

How green can this country become?

Green parties are on the rise in European politics. LMP is hoping to ride the wave that is taking the German Greens from one electoral success to the next. But the situation is very different in Hungary, as the party's leadership is no doubt aware. An ecological outlook alone will not only be insufficient to be successful, but if overdone, it might be downright harmful to LMP's prospects. Making sure that its environmentalism isn't overemphasised may be the easier challenge, however: LMP also seeks to successfully draw former right- and left-wing voters without professing to be either left or right.

This looks like a more promising time to be a green politician than any period before. Germany just elected its first Green Party state prime minister, and not in some teeny left-leaning city state, but in Germany's third-largest and second most conservative state, Baden-Württemberg, whose population is larger than Hungary's. Voters' sudden and pronounced predilection for the Greens in Germany may seem like a passing folly triggered by the tragedy in Fukushima (in public perception, their anti-nuclear stance has probably characterised the German Greens more than any other issue they stand for), but while the magnitude of their electoral success in the regional elections might have been thanks to this striking memento of the hazards of nuclear power, they have been solidly trending upwards well before the Japanese nuclear power plant disaster.

In fact, while this trend is most pronounced in Germany, green parties have been gaining strength in other countries as well.

Seeing all this, András Schiffer might well have sent a request to the German Shoe Museum for the sneakers in which Joschka Fischer first took his oath as the minister of a federal state in 1985 – except, having skipped over a few evolutionary steps, LMP's cadres are already much more comfortable in business attire than their German counterparts were at this age.

LMP is ambitious

Since its stunning success in last year's parliamentary elections, a series of failures has plagued LMP. Its showing in the local elections last October was dismal, its events draw few supporters, it has failed to generate much media attention and is facing organisation woes and financial troubles.

Nevertheless, it was never a real secret that despite its as of yet modest size and the aforementioned problems LMP – or rather some of its leading figures – harbours major ambitions: seeing MSZP as hopelessly discredited with many voters, it can envision itself becoming the dominant force on the centre-left. It does not want to be a left-wing force in the traditional mould, maybe not even a self-described left-wing force, but nevertheless a party that would gobble up many of the voters on the left that have become alienated from the Socialists and potentially even from politics in general.

For those who might have failed to discern this, the party's parliamentary leader and de facto chairman, András Schiffer made it clear at a press conference this past Friday: pointing to the very success we alluded to in the introduction, Schiffer envisions a governing role for LMP.

While mere government participation is a modest aspiration, this statement must be interpreted in context: mindful (and fretful) of SZDSZ' unfortunate history, currently LMP is hell bent on not being a minor junior partner to MSZP. And as far as a coalition with Fidesz is concerned, well: Hungarian history is littered with the corpses of parties that went down that road.

So a realistic scenario from LMP's viewpoint *at the moment* (this may well change by 2014), would be to become either the main challenger to Fidesz or a medium-sized party that is on par with MSZP – this status might make it amenable to a coalition with a reformed Socialist Party (please note that this is not the party's official stance).

The limits of green politics

From the very start LMP has defined itself as an ecologically oriented party, it has chosen green as its colour (fortunately for LMP, the previous “occupant” of that colour – which had not chosen it for its environmental symbolism –, MDF, has since practically disappeared from politics), and as an observer party it is affiliated with the European Green Party, which has just concluded its Council Meeting in Budapest. Yet if LMP will indeed succeed in its aspirations, it will be despite its commitment to ecology, not because of it.

The Hungarian public has a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards environmentalism. It is all for environmentalism as an abstract principle, but it is far less enthusiastic about those many nitty-gritty details that actually give the concept any substance. While in a 2007 survey the vast majority of respondents wanted the government to do something for the environment, only 38% claimed to be environmentally active themselves (probably an exaggerated number), and a mere 3% expressed willingness to pay higher taxes for the environment.

Hungarians are neither special nor hypocritical in that way: this is a fairly common approach among the EU's new democracies, where economic convergence – for the most part damned be the environmental consequences – is still the main goal, and where a significant proportion of the population continues to struggle with daily needs while another significant segment is desperately trying to accumulate the consumer goods necessary for a western middle-class lifestyle. Practical environmentalism is still a luxury for most.

If LMP succeeds, it won't be as a green formation

Though for the aforementioned reason the left-wing intelligentsia occasionally likes to poke fun at LMP's ecological outlook, the fact is that it does not at all doom the party's chance to succeed: as long as it does not push the environmental agenda too far and it doesn't put it at the centre of its activities.

LMP was of course not defined merely by environmentalism from the start, and its ambition to be an all-round party found a key expression in its extremely detailed election manifesto. LMP has also attacked Fidesz on many grounds, from the latter's attitude towards democracy all the way to its social- and economic policy, which LMP labels unfair.

Though green parties are generally considered left-wing, that characterisation fails to do justice to the varied ideological streams in green politics (while it is true that environmentalism is generally not business friendly, there is nothing about it that makes it left per se): the Irish and Czech green parties have entered into coalitions with right-wing parties, and the German Greens are also increasingly emphasising their centrist orientation, including coalitions with Christian Democrats on the state level.

Can LMP gradually edge out MSZP?

The crucial question for LMP is whether its non-committal approach in terms of identifying its place on the ideological spectrum will ultimately do. Previous formations that had attempted to do the same – all like LMP banking on voters' nausea with the left-right division in Hungary – have failed. Until now, it appeared that even though voters were fed up with the polarisation between left and right, they showed little inclination to move beyond it.

Now, however, the room for “beyond left and right” may be greater than ever. There is a left-wing electorate that is still unwilling to put its support behind MSZP, and there is a growing number of voters who are disappointed with Fidesz as well. There are therefore plenty of potential voters for LMP to pick up.

Some analysts point to LMP's inability to make major inroads in the opinion polls as evidence of its failure to establish itself as a major force. But 2011 is still early as an indicator for 2014: Fidesz, for example, was also low in the polls in 1994-1995, but nevertheless succeeded in consolidating the right and becoming its dominant force after MDF's demise left a vacuum on that side of the political spectrum.

Realistic scenarios

It is possible that LMP will manage to supplant MSZP as the dominant force on the left and in the process establish itself as the main challenger to Fidesz. It is also easily conceivable that LMP will falter – for instance because the internal squabbles about the ideological orientation of the party will drain its energies and make it unattractive – and MSZP will gradually regain its lustre. A more realistic scenario, however, is that neither party will fade.

One scenario, envisioning less change, would be that MSZP polls around 25-35% in 2014, while LMP gets 10-15%. Another scenario would have them both between 20-25% (the Baden-Württemberg scenario). Both of these of course presuppose a significantly diminished Fidesz, which may not materialise.

If it does, however, then the resurgent centre-left will not necessarily seal Fidesz' fate. Even with such strong numbers, its opposition might lose the election: in and of themselves, neither of the results above would be enough to win enough constituencies to replace Fidesz as the strongest party. Ultimately, for voters seeking to oust Fidesz – assuming they are more concerned about this than with the struggle between MSZP and LMP –, the more pertinent question is whether these parties can cooperate to achieve the goal, or whether their simultaneous strength actually constitutes a hindrance of the overarching goal.