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Controversy over the Hungarian candidate to the European Commission

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The Hungarian politician László Trócsanyi, who as Hungary's minister of justice in 2014–2019 supervised reforms which are criticised in the EU for being anti-democratic, has been presented as an official candidate for the EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement. The reforms included the anti-immigrant package of laws known as 'Stop Soros' in response to which the European Commission brought a complaint against Hungary to the Court of Justice in Luxembourg. Trócsanyi's candidacy has been harshly criticised in the European Parliament and among the Hungarian opposition. According to critics, Trócsanyi will be neither effective nor credible in enforcing the implementation of reforms to strengthen the rule of law in EU candidate countries, and the attempt to nominate him to this position is a manifestation of disregarding the principles of the rule of law by the new EU authorities and a sign of the downgrading of enlargement and neighbourhood policy.

Commentary

- Trócsanyi's candidacy will most likely not be approved by the European Parliament's committee. Therefore, Hungary will probably agree to the nomination of a less controversial candidate to keep the desired office. It applied for this position already in 2014. There is speculation that Enikő Győri is an alternative candidate; Ms Győri is a Member of European Parliament and has served as an ambassador in Madrid. There is little chance that the enlargement portfolio will be taken away from Budapest, because this would entail the need to partly modify the makeup of the present commission and resume political negotiations. Another factor that will help Hungary retain the office is the unwillingness of the old EU member states to further enlarge the EU (the French president Emmanuel Macron has made the accession of new member states dependent on conducting an institutional reform of the EU). This may mean a further marginalisation of the enlargement policy and the Eastern Partnership in the EU.
- Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has declared that accepting the Balkan states as new EU members will be the main task for the Hungarian commissioner. According to him, this would stabilise the situation in the Balkans and create a buffer in southern Europe that would halt migration to EU member states. However, there is concern that the Hungarian commissioner for enlargement will be focused less on achieving the goals of the EU's

policy and more on Hungary strengthening its economic and political influence in the Balkans. Over the past few years, business people linked to the Hungarian government have invested their assets (not always in a transparent manner) in the media, financial and energy sectors in the Balkan states (Serbia, Macedonia and Albania). The fact that in 2018 Budapest offered asylum to the former prime minister of Macedonia, Nikola Gruevski also casts a shadow on Hungary's policy in the Balkans, since Mr Gruevski had been sentenced for corruption.

- The portfolio offered to Trócsanyi also includes neighbourhood policy, including the Eastern Partnership. Given the Orbán cabinet's close relations with Russia and its policy towards the Hungarian minority in Ukraine, Kyiv is reluctant about this candidacy. The Ukrainian press has referred to the fact that it was Trócsanyi who decided in 2018 to surrender Russian arms dealers to Moscow, while the USA was also requesting their extradition. There is concern that Hungary will use this portfolio as an instrument for implementing its own policy on Ukraine. One of its goals is to support the aspirations of the Hungarian minority in Zakarpattia, to enhance their autonomy. Another is to impede the implementation of the Ukraine–EU Association Agreement. For example, when an act resulting in restricting ethnic Hungarians' rights to receive education in their native language was passed in Ukraine in 2017, Orbán's government blocked the Ukraine–NATO talks and threatened to withdraw its support for the Association Agreement.