



The state of the left-wing alliance tango

More than the polling results of individual opposition parties, the question of whether a comprehensive left-wing alliance can be formed has emerged as the crucial issue in terms of evaluating the potential for a government change in 2014. It is still unclear whether the combined support of the left-wing parties would be enough to defeat Fidesz. What appears clear, however, is that none of the left-wing parties is likely to achieve victory on its own. MSZP for its part wants an alliance very badly. LMP, however, remains deeply steeped in its rejection of the Socialists, and also strives to establish itself as a serious counterpole to the erstwhile leftist behemoth. It appears torn by its desire to see Orbán defeated and the painful insight that without MSZP that's an impossibility. That is also reinforced again by a recent electoral study published by Gordon Bajnai's foundation, which posits that the Fidesz government can be sent packing in 2014, but most likely only with an electoral alliance. Bajnai, of course, is a major contender for leading such an alliance, but his own reluctance to step in may also stem from doubts about his ability to actually unite the fractious left at least for a while.

The decisive issue on the left is still whether there will be an alliance against Fidesz in 2014. Without one being formed even before people go to the ballots, whatever theoretical chance might exist to oust the current government will dissipate. Each of the potential participants in such an alliance comes to the question with vastly different motivations and incentives, which are often mutually contradictory.

Getting his ducks in a row

How crucial some reconciliation of these differing interests is was pointed out in a recent study published by PM Gordon Bajnai's Haza és Haladás Foundation. The study reviewed the electoral prospects of the left under the new electoral regime and concluded that though it faces a daunting task, it could in theory win. In practice, even the slight chances made out by Viktor Szigetvári – Bajnai's former chief of staff – and Balázs Vető hinge on co-operation between the various left-wing forces.

The fact that this plausible conclusion is emphasised by an institution affiliated with Bajnai is in itself significant. Thanks to his excellent standing in large segments of the left-wing intelligentsia, the former prime minister is one of the few people who might have a genuine shot at making such an alliance happen. Bajnai has been hesitant to convert the widespread respect he enjoys into actual political currency. His problem may be somewhat of a chicken/egg problem. He probably does not want to get involved unless there is fairly good chance that he can unite the fractious left behind his candidacy (and unless of course there is a decent chance that this coalition can actually prevail). At the same time, without a popular and widely respected figure to unite the fractious left, even the beginning of talks appears unlikely for now.



The contrarian band

The most difficult partner to win for such an alliance would be LMP, which was formed and succeeded in opposition to everything that the established left in Hungary represented, and is moreover deeply sceptical of the economic policies Bajnai has pursued while in office. As the political system around LMP changes, it is clear that the alliance issue constitutes a fateful dilemma for a formation that is otherwise fairly confident at coming up with public policy approaches. The alliance question has been nagging away at the party from very early on and is presumably one of the main causes for the resignation in January of parliamentary leader András Schiffer. Schiffer is considered the most vociferous opponent of any rapprochement with the leading left-wing party, MSZP.

Despite Schiffer's partial withdrawal, the party remains resolutely opposed to an electoral alliance with the Socialists. There are occasional minor joint actions between the two parties, such as Schiffer's and Mesterházy's 2010 joint letter and press conference protesting the curtailment of the Constitutional Court's power of judicial review, but LMP has been very good at dispelling any notion that these may be part of a larger process of co-operation. As recently as early August, LMP's new chairman Benedek Jávor attacked the Socialists once again, mocking MSZP's "green turn" – which was clearly intended as a sop to LMP and its base – in the context of the latter's stance on the expansion of the nuclear reactor in Paks.

Dwarves bridging the gap?

LMP also found another way of implicitly rejecting co-operation with the Socialists. By initiating the formation of what journalists referred to as another political pole forming around LMP, it appears to emphatically stress that it will remain in competition with MSZP beyond 2014. The public discussion about the possibilities of co-operation between LMP, and the major non-parliamentary players, the youth-oriented 4K!, the trade union based Szolidaritás and the civic group Milla, gave LMP the possibility to present itself as the centrepiece (read largest and only parliamentary party) of a broadly based opposition formation. The smaller parties could benefit, too, since a successful co-operation could offer a less arduous road towards entering Parliament than the one generally reserved for new parties, which mostly ends in failure.

Yet, while this process may hold great promise for LMP's independent aspirations, it holds out the potential of some other, maybe less palatable options as well. Neither Solidarity nor 4K! are namely as resolute in their rejection of MSZP as LMP is. 4K! Chair András Istvánffy has called MSZP "unavoidable" and noted that "some type of co-operation [with MSZP] is inevitable". Similarly, Szolidaritás' Péter Kónya has designated the replacement of Orbán a top priority and included MSZP among the parties with which he would co-operate to this end. Milla is probably closer to LMP's rejectionist view, but many of the vast numbers of citizens who attend its demonstrations – which give the organization its clout – are not. In one scenario, the smaller parties could help build a bridge between LMP and MSZP, which will allow the former to enter into some form of alliance while saving face among its more resolutely anti-MSZP voters. In another potential scenario, LMP could be seriously hurt by crafting a seemingly successful cooperation with the smaller forces, which then ends in fractious disputes over the alliance question, among other things. If some formal co-



operation were to come about, continued public friction would damage LMP. How could it wish to govern if it can't keep a bunch of amateurs in line?

The devil you know

Anxious as it is to see some movement in the alliance debate, MSZP must also be enjoying the lack of progress in the polling numbers of its envisioned partners. Every day that passes without any of the newer opposition parties making some impressive headway, MSZP's position as the only viable alternative to Fidesz is reinforced. It is at this point not clear whether MSZP will regain its pre-2010 position as the alternative party of power; nor is it even clear whether this question will be settled during the current term. What is clear, however, is that MSZP has survived the terrible public assessment of its eight years in government. Moreover, even in its substantially reduced state, it remains by far the strongest left-wing opposition party.

To substitute MSZP as the leading party, one of the other forces – most likely LMP – would have to siphon off further Socialist support either suddenly, exploiting some momentum, or gradually, with some visible impact. Thus far, neither has happened. In the short-term, time is a serious problem for aspiring kingkillers. In the long-run the opposite hold true because MSZP's base is old and diminishing election by election. But to profit from MSZP's problem with an aging electorate, any other formation must first survive despite an electoral regime favouring larger parties. In the near future the Socialists' current stature could make it the party of default for anyone who is more concerned with ousting Fidesz than with the question of whom in particular she entrusts with it.

For the alliance, only one question matters

All these dilemmas and uncertainties can be resolved fairly easily if there is a widespread perception that there is no chance of defeating Fidesz. In public, MSZP is intensely clamouring for an alliance with LMP and is on occasion even downright obsequious in the face of the new party's putdown of its leaders and record. But even the most ardent LMP proponents of an alliance would be loath to endorse the idea of helping the Socialists to a stronger parliamentary presence if that did not involve a serious prospect of getting rid of Fidesz. Instead, the party might wish to emulate Fidesz during its first decade, which moved from minor player on the right to a dominant force by sidelining the dinosaurs (whose social embeddedness was considerably weaker than that of MSZP, however). For now, the strategic game continues. By abolishing the second round of the elections, however, Fidesz has condemned the actors involved to make a strategic choice well before the actual election. Stay tuned.