

Bajnai back in the game

The political parties on the left are lucky that they had no major events planned for the 23 October commemoration of the 1956 revolution, for they would have been upstaged by the pre-announced announcement of former Prime Minister Gordon Bajnai's return to political life. Bajnai picked Milla's mass gathering as the venue for his announcement, which was a suave decision. While the issue of who will lead the left was bound to come up sooner or later, Bajnai's decision is already causing tense internal debates on the left. After allowing Milla to predominate on the previous 23 October, Fidesz is now countering the left-wing mass demonstration with a gathering of its own, though it is using a proxy group, the Peace March, to represent the governing party.

It appears that the complacency characterising the left is giving way to frenzied activity. It is not clear whether the growing number of opposition movements on the left think that Orbán can be beaten or whether they just want to share in the bounty that will be distributed as voters will be increasingly motivated to vote against Fidesz. Either way, there is an increasing fervour on the left, with the panoply of old, recent and new parties holding meetings, conferences, making announcements and scheming. In terms of best exploiting the 23 October commemoration of the 1956 revolution, a civic movement, Milla is once again on top, drawing both the big name speakers and likely the big crowds, too.

A hat in the ring

The big news for 23 October is of course that former PM Gordon Bajnai will announce his return to Hungarian politics at the Milla demonstration. There has been a growing clamouring for Bajnai to enter the fray and challenge Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in 2014, though importantly none of the political parties vying for support on the left have raised him on their shields. This is not necessarily an indication that none of the left wing movements can identify with Bajnai. Naturally, neither of the political parties that might actually give him a political home would want to run the risk of publicly aligning itself with the former PM only to be rebuffed. Especially this early, Bajnai is unlikely to tie his fortunes to a specific party. It still appears that only an alliance of several players has a chance to oust Fidesz, so Bajnai would need to be acceptable as a candidate to all participants, which would become more difficult – though not impossible – if he were identified with any one player.

Nevertheless, relations are indeed complicated. LMP has defined itself as an opposition movement established to protest MSZP's previous terms in government, and even though on a personal level most of LMP's ire was always directed at Bajnai's predecessor, Ferenc Gyurcsány, the party is hardly at peace with Bajnai's short term in office, either. Moreover, there is a significant ideological divide between Bajnai and LMP, since the former PM's economic policies are regarded as neo-liberal by the greens. Index reports that even though there have been several meetings between Bajnai and LMP's top leaders, the party leadership is bitterly divided over the former prime minister issue.

MSZP is undecided

MSZP, obviously displeased with Bajnai's decision to return to the public realm at a Milla event, was quick to downplay the relevance of the occasion. Chairman Attila Mesterházy noted that there are several people who would be able to become candidates for premiership, and his predecessor, Ildiko Lendvai, observed that the event was likely to be overrated, though at the same time she was clearly also highly sympathetic to Bajnai.

Talking to Index, anonymous Socialist politicians echoed the same opinions, grumbling that Bajnai had made the wrong call in appearing with Milla first – “Whose candidate does he want to be?”, an anonymous MP mused. The comments also reflect an understandable fear that the left's craving for a messiah (or a counter-Orbán) would lead to unfulfilled expectations and disappointments, as it has time and again. Still, MSZP's choice whether to side with Bajnai will of course ultimately be pragmatic, especially since the Socialists are the opposition formation that stands the most to lose if the left fails to overcome Fidesz in 2014.

Why Milla?

Picking Milla's event as the setting of his first political appearance in a long time was the least risky choice for Bajnai. By announcing that it is becoming an official association (rather than an informal group), Milla underwent an organisational transformation that is one step closer to the political rat race. But it is still not a party and thus a speech at its event is less likely to offend any of the parties Bajnai might need. MSZP might be slightly miffed that the prime minister it supported in office chose Milla over the Socialists, but that's nothing compared to the hue and cry Bajnai would have raised had he chosen an actual political party.

More importantly, Milla has a proven ability to mobilise masses, which is unusual on the left. A first public appearance after a long break in politics in front of a few dozen LMP activists – assuming a presently unlikely public rapprochement between Bajnai and LMP – or a couple of hundred MSZP supporters is clearly not an alluring prospect as compared to the tens of thousands Milla might draw from the entire spectrum of the political left.

Ceding the field

Officially, the major parties do not hold their own mass gatherings, ceding the field to civic organisations. In reality, however, it is only MSZP that abstains, which shows that though the party may be slowly rising in the polls, it is still weak in mobilising folks. Fidesz never had this problem, neither in opposition nor in government. Still, precisely because of its known ability to mobilise, the governing party is held to a higher standard. In order to avoid a lacklustre turnout, Fidesz, too, failed to challenge Milla's successful event last October. In fact, the PM even skipped town, citing an EU summit.

This year, Orbán is speaking at the commemorative event of the 1956 revolution, as is customary for the prime minister. Emboldened by the success of the previous Peace March, Fidesz is once again outsourcing its own mass event to members of the Fidesz-aligned conservative intelligentsia, though few doubt that the party's experienced organisers will contribute their share.

A clash of future opponents?

While many may expect a big showdown between the two politicians who may face off in 2014, there is no reason to anticipate much of a clash on the 23rd. Orbán's celebration speeches have often been far from apolitical, but he generally spoke of political opponents (i.e. communists) at a level of abstraction that is mild in terms of general campaign communication. If Bajnai wants his speech to reflect the general tenor of Milla speeches, then he will be considerably more outspoken than Orbán. Even if Bajnai will set a different tone than the generally outraged Milla contributors, however, he would upset popular expectations if he would not take the Orbán government to task for its perceived failures and its attacks on democracy.

One key measure of Bajnai's success will of course be the Milla turnout. The closest measure of whether Orbán has retained his ability to mobilise will be the Peace March turnout, though it is not confirmed yet whether the event will feature the PM himself or not. But at this point the more interesting question is how the left will handle the reappearance of the former prime minister, and how Bajnai's entry will impact the thorny issue of alliances. That will likely have a much greater effect on 2014 than the respective performances of the two camps on the 23rd.