



After 23 October, fragmented left a bit more united

Gordon Bajnai came close to declaring his candidacy for prime minister, but ultimately shrank back from a pledge to run. In his much awaited speech he was harshly critical of the government, however, calling on a wide coalition to oust Fidesz and restore democracy and sound economic policy. Not far away, the prime minister himself spoke before his adherents, essentially reiterating the motifs of his earlier speeches, notably the threat of foreign domination and the decline of the West. While the 23 October brought few surprises, Bajnai did manage to get Milla's leader, the politician-bashing Péter Juhász, as well as Solidarity's Péter Kónya to sign up for a co-operation with the former premier, marking the first two pieces in the complex puzzle that Bajnai will need to solve to successfully run in 2014.

In retrospect, former MSZP Chair Ildikó Lendvai either had insider information or moonlights as a fortune-teller: her assessment that former Prime Minister Gordon Bajnai's first public appearance in a long time on 23 October was both under- and overrated in the left-wing media – which at times did indeed appear on the edge of hyperventilating – was spot on. It was overrated because though Bajnai came as close as to declaring his candidacy as was rhetorically possible, in spite of press reports to this effect he did not actually pledge to run. The former PM himself strenuously sought to downplay the significance of his speech, clearly rejecting the notion that his appearance means that he is ready to enter the fray.

Deftly played

This is disingenuous, of course, for that is exactly what his appearance was. Nevertheless, despite the obvious false modesty in Bajnai's "I am just a citizen"-type comments to reporters, he was smart to try to force a lid on overexuberant expectations that he would immediately seek take over leadership of the disunited left. For one, if he places himself at the centre of the political game, that will immediately damage his relatively unscathed reputation. Sooner or later it is inevitable, of course, and the scorn that the left- and right-wing media keep in store for candidates of the other side will ultimately be unleashed on him (though it did not have much of an impact last time).

Moreover, getting a united left to line up behind him will take a lot of work, and Bajnai needs to make sure that he does not force any of the left-wing opposition formations into a position of having to publicly rebuff him. Finally, Bajnai may genuinely wish to keep his options open. It is far from clear whether the left will be either strong or united enough to oust Fidesz from power. If leading the left is going to be a losing proposition, Bajnai won't have to beat a retreat, he will just continue to portray himself as the concerned external observer that he presently claims to be.

An impressive show of unity

Still, by getting both the new Solidarity movement and the civil powerhouse Milla to sign up for a joint platform, Bajnai has lined up two important players behind him. Solidarity's heft is untested of course, so the extent of its influence is unclear. Though it holds an edge over the



other parties because it actually includes working class folks, Solidarity's social support is unmeasured by regular polls and likely low at this point. What is key, however, is that Solidarity could serve as a bridge along Bajnai's route towards a still sceptical LMP. Being wedded to their virulent opposition against the pre-2010 governments, theoretically including the Bajnai cabinet (which is obviously less virulently rejected by LMP), the greens will be the most difficult partners on the left to woo. Solidarity maintains strong ties to LMP, having conducted consultations on co-operation and even having fielded candidates together. If a friendly organisation embraces Bajnai, that might make a rapprochement more easy (read less like flip-flopping) for LMP as well.

Milla is of course important because – as was apparent once again – by relying on its anti-establishment and anti-politics sentiment it is the most powerful mobilising force on the left. Bajnai clearly seeks to ride the same wave that makes tens of thousands of frustrated people attend Milla's rallies, even as the parties that drew hundreds of thousands of voters two and a half years ago generally attract a few hundred, maybe a few thousand at most to their rallies. Milla is simultaneously closed to all parties and in theory open to all their supporters, and this kind of supraparty attitude is the one Bajnai's quite campaign for premiership wishes to exude as well.

Two speeches

The prime minister's speech was not especially remarkable, though it is only in view of his highly provocative statements in previous years that Viktor Orbán's harsh comments concerning the EU and the opposition in this year's speech did not raise many eyebrows. Once again, he talked about efforts at foreign domination and the failure of the West and the EU, cautioning that this failure was rooted in the fact they had been beholden to credit lines provided by an ominous "financial world empire". Before half burying the West, he also equated the preceding MSZP governments with the communists of 1956.

While Orbán was lambasting the left and the wider world, a few kilometres away Bajnai was not holding back, either. As anticipated, he took the Orbán government to task for its attacks on the democratic system and its economic policies that have failed to advance Hungary. In an ironic turn, he held the government responsible even for his own return to politics, arguing that even though he had once said that he was not a politician, the Orbán government made it impossible for anyone to abstain from politics. He called on a wide coalition (describing the political elements rather than specifically naming them) to change the government and with it the entire post-transition political culture. Foreshadowing what will likely be a momentous challenge for any post-Fidesz prime minister, Bajnai also noted that it would take a comprehensive effort to overcome the institutional blocks (or safeguards, depending on one's view) Fidesz has enshrined with its supermajority. To overcome those, however, the left would need a boost from which it is very far for now.

The numbers game – and what it means

The perennial concomitant of political demonstrations is the numbers game, since the success of each political demonstration depends on its ability to bring people into the

streets. As a result, estimates of crowd sizes are extremely politicised, and faced with a mathematical problem without any non-biased data accessible, we find ourselves helpless in ascertaining what really went on. The police reported numbers that many critics said betrayed political bias and lacked in seriousness: according to the Ministry of the Interior's statement, there were 20,000 at the Milla demonstration, 150,000 at the Peace March endorsing the government, while a whopping 400,000 allegedly heard Prime Minister Viktor Orbán speak in Kossuth tér.

Some of the non-aligned media remained agnostic on the question, while the left-wing media – echoing Milla – asserted that an estimate of 20,000 was especially ludicrous in light of the fact that it drew a larger crowd than ever. An estimate of 60,000-80,000 might stand closer to the reality. Nevertheless, the key insight concerning mobilisation is that neither side produced numbers that were either embarrassing or stunningly impressive. All in all, that is better news for Fidesz. If Fidesz has reached its low point in the polls, then it can take solace in the fact that it can still mobilise considerably more people than MSZP could when it stood in a comparable position in the polls (and maybe ever). The governing party has demonstrated that unlike its predecessor, it will continue to be a formidable foe going into the next elections.