

Hungary: the president's resignation will not affect Fidesz

Andrzej Sadecki

On 2 April the Hungarian president Pál Schmitt resigned following the confirmation of charges of plagiarism in his PhD thesis. In January HVG weekly announced that the majority of the thesis was translated from foreign literature without providing sources. A commission set up especially for this purpose at Semmelweis University confirmed these allegations and on 29 March the senate of the university revoked the title of PhD which Schmitt was granted 20 years ago. The parliament almost unanimously accepted the president's resignation and has 30 days to elect his successor.

Pál Schmitt, supported by the ruling Fidesz-KDNP coalition, took his office in August 2010.

Commentary

- Prime Minister Viktor Orbán will make the decision about the appointment of the new president. The decision should be announced by 16 April. The ruling Fidesz-KDNP coalition has a two thirds majority in parliament, which is sufficient to secure the election of its candidate. Following the scandal involving Schmitt, Fidesz will seek to rebuild the prestige of the president's office. Therefore the appointment of a person of immaculate reputation, chosen from the camp of the ruling right wing, should be expected. Orbán, as he did in 2010, will probably opt for a politician who will be convenient for the head of the government. Schmitt, unlike his predecessors who willingly used the right of veto, passed all laws which were submitted to him, including the new constitution adopted in April 2011.
- It is quite likely that one of the trusted politicians from Fidesz will be appointed president. Among the candidates being considered are: László Kövér, who as speaker of the parliament performs the functions of the president until his successor is appointed; Member of the European Parliament János Áder; and the foreign minister János Martonyi. However, the reshuffling of the head of diplomacy could now complicate the negotiations which Budapest is holding with the European Commission about sanctions due to its excessive budget deficit (Hungary is being threatened with the loss of nearly 500 million euros from the Cohesion Fund in 2013).
- A substantial decline in support for Fidesz due to the scandal involving Schmitt should not be expected as his resignation meets the expectations of public opinion. Following Schmitt's resignation, Fidesz can still present itself as an honest party capable of purging itself. It is quite contrary to the compromised socialist party MSZP and its Prime Minister

Ferenc Gyurcsány who did not decide to step down in 2006 despite the scandal following the revealed tapes on the concealment of economic data.

- The opposition is trying to capitalise on this scandal and the change in the office of the president but its activity will lead to improved results in opinion polls to only a small extent. The extreme right-wing Jobbik has put forward a proposal to introduce direct presidential elections –a concept supported by most of society–, whereas MSZP is suggesting the candidature of the former president –László Solyom, who is popular in Hungary. However, neither proposal stands a chance of being implemented on the current political scene. On the other hand, the LPM party (Politics Can Be Different) presents Schmitt's resignation as its own success because it was mainly its activists who protested in Budapest and called for Schmitt to step down.