Men in Gucci

It turned out in April, that Árpád Habony who is thought by many to be the mastermind behind the prime minister’s actions, was not actually advisor to Viktor Orbán. While the name of Habony probably doesn’t ring a bell to the foreign reader, his person is probably familiar. He was thought – especially by foreign audiences – to have as much power in Hungary as Karl Rove, advisor to President George W. Bush or Alastair Campbell in Tony Blair’s staff.

Probably the most that is known abroad about Árpád Habony is that he is the man frequently seen around Orbán with a Gucci bag. Photos of him have spread across Hungarian news portals and presumably international media as well. But of course he is the advisor of whom we now know that even if he is one, at most, he is an informal one – meaning he doesn’t give advice day and night, only occasionally, and even so, he is just one of the advisors to Viktor Orbán.

This scenario must seem quite unusual to Western-European readers. It isn’t an everyday event that the one commonly thought by the public to be an advisor turns out not to be, or at least not in the way he was thought to be. When surfing websites of Western governments or high level executives, one finds the name of those giving counsel to the given government or leadership. For example, to take any name: John Smith is advisor in ideological issues, and Peter Brown gives counsel regarding policy issues and so on. It is evident that there is an Advisory Protocol.

In the 25 years since the system change, Hungary was not capable of taking steps to create transparency in the field of political advisors. The phrases so well known in the West (think tanks, spin doctors, pundit, expert etc.) are starting to gain popularity in Hungary as well, nevertheless we know very little about whom they are and in what way do they participate in decision making.

The transparency of a democracy does not solely mean the public’s awareness of economic data, but if we know the experts working behind parties and governments. After all, they have great responsibility, as they get to lay out what alternative options
the politicians have. If not Habony, then who gives formal counsel to the Hungarian prime minister? Could it be that Viktor Orbán advises himself? And what about the other parties? Are Gyurcsány, Szigetvári, Tóbiás, Schiffer and the others their own counsellors? That would be strange.

The question goes beyond the Orbán government though. It is understandable that the domestic and foreign public concentrates solely on this – as currently Orbán is at the centre of attention. There is still no opposition, so it almost doesn’t matter who is the mastermind behind the liberal-left parties’ messages.

However we can make an observation that informal advisors can be found abroad as well. Tony Blair’s victorious governments had Alastair Campbell as a key component. An advisor who had no formal position yet had significant informal power. He later converted this influence into a position in government going on to write his experiences in the book titled, the *Blair’ Years*. Why would he have written it, had he not seen and heard a lot that he could tell us?

For the time being, there are no such memoirs in Hungary. All we have are stories of Gucci bags and the watch of János Lázár, the Chancellor Minister, worth millions; both seen as symbols of the government’s pomp.

We have a dream here at Centre for Fair Political Analysis. In a couple of years, if we visit the Government website, we would find the names of the advisors in alphabetical order, clearly showing who is responsible for which field. The same goes for the opposition parties' websites. The reason we want this, is not that it would enable us to know exactly who to lash out at, but because it would be the European way.