ‘Yes’ vote share as more sensitive to turnout than the ‘No’ vote.

Table 1: Results of the 2003 EU accession referendum in Hungary

	Total	% of Registered Voters	% of Valid Votes
Registered Voters	8 042 272		
Appeared at polling station but did not vote	2 537	0.03	
Votes Cast	3 666 715	45.59	
Invalid Votes	17 998	0.22	
Valid Votes	3 648 717	45.37	
Yes	3 056 027	38.00	83.76
No	592 690	7.37	16.24

Votes required in support of a valid result (25%+1 of registered voters): 2 010 569

Source: National Election Committee, www.valasztas.hu

The geographical pattern of turnout was largely in line with other national elections, being lower in the poorer east and south, and higher in the richer central and western regions and Budapest. However, there were regional and local variations in the relationship between turnout and vote shares (the ‘Yes’ vote at county level ranged only between 82%-88%, against turnout that varied between 36%-56%). In particular, the turnout in Budapest was five points higher than anywhere else, but the ‘Yes’ vote was below average at 82.5% and the ‘No’ vote above average at 17.5%. A similar, although weaker, pattern was seen in surrounding Pest county, where the county-level ‘No’ vote peaked at 19.4%. This confirms the capital and its surroundings as the heartland of the radical right.

Attention has focused on why turnout as a whole was so low. Part of the surprise came because of the divergence from pre-poll expectations. Even in the last few days before the poll, well over 60% of respondents had been reporting an intention to vote. In this respect, there was a difference between the 1997 NATO referendum and the EU one. In August-October 1997, the share of the population reporting an intention to vote in the NATO referendum ranged between 43% and 56%, much closer to the 49% outcome than the 60%+

opinion poll figures were to the 45% outcome in the EU poll.¹¹ Following significant under-reporting of intended participation and Socialist voting in the 2002 parliamentary election, for two successive years some Hungarians, therefore, seem to have been telling pollsters what they thought they wanted to hear and thereby undermined the reliability of opinion polls.

As regards absolute outcomes, however, there are striking similarities between the NATO and EU polls. Meanwhile, the small turnout in the EU poll contrasts strongly with the 70%+ participation in the 2002 parliamentary elections. This suggests that the nature of the poll was at least part of the explanation. In the 2002 parliamentary poll, voters saw a clear choice between two alternatives, the result was obviously going to be close, and the turnout corresponded closely to the share of the population reporting that the outcome mattered. In the EU referendum, by contrast (and just as in the NATO case), voters seem to have had little sense that their vote mattered, in terms of affecting what was seen as an inevitable result; or that the result would make much immediate difference to their lives. An expectation of personal benefit had always been strongly correlated with a 'Yes' vote and a high commitment to voting. In March, 42% of the electorate expected personal benefits from accession - much closer to the size of the actual 'Yes' vote than the 60-65% that were reported as intending to vote for the EU.¹²

It might be thought that membership of the EU is more likely to bring tangible personal benefits than that of NATO. However, as suggested above, few such benefits are automatic or immediate, and those that are (such as easier travel or work in the EU) are of interest to only a section of the population. Moreover, two broader developments since 1997 might have had countervailing effects:

1. The capacity of general notions such as security, 'Europe', democracy and economic development to mobilise individual voters has probably declined. Those Hungarians for whom these might once have been a mobilising factor no longer feel them to be in question.¹³ In this respect, there might be a contrast with Slovakia and perhaps Slovenia. In relation to the EU, the perceived slowness of the enlargement process and lack of generosity on the part of the Union have also undermined the value of these general notions in Hungary.

2. Partisanship has strengthened. This may have had an impact via three channels: the lesser likelihood that voters will be mobilised in the absence of a party conflict; the impact of Orbán's stance in increasing doubts about accession and hostility to the EU among his own voters; and the higher motivation of some right-wing voters to stay at home (or vote 'No') to avoid benefiting the government. Asked afterwards, 40% of FIDESZ supporters said that they had not voted, against 20% of Socialist voters.¹⁴

Among the 175 people who admitted in the poll that they had not voted, Table 2 shows the proportions giving various reasons for their non-participation (more than one could be mentioned):¹⁵

¹¹ See: Dóra Husz, 'Csatlakozásra várva', in Sándor Kurtán, *et al.*, eds., *Magyarország politikai évkönyve 1998* (Budapest 1998) pp. 807-825 at pp. 819-820.

¹² Hungarian Gallup poll, 7-12 March, at www.gallup.hu; see also: *Népszabadság*, 3 April 2003.

¹³ In September 2001, only 22% and 34% respectively agreed that democracy could be consolidated and significant rises in living standards gained *only* with accession; TÁRKI poll, see: *Népszabadság*, 30 November 2002.

¹⁴ Szonda Ipsos poll, see: *Népszabadság*, 15 April 2003.

¹⁵ Of course, the group might not reflect accurately the make-up of those who actually did not vote: inaccurate retrospective reporting of both participation and party vote is normal in Hungary. In the case of the EU

Table 2: Reported reasons for not voting in the EU accession referendum in Hungary

	%
Saw 'Yes' result as inevitable	57
Too busy to vote ¹⁶	57
Believe accession good but not important enough to vote for it	51
Saw disunity, mixture of 'Yes' and 'No' calls among politicians	34
Believe accession bad but did not want to vote 'No'	27
Weather	11

Source: Szonda Ipsos poll, *Népszabadság*, 15 April 2003

In another small telephone poll, of all respondents asked to suggest reasons for the low turnout, 33% gave lack of interest, 25% the inevitability of the result, and 20% shortcomings in the campaign.¹⁷

Overall, the non-voting camp was highly diverse in terms of motivation, social background and party affiliation, but was probably made up of: both 'Yes' and 'No' voters who regarded the result as inevitable; mostly poorer, less educated, rural voters who saw no personal benefit from accession; FIDESZ voters in particular who were doubtful about the benefits of membership, unimpressed with the EU, unable or unwilling to take a stand either way, but probably ultimately content that a 'No' result was unlikely; and some right-wing voters, especially those angered by the nature of the campaign, who did not want to contribute to a likely government success. Although there has clearly been a net growth in negative attitudes over recent months, especially on the right, the overall result should not therefore be interpreted as too strong or radical an anti-EU shift. Asked afterwards, 81% of respondents (including 75% of FIDESZ voters) claimed to be pleased about the result.¹⁸ This suggests a continuing, basically favourable disposition towards EU membership, even allowing for the extra support which the winning side receives after any election in Hungary. Rather, the result highlights the fact that the 'Yes' vote was always 'soft' - for example, it was higher than the share of the electorate thinking that accession was a good thing, and much higher than the share expecting to benefit personally from membership.¹⁹ As suggested by the impact of Orbán's stance, the 'Yes' vote was probably also always susceptible to elite leadership in a more negative direction. While Hungarians did not report themselves as significantly less informed about the EU than the electorates of most other post-communist candidate states, the 'Yes' vote had not been tested until Orbán's sudden change of language only six months before the referendum. This left little time for a more effective 'Yes' campaign to organise to meet the challenge. Simplifying massively, it seems that a previous 'if you don't know, say yes' attitude had been replaced by an 'if you don't know, don't go' stance.

referendum, 79% of respondents told pollsters that they had voted; Századvég poll, see: *Népszabadság Online*, 18 April 2003.

¹⁶ The fact that the 12 April date put the referendum on a Saturday, rather than the normal Sunday voting day, may have played a role here, as many Hungarians either work on a Saturday or go away for the weekend. Voting away from the normal place of residence is possible, but requires arrangement in advance.

¹⁷ Századvég poll, see: *Népszabadság Online*, 18 April 2003.

¹⁸ Szonda Ipsos poll, see: *Népszabadság*, 15 April 2003.

¹⁹ See, for example, February and March polls by Hungarian Gallup and TÁRKI, at www.gallup.hu and www.tarki.hu, respectively.

Future prospects

The low Hungarian turnout has caused some concern in other accession states, especially those such as Poland where a referendum result needs a 50% turnout to be constitutionally valid. Hungary's experience may have contributed to Poland's decision to hold its referendum over two days, on 7-8 June, in the hope of boosting participation. However, precisely because of the turnout requirement, plus the larger, more organised, and more appealing 'No' camp, Polish 'Yes' voters are likely to be more mobilised than their Hungarian counterparts. With the benefit of hindsight, some pro-accession voices in Hungary have regretted that the arguments of their 'No' camp did not receive greater prominence.

In Hungary, the referendum has had little immediate political impact. Polls of general party preferences moved little during the campaign. The low turnout denies the government the general political boost for which it had been hoping, but as FIDESZ had not called for a boycott or cast the poll as a vote on the government, it also cannot claim a success. However, in the medium term the referendum is likely to have some domestic political impact in two ways in particular:

1. Parties are likely to begin to develop more detailed positions on the EU itself, rather than simply the general question of accession. The accession issue on its own split the right and proved a less-than-satisfactory electoral appeal for the left. Particularly because it coincided with the war in Iraq, with its sudden focus on Hungary's relationship to the EU's common foreign policy, the referendum process has encouraged greater interest in the EU among political, media and intellectual elites. This process is likely to be intensified by the participation of Hungarian observers in all EU institutions in the pre-accession year.
2. The referendum may affect the internal debate about reform of the Socialist Party, where the disappointing outcome is likely to strengthen those who want the party to engage more with its voters. Equally, the referendum will feed into the ongoing debate about the reorganisation of the right.

The results of these processes will next be seen in the June 2004 European Parliament elections, which are seen as a major mid-term test of party strategies. However, the referendum has also confirmed that Hungarian voters can best be mobilised where they see a personal (especially economic) stake in the outcome and/or a personal impact on the result and/or a clear party conflict. Given that it will be difficult to connect the European Parliament to the economic issues that concern Hungarian voters, the elections are likely to be fought primarily as the next round in the domestic party battle.

Despite the low turnout, the NATO precedent in particular suggests that the referendum outcome is unlikely to lead to questioning of the legitimacy of Hungary's EU membership. Until they inserted the requirement into the constitution, political elites did not *have* to hold a referendum on the issue at all. Having already given explicit authorisation to apply for membership in 1994, on 15 April parliament unanimously authorised the signing of the accession Treaty.²⁰ However, the referendum process has revealed the softness of pro-membership opinion and, to some extent, legitimised the framing of EU-critical views.

²⁰ One FIDESZ MP intentionally voted 'No' and promptly resigned his party and parliamentary posts (but not his seat).

Should future economic difficulties come to be associated with accession, FIDESZ is in a position to benefit electorally. However, given that the party ultimately advocated a 'Yes' vote, it will remain in a stronger position to attack the government for not informing the public adequately about accession, negotiating strongly enough within the Union, or adopting appropriate domestic policies to cope with membership, than to attack membership itself.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute OERN was established in June 2000 as an international network of scholars studying party politics. The original focus was to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems but the Network has widened its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/SEI/oern/index.html>