

# **An innovative and traditionalist president**

**Katalin Novák's first 100 days in office**



**NÉZŐPONT INTÉZET**

## 1 First hundred days: Medium profile, high support

Katalin Novák was elected by the Parliament as the President of Hungary on 14 March 2022, and took office on 10 May. A hundred days after her inauguration<sup>1</sup>, the Nézőpont Institute has overviewed the first 100 days of her presidency, examined the support behind her and attempted to provide an explanation for her popularity.

In Hungary, the president is elected by the members of the parliament, but at the same time she must express the unity of the nation and represent Hungary. It is therefore an important question what Hungarians think about her. The Nézőpont Institute conducted a poll<sup>2</sup> to find out what Hungarians think about Katalin Novák's work so far.

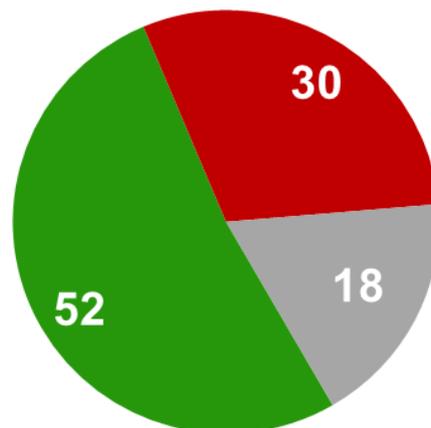
At the first five percent of the five-year presidential mandate, she is moderately known, only 53 percent of Hungarians are able to name the President of Hungary. However, among informed citizens, more than every second Hungarian (52 percent) believe that Katalin Novák is properly fulfilling her duties as the President of Hungary, and less than one in three (30 percent) think the opposite.

### NOVÁK KATALIN ELNÖKSÉGE MEGFELEL A MAGYAROK ELVÁRÁSAINAK



**KÉRDÉS:** Ön szerint Novák Katalin összességében az elvárásoknak megfelelően tölti be az államfői tisztséget? *(az államfő személyét ismerő válaszadók körében)*

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This means, on the one hand, that the left's anti-Novák campaign has not been successful and, on the other hand, by raising her profile, her support may even increase. Her symbolic moves, her communication messages and thematic emphases have every reason to be positively regarded by the vast majority of society.

## 2 Novelty and respect for tradition

Katalin Novák's high popularity can be attributed to two factors: her novelty and her respect for tradition. Further exploiting the potential of this duality might be the key for increasing her popularity, by which she can make herself better known to social groups that are not hostile to her.

The novelty of the new president is unquestionable. Katalin Novák is young, she is a woman and raising children is a daily challenge for her. All three qualities make her unique among the previous Hungarian presidents, in a certain sense, they also supersede the clichés about presidency. These three novel qualities are also the basis for Katalin Novák's high public support, since she knows, and as a mother she lives the everyday life of ordinary people raising children. Over the past hundred days – and even before that, as a minister and state secretary – Katalin Novák has elegantly exploited the communication potential of her novelty.

Below, however, another important element of her popularity, the strategy of following presidential traditions, will be discussed. She does not follow all the traditions of her predecessors, but, from each former presidency, she has integrated a characteristic that defined the activities of the president and which can be highlighted as a positive aspect of the given presidential cycle. Her actions also reflect the actualization of the presidential traditions established since the regime change. Even in János Áder's conception of his role, the positive presidential traits<sup>3</sup> created by his predecessors could be witnessed, however, under Novák's presidency, this integrative role itself may even become a lasting tradition.

### 2.1 Sociability – In the footsteps of Árpád Göncz

Árpád Göncz, “everyone's Uncle Árpai,” was the creator of the sociable presidential character. With the help of the left-wing press, he consciously represented and built the plebeian image of the first elected president of the republic after the regime change, which, despite his active political role, brought him high popularity. This awareness was reflected in his 1994 statement: “I think I am the average Hungarian. The mean value. Examined from above, from below.”<sup>4</sup> The social intimacy that he demonstratively expressed at every occasion was a novelty in the 1990s.

This openness has not been typical of all former presidents, however, after Árpád Göncz, with Katalin Novák, Hungary now has a sociable president again. Compared to previous presidents, she utilizes online communication channels more efficiently, posting presidential and personal contents almost every day on her Facebook page with 150,000 followers and on her Instagram profile with more than 40,000 followers. Unlike her predecessors, she also shares family-related events with the

public. She shared pictures of a vacation with her mother<sup>5</sup> and daughter<sup>6</sup>, and also of her family adopting a new pet<sup>7</sup>. Katalin Novák has also reported on her participation in community events over the past hundred days that have no formal political aspects. For example, she promoted physical activities by climbing a wall on the Challenge Day<sup>8</sup>, visited the Bosch exhibition<sup>9</sup> with young gypsy students, visited melon growers in Draviványi<sup>10</sup>, or visited a local shopkeeper lady in Karácsond, who had previously congratulated<sup>11</sup> her on her appointment as president. In addition to her social intimacy in the online space, she was able to remain self-identified, which is largely due to the fact that she did not change her previous image: she kept the image of a mother actively participating in community programs and a politician representing families.

## **2.2 Public declaration of faith –The legacy of Ferenc Mádl**

Ferenc Mádl's conception of his role as president was significantly influenced by his publicly professed Christian faith and his ethical education. He participated in some 50 Catholic presidential programmes during his five-year term<sup>12</sup> as president. As a Catholic, he also participated, among other things, in the reformed youth conference of the Public Life Foundation, where he formulated the phrase that would become the motto for his role as president: “Christian faith is the most personal public matter.”<sup>13</sup>

Several elements of the first hundred days indicate that the public expression and practice of her faith is also a key element in Katalin Novák's conception of her role. Her inauguration began with a church ceremony, and this was the first time when Catholics, Reformed, Evangelicals and members of the Jewish community joined together to ask God's blessing on the president. In her first written interview, Novák highlighted the role of her faith when she had carried out self-examination before accepting the nomination: "(...) I only spoke with my family, and I don't hide the fact that as a Reformed believer, I also turned to God for guidance." <sup>14</sup>

Since taking office, she has attended several religious-related programmes. Among other things, she visited the Primary School of the Sisters of Nazareth, where she was accompanied by the Provincial Superior of the Piarist Order<sup>15</sup>; inaugurated the new Transylvanian landscape<sup>16</sup> unit in the Szentendre Skanzen with the blessing of Transylvanian bishops; travelled to Transylvania<sup>17</sup> with Catholic Archbishop Gergely Kovács of Gyulaféhervár, where she attended church consecrations<sup>18</sup>; she was hosted by Reformed Bishop Béla Kató and his wife<sup>19</sup>; met with Reformed bishops from the Carpathian Basin in the Roman Catholic Cathedral<sup>20</sup>; attended the Berlin Prayer Breakfast<sup>21</sup>; and gave a lecture to Christian youth interested in politics from all continents of the world at the summer university<sup>22</sup> of the International Catholic Legislators Network. It is also a result of her first hundred

days, that after the summer diplomatic break, Katalin Novák will be received by Pope Francis at the Vatican.

### **2.3 Ambassador No 1 - The example of Pál Schmitt**

It is part of the president's main functions to represent the Hungarian state at home and abroad, in front of diplomats and political leaders. Pál Schmitt's one-and-a-half-year presidency – thanks to his past as a member of the European Parliament and as a sports diplomat, as well as his decade long IOC membership – was mainly dedicated to increase the international representation of Hungary's position. Even in his speech as a presidential candidate, he had set himself this goal: "As the country's number one ambassador, I believe that increasing Hungary's diplomatic weight is a key task."<sup>23</sup>

At the beginning of the current presidential term, the role of the “ambassador number one” has become more important, since a war broke out in a neighbouring country, which had previously only happened during the term of Árpád Göncz. Katalin Novák began her term in a war-torn international and economic situation, which gave her an even greater diplomatic challenge than before. She began her political career at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where she served for two years as a ministerial adviser to János Martonyi, then she was a ministerial commissioner for francophone affairs for a year. As “ambassador number one”, it is not surprising that her first trip was to Poland, a country which had a different view on the neighbouring conflict, where she met with Polish President Andrzej Duda and Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki<sup>24</sup>, and where, in line with the government's pro-peace foreign policy, she condemned the Russian aggression, spoke out in the name of the "friendship of a thousand years," and they jointly called on the European Commission to disburse EU funds.<sup>25</sup>

It is almost an official duty of the president, which goes far beyond diplomacy, to maintain active relationship with Hungarians across the borders. In this regard, her meetings with RMDSZ president Hunor Kelemen<sup>26</sup> were considered significant events. However, it is a real diplomatic achievement that afterwards, at the meeting of the Central European heads of state in Bucharest, he also met with the Romanian president, who does not always emphasize his friendship with Hungary.

During her first hundred active days, she had several other important meetings, including a visit to Berlin where she held talks with President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. During the more than one-hour face-to-face conversation, they discussed, among other things, the negative effects of the Brussels sanctions package.<sup>27</sup> She also met with Czech President Miloš Zeman, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala, Slovenian President Borut Pahor and Slovenian Prime Minister Robert Golob. The Bucharest

Nine Summit was another opportunity to meet with the Polish President and – as mentioned above – with the Romanian President Klaus Johannis. During her trip to Brazil, she held talks with President Jair Bolsonaro on trade issues, future cooperation and economic relations.<sup>28</sup>

## **2.4 Representing values beyond politics - In the footsteps of László Sólyom**

The presidency of László Sólyom differed from that of his predecessors in that he had his own agenda.<sup>29</sup> He focused on the environment, an issue above party politics, thus reinforcing the president's non-partisan character. Sólyom's support for the green cause did not come out of nowhere. Starting in the 1980s, he advised various environmental movements, and he was a founder of Duna Kör ("Danube Circle"), a protest body against the construction of the Gabčíkovo – Nagymaros Dams.<sup>30</sup> Under his presidency, he often participated in environmental events<sup>31</sup>, and he established a network of green presidents.<sup>32</sup>

Katalin Novák is committed to similar values beyond politics. As a new initiative, she presented a presidential programme in five points.<sup>33</sup> Unsurprisingly, her first point is about supporting families, "so that every longed-for child could be born and raised safely, because children are our future." Not only her professional background, but her personal life is of note here. As a mother of three and a minister without portfolio responsible for families, she has contributed to the establishment of Hungary's targeted family support system, through which more than 6% of the GDP, or HUF 3,500 billion is spent on families by the Hungarian government.

She named supporting women's free self-fulfilment as her second point. Symbolic events such as receiving the female honorary president of the Hungarian Business Leaders Forum<sup>34</sup> suggest this cause will stay on the agenda.

The third point is supporting those in need. In line with this, she personally appeared in the fundraising programme of a Ukrainian television channel<sup>35</sup>, and she visited sick children in a hospital on children's day.<sup>36</sup>

Her fourth point is supporting talented youth. As an example, she spent three days with young people participating in the STIPI scholarship programme<sup>37</sup>, and she participated in the shooting of the talent show Virtuózok V4+.<sup>38</sup>

Her fifth point is a general wish for an "even better, more beautiful, more peaceful, richer and safer life." Here she used the term "smiling Hungary," which appears to be a recurrent phrase of her presidential vocabulary. In addition to sketching her programme, she also opened the possibility of building her own brand with the motto that is in line with her personal character.

## 2.5 Autonomy without dissent - János Áder's path

Despite what the left-wing media suggest, Hungary has not had a president without party links since the fall of the communist regime. Árpád Göncz was a member of SZDSZ' national council; Ferenc Mádli was a minister of the Antall-government; László Sólyom was an MDF MP for a short period; Pál Schmitt was a vice-chair of Fidesz, and - like Árpád Göncz - an MP and the speaker of the Parliament. Before his election as president, János Áder was a vice-chair of Fidesz, its parliamentary group leader as well as the speaker of the Parliament. From this perspective, the fact that Katalin Novák also used to be a vice-chair of Fidesz is not a novelty but rather in line with tradition.

But Hungary has two kinds of traditions regarding the president's links to political parties. In the first one, developed by Árpád Göncz, the president takes a stand in party political struggles using the communication and legal tools at his or her disposal. In 1990-1992, Göncz vetoed seven appointments and removals proposed by the prime minister. There was no example for this under the MSZP-SZDSZ government. In 1990-1994, he sent seven laws to the Constitutional Court for review. He did not send any during the socialist-liberal government.<sup>39</sup> With his political vetoes, he took the side of his former party SZDSZ' initial reasoning in debates within the ruling coalition.<sup>40</sup>

The other tradition is represented by János Áder, who was a party politician-turned president. As his former party nominated him for president, it is understandable that he did not act as opposition. At the same time, his autonomy is unquestionable. During his 10-year tenure, he raised concerns about a total of 44 acts supported by the ruling majority. Before being elected, he said, "If I get a hundred good laws, I will sign a hundred. If I get a hundred bad ones, I will send a hundred back to the Parliament." In her first major interview<sup>41</sup>, Katalin Novák cited Áder's comment, saying this is the principle she aims to follow. In her first 100 days as president, Katalin Novák did not use her constitutional or political veto. Yet she has given no sign of change in her understanding of her role as autonomous president, as put forward 100 days ago.

In the first 100 days of his mandate, Áder sent back five laws to the Parliament, but he had technical-procedural concerns, not substantial ones. Novák expressed critical views about the amendment of the kata law, but she found no problem with the law's constitutionality and the legislative intent. She also voiced her opposition to the 11th amendment of the Fundamental Law because she saw no compelling reason for the change.<sup>42</sup> When it comes to changing the Fundamental Law, however, the president cannot send it back to the Parliament, and the Constitutional Court can only be turned to in case of procedural errors. All in all, Novák's understanding of her role so far is not

counterbalancing but balancing. Her decisions have not been influenced by the government, the media or the pressure from the opposition parties.



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<https://www.facebook.com/novak.katalin.official/posts/pfbid02XvmqUHZeQZNqiMR9VDkuekHagEnJcCesntHyaRVdoKxXXmDFez6Akxj1aQSGAEaI> (Downloaded: 12 Aug 2022)

<sup>39</sup> Szomszéd Orsolya (2005) Államfői jogkörök alkalmazása a gyakorlatban. In:

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<sup>40</sup> Kumin Ferenc (2013) Megfontolásra vissza. In: [http://phd.lib.uni-corvinus.hu/710/1/Kumin\\_Ferenc.pdf](http://phd.lib.uni-corvinus.hu/710/1/Kumin_Ferenc.pdf) 171.

<sup>41</sup> <https://hirado.hu/belfold/cikk/2022/06/09/lanczi-tamas-vendege-novak-katalin-koztarsasagi-elnok-jon-a-het-legfontosabb-48-perce>  
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