

HUNGARIAN POLITICS IN-DEPTH

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ANALYSIS: MR. NAVRACSICS GOES TO BRUSSELS

A commissioner in Hungary is a "biztos", that is someone who is certain of something. Based on the Hungarian meaning of the word, few people in Hungary are more qualified to become EU Commissioner than foreign minister Tibor Navracsics. Certainty is not in short supply anywhere in Fidesz, of course, but even in this rather competitive field Navracsics's certainty, bordering on arrogance, stands out.

Still, if Orbán had intended to take revenge on Brussels for the conflicts he's had to endure over the past years, he surely could have done better. But if he sought a top Fidesz official with a reputation of "party above all else" who would simultaneously stand (some) chance of being confirmed in Brussels, then Navracsics was likely the best of his limited options.

Navracsics is undeniably a highly intelligent and crafty politician. He was (is) also a very popular political science professor, though he likely won't be remembered for his scientific work. Apart from his undisputed intellect, his political allure owes to an ability to make himself seem an independent and moderate mind in an increasingly monolithic and in many senses extreme governing party.

Both, his purported independence and his moderation, are myths, that is they are only true in such a relativistic sense as to render them meaningless. "Independent by Fidesz standards" has little to do with independence. And though he may have been a moderating influence on Orbán behind the scenes, as some claim, as a long-time minister of justice Navracsics has been in charge of - and has faithfully executed - some of Fidesz' fiercest attacks on the system of checks and balances. He evinced no discomfort in implementing these policies.

The Hungarian fact-checking site/blog Ténytár has compiled a survey of the bills Navracsics played a major part in, and even the highlights read like the catalogue of a little shop of legislative horrors: "[U]ndermining judicial independence; turning county municipal governments into depositories for officials who have outlived their usefulness in higher positions; an election law and suffrage law that are biased in favour of the right; the Fourth Constitutional Amendment, which incorporated several unconstitutional laws into the Fundamental Law [the Hungarian constitution]. On the whole, the role he assumed in destroying the system of checks and balances raises concerns as to his suitability [for the position of EU Commissioner]."

One of the reasons why Navracsics is nevertheless perceived as a moderate is that his function was never that of a rhetorical firebreather. Generally, politicians who aspired to leadership positions in Fidesz without the bone fides of belonging to the founding generation had to be willing to temporarily take the assigned role of "attack dogs." Antal Rogán and Navracsics's successor as foreign minister, Péter Szijjártó, are prime examples of politicians whose sole political function was to bash the opposition, whereby they earned the possibility to assume more serious offices.

Having joined politics relatively late as a successful university teacher, Navracsics was allowed to rise high quickly without having to go through this role, which has helped him avoid becoming as polarising as many Fidesz leaders tend to be (incidentally, Szijjártó and Rogán have also mellowed considerably since their elevation to higher offices). Yet in substance there is no indication that Navracsics harbours any doubts as to Fidesz' entitlement to the position of power in Hungary, even if that is maintained at the expense of the democratic process. Moreover, as someone known for his wit, condescension and even

considerable - though publicly less apparent - temperament, he would have been just as successful in taking the traditional route to success in Fidesz.

It would be wrong to suggest that Navracsics is intellectually unsuitable for his designated role in the Commission. He will likely discharge his professional responsibilities skilfully. Yet in terms of the democratic and moral dimension of politics, he easily can be a liability for the EU.

In addition to his steps to weaken Hungarian democracy, he was also a key player in one of the most reprehensible episodes of Fidesz' interpretation of realpolitik, when the government extradited an Azerbaijani military officer, Ramil Safarov, who had brutally murdered an Armenian soldier in his sleep, to his home country. At home, Safarov was welcomed as a hero and promptly pardoned. Navracsics's governmental department at the time, the Ministry of Public Administration and Justice, justified the measure by arguing that the Azeri government had pledged to keep Safarov imprisoned. While we will never know the truth behind the episode that led to the Armenian government's decision to sever diplomatic ties with Hungary, the most reasonable explanation is that Safarov's extradition was part of some financial deal.

Navracsics's role in the de facto release of a brutal murderer is especially striking as otherwise - i.e. when the victims were not foreigners who should theoretically have enjoyed the protection of the Hungarian laws and authorities - he sought to cast himself as an ardent law and order politician. He played a laudable role in relentlessly and successfully pushing for the Irishman Ciaran Tobin, who had accidentally killed two children with his car in 2000, to actually serve his prison sentence for the killings. Less laudably, Navracsics also chided Hungary's high court, the Curia, in a letter because of the court's allegedly lenient decisions in high-profile cases. Navracsics specifically citing public outrage as a reason for stiffer sentencing. This is not only revealing of Navracsics's problematic understanding of judicial independence, but also of his highly inconsistent attitude towards violent crime (there was no outrage concerning the release of Safarov, even though that act allegedly even involved a betrayal of the Hungarian government).

For Navracsics, Brussels will be welcome opportunity to relaunch his career as a European politician who can work within the boundaries of European values. The question is only what European values mean if he is elected to a position that is meant to embody these values.

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