

LMP at the crossroads

Hungary's green party, LMP is a young party facing weighty choices. Its policy of maintaining equal distance to MSZP and Fidesz appears untenable as pressure mounts to join a left-wing alliance to oust the Orbán government in 2014. LMP is under pressure from a variety of source. For one, with the emergence of numerous new parties it is losing its position as the only left-wing MSZP challenger. Second, the emergence of former PM Gordon Bajnai fills large parts of the left – including many LMP supporters – with hope that the left has a viable candidate to challenge Viktor Orbán. For LMP this poses a serious dilemma, as both routes, being the spoiler of a potentially successful left-wing alliance, as well as losing its independence by joining it harbours great risks.

Before 2010, LMP heaped success upon success, but since the fateful election that catapulted the new party into Parliament, it appears to have been pulled down by political gravity. Already during the fall of that year the party couldn't meet the massively exacerbated signature requirements for local elections in much of the country, thereby failing to appear on the ballot of many voters. Unfair as the requirements may have been, the other parliamentary parties met them with relative ease and LMP's organisational weakness outside Budapest was laid bare for all to see. More painfully, despite staunch criticisms of the Orbán government and fervent activism, the party has failed to significantly increase its support in public opinion, even as a record number of voters indicate no party preference and Fidesz is sinking to ever new lows in surveys.

What must be especially irksome for the green party is that MSZP, the party LMP seeks to supplant on the left, appears to gradually recover some of its previous strength. With a recent poll showing impressive support for a potential party led by former PM Gordon Bajnai, along with very poor numbers for LMP, the young party is faced with two choices, both of which are risky: continue to go it alone and potentially end up squished between a clash of Fidesz and MSZP and/or Bajnai (this scenario includes being the spoiler of the opportunity to oust Fidesz in 2014), or strike a deal with the whole or parts of the latter and potentially end up subsumed in a left-wing mass without any remaining distinct appeal to voters. For a party that has built its success on independence but is nevertheless dependent on a mostly left-leaning intelligentsia that is deeply fed up with Fidesz, this is a highly uncomfortable situation to be in.

A bit of history

By any measure, LMP has had an astonishing career. A mere few years ago it emerged from nothing, as the brainchild of a former Young Socialist, András Schiffer, who was massively disaffected with the Hungarian party system, which effectively meant the two dominant players, Fidesz to the right and MSZP to the left. Successive MSZP governments had governed the country into a series of crises, interrupted only by brief respites that were followed by deeper bouts of crisis. Endemic corruption and the impact of the world financial crisis removed even the slightest hope that the Socialists would land on their feet in 2010. Few doubt Schiffer's commitment to the principles he relentlessly propagates, but his timing was also impeccable; there was a giant crater on much of the ground that used to delineate

the position of the Socialist Party in the political landscape. Jobbik and Fidesz may have picked up much of the support lost by MSZP, but Schiffer's team also realised that a portion of the left, especially among the young, would never vote for right-wing parties and needed a different alternative to the ruling Socialists. Based on this demographic began the rise of LMP.

With a mix of bemused bitterness, political analysts sympathetic to the Socialists relentlessly pointed out that the influential Fidesz media were also helping to build up the new party's public standing, with the obvious intention of weakening the governing Socialists. In Socialist circles it was also whispered that Fidesz was giving the greens endorsement sheets to help the new party qualify for the ballot. Though this conspiracy theory might be a reflection of MSZP-supporters' slightly paranoid mentality in 2010, it also shows that some of LMP's animus towards the Socialists was (is) in fact mutual. What is a fact, however, is that Nézőpont Institute, where Fidesz' polls are made to order, often measured LMP above the level of other polling companies.

No longer the only game in town

Now, a few months shy of its fourth birthday as an official party, LMP is facing a number of strategic challenges. First, it must gradually come to terms with the fact that its early failure to make more impressive inroads in public opinion has proven durable. In Medián's most recent survey, it still stands at a mere 4% in the total population, though it also continues to be the least rejected party. More importantly, it is no longer the only left-wing alternative to Fidesz, with organisations mushrooming all over the place, from DK, Szolidaritás, 4K! all the way to Milla, which can't decide whether to become a party. Unlike the newbies, LMP has of course already demonstrated its viability, but in the eyes of many it has also shown its limits. LMP may be even more threatened by the numbers that Medián measured for currently non-existent challenger, a potential party led by former PM Gordon Bajnai, which would be the strongest force on the left.

With the Bajnai train on the move, the pressure on LMP to support a left-wing alliance against Fidesz is growing, and it is no longer confined to those segments of the older left-wing intelligentsia that LMP loves to disdain. The party itself and its base appear less critical towards Bajnai than the leadership, which can't forgive the former prime minister's role in the post-2006 MSZP-led government. But the pressure is bearing fruit. Before October 23rd, the party stuck by its rejectionist stance. Two weeks ago, the leader of the LMP parliamentary group, Benedek Jávor was already far less resolute, mostly trying to avoid taking any stance by saying that LMP had not even been invited to the "Together 2024" coalition initiated by Bajnai. A few days ago, there was another clear shift in Jávor's position: now LMP is positively eager to begin talks. Indeed, conflicted as LMP may be about Bajnai's previous role, Jávor has now publicly backed down from Schiffer's categorical pronouncements concerning the former PM; LMP is at least willing to discuss who the prime ministerial candidate may be.

Risks every which way

If Jávör's new position prevails in LMP, then this would mean that the left-wing alliance was a lot easier to forge than the sceptics imagined it'd be. To be sure, Jávör's willingness to talk leaves many potential outcomes open, but it is a move that would have been anticipated to occur much later and after more enduring courtship. It arguably also marks the green party's intense vulnerability at this time, and its sense that it may gain more from negotiations now that it still commands critical margins for any left-wing victory in 2014, than at a later point in time, when its standing in polls may be further diminished still.

LMP is still in a strong bargaining position vis-à-vis Bajnai. It does not matter whether it retains the loyalty of 4%, 7.5% or 10% percent: no left-wing alliance is likely to be strong enough in 2014 to comfortably forego these votes. Whatever strategic goals Jávör may have been referring to, this is indeed a good time to make them part of the Bajnai '14 platform. Still, the risk that LMP will disappear without a trace in the Bajnai movement continues to persist. For MSZP this risk is not as large (though it exists), as the party boasts both significant funds, a larger loyal base and a better organisation. The smaller parties have very little to lose, at this point they mostly bring just their respective names to the potluck. LMP, however, has believed that it could successfully imitate on the left Fidesz' impressive gradual takeover of the right in the 1990s, when the small liberal party overcame a series of larger right-wing parties to emerge as the dominant force on the right. Joining the Bajnai bandwagon makes such a scenario far less likely. But of course becoming the force that effectively helps Viktor Orbán secure another term in government would also be pretty damaging to this prospect.