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NEW HEAD OF STATE OFFICE FOR RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS

Hungarian Research and Evaluation Note. -- On 20 October 1961 the Presidium relieved Karoly Olt from the Presidency of the State Office for Religious Affairs "at his own request", and appointed Jozsef Prantner to the same position. At the same time Prantner was given also the rank of a minister.

This is the first time that the President of the Office has received the rank of a Minister. The Office for Religious Affairs was created in May 1951 and placed under the direct supervision of the Council of Ministers. In December 1956 the Office ceased to be an independent organization and was incorporated in the Ministry of Education. Finally, in June 1959 the Office regained its pristine status of an independent organ and was again placed under the supervision of the Council of Ministers. The raising of the President of the State Office for Religious Affairs to the rank of minister is in line with the policy adopted this September, when the Presidents of the Planning Office and of the Committee of Technical Development were also given the rank of a minister. (See News Background F-118-189 of 14 September 1961.)

The new President Jozsef Prantner is a former construction worker. In April 1957, he was appointed commissar of the State Office for Religious Affairs in the diocese of Vas. At that time he received the golden degree of the People's Republic Merit Order for his activity in the Hungarian "Peace" movement. It is not known how long Prantner was detailed to the Vas diocese. In July 1957 he was mentioned as member of the Party Committee of county Tolna of which later he became the first secretary, an office he has been holding until now. In November 1958 he was elected member of Parliament for the county Tolna.

Karoly Olt has so far held a large variety of high positions: Minister of Social Welfare, Speaker of the Parliament, Secretary of the Presidium, Minister of Finance (for five years) and chief of the Secretariat of the Council of Ministers. In comparison, Prantner's career is "small beer". On 7 October 1961 Olt was dropped from the Presidium, of which he had been a member since May 1957. Now that Olt has been relieved also of the Presidency of the State Office of Religious Affairs, it seems clear that there has been a decrease in his standing in the regime; all the more so, as his removal from the State Office was not accompanied by any hint at a further employment in some other office.

Whether the replacement of Olt with Prantner will involve

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some change in the regime's policy toward the churches is not yet clear. The pressure exerted by the regime on the Catholic Church reached a new pitch with the trial of priests and laymen in June 1961, and there have been signs (for example the severe attack against the so-called clerical reaction in "Uj Ester" of 3 September 1961) that the pressure would not be eased. Frantner is not a new hand in the dealings of the State Office for Religious Affairs with the Catholic Church. He is known to be a rather primitive and violent person. He was the commissar of the State Office for Religious Affairs in the diocese of Vao at the time when the attacks against the Bishop of Vao, reached their culmination, and eventually led (early 1957) to the forcible removal of the Bishop from his diocese and his confinement in the village of Hajos under police surveillance. Thus Frantner's appointment may have ominous connotations.

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