

Tamás Sulyok is elected Hungary's president

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On 26 February, the Hungarian parliament elected Tamás Sulyok, who until recently had served as the head of the Constitutional Court (CC), as the country's new president. In a secret ballot he was supported by 134 MPs (out of the 198 current members of the unicameral National Assembly); that figure includes the entire Fidesz–KDNP ruling coalition which holds the majority of seats (more than two thirds). Sulyok will replace Katalin Novák, who announced her resignation on 10 February in the wake of a scandal over her pardoning a man convicted of covering up sexual crimes against minors (see '[Hungary: resignation of President Novák](#)'). Sulyok will take office on 5 March. Until then, the speaker of the National Assembly László Kövér will be the acting head of state.

Commentary

- The appointment of the head of the Constitutional Court as president came as a surprise because his name had not been listed among the possible presidential candidates following Novák's resignation. Until recently, Sulyok had been pursuing his career as a lawyer, and did not engage in politics in a direct manner. However, he was appointed as a Constitutional Court justice during Fidesz's rule in 2014, and in 2016 he was appointed head of the Court. He also endorsed numerous decisions which were in line with the government's official policy (for example the CC ruling in 2023, which stated that there had been no violation of the law regarding the Central European University, although the government has effectively prevented the university from operating in Hungary). Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is betting on a brand-new figure on the Hungarian political scene, one who has not yet fallen short of the public's expectations and who at the same time is a qualified lawyer. This is intended as a response to the reputational crisis with which Fidesz has been grappling since the outbreak of the pardoning scandal. At the same time, it is a safe move from the party leader's point of view because it does not alter the balance of power between the various interest groups in the ruling camp.
- The scandal revealed by the media has provoked what is viewed as one of the biggest political crises in Fidesz's 14-year rule. Polls commissioned by the party have shown that it has also caused outrage among its electorate, which was the reason for President Novák's quick decision to resign. The scandal has also triggered a wave of the biggest anti-government protests seen in Hungary for several years. A rally held on 16 February on Heroes' Square in Budapest, which was organised by online influencers and media personalities, was attended by around 50,000 individuals. Although its main slogans included the protection of children, it quickly took on a more distinct political meaning; aside from demanding that the government act in a transparent manner and criticising

the ruling elite's approach, the protesters chanted anti-Russian slogans. However, the opposition parties have so far been unable to capitalise on social discontent in such a way as to increase their level of support ahead of the local elections and the elections to the European Parliament, both of which will be held in June. The main opposition parties, the Democratic Coalition (DK) and Momentum, have not put forward their own presidential candidate, and have limited themselves to demanding that the country's president should be elected by universal suffrage.

- Losing Novák has been a major blow to Fidesz (PM Orbán spoke about it on 17 February in his annual state of the nation address). She had been a particularly important figure in the ruling camp, as she improved Fidesz's image due to her personal involvement in Hungary's family policy and toned down its anti-Ukrainian orientation at the international level. Despite the narrow set of competences of Hungary's president, she has also become one of the best-known figures in the ruling elite. It seems unlikely that Sulyok, who is a generation older than Novák and lacks political experience, will be able to play a similar role. However, just like Novák, he will likely be fully loyal to Orbán, who wields absolute power in the Hungarian state, especially as Sulyok owes his current position to the prime minister.