



Slight renovations in the Orbán machine

The Orbán government has reached the middle of its term and it marked the occasion with the first significant cabinet reshuffle since it entered office. There is not much of a transformation going on, however. Mostly, the cabinet overhaul has reinforced the relative influence of Fidesz' inner circle, i.e. of people close to Orbán. Especially crucial may be János Lázár's shift from the leadership of the parliamentary faction to the PM's office, and the nomination of Antal Rogán as Lázár's successor at the helm of Fidesz' group in Parliament. Overall, Lázár did a fine job as a faction leader, but arguably his new office will make use of his better qualities while giving him less room to publicly display his weaknesses. Rogán's elevation marks the completion of a long process of rehabilitation for one of Fidesz' most talented young politicians.

In the middle of Fidesz' term in government, Viktor Orbán's famously stable cabinet is finally undergoing a medium-sized overhaul. Despite problems on the economic front, a series of controversial reforms with little evidence of success thus far, and an aggressive and confrontational governing style occasionally marred by scandals, Orbán famously stood by his team, true to his own emphasis on loyalty.

The only change at the cabinet level thus far had been Tamás Fellegi's demotion from the helm of the Ministry of the National Development to a minister without portfolio, in charge of the negotiations with the IMF. Just when those finally got off the ground, Fellegi became the first minister to be completely let go, along with Minister of National Resources Miklós Réthelyi.

Supersize me

Réthelyi will be succeeded by the junior minister for Roma issues, Zoltán Balog, who will lead a significantly enlarged ministry. And when we talk of significantly enlarged, it's worth keeping in mind that the behemoth department already deals with health, education, family, youth, drugs and drug prevention, culture, sports, social and pensions policy, science and equal opportunities. This is a cabinet within the cabinet. Now it will also feature social integration, the promotion of social and civil relations, church relations, as well as minority and Roma policy.

While Réthelyi had long been considered a certain candidate for ouster, Balog's was only one of the names floated. The selection of Balog, who appears a far less pro-active – or aggressive, if you like – politician than, say, Lázár, whose name was also mentioned, suggests that the hands off supervision by the minister will likely continue. Réthelyi appeared to have very little to do with the goings-on in his vast ministry. Effectively, his junior ministers Rózsa Hoffmann (education) and Miklós Szócska (health) were running their own shows, with little input from their nominal superior. The enlarged super-ministry suggests that the junior ministers will probably continue to operate their fiefdoms relatively autonomously.



Consolidation of old structures

What makes the current reshuffle interesting are not the changes, but how much things remain the same. To apply the framework of the government communication's new buzzword (see most recently Week 19), these changes mark the consolidation of old structures. The “in” people in Orbán's circle reinforce their positions, while some of the few “out” people, well, they are really out now.

Most crucially, Minister of National Economy György Matolcsy retains his position as the official architect of economic policy. In fact, the personnel announcements followed just on the heels of the government's official nod to Matolcsy's new taxes on telecommunications and financial transactions. Though he was upstaged by the reshuffle announcement – most likely timed to steer the media spotlight away from the new burdens imposed on the public – Matolcsy had plenty of opportunity this week to bask in the limelight and reinforce public perception that he remains in charge of the economy.

Behind closed doors

The only sop to adherents of “orthodox” economic policy was the elevation of Mihály Varga to the cabinet, to replace Fellegi as the leader of the government's IMF delegation. Though he talks little to the press and reveals still less, Varga – himself a former minister of finance in the first Orbán government – is generally considered more of a textbook type of economist and a stabilising influence in a government that is wedded to its unusual economic policy.

More importantly, in his role as leader of the IMF delegation he will presumably have the authority to make concessions to the Monetary Fund (assuming that the government actually wants an agreement), and to reveal details about Fidesz' real vision for the Hungarian economy. Whatever pronouncements Matolcsy makes in public, it is likely that Varga's commitments and revelations at the negotiating table will have more bearing on the actual realities of policy-making, which is not to say that these will necessarily be in conflict. The only question is what Varga will do once the talks have been concluded – it appears extremely unlikely that he'd be on the way out, like his predecessor as IMF delegation leader.

Young Turks rising

Varga's replacement as the junior minister in charge of the Prime Minister's Office will be Fidesz' current leader in Parliament, János Lázár. As Orbán put it, the appointment moves Lázár closer to him, though it does come at some cost to the young politician who rose very high very quickly. He has to give up the mayoralty of his hometown Hódmezővásárhely, which was the office that propelled his entry into national politics. Due to the new rules on conflicts of interest for MPs, he would likely have surrendered the mayoralty in 2014 anyway, but the early move nevertheless deprives him of an independent power base.

More importantly, his new position will give him far fewer opportunities to be in the limelight and will also lessen his influence over Fidesz 262 MPs, a significantly more crucial power base than Hódmezővásárhely, a town of 47,000. He will of course be closer to Orbán



– and for those who wish to wield influence on policy that's more important than controlling a few hundred MPs.

In any case, the move is also smart because Lázár has proven adept as an organiser – a key aspect of his new office. Fidesz' parliamentary faction is a highly disciplined machine, which is a testament both to Orbán's skill in selecting MPs and to Lázár's managerial qualities. At the same time, though Lázár is passable as a rhetorician, he has proven highly gaffe and scandal prone over the past two years. His comments about public affairs reveal an extremely combative and often insensitive nature. Some of his remarks betrayed a sense of entitlement and also lacking empathy for the underprivileged. Keeping him off the TV screens for a little while meshes well with the notion of consolidation.

Smooth operator

As Fidesz' leader in Parliament, Lázár is succeeded by the mayor of Budapest's central (5th) district, Antal Rogán. This marks the most recent apex of Rogán's arduous climb back to prominence after years of political exile. During Orbán's first term in government, Rogán was seen as the potentially most promising political prospect in Fidesz. Rogán shared this assessment and fatally went public with it, announcing that he could see himself as PM ten years hence. Though a horizon of ten years could hardly be construed as an immediate claim, his statement probably did not sit well with a PM who does not like competition very much.

Ten year's later, the assessment hasn't changed much: he could still be PM ten years from now, but he has learned not to say such things publicly. He suffered for his early hubris by being sidelined for many years, and paid tribute this term by introducing many of the most controversial pieces of legislation. With Rogán's ascension, all the currently likely contenders for Orbán's succession – Fidesz' vice chair and Debrecen mayor Lajos Kósa, Minister of Public Administration and deputy PM Tibor Navracsics, and of course Lázár and Rogán – hold major offices in the party or in government. The pieces may all be in place, but don't count on the game to begin any time soon.