

Is Gordon Bajnai planning a comeback?

Though he took the helm in troubled times, Gordon Bajnai's premiership is widely considered a brief period of stability in the long period of chaos that has characterised Hungarian politics over the past years. He left the political stage immediately at the end of his term, but especially in the left-leaning intelligentsia many hope that his departure was temporary. Judged by his activities in recent months, their desire for his comeback at some point looks increasingly realistic. We will briefly review Bajnai's political career and then assess the prospects of his return into the public sphere, as well as the challenges he would likely face.

Following his brief tenure as prime minister, Gordon Bajnai completely left the political scene. He noted that he had performed the task he had been entrusted with and had no further interest in a political career. Though he was not exactly popular at the time he left office – generally speaking all officials of the previous government regardless of personal merits were disliked on account of MSZP's hugely unpopular rule –, three key features of his tenure marked him as a man with a potential future in politics.

First, especially among economic policy experts he was widely recognised to have done a decent job of steering Hungary through the difficult year of 2009, a recognition that gradually seeped into public consciousness as well. Second, neither his temperament nor his actual performance in office lent themselves readily for the successful intense vilification that Fidesz had engaged in during the term of his two predecessors. As a result, popular attitude, which had been largely furious with MSZP for clinging to power rather than submitting early to the voters' verdict, was more forgiving, partially even friendly towards Bajnai than towards his predecessors. The slight shift in popular mood failed to translate into more votes for the Socialists, but it laid the seeds for Bajnai's potential comeback as one of the least damaged figures on the left.

Not a promising start

Bajnai's relative success came against the odds. Even his nomination was a surprise and there was widespread scepticism that he would be able to do anything useful in light of the panic that was besetting the governing party (then MSZP) and an opposition that craved a new election. The selection of Bajnai as prime minister followed a disastrous, prolonged hunt for a viable candidate following the abrupt resignation of Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány in March 2009.

Though large parts of the Socialist party were keen to get rid of their controversial prime minister, they were obviously caught off guard by the demand to find his replacement quickly. There was general agreement that it should be an economic expert outside MSZP,

and many names were floated in the media – some of whom no one with any say in the affair ever publicly acknowledged proposing for the office. With some figures put forth saying no and others being vetoed by influential persons within the party, the search for Gyurcsány's successor lasted too long and had a substantial adverse effect on MSZP's already low level of popularity.

Bajnai's name was suggested at a point when party leaders were increasingly desperate that the PM search would have a disastrous impact on the remnants of the party's base. At first sight, the choice of Bajnai was odd. In terms of his personal background, a wealthy businessman with some controversial deals in his past, he was similar enough to Gyurcsány to be referred to as the “clone” by the right-wing media. Nor was being charge of the Ministry of Economics during the crisis a good recommendation at the time.

Despite the odds

Though there were superficial similarities and the two men were/are allegedly friends, Bajnai's personality was vastly different from Gyurcsány's. Where the latter is a combative and impulsive person who seemed a perfect fit for the heated atmosphere of Hungarian politics, Bajnai is a mellow, more reserved person who enjoys managing but is not a natural political leader. Yet, as Hungary was still reeling from the impact of the global financial crisis and dangerously close to a default, his type of steady stewardship in tandem with financial expert Péter Oszkó – one of the very few actual independents in Bajnai's cabinet, though he viewed it as a care-taker government – was perceived as good match for the needs of the Hungarian economy.

Bajnai's political position was reinforced by the fact that any possibility of his failure would have been perilous for MSZP. After the embarrassing search for somebody willing to lead the country with Socialist support, it was clear that with a few months to go before campaigning started for the 2010 elections, MSZP had to make sure that its governance exuded stability and professionalism. This allowed Bajnai to implement austerity measures that his predecessor would have had great difficulty to push through an increasingly restless MSZP faction in Parliament.

A comeback?

Bajnai's brief term did not herald major political changes for the better, but viewed against the backdrop of the continuous turbulences associated with governments that came before and after his, the year under Bajnai came to be regarded as a phase of relative stability that many people feel Hungary would need more, not less of. His improved public standing following his precarious start owed also considerably to his wise pledge to leave politics

upon the completion of his task of stabilising Hungary. In spite of some clamouring from left-wing intellectuals, he resisted not only the hardly tempting prospect of trying to become MSZP's candidate for premiership, but also the perhaps more realistic option of dabbling in politics after 2010.

This of course allows him to choose the most opportune time to stage a comeback, and there are growing signs that at some point he intends to do so. The establishment of the Patriotism and Progress Public Policy Foundation with key figures from his political circle was clear indication that Bajnai wishes to shape public and especially intellectual opinion in Hungary. His article last week on the state of Hungary was deftly timed to impress on readers' minds the difference between the stability experienced under him with the chaos and widespread apprehensions that characterise Orbán's term.

Challenges ahead

Yet actually finding an ideal form of engagement won't be easy for Bajnai. Founding a party would be arduous and hardly yield results that would reinforce Bajnai's political standing. Among the existing political parties, the only one that would be an option for Bajnai's political engagement would be MSZP. Still, there is a dilemma there. In MSZP's weakened state Bajnai would clearly not benefit from associating itself with the Socialists too early. On the other hand, if the party regains credibility with Attila Mesterházy, and the party leader actually makes MSZP a contender again may himself aspire to lead a future left-wing government.

One, currently less likely scenario for Bajnai's return would be for MSZP to surge by default, as the most viable alternative to Fidesz, but without generating a leader who is an obvious candidate for premiership. This could open up the possibility of the Medgyessy-Kovács co-operation in 2002, when the mellow non-party economic expert Péter Medgyessy courted the general electorate while the party stalwart and rhetorician László Kovács mobilised the left-wing base. This would assume, however, that MSZP will regain its pre-2010 dominant position on the left.

Internal divisions

The more realistic option would be for Bajnai to become the compromise candidate for a Hungarian iteration of the Italian Olive Tree Coalition led by the independent expert Romano Prodi. Bajnai's personality would be theoretically ideal for such a constellation, as he would be highly unlikely to arouse significant negative sentiments among the various forces on the left.

Still, in such a scenario Bajnai would have to contend with the problem that the left is not only divided into more parties than it was before 2010, but is also ideologically more heterogeneous. Bajnai's vision for Hungary is substantially the same as Gyurcsány's, with the crucial difference between them being that especially in intellectual circles – where this vision is very popular - Bajnai is considerably more widely regarded as being capable of delivering on it.

While Bajnai's economic policy views and expertise increasingly gain currency on the moderate right as well, where massive disenchantment with Fidesz has set in, there is a wide chasm between his ideas and the political economy espoused by the new forces on the left, except for Gyurcsány's DK. For example, András Schiffer of green-left LMP has already made it clear that they would not support Mr Bajnai because of his "neoliberal" ideas. And while the moderate right has no political arm yet, the new left does and is likely to wield at least some influence in any left-wing government that could emerge in the foreseeable future. Though it should be able to square this circle, MSZP would also be in somewhat of an odd position considering that it has repeatedly called for a shift to the left since its defeat in 2010. To wit, Prodi's coalition also struggled and ultimately stumbled over such divisions, twice. While none of this rules out Bajnai's comeback, it does mean that the hurdles are significant.