



Áder as president

No loud gasps were heard when Fidesz nominated its MEP János Áder as the candidate to succeed President Pál Schmitt. Given Orbán's insistence that the new president be a person of unflinching loyalty, the party had few experienced persons to choose from. Among the 3-4 names on the table, Áder must indeed have appeared as the best choice even though he spent his entire adult life in politics where he built a relatively undistinguished and recently declining career. Disappointing as the selection may be for those who had hoped that Fidesz would nominate someone universally respected, Áder's even temper may serve as a welcome contrast to Fidesz' heated style. Still, like Schmitt, he won't be the person to put the brakes on Fidesz when the latter does something blatantly injurious to the rule of law. At best, he could become the successful quiet president that Orbán had intended Schmitt to be.

The major question was whether Fidesz still needed someone as president who would be loyal to the core, as Schmitt was, or if it would be willing to embrace a high-profile, widely respected intellectual who could not be relied on to do the government's bidding when it comes to unreflectively signing controversial legislation. The answer to this question would also implicitly reveal whether Fidesz' restructuring of democracy and state has reached a stage of completion where the governing party can lean back and risk a more meddling president.

Whatever Fidesz' specific plans may be, the answer is that it does not feel confident enough to risk someone who is not a party loyalist. There would have been a number of widely recognised candidates who are well-disposed towards Fidesz and would not have quarrelled with it save for extreme instances – the president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and former Fidesz minister, József Pálinkás, comes to mind –, but Fidesz did not dare choose from that pool. The candidate therefore had to satisfy a difficult mix of criteria: s/he had to be widely known and considered a heavy-weight, had to be scandal-free and also of iron-clad loyalty. At other times being respected across the political spectrum may be an important criterion, but it was certainly not crucial enough now to be on equal footing with the loyalty requirement.

Slim selection

Very few people meet all these criteria and they belong exclusively to the shrinking group of still active Fidesz politicians from the party's founding generation, i.e. the President of Parliament, László Kövér, and MEPs József Szájer and János Áder. MEP Tamás Deutsch satisfies all criteria but one: he was never taken really seriously and has shredded his remaining reputation with a series of obscene comments that were shocking even within the very debased standards of Hungarian political discourse.

Kövér apparently did not want the job, though he, too, would have been an ill-fit: even for a Fidesz politician he loathes the Socialists to an unusual degree, and has found that his theoretically impartial position as Speaker does not compel him to moderate the outward expression of his hatred. In his most recent outburst he said it was shameful "that the MPs



to my left may be Members of Parliament at all.” Though he issued an apology of sorts, he refused to deliver it personally. With such a polarising attitude Kövér either would have been compelled to exercise significant restraint – his words and actions as Speaker of Parliament suggest that that might be impossible – or else risk miring the presidency in continuous political battles, which cannot be in Fidesz’ interest. As for Szájer, he still does not exude the authority that the office requires, despite the fact that he has received highly important tasks recently, including drafting Hungary’s new Basic Law.

The man who never smiled

With the demanding criteria that framed the selection process, Áder was therefore clearly the most suitable candidate. Due to his reserved, generally calm demeanour he had been less used up in the warfare that is Hungarian politics even before he left for Brussels in 2009. His prolonged absence since then has made him an even more unlikely candidate to become the object of the opposition’s attacks. As anticipated, opposition reaction was hostile but nevertheless muted: Áder does not elicit much emotion, neither in his favour nor against him.

Clearly, his seeming unfriendliness – the press mocked his stern expression by asking government politicians whether they had ever seen him smile – probably disguises a natural shyness, but either way: he lacks Schmitt’s natural gregariousness or Árpád Göncz’s and Ferenc Mádl’s grandfatherly demeanour. At least in terms of the manner of his appearance, he will be more like László Sólyom, though the difficulty with smiling is where the parallel between them ends.

An entirely political...

Pundits and opposition politicians have made much of the fact that Áder’s entire career was spent in politics and that he never had to prove himself in any environment other than Fidesz and politics. While the miniscule number of political survivors since transition shows that this is anything but an easy or risk-free career, the implicit argument, namely that politics as a vocation is an inferior type of activity, is troubling. But unfortunately not without merit.

It is true that elsewhere party politicians have successfully morphed into distinguished, impartial and widely respected heads of state. It is no coincidence, however, that when it comes to the presidency, Hungarian post-transition politics has mostly eschewed politicians in favour of scholars, judges, etc. For one, post-transition politics has not yet learned to handle conflict well, and thus it is more acrimonious than in most established democracies. Anyone who is successful in such an environment is likely to be rejected by a significant proportion of the public, regardless of personal merits. This is likely to hold for Áder as well, that is even though he is generally less loathed by opposition voters than most other prominent Fidesz politicians, he would have to make huge efforts to capture their sympathies.

Incidentally, the apparent irreconcilability of total loyalty to Fidesz and a distinguished professional career amplifies why Schmitt seemed so suitable: he was reliably loyal and yet



had a respected career as a sports functionary – though for reasons related to his personality rather than his professional achievements many, even on the conservative side, found him to be a lightweight.

...and hardly distinguished career

In spite of his name-recognition, Áder's career is rather undistinguished. He never served in a cabinet position and he was not known for the vocal advocacy of any major public policy issue. During Fidesz' first term in government he served as the Speaker of Parliament, a position that he handled unspectacularly but without major scandals (the disputes that did arise during his tenure were due to Fidesz' efforts to curtail the rights of Parliament rather than Áder's actions.) After the loss of the 2002 election he served as Fidesz' parliamentary leader during the entire term. Though that was necessarily a polarising position, he wasn't as divisive as János Lázár is now – though Fidesz also had far less power.

By 2006, his role was clearly fading and after the election he declined to lead Fidesz in Parliament. He retreated back into the safety of the parliamentary vice presidency instead, until given the opportunity to go to Brussels, where he reportedly felt very much at home. There were rumours of clashes with Orbán, but nothing was ever aired publicly and the gossip that was revealed was inconsequential. In the run-up to the 2006 campaign, for instance, Áder supposedly attacked Orbán heatedly in a closed meeting because he felt that the party's campaign staff and Orbán's special access staff were working at cross-purposes. Hardly the stuff that legends are made of.

Beyond the front lines

Though he is battle-tested, Áder obviously feels more comfortable in a non-divisive position. The presidency is therefore ideal for him, even if it marks the end of his political career at a relatively young age. He may yet surprise the public and the opposition by making an effort to embrace the non-partisan nature of the office. While that is just one possible scenario, Áder might strive to express the national unity that his new office is supposed to embody. His dry personality and lack of charisma clearly limit his possibilities, but his ability to spend two decades as a Fidesz politician without eliciting visceral hatred from the left shows that he has some promise. And he is clearly far less gaffe-prone than his predecessor, a significant advantage in terms of restoring some of the office's battered lustre.

He is very unlikely to surprise in terms of acting as a protector of democracy – also part of his constitutional role – when that requires standing up to Fidesz. In the unlikely case that there will be conflicts, Áder is more likely to relieve the tension by travelling more abroad, as he did in 2009. In the best scenario for Fidesz and himself, he could fulfil the role that the failed Schmitt had been designated to fill: a quiet and loyal president who is calm enough to stand above the opposition's attacks.