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Hungary: resignation of President Novák

Ilona Gizińska

On 10 February Hungary's President Katalin Novák resigned. This was the result of a wave of criticism of her, which had been building up for a week, for having pardoned a man convicted of covering up sexual crimes against minors in April 2023. The affair was revealed on 2 February by an independent website, after which the topic was taken up by opposition parties demanding that the head of state step down. Initially, government representatives and the media in their favour tried to keep the matter quiet, but the growing atmosphere of scandal – including protests outside Sándor Palace, the presidential residence – forced Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to take a stand. On 8 March he announced the adoption of a constitutional amendment making it impossible to pardon convicted paedophiles. Simultaneously with Novák, Judit Varga, who as minister of justice counter-signed the controversial pardon, announced that she would resign from both her parliamentary seat and her role as leader of the Fidesz list in the European Parliament elections.

The function of head of state will be performed by the president of the National Assembly, László Kövér of the ruling party, until a successor to Novák is elected. According to the constitution, a new president must be elected within 30 days of his predecessor's resignation, and a written recommendation from one-fifth of MPs is required to become a contender.

Commentary

- Novák's departure from office means that Fidesz has lost one of its leading figures, someone who will be difficult to replace on both the national and the international level. Less than two years ago she was elected head of state, as both the youngest candidate and the first woman in Hungarian history. Throughout her career she remained associated with Fidesz, representing a younger generation of politicians who are well-educated and more familiar with the wider world. Her administrative experience, and later her mandate to the National Assembly, translated into roles (including as minister for families) in successive Orbán governments. Considered one of the most loyal people around the prime minister and as the 'gentler face' of Fidesz, Novák became known not only as a proponent of a conservative pro-family course, but also as a representative of the more pro-Western and pro-Ukrainian wing of Budapest politics. This helped to bring balance to Hungary's international image, as the most important role of the president is to shape and mould that image.

- The Novák case is another example of Orbán consistently cutting himself off from moral scandals. It is based purely on political pragmatism and the need to move on quickly, and is influenced by the upcoming local and European elections in June. Fidesz has been bale to keep power for a fourth consecutive term thanks to its ability to efficiently pick up on topics that might disturb the core of its electorate. In this context, Novák's mistake proved politically unforgivable. The media reported on a poll commissioned by the government, which purportedly showed that her retention of office would translate into a significant fall in support for her party. Examples of previous quick reactions to scandals within the party include the resignation of President Pál Schmitt in 2012 following revelations that he had plagiarised a dissertation, and the resignation from his mandate by of József Szájer, an MEP close to Orbán, following a scandal that damaged Fidesz's conservative image.
- The president's seat will be taken by one of the ruling party members close to the prime minister. The party has a qualified majority in parliament, which will allow it to decide who the new head of state (the president is elected by parliament in the Hungarian system). The favourite is probably the defence minister Kristóf Szalay-Bobrovniczky, a former diplomat and businessman who has made his fortune from a casino chain, and is expected to perform favourably in the internal polls of Fidesz activists. However, appointing him would be a controversial step due to the recent stake in a Russian-Hungarian railway consortium which he recently took up, as well as his support for a policy of not sending any aid to Ukraine's military. Another strong candidate is László Trocsányi, an MEP and a former minister of justice, Ambassador to France and Constitutional Court judge, whose extensive competence in the field of justice makes a strong case for his election in the light of the legal scandal.