

Hungary: A new president and a staff reshuffle in the state apparatus

On 29 June, Hungary's parliament elected Pal Schmitt - a politician from the government party Fidesz - president by a significant majority (263 of the 322 votes were cast for him). Right-wing politicians, who have 2/3 of the votes in the National Assembly, in an atmosphere of accountability for the socialist governments' abuses, want to conduct a sweeping staff reshuffle in the state apparatus.

Pal Schmitt replaced President Laszlo Solyom, who had held this function from 2005. Schmitt is a double gold Olympic medallist (fencing), a former diplomat (ambassador in Spain and Switzerland among other countries) and the chairman of the Hungarian Olympic Committee (since 1989). In 2002, he ran for Mayor of Budapest as the candidate of Fidesz. He was a Member of the European Parliament between 2004 and 2010. He was entrusted with the function of National Assembly speaker after the recent parliamentary elections.

The election of a candidate who is strongly linked to Fidesz in place of President Solyom, who is close to the right but is much more independent, is an element of a broader operation of staff reshuffle in the state apparatus. The parliament, which is dominated by Fidesz, on 8 June adopted a law enabling the dismissal of state administration workers with a two-month notice period without the need to provide a reason. The law was vetoed by President Solyom but it was adopted again after some minor modification by the governing coalition's votes.

Dismissals have already been carried out at the general staff, police and intelligence commands. By nominating its trusted people, Fidesz also wants to gain stronger control over the Constitutional Court and managements of numerous state-controlled companies (including the energy company MVM and the post office). It has also been putting strong pressure on the president of the National Bank and is demanding his dismissal. Serious changes are expected soon in the diplomatic corps; the senior staff of more than ten diplomatic agencies are planned to be replaced before the expiry of their respective terms, for example, in Berlin, Vienna, Rome, Paris and Kyiv. Major staff changes are also expected at diplomacy headquarters, which may complicate Hungary's preparations for taking over the presidency of the EU Council in the first half of 2011. <boc>