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Hungary's Largest Political Scandal in the Orbán Era

How the main political narratives of Fidesz
collapsed like a house of cards and why it won't
affect the party's popularity

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AIIES COMMENT

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Introduction

In February 2024, Hungary was shaken by an outrageous scandal on giving a presidential pardon to a pedophile accomplice. This was one of the largest political scandals in contemporary Hungary and it has erupted around Katalin Novák, the president of Hungary. It rarely happens that Fidesz cannot control the political discourse and was forced to dismiss two high-profile politicians. In a country where political mistakes have little or no effect on the elites, such events bear a significant value. What has happened exactly, and why was this scandal different than the previous ones? I argue the scandal cut deep in the core narratives and credibility of Fidesz. I identify four narratives that have been damaged in the pedophilia scandal 1) Fidesz condemns pedophilia; 2) Fidesz is the protector of families and children; 3) Fidesz follows Christian values; 4) Fidesz is a united party. This AIES Comment highlights the significance of the scandal and discusses the future prospects of Fidesz.

The Scandal

Katalin Novák was a prime politician of Fidesz. Since 2001 she had served in various ministries and was also a member of Parliament. Before becoming the president of Hungary in 2022, she was Minister of Family Affairs¹. Her political persona was built up as the protector of traditional families, the protector of

children. Novák is also a mother of 3 children, which further strengthened the narrative. Therefore, the scandal about giving a presidential pardon to Endre Kónya – a deputy director at a children's home – who actively helped in covering up several pedophile crimes in his own institution, caused public outrage and resulted in the resignation of Katalin Novák². The decision of giving a presidential pardon to a convicted criminal of child abuse became public on the 2nd February 2024³ and it heavily undermined the political character of Katalin Novák and the narrative of Fidesz. Later, Novák justified her decision by referring to the self-declaration of the perpetrator, Endre Kónya, who called himself innocent⁴.

One could argue that believing in the innocence of Kónya was utterly unrealistic, as he was sentenced to 3-4 months in prison both on first and second degree which the Supreme Court upheld⁵. The question emerges: what was the real reason for giving a presidential pardon to a convicted pedophile accomplice? There have been no official statements on the matter, but investigative journalists have found that Endre Kónya had powerful political connections. Presumably his biggest supporter was Zoltán Balog⁶ a bishop from the reformed church who was formerly Minister of Human Resources. Zoltán Balog was previously the boss and mentor of Katalin Novák,

which means he had great leverage over the ex-president. Moreover, Endre Kónya had direct connections to the Orbán family⁷, which further explains why he had gotten away with the crime.

Whenever a scandal broke out, or Fidesz just wanted to test the waters with a new political message, they commissioned a public opinion poll⁸. Based on the results, and growing dissatisfaction within their supporter base they decided that Katalin Novák's resignation was not enough to suppress the critical voices. It became apparent that it was necessary to replace another high-profile politician that was linked to the scandal in order to quell public anger. Judit Varga, Minister of Justice and leader of the European Parliamentary list of Fidesz counter-signed the request for the presidential pardon⁹. On the same day as Katalin Novák, she also resigned and completely withdrew from public life¹⁰. Sacrificing two leading politicians is extraordinary within the Fidesz party, and it showed the increased efforts of distancing the pedophile scandal from the party and from the prime minister himself.

However, even after the resignations the political discourse did not quiet down. In fact, famous influencers from pop culture organized a large-scale demonstration, which attracted 150.000-200.000 participants¹¹.

The novelty of this protest was that influencers stepped out of the internet because they felt it was their civic duty to stand by the side of the victims. They demanded an all-encompassing reform in the child protection system and a sincere apology to all the molested children. Even though it was the largest demonstration in the Orbán era¹² – or even since the revolution of 1956¹³ – the political opposition missed the opportunity to take an advantage of the situation.

Nonetheless, the scandal had a great reach, that went beyond the core base of the opposition parties. Fidesz knew that, otherwise he would not have made the top politicians resign. The scandal has damaged four core narratives including the moral basis of Fidesz.

Narrative one: Fidesz condemns pedophilia

Pedophile scandals around Fidesz are not without precedent. In 2020 the diplomat Gábor Kaleta stored 19.000 child pornography pictures on his working laptop¹⁴. In court he admitted his guilt and was sentenced to a suspended prison for 2.5 years and was obliged to pay 540.000 forints¹⁵ (approximately 1600 euros, based on the exchange rate of February 2020), which is a surprisingly mild punishment for such a serious offense. However, this scandal subsided without any serious political consequences. Seemingly Fidesz could control the narrative and isolate it from the party by claiming it as a “one-time case” and putting all the blame on Gábor

Kaleta. As a reaction to the diplomat’s wrongdoing, Fidesz promised to enact strong child protection laws and tightened the Criminal Code¹⁶. The governing party also created a publicly available website, where citizens can directly retrieve data on pedophile criminals¹⁷.

Since the governing party got involved in a pedophile scandal again, its “excuse” of such a matter being a “one-time case” is not credible anymore. From the latter it can be seen that the existing “stricter” regulations in place are not sufficient as they did not deter pedophile criminals, especially if they have high-level governmental connections.

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Narrative two: Fidesz is the protector of families and children

Fidesz undertook several measures to incentivize family establishments. The most notable ones were the Family Housing Allowance (CSOK)¹⁸, family tax benefit¹⁹, income tax benefit for mothers under 30 years²⁰, full tax exemption for mothers who have at least four children²¹, and a state subsidy for a 7-seat car²². Even though these measures do help families on a personal level, there are deeply rooted systematic problems on the societal level. Public institutions directly related to family establishment are severely underfunded and

malfunctioning. For example, in several rural towns, it is not possible to give birth on weekends and after 4 pm on weekdays²³; there are not enough seats in kindergartens²⁴, so parents or grandparents have to stay at home or choose a private nursery; schools are outdated and struggle with a shortage of teachers leading to school closures²⁵ and above all, the child protection system is unable to protect children.

The incident showed that the most vulnerable children cannot count on the state. After the scandal broke out, Fidesz focused on a quick political solution by removing two politicians from the stage instead of seeking systematic reforms in the child protection system. The recently announced constitutional amendment that a presidential pardon cannot be given to child abuse offenders²⁶ is just another symbolic move that is practically pointless in a system where only personal connections matter.

Narrative three: Fidesz follows Christian values

Fidesz has a long history with the Christian church, which also shows in their political motto of “God, homeland, family”. Christianity should serve the moral basis of the party, but it is rather used as a strategically important tool for the expansion of their voter base. Fidesz realized there is a huge potential in exploiting the network and the reach of the church. Already in 2013, Zoltán Balog – who was at that time a

Minister of the Fidesz government and now a key figure in the pedophile scandal – sent a mail to all churches about the preferred political narratives of the government with the expectation that priests will read the letter to the congregation. The letter contained biblical images, where Fidesz posed as the savior of Christianity and the protector of conservative values²⁷. This incident became publicly known after the scandal erupted.

Zoltán Balog's interplay in the scandal caused a crisis within the reformed church. Balog had to resign from his position as the president of the synod, but he could keep his title as a bishop, which led to further conflicts within the church²⁸. However, 86% of the leaders of the reformed church stood by Balog's side in a vote of sympathy²⁹. One bishop explained why: "If Zoltán Balog was good when he obtained grants for the church, he should be good in these hard times as well"³⁰. This statement exposes the connection between the church and the state, referring to the secret deal of offering influence in exchange for financial support.

Narrative four: Fidesz is a united party

It is a long-standing myth that Fidesz is a strong and united

party. This perception has shifted when Péter Magyar, a deeply embedded businessman in the circles of Fidesz, who was also the ex-husband of Judit Varga (former Minister of Justice) exposed the internal conflicts of the party³¹. According to him there are two wings within Fidesz, one that works for the wealth of the nation, and another that only works for their own wealth. Judit Varga and Katalin Novák belonged to the former wing, whereas those who supported their removal from power belonged to the latter wing. Péter Magyar's insights offer a new perspective on the inner dynamics of Fidesz. He claims that the critical voices within Fidesz are getting weaker, and the number of office and rent-seeking politicians are continuously growing. Since his ex-wife, Judit Varga had resigned, he could finally turn to the public and share the worrying tendencies he had observed.

Future perspectives of the party

The scandal has clearly caused some unpleasant moments for Fidesz and damaged numerous narratives. Nevertheless, most likely it will not have a permanent effect on their voter base because there is no other appealing political alternative. The gov-

ernment critical parties are fragmented and weak and could not ride the wave of the scandal³². It also shows their weakness that the huge protest was organized by civilians, who explicitly asked for the political parties to be absent from the protest³³. However, the scandal might have a greater effect on the already critical masses. After two years of political apathy and hopelessness for political change, the protest gave a beacon of hope that many are dissatisfied with the system. People have found their long-lost voice, which might increase their chances of participating in the EU and the municipal elections on the 9th June 2024.

About the Author

Alexandra Fehér is a junior policy analyst from Hungary with 1.5 years of research experience. She was involved in several research projects, one of which was together with the World Bank. Alexandra holds a master's degree with merit from Central European University (CEU), where she studied Public Policy. Her interests are diverse, but so far, she has experience with European policy making, anti-corruption-, economic-, and security policies. From January 2024 she has been an intern at the AIES.

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