

Rumours about the death of MSZP are greatly exaggerated

For the Socialists, there is a long tunnel ahead and it is far from clear whether the flickering lights in the distance herald redemption or just another station in the purgatory

For MSZP, the good news is that thanks to its showing in the municipal elections it has now reinforced its position as the leading contender among those formations jockeying for the position of main challenger to Fidesz in 2014. But still, this is a bit akin to being the alpha wolf in a pack attacking a gigantic and seemingly invulnerable bear – the difference in size is still enormous.

Currently, it is not the government but the opposition that is more fortunate that the next electoral contest is several years away. While all three parliamentary opposition parties spend a disproportionate amount of time resolving internal conflicts rather than critically reviewing the governments' actions, MSZP in particular is (and has been) constantly preoccupied with internal personal disputes and competitions, which sometimes masquerade as ideological clashes.

Much as they hurt the party's image and coherent appearance, the incessant clashes between the party's leading figures and the leadership speculations within MSZP make sense for a variety of reasons. For starters, MSZP may be the party in Hungary in which internal democracy – with all its advantages and disadvantages – is most virulent. For those who wish to attain a leading position, it is not enough to seek the graces of any single influential leader, but they must court a wide variety of persons and intra-party constituencies.

Second, the fact that several politicians apply their ambition to the Socialist Party suggests that in spite of its abysmal state, a leading position in MSZP continues to be an attractive proposition for some career politicians. While it does involve a gamble, the bet is not irrational.

With MSZP pulling away from Jobbik and with LMP's organisational woes laid out open (see Week 40 newsletter), the Socialists still seem to be the most likely beneficiaries of a potential popular disenchantment with the Fidesz-government. While at the moment an extended (i.e. more than one term) Fidesz governance looks likely, nothing in politics is ever certain, and those hoping to move into government offices from the opposition ranks are most likely to do so by attaining positions in the Socialist Party.

Can a house divided stand?

In spite of the spate of retirements resulting from the two 2010 elections, a comprehensive list of those MSZP politicians, groupings and platforms that vie for influence in the party would take up an entire column. The dominant players are the party leader Attila

Mesterházy, their nemesis former PM Gyurcsány, and the mayor of Szeged, László Botka. Botka, incidentally, was one of Gyurcsány's key supporters when the latter made his first bid for the premiership in 2004, but has since repeatedly and publicly broken with him.

In most of the internal conflicts it is difficult to make out wherein the political differences lie, and even when they are clad in grandiose pronouncements, such as becoming “more left-wing” or “back to the roots”, the specific policy proposals that would lend substance to these statements are few and far between.

Boiled down to a strategic rather than an ideological conflict, the most relevant question addresses a common social democratic dilemma: should the party seek to be a catch-all party courting an ideologically diverse set of voters, such as the Italian and American Democrats are, or should it – at least in the process of rebuilding – focus on core left-wing voters and values, hoping to add swing voters by its coherent and convincing message.

Both ideologically and strategically, Gyurcsány has made the most unequivocal stand. His newly established platform within MSZP openly seeks to cater to the remnants of SZDSZ's liberal and MDF's moderate conservative base. Gyurcsány, who has always hewed to the right within MSZP, sees that a certain segment of liberals and conservatives have no political home in the current parliamentary parties and wants MSZP to fulfil this role. It will be a crucial measure of Gyurcsány's influence how strong the platform he established will turn out – the refusal of some former allies to join him is consequently an early setback, but not decisive.

Mesterházy, in contrast, believes that the main cause of the party's electoral weakness is that it has abandoned classic social democratic tenets and sacrificed its credibility as a left-wing party in the process. The hope implied in such an approach is that many voters with left-wing instincts have become alienated by politics or have temporarily bolted to Fidesz, from whence they can be recaptured. At the same time, nothing suggests that Mesterházy is a dogmatic ideologue, and he has quickly embraced the idea of attacking the government of the issue of private pension funds, which is most likely to please the strata Gyurcsány seeks to court as well.

Botka, finally, hasn't tried to stake out a distinct ideological ground thus far. He is seeking to build his stature within the party based on his impressive success in Szeged, where he has proven that as a pragmatist he can attract non-MSZP voters based on his personal appeal, which, he seems to imply, could put to use in the service of the national party.

The party's complete wipe-out has its benefits

There are many causes that account for MSZP's massive fall from grace, too many to list here. The fact that contrary to some expectations the party failed to rally a larger portion of its jaded left-wing supporters in the final months before the election was most probably due to the unceasing stream of corruption affairs. Many left-wing voters might have been willing to forgive bad policy making, but a lot of them drew the line at the chronic misappropriation

of public funds, and the signs indicated that this was an endemic problem under the previous government.

In this respect, being comprehensively routed from government at all levels – without the prospect of returning there any time in the near future – may prove helpful, as the temptation for corruption was wiped out along with the access to public procurement. The Socialists themselves were slow to recognise the importance of this point, but the voters have now helped them. Once the corruption scandals of the previous term fade out, any new scandals – assuming of course that given the unalterable nature of Hungarian politics there will have to be some, and also that the prosecutor's office will be willing to bring charges, which is less certain – will most likely be tied to the party that controls every level of government.

Avoiding a collision with the Warsaw Express

The major question for MSZP was of course long-term survival – or in the more optimistic version, its survival as the main opposition party – and even with its slightly improved position, this question is not entirely resolved. But despite the gleeful gloating of some right-wing commentators, neither the April nor the October results confirm that the fate of the Hungarian Socialists has mirrored that of the Polish post-Communists, whose level of electoral success was similar to that of MSZP before voters dispatched them into obscurity.

After a performance in office that most MSZP supporters consider poor – and which even some Socialist politicians privately concede was very disappointing – the party managed to draw almost 20% of the votes. Even if one plausibly posits that quite a few voters only supported the Socialists in the vain hope of preventing Fidesz' two-thirds majority or to make a statement against Jobbik, a party that can count on 20% of voters when it hits rock bottom is a force to be reckoned with.

Even if MSZP were only able to stabilise itself near the 20% level, it is impossible to imagine a scenario wherein a Fidesz government can be replaced without the Socialists. Thus even if LMP's (or any new left-wing formation's) bold and highly unlikely aspiration of becoming the main challenger to Fidesz were to materialise in spite of its current malaise, the notion that they could achieve such a position without co-operating with MSZP (and its base of committed voters) is a pipe dream.

Furthermore, with Fidesz moving towards making ballot access more difficult for new parties (see Week 35), it is also making it more difficult for new left-wing parties to challenge MSZP's position on the left (which may have been one of the underlying objectives). This ought to give potential MSZP secessionists a pause.

Katalin Szili's case will be instructive in this context. For years the former speaker of parliament was the party's most popular figure in surveys of the general population. Yet, most experts agree that her effort to build a new party stands little chance of success. The question is threefold: 1) how large is the disaffected electorate to the left of MSZP; 2) is Szili



the right person to lead this group; 3) will the general obstacles, i.e. campaign finance and ballot access problems make it too difficult for her party to succeed in a national election. Our hunch would be that the while the answer to 1.) is “large enough”, questions No. 2 and 3 make Szili’s success unlikely.

Incidentally, roughly the same questions arise for any potential Gyurcsány formation emerging to the right of MSZP, though the former PM enjoys a few advantages (e.g. money and a more committed base) that Szili does not.

So for now, MSZP’s leading politicians continue to be caught up in their own version of Schopenhauer’s hedgehog dilemma: to have any chance at success, they must co-operate and move closer together. As soon as they do, however, their quills (i.e. personal and political animosities) sting each other and they move further apart. For distinct reasons, Fidesz and political analysts are both grateful.