

## Opposition at halftime

*At halftime, the opposition is in much the same awful shape as Fidesz. None of the opposition parties has seen major progress in terms of its popular support, and there is no clear alternative majority emerging. While two years is plenty of time, none of the opposition parties have made an impression that would suggest they could lead a coalition against a Fidesz, much less that they could replace the governing party on their own.*

Whatever remains of Fidesz' former glory stems mostly in the opposition's persistent weakness. Two years into the sixth term since democratic transition in 1990, the governing party – elected by an unprecedented majority – has lost its lustre. No one seems ready to claim it.

The odds are of course that if any player is going to replace Fidesz as the leading party in the short run, it will be one of the parliamentary opposition parties. Though the hierarchy among these has not changed over the past two years, all the existing players are unpredictable, with the potential to rise or fade completely. We will briefly review each of the players and where they are two years before the next election.

### ***MSZP: On the verge of breaking away?***

For two years MSZP has tried in vain to break away from the pack of opposition parties and to re-establish its former position as Fidesz' one and only real antagonist. Finally, over the past few weeks some pollsters – specifically Tárki and Ipsos – saw the Socialists gain some traction, though especially among likely voters they still lag significantly behind Fidesz and are not far ahead of Jobbik. And even the improved numbers do not mark an impressive plus over 2010.

Time is certainly working for MSZP, however: many voters determined to oust Fidesz may well opt for the Socialists as the most realistic alternative. Of course there is the memory of the dreaded eight years, which both Fidesz and the other parties incessantly emphasise in the hope of keeping the Socialists at bay. But over time the intense feeling of disappointment with MSZP's rule will make – or rather is gradually making – way for disenchantment with Fidesz and many, especially elderly and middle-aged voters with more superficial interest in politics, will automatically pick the most recognisable brand name, i.e. MSZP.

Moreover, MSZP's time in government over the past 20 years has been varied and complex: those with a nostalgia for government largesse can pin their hopes on a return of the 2002-2006 MSZP, just as those who long for another round of tough austerity may recall other “jollier” times of Socialists in power. The post-2014 MSZP is of course a dark horse, but one that is open to the projections of various sorts of optimists. Ultimately, András Istvánffy, leader of the new left-wing party 4K! acknowledged what MSZP's other competitors have been loath to admit: a party that has been battered but retained such sizeable support is an unavoidable force on the left.

## ***Jobbik: Radicals on the run***

There were a few months when Jobbik seemed on the way towards the destiny that its adherents fervently desire, i.e. that of becoming the alternative to Fidesz. But though a few polls put the far-right party slightly ahead of MSZP, it failed to build a lead over the Socialists and appears solidly in third place, though it still commands considerable support. The fluidity of the current situation leaves many scenarios open, including Jobbik's rise, for now it seems to be limited by two key factors.

For one, there is an inherent limit to a radical party's appeal, since a portion of the electorate eschews radical politics. Nevertheless, the opposition to Jobbik's radicalism is no longer such an overwhelming attitude as to constitute a major stumbling block to Jobbik's future rise. Public opinion has shifted decisively to the right, and on Jobbik's key issues – e.g. ethnic prejudice – the party is not divorced from the mainstream.

A greater challenge than voters' reservations seems to be Fidesz, which is making it clear that it won't let the growing radical electorate go without a fight. On the symbolic front, Fidesz is aggressively picking up far-right issues, just it has always done when it felt challenged on the right or when it needed to mobilise the radicals. The farcical attempt to rebury the novelist and nazi sympathiser József Nyirő in his homeland in the ethnically Hungarian parts of Romania, the growing appreciation of wartime leader Miklós Horthy, etc., are all things Jobbik is supposed to push rather than the governing party, which is supposedly in thrall of foreign interests. So what's left for Jobbik is questioning Fidesz' authenticity – which it tries – and to flank it by going further right, still, with the risk that by going too far it might ultimately run into the real limit of the electorate's tolerance for far-right attitudes. Though this conundrum contributes to the persistent internal rumblings within Jobbik, thus far the party has managed to maintain its façade of stability. Rather than a quick march to power, Jobbik's best route to the top is that of its Austrian counterpart, the Freedom Party, whose stint in government was realised in coalition with the conservatives.

## ***LMP: Making Fidesz mad, but what for?***

Before 2010, LMP was astonishingly successful in carving out a new parliamentary party despite placing environmentalism – an issue that remains of limited interest to Hungarians – front and centre. Impressed by this achievement, many expected that LMP would replace MSZP as the leading party on the left, but the party has thus far failed to break out of single digits in the opinion polls. This must seem frustrating to its leaders, who have successfully pushed Fidesz' hot buttons on several occasions. LMP has been the most effective party in setting the agenda on several major issues that irk Fidesz, most recently the oligarchy question. LMP is also rather skilful in pushing issues pertaining to social justice, corruption and democracy.

Still, LMP is visibly struggling to convince the middle-aged and older generations that it will be a better representative of their interests than MSZP. Just as for the entire opposition, however, the most potent untapped source of new voters are not the other parties, but the huge mass of non-voters, many of whom feel completely alienated after their disappointment with both of the major parties. Especially because of this huge reserve pool it would be a mistake to write off LMP's chance to emerge as a significant player on par at least with



Jobbik. If it could add a few percent that would make it seem like a more serious contender, this might well make the masses of undecided and uncommitted voters take a second look at the green formation. Whether LMP will be at 10%, 20% or 25% in 2014, the question it won't be able to put off forever is one that the party finds most inconvenient: align with others to defeat Orbán or insist on its rejection of other relevant parties, and thus potentially take the blame for helping Fidesz win re-election?

## ***DK: Uncertainty abounds***

Most polls see former PM Ferenc Gyurcsány's party under the parliamentary threshold of 5%, but the party is close enough among likely voters to hold out the hope of entering the 2014 Parliament. This can sound disappointing or impressive for DK, depending on one's perspective. Clearly, Gyurcsány was hoping that he would capture a much larger segment of MSZP's members and voters. At the same time, all previous attempts by big name politicians to secede from large parties have failed, and DK's standing in the poll suggests that it might become the first to succeed. Nevertheless, a leading role on the left appears extremely unlikely, and thus the question for Gyurcsány – and the dilemma for the entire left – is how he wants to use his votes and what role he wishes to play with the amount of support that he can muster.

Ironically, given Fidesz' intense hostility towards Gyurcsány, a voter registration requirement would probably help DK a lot: low participation generally helps smaller parties with a dedicated ideological following, and DK, too, would likely benefit in such a situation. In this respect the plagiarism scandal might have played a paradoxical role. There is no question that it has hurt Gyurcsány in the left-wing intelligentsia, and potentially in the wider electorate as well. DK nevertheless claimed to have experienced an uptick in membership applications, and that is not inconceivable either: Fidesz' attacks might go a long way towards energising Gyurcsány's potential base.