



# **Left-wing movements' boom in Hungary - Analysis of the situation of the Hungarian opposition -**

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**The Hungarian left-wing and liberal opposition faces an unprecedented situation: with the weakening of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the disappearance of its traditional coalition partner, the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) in 2010, new parties and movements have started to rise in an effort to become inevitable political actors at the time of the next elections in 2014. The crucial question of the next two years is whether the Hungarian Socialist Party will be able to win the elections by itself, and, if not, whether an alliance of opposition movements can be created which will be able to defeat the current prime minister, Viktor Orbán.**

Between 1998 and 2010 a quasi two-party system characterised Hungary, where the Hungarian Socialist Party and its liberal coalition partner faced off with the conservative Fidesz. The decision of the voters was as simple as choosing between the two sides – other parties, whether brand new ones or ones with traditional ties, did not stand a reasonable chance of becoming a major political force in Hungary. By 2010, however, eight years spent in government had eroded the popularity of left-wing parties to such an extent that MSZP lost 60% of its former voters (1.4 million people) and SZDSZ all but disappeared from the political map of Hungary.

These events provided an opportunity for two new political movements to surface and rise in time for the 2010 general elections. Right-wing extremist, quasi-Nazi Jobbik, by attracting lower-educated former MSZP voters, the more extremist elements of Fidesz and young first-time voters, in North-Eastern Hungary became the third biggest party in the country. Another party, Politics Can Be Different (LMP) addressed the former urban-liberal voters of SZDSZ and other green voters and reached 7.48% passing the 5% parliamentary threshold.

Even though after the elections opinion leaders expected LMP to replace MSZP as the leading left-wing party and predicted Jobbik's rise, the last two years instead saw the slow recovery of the socialists' popularity, the stagnation of Jobbik and the weakening of LMP. It has become clear that MSZP, led by Attila Mesterházy, will be the leading opposition force and the inevitable challenger of Fidesz in 2014. It is, however, a cautionary tale for the left that the more than 1 million voters that Fidesz has lost since the elections have become undecided voters and no party has been able to win them over so far. Altogether one third of Hungarian voters declare to pollsters an intention to participate in the next elections without having a party preference. Also, despite the slow but steady growth of MSZP, opinion leaders and the media continuously question the socialists' moral renewal and their ability to defeat Viktor Orbán.

## **New election law – the winner takes it all**

Along with the Hungarian party system, election law has also been transformed in the past years. The new law passed by Fidesz introduces a one-round system where single-member constituencies make up 53% of parliamentary seats. A new compensation list system was also introduced which also favours major parties against smaller ones. The new system clearly benefits unified political blocks and disadvantages those without an ability to cooperate. In addition, related new laws introduce the institution of voter registration – an unfamiliar and

unnecessary institution in a country where precise lists of voters already exist -, resulting in the election campaign starting as soon as autumn 2013, 7-8 months prior to the elections with voter registration drives. This legal environment 'sentences to death' small and middle sized parties with weaker ground operations and clearly favours massive political blocks such as the governing Fidesz and to some extent the Hungarian Socialist Party. The unequivocal consequence of this new system is the fact that the still small opposition movements cannot defeat Fidesz in 2014 without cooperating with the Hungarian Socialist Party, no matter how much they oppose such cooperation.

## **Wannabe challengers on the left**

The anemic growth of MSZP's popularity, the appearance of the new left-wing movements and the new electoral law have raised the pivotal question of whether the Socialists alone, the Socialists together with other movements, or the alliance of new movements excluding MSZP will be the number one challenger of Fidesz in 2014.

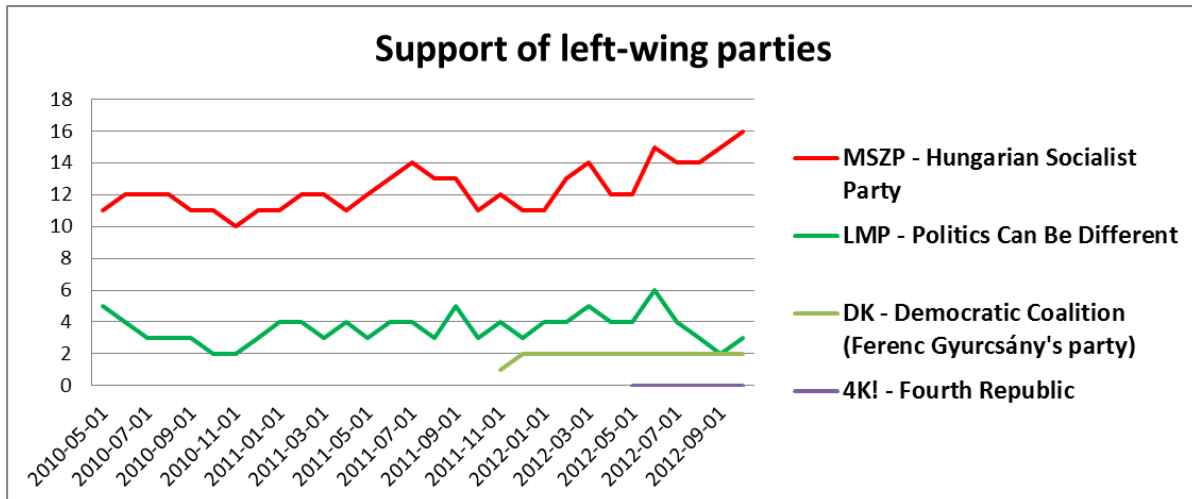
### **Politics Can Be Different (LMP)**

First, being a parliamentary party, the LMP seemed best positioned to assume that role, the party, however, could never persuade the media, opinion leaders and – through them – voters about the party's ability to govern, despite having one of the most detailed programmes in Hungarian politics. Due to the left-wing dichotomy of Hungarian politics, voters could not accept the fact that the green party considers itself 'neither right-wing nor left wing'. Moreover, LMP's sometimes radically leftist economic proposals do not go down well with the mainstream media and the markets. Also, the party suffers from internal tensions: while the majority of LMP's voters and its parliamentary group support some kind of cooperation with the Socialists, most of its members and some of its leading politicians consider it unfathomable. The party is still supported by 3-4% of eligible voters, its growth opportunities, however, are limited by the proliferation of new left-wing movements. The LMP is in strong cooperation with 4K! – the Fourth Republic Party, one of these new organisations without much popular support.

### **Democratic Coalition (DK)**

The Democratic Coalition, the party of the former socialist Prime Minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány, mainly addresses older liberal and left-wing voters in Hungary. Mr Gyurcsány and nine other socialist MPs left the Hungarian Socialist Party in autumn 2011 because of growing conflicts with MSZP's leaders. 2% of the total population supports Gyurcsány's party. However, the former Prime Minister's image is so negative in Hungary that it is highly doubtful whether the Democratic Coalition will be allowed to participate in any potential opposition alliances.

The public support of the four left-wing parties is illustrated in the graph below:



In total population, source: Szonda-Ipsos

### One Million for the Freedom of the Press (Milla)

The 'One Million for the Freedom of the Press' Facebook group is the most significant new movement in Hungary – even in spite of the fact that it has no formal membership, infrastructural background or political programme. The source of the group's strength is its ability to mobilise people for the biggest opposition demonstrations and rallies with tens of thousands of demonstrators, its strong connections with the liberal elite and its populist anti-establishment rhetoric. The movement, with its full-throated advocacy for human rights, democracy, rule of law and the rights of minorities addresses the very same urban-liberal voting group that lost its political representation when SZDSZ, the Hungarian liberal party lost its credibility and disappeared from politics. However, as the movement is a not an established party, it is an open question whether Milla would have any public support in a future election.

### Hungarian Solidarity Movement (Solidarity)

The Hungarian Solidarity Movement addresses completely different voting groups: blue-collar workers and rural voters. Solidarity, which relies on the base of existing trade unions, might pose a threat by addressing the same voters as the Hungarian Socialist Party, but the organisation doesn't have a political programme or any significant infrastructure.

### Patriotism and Progress Foundation

The Patriotism and Progress Foundation was founded by Gordon Bajnai, the independent former Prime Minister of the socialist government between 2009 and 2010. The Foundation's aim is to draft policy programmes, with the first, and only one so far, of these papers dealing with the eradication of poverty. Due to the relatively positive perception of his premiership, the media and opinion leaders have been putting pressure for over a year on Mr Bajnai to return to politics and lead the opposition forces. He finally did so in October 2012, when, together with the leaders of Solidarity and Milla, he announced the foundation of an umbrella organisation called "Together 2014".

The strength of the different opposition organisations is summed up in the table below:

<b>Strength of the different left-wing organisations</b>			
<b>Name of organisation</b>	<b>Support in total population</b>	<b>Number of members</b>	<b>Media coverage</b>
<b>Hungarian Socialist Party</b>	13%	More than 20.000	High media coverage, ambivalent image
<b>Politics Can Be Different</b>	4%	700	Regular media coverage, slightly positive image
<b>Democratic Coalition</b>	3%	4000	Regular media coverage, negative image
<b>One Million for the Freedom of the Press</b>	n/a	n/a	Occasional media coverage, neutral image
<b>Patriotism and Progress Foundation</b>	2-3%	n/a	Occasional media coverage, positive image
<b>Hungarian Solidarity Movement</b>	2-3%	n/a	Low media coverage, neutral image
<b>4K!</b>	n/a	700	Low media coverage, neutral image

## **Together in 2014?**

Numerous conflicts of interest and tensions exist among the seven left-wing political actors which encumber the preparation of these organisations for the next elections. The Hungarian Socialist Party is basically open for cooperation, however, its strategy is built on winning the elections alone. As the public support of the party is higher than of all other organisations' combined, it is in the party's interest to convince other movements to line up behind MSZP. Nevertheless, should the socialists' popularity fail to further increase, the other movements' blackmailing potential will increase, as a third-party campaign can prevent the opposition from winning by fragmenting the vote.

Through its alliance strategy, Politics Can Be Different has manoeuvred itself from one of the best political positions to one of the worst. In 2010, the question facing them was how to become the leading opposition force. By 2011, they were forced to start discussing whether they would be willing to assist MSZP winning the next election. This year, the party has basically run out of options. With an independent campaign, there is a very real chance that they may not clear the hurdle of the parliamentary threshold or get only four or five seats, which means that LMP will be forced to throw their support and line up either behind the Bajnai alliance or MSZP. In either scenario, the party will lose face and considerable voter support as they would have to support a political entity against whom they used to define themselves. This important decision will be made during the party's congress in November. As it stands, it remains unlikely that LMP will become part of any alliance in which MSZP is also a participant.

Just a few months ago, LMP was preparing to establish a new political pole together with Mila and Solidarity. Today, this goal seems to have been realised instead by Gordon Bajnai's Patriotism and Progress. The main strength of the umbrella organisation came to be known as Together 2014 is Gordon Bajnai himself: the former prime minister may be able to appeal to voters who would not vote for MSZP.

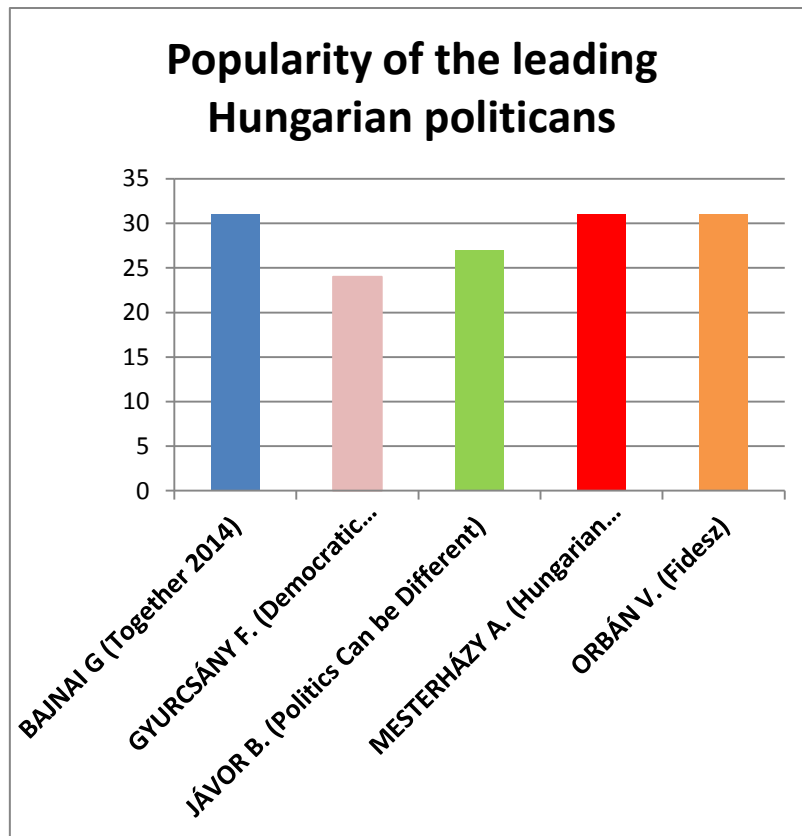
## **Scenarios to Consider in the Next Two Years**

In the next two years, MSZP and the opposition in general has to convincingly answer three strategic questions:

- 1) Is there virtue in campaigning independently in the 2014 elections?
- 2) If an election alliance is to be created, who should participate?
- 3) Who should be Viktor Orbán's challenger as a candidate for the premiership?

In this last section, we will overview the different scenarios these questions can result in.

- 1) Since the new election system favours big parties and 'penalises' small and medium-sized political entities, the only actor that stands to benefit from campaigning independently is the strongest opposition party, MSZP. Even MSZP, however, is better off joining or leading an alliance if its support does not reach the level necessary to defeat Fidesz. For LMP, an independent campaign is a realistic option only if they are content with four or five parliamentary seats (the 'reward' for 7-8% of the vote) and wish to instead concentrate on the 2018 elections. An independent campaign, however, would certainly spell doom for Together 2014: loose political alliances do not usually survive electoral defeat.
- 2) Should MSZP decide to forgo an independent campaign in 2014, it might have two options. It will either join the Together 2014 alliance as 'one of many' participants, or, if it wishes to maintain its independence and identity, set up a joint Together 2012 – MSZP list for the elections. The first option would clearly be favoured by the other, smaller participants in the alliance, allowing them to portray themselves as MSZP's equal and to hide the Socialists as much as possible. A joint list, of course, would be preferable for MSZP, allowing it to preserve its identity and privileges.
- 3) In the next 12 to 14 months, MSZP will have to decide whom to nominate for prime minister. The obvious choice, of course, is Attila Mesterházy, the party leader: he is supported by the same proportion of voters as Viktor Orbán and Gordon Bajnai and this makes him one of the most popular opposition politicians. Participating in an alliance, however, may force MSZP to give up nominating its own prime ministerial candidate and throw its support behind Gordon Bajnai, or even a third party candidate.



Scale: 0-100, in total population. Source: Szonda-Ipsos

**On the author:**

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