

The Barroso Drama

Brussels for Beginners.

Mr. Kovács's Curious Adventures between Capitals

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Kovács's survival in the Barroso Commission through change of portfolio. Result of Hungarian and European party politics. Interconnected fates of various Commissioners.

After weeks of upheaval centered around the composition of the Barroso Commission, László Kovács's ultimate presence therein – his survival, in essence – came as a surprise to many observers. After all, he comes from a new, mid-sized member state; he has a questionable past, in Hungary's last communist government; and he performed dismally at his first committee hearing. In fact, his name was mentioned from the get-go among the group of problematic individuals. While Rocco Buttiglione and Ingrida Udre returned to their respective states, however, he was simply assigned to a different portfolio. Why?

An explanation emerges from the singular constellation of domestic and European developments. So, let us look at events as they unfold.

August 2004, Budapest. A few months after Hungary's accession to the European Union and mere weeks after European Parliament elections – with voter turnout in the low range among member states – public attention is focused on the figure of Mr. László Kovács. He has recently been named Hungary's designate to the European Commission, in a decision the opposition qualifies as a 'provocation' and a threat to co-operation within the Hungarian delegation to Brussels.¹ The grapevine speaks of Mr. Kovács taking the blame for the Socialists' poor showing

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¹ Népszabadság [*Freedom of the people*], Kovács Lászlót jelölik magyar EU-biztosnak [László Kovács nominated Hungarian EU commissioner] (4 Aug. 2004); Népszabadság [*Freedom of the people*], Fidesz: Kovács megoszt [Fidesz: Kovács divides] (5 Aug. 2004).

in the European elections² – especially in light of his withdrawal from the upcoming race for the presidency of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), which he currently holds³ – but whether banishment to Brussels is punishment or gift is, obviously, in the eyes of the beholder. The resulting political storm, focusing on the kind of national interest this particular candidate will protect, is, in itself, interesting for the apparent misunderstanding of a European Commissioner's role.⁴

But his candidacy is no longer why our protagonist is making headlines. As president of the Socialist Party, he is representing the ruling coalition's larger party in talks about the person of the Prime Minister.⁵ It so happens that Prime Minister Medgyessy is on his way out as a result of disagreement over a cabinet appointment or, alternately, as a result of what one commentator, in a slight downplay of the minority coalition party's role, terms 'Kovács's putsch.'⁶ Matters are not going well, in any case: the Prime Minister is refusing to resign, while the preferred Prime Minister designate of the socialist leadership seems to lack support.

Meanwhile, European Commission President Barroso makes an announcement in far-away Brussels: Mr. Kovács is to be assigned the Energy portfolio. A surprise, considering commentators had discussed the possibility of Regional Policy or External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy,⁷ but not an announcement deserving much airtime in the midst of the domestic crisis.⁸

September 2004, Budapest. The new Hungarian government is in place with Prime Minister Gyurcsány at its helm, after his upset victory at the Socialist Party Con-

² HVG [*Weekly World Economy*], Pofonok völgye [Valley of slaps] (19 June 2004); Magyar Nemzet [*Hungarian Nation*], Kovács Brüsszelbe távozna [Kovács to depart for Brussels] (4 Aug. 2004).

³ Népszabadság Online [*Freedom of the people Online*], Kovács László visszalép a pártelnökségtől [László Kovács steps back from party presidency] (15 June 2004); Népszabadság Online [*Freedom of the people Online*], Kovács: Az EP-választás előtt döntöttem [Kovács: I decided before the EP election] (17 June 2004).

⁴ Népszabadság Online [*Freedom of the people Online*], Erdélyi lap bírálja Kovács biztosi jelölését [Transylvanian paper criticizes Kovács's commission nomination] (4 Aug. 2004); Népszabadság Online [*Freedom of the people Online*], Lehet-e jó biztos Kovács László? [Can László Kovács be a good commissioner?] (6 Aug. 2004).

⁵ HVG.hu [*Weekly World Economy*], Ingó miniszteri székek, nagyszabású kormányalakítás? [Wobbly minister seats, large-scale government re-shuffle?] (10 Aug. 2004); Népszabadság Online [*Freedom of the people Online*], Kovács szerint kedd estére dönthetnek a kormányalakításról [According to Kovács decision on government shuffle may be made by Tuesday night] (17 Aug. 2004); Népszabadság Online [*Freedom of the people Online*], Kovács Medgyessy lemondásának lehetőségéről [Kovács on the possibility of Medgyessy's resignation] (23 Aug. 2004).

⁶ Népszabadság [*Freedom of the people*], Kovács puccsa [Kovács's putsch] (23 Aug. 2004).

⁷ Népszabadság [*Freedom of the people*], Tárgyalt Barroso és Kovács [Barroso and Kovács met for talks] (7 Aug. 2004).

⁸ HVG.hu [*Weekly World Economy*], Kovács László energetikai ügyekért felelős biztos lesz [László Kovács to be commissioner for energy matters] (12 Aug. 2004); Magyar Nemzet [*Hungarian Nation*], Barroso csapata [Barroso's team] (14 Aug. 2004).

gress. Mr. Kovács is nearing his hearing before the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy, on 30 September, while continuing to serve not only as the Socialists' (outgoing) president, but also as Hungary's Foreign Minister (for another three weeks), as a member of the Hungarian Parliament and as a vice-president of the Socialist International. The laundry list of posts is not only a reminder of our protagonist's credentials as a 'political heavyweight' but, in hindsight, also a sign of political handicap. It is, furthermore, an echo of Mr. Kovács's role in Hungarian politics: as Deputy Foreign Minister under the last communist government, as Socialist Party co-founder, as two-time Foreign Minister, as twice almost-candidate for Prime Minister. There is no way around our protagonist: the only way to remove him from Hungarian politics is to send him to Brussels.⁹ This is exactly what Prime Minister Medgyessy had meant to do in appointing him, and, considering Mr. Kovács's open support for Prime Minister Gyurcsány's rival during the August crisis, pre-emptive circumspection also goes a long way in explaining why our protagonist remained Hungary's candidate, despite intense criticism. But it is not the entire explanation.

October 2004, Brussels. One day after Mr. Kovács's hearing, negative reactions are near unanimous. Some question his commitment to his future assignment, in light of his ongoing obligations in Budapest.¹⁰ The Hungarian opposition sees itself vindicated in its earlier criticism of the person of the candidate, while the Hungarian socialists speak of the exportation of domestic tensions in the guise of what they claim were questions planted by the opposition.¹¹ Giles Bryan Chichester of the EPP-ED faction, as chairman of the panel, remarks on our lead character's lack of knowledge on energy matters.¹² Rebecca Harms of the Greens-EFA group claims his performance had been offensive to the European Parliament.¹³ In response, Mr. Kovács simply continues repeating that energy matters are not his area of expertise. The possibility of re-hearings makes the rounds in Brussels, as the Committee postpones, for the third time, its report on the candidate. But attention quickly shifts from our protagonist to Buttiglione, after the latter's baptism by fire in front of his respective panel. By 7 October, Hungarian socialist delegate Csaba Tabajdi speaks of Mr. Kovács as a 'hostage' in the increasingly

⁹ This is true for a number of other candidates, most obviously the Czech Vladimír Špidla.

¹⁰ Magyar Nemzet [*Hungarian Nation*], Kovács László kínos percei Brüsszelben [László Kovács's awkward minutes in Brussels] (1 Oct. 2004).

¹¹ Magyar Nemzet [*Hungarian Nation*], id., Népszabadság [*Freedom of the people*], Biztos, Kovács lesz a biztos [It's certain, Kovács will be the commissioner] (8 Oct. 2004).

¹² Magyar Nemzet [*Hungarian Nation*], id.

¹³ Népszabadság Online [*Freedom of the people Online*], Kovács jelölése ellen tiltakoznak az európai parlamenti zöldek [European Parliament Greens protest Kovács's nomination] (1 Oct. 2004).

tense showdown between right and left wing parties in the European Parliament.¹⁴ Our protagonist must be feeling some of the pressure, as he makes a statement expressing his hope that candidates will not be judged on the basis of the principle of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, in light of the qualitatively different reservations raised.¹⁵

Apparently, the Committee feels the same, since it approves Mr. Kovács's candidacy on 12 October,¹⁶ albeit with strong reservations about his professional competence, one day after that of Buttiglione had been rejected. Still, in light of the EPP-ED faction's continued support for Buttiglione, Hungarian newspapers continue to link Mr. Kovács's fate with that of his Italian colleague.¹⁷ As the furor around the composition of the future Commission grows, an increasing number of Commissioner-designates get sucked into the fray: Mr. Kovács is now only one in the pack and not even the most problematic. In fact, his place in the Commission, if not his post, seems rather secure, given that the main objection of both the Greens-EFA and the EPP-ED is his lack of preparation – the former directly call for his placement to another portfolio, mentioning, among others, Agriculture and Rural Development, Competition and Tax and Customs Union.¹⁸ But any sense of relief our main figure may feel dissipates by the 26th.

It seems that the ALDE group, at least, had clearly required the removal of both Buttiglione and Mr. Kovács in the run-up to the European Parliament vote, so that the latter is back in the spotlight.¹⁹ In the days after the withdrawn Commission, as the Parliament celebrates its newfound relevance, clean up begins with Buttiglione's resignation. At the same time, the EPP-ED faction grows increasingly bothered by our protagonist's communist past, while the Socialists hold firm in defense.²⁰ A number of sources speak of the likelihood of his removal, in the

¹⁴ Népszabadság Online [*Freedom of the people Online*], Szájer és Tabajdi a Kovács körül kialakult brüsszeli vitáról [Szájer and Tabajdi on the dispute arisen around Kovács in Brussels] (7 Oct. 2004). Kovács himself repeated this view in an interview given after the Barroso Commission had been approved. 10(42) *European Voice*, Hungary's Mr. Clean (2 Dec. 2004).

¹⁵ Népszabadság Online [*Freedom of the people Online*], A bizottság nem ellenzi Kovács jelölését [The committee does not object to Kovács's nomination] (12 Oct. 2004).

¹⁶ European Parliament, Ref. ITRE/2004/D/41375. All reports are available on the site of the European Parliament.

¹⁷ HVG [*Weekly World Economy*], Rocco és fivérei [Rocco and his brothers] (16 Oct. 2004); Magyar Nemzet [*Hungarian Nation*], Buttiglionét Kovácsért [Buttiglione for Kovács] (16 Oct. 2004).

¹⁸ Népszabadság Online [*Freedom of the people Online*], Zöldek: Kovács ne legyen energiapolitikai biztos [Greens: Kovács shouldn't be commissioner for energy politics] (20 Oct. 2004).

¹⁹ *The Guardian*, 'Gay rights row leaves EU in crisis' (28 Oct. 28, 2004). See also Peter Ludlow, *The Barroso Commission. A Tale of Lost Innocence*, EuroComment Briefing Note No. 3.4, 20 et seq. (Dec. 2004).

²⁰ Népszabadság Online [*Freedom of the people Online*], Gyurcsány kiállt Kovács László mellett [Gyurcsány stands up for László Kovács] (28 Oct. 2004).

footsteps of the Italian and Latvian candidates, but the Hungarian government continues to stand by Mr. Kovács.²¹ Why? Besides the domestic consideration already mentioned, for two reasons. One, because the possibility of a shift of portfolios – raised before the run-up to the vote – has increased significantly with the change of Commissioners by other member states. Given this context the Hungarian government, and the candidate, likely hedged their bets on a transfer²² – that the gamble, if it paid off, would also be a sign of strength amidst opposition attacks in Hungary is an added bonus. Two, because it seems the European Parliament cannot agree on what their exact problem with Mr. Kovács is: no reminder is necessary of his obvious lack of knowledge in energy matters, but all other reservations, from his other posts to his past, come and go, so that no one, obvious problem can be pinpointed, as in the case of Mr. Buttiglione or Ms. Udre.

In the wake of Buttiglione's resignation, however, the possibility of a tit-for-tat removal (a socialist for a conservative) looms increasingly large.²³

November 2004, Brussels. In spite of Prime Minister Gyurcsány's repeated insistence that Hungary has only one possible candidate²⁴ – our leading man – rumors fly about possible scenarios. No surprise, perhaps, given the growing intransigence of both right and left wing parties in Parliament.²⁵ Maybe Péter Balázs, Hungary's acting Commissioner since May, will be nominated and, in return, be given a more high profile portfolio?²⁶ In any case, Mr. Kovács has to go, along with Ms. Udre, doesn't he? After all, even Martin Schulz, the head of Parliament's Socialist faction, calls his case problematic.²⁷ Or maybe he could get another portfolio?²⁸ This last possibility again looks increasingly likely, given the refusal of the Dutch and Danish governments to recall their own embattled Com-

²¹ Id.; Magyar Nemzet Online [*Hungarian Nation Online*], Gyurcsány: Kovács marad az EU-bizottsági jelölt [Gyurcsány: Kovács to remain EU-commissioner nominee] (29 Oct. 2004).

²² HVG [*Weekly World Economy*], Játszd újra José! [Play it again José!] (6 Nov. 2004).

²³ *Financial Times*, Barroso hopes final team ready for summit (4 Nov. 2004).

²⁴ Népszabadság [*Freedom of the people*], Gyurcsány kitart Kovács László mellett [Gyurcsány stands by László Kovács] (4 Nov. 2004).

²⁵ *The Guardian*, Barroso juggles his lineup in bid for approval (3 Nov. 2004).

²⁶ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* [Frankfurt General Newspaper], Abgeordnete fordern Austausch weiterer Kommissare [Delegates call for substitution of further commissioners] (1 Nov. 2004), Népszabadság [*Freedom of the people*], Balázs jönne Kovács helyett? [Balázs to come instead of Kovács?] (2 Nov. 2004).

²⁷ BBC Monitoring Service, Right to reject new EU Commission if Hungarian, Latvian candidates stay (2 Nov. 2004).

²⁸ *Süddeutsche Zeitung* [South German Newspaper], Änderungen auf sechs Positionen [Changes to six posts] (30 Oct. 2004); FigyelőNet, Kovács László verseny-vagy adóügyi biztos lehet [Kovács may be commissioner for competition or tax matters] (3 Nov. 2004); Népszabadság Online [*Freedom of the people Online*], Martens szerint Kovács más tárcát kap [According to Martens Kovács to get different portfolio] (4 Nov. 2004).

missioners and despite the constant threat of an Old Testament-inspired reaction by the EPP-ED to Buttiglione's removal.

On 5 November, the guessing-game ends, as Barroso assigns our protagonist to the Tax and Customs Union portfolio. The Hungarian reaction is not altogether positive. Prime Minister Gyurcsány cancels a planned press conference, while his spokesman asserts it is not the job of the government to examine which portfolio Mr. Kovács is fit for.²⁹ The opposition, in a fit of hyperbole, labels the new post ignominious and – given the lack of a Community tax policy – declares it the equivalent of an engine-wheel pump [*mozdonykerék-pumpáló*] in the Commission.³⁰ The European Parliament, in turn, seems more concerned with the continued presence of the Dutch candidate in her previous post, while blaming certain national governments for not having understood the message sent.³¹ Before the dust has settled, however, the supposed existence of a letter from Barroso to Prime Minister Gyurcsány, asking for the removal of Mr. Kovács, is revealed.³² The Hungarian opposition pounces on the secret letter as a sign of government insensitivity, while the latter denies the existence of said request.³³

But this is not all. The focus of the EPP-ED again returns to our candidate's past, especially after the mysterious appearance of a photograph showing a young man in the uniform of the *Munkásőrség*, Hungary's communist party militia, who bears a resemblance to Mr. Kovács. Though the Hungarian candidate firmly denies he had ever belonged to the entity, the damage is done. Czech and Polish EPP-ED representatives openly question why a Communist should be present in the Commission, if a Christian had to go, and Hans-Gert Pöttering, EPP-ED president, recalls that the Hungarian government bears full responsibility for Mr. Kovács's continued presence therein.³⁴ Meanwhile, both Hannes Swoboda, the vice-president of the Socialist faction, and the head of its Hungarian grouping speak of a campaign against the Hungarian candidate and point out his role in the

²⁹ Magyar Nemzet [*Hungarian Nation*], Szájer: 'Kovács mozdonykerék-pumpáló lesz' [Szájer: 'Kovács will be an engine-wheel pump'] (5 Nov. 2004).

³⁰ Id., Népszabadság [*Freedom of the people*], Kovács-vizsga tíz nap múlva [Kovács exam in ten days] (6 Nov. 2004).

³¹ *Financial Times*, Parliament to approve Barroso, but doubts remain over Kroes (10 Nov. 2004); Népszabadság [*Freedom of the people*], Kovács pótvizsgálója sem lesz könnyű [Kovács's supplementary exam won't be easy either] (11 Nov. 2004).

³² Magyar Nemzet Online [*Hungarian Nation Online*], Barroso többször is kérte Kovács László lecserélését? [Barroso asked repeatedly for László Kovács's substitution?] (7 Nov. 2004).

³³ Magyar Nemzet Online [*Hungarian Nation Online*], Fidesz: Barroso levélben kérte Gyurcsánytól Kovács visszahívását [Fidesz: Barroso asked for Kovács to be recalled in a letter to Gyurcsány] (7 Nov. 2004); Népszabadság [*Freedom of the people*], EU: Barroso ellenezte Kovács biztosságát? [EU: Barroso was against Kovács's commissioner-ship?] (15 Nov. 2004).

³⁴ Magyar Nemzet [*Hungarian Nation*], Lengyelek és Csehek Kovács ellen [Poles and Czechs against Kovács] (13 Nov. 2004).

1989 changes.³⁵ Even Gerhard Schröder and Helmut Kohl supposedly intervene, on our protagonist's behalf.³⁶

Despite the countless questions raised about the figure of the Hungarian Commissioner, Mr. Kovács's second hearing, in front of the Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs and that on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection, goes smoothly,³⁷ albeit with occasional echoes of what one Hungarian daily calls a 'political comedy.'³⁸ At the beginning of the hearing, our protagonist gives a statement about his past, declaring he had no role in the *Munkásőrség*, the secret police, or, generally, in domestic politics during the communist period. His answers to technical questions elicit positive responses from the members of the panel, so that his second approving report – with no question marks this time – comes as no surprise.³⁹

And so Mr. Kovács ends his curious adventure still in Brussels, a few offices over from where he had started it. The trajectory of his journey, as well as its stops, are revealing on a number of levels, however. Hungarian domestic matters had been decisive in his nomination and, in indirect form, help explain why it was not revoked. Conversely, European considerations seem to have entered the domestic fray only to the extent the opposition made use of Brussels and Strasbourg reactions to László Kovács, at differing points, to discredit the government. In other words, the ruckus around the person of the Hungarian candidate brought with it the threat of *blamage* for Hungary on the European stage. But it also brought home the inter-connected fates of varied Commissioners, as the constant references to tit-for-tat removal show: at issue was socialist-liberal-conservative and other party politics in the European Parliament, not just the capabilities of individual candidates or the stature of the European Parliament, as institution. Under these circumstances, Hungary could afford to sit and wait until the coast was clear before (not) taking action. In fact, the whole episode likely served as an instructive guide to new member states: when the national politics of 25 member states meet with European institutional and party politics, the outcome can be volatile. Welcome to the European Union.



³⁵ Népszabadság Online [*Freedom of the people Online*], Kijújt a vizály Kovács László jelölése körül [Renewed discord over Kovács's nomination](10 Nov. 2004); Népszabadság [*Freedom of the people*], Hadjárat Kovács ellen [Campaign against Kovács] (13 Nov. 2004).

³⁶ MTI, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* [South German Newspaper]: Schröder és Kohl Kovács László mellett [*Süddeutsche Zeitung* [South German Newspaper]: Schröder and Kohl for László Kovács] (13 Nov. 2004).

³⁷ Népszabadság Online [*Freedom of the people Online*], Elfogadták Kovács jelölését a bizottságok [The committees have accepted Kovács's nomination](16 Nov. 2004).

³⁸ Népszabadság [*Freedom of the people*], Kovács átcúszott a vizsgán [Kovács scraped through exam] (17 Nov. 2004).

³⁹ No reference number given.