



The Alliance of the Hungarian Opposition: Burying the Hatchet

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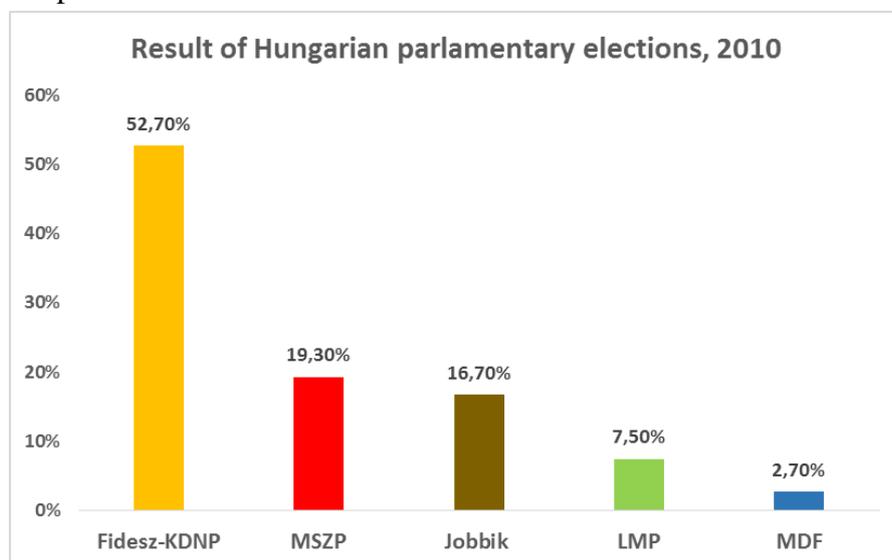
The Alliance of the Hungarian Opposition: Burying the Hatchet

A year before the 2014 parliamentary elections, the political adversary of the right-wing Fidesz – a force which possesses a two-thirds legislative majority and a confident lead in all polls – was a divided opposition. Thus, the most important political question in the summer of 2013 was whether different leftist forces would be able to reach an agreement regarding a joint ticket and a single candidate for prime minister. The pact, which saw daylight in the final days of August, definitely fulfills the minimum requirements for an electoral victory: the candidates of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the Együtt-PM coalition led by ex-prime minister Gordon Bajnai will not run against each other in single-member districts. On the other hand, they will not run on a mutual list and the parties do not have a common prime ministerial candidate.

Transformation of the political scene

In the 2010 Hungarian elections, left-wing and liberal parties had been defeated by the right-wing Fidesz, which has resulted in the **transformation of the Hungarian political scene**. The **Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP)** lost more than half of its voters; new parties, such as the extreme right Jobbik and the green **Politics Can be Different (LMP)** emerged; and liberal parties disappeared.

Graph 1



Source: www.valasztas.hu

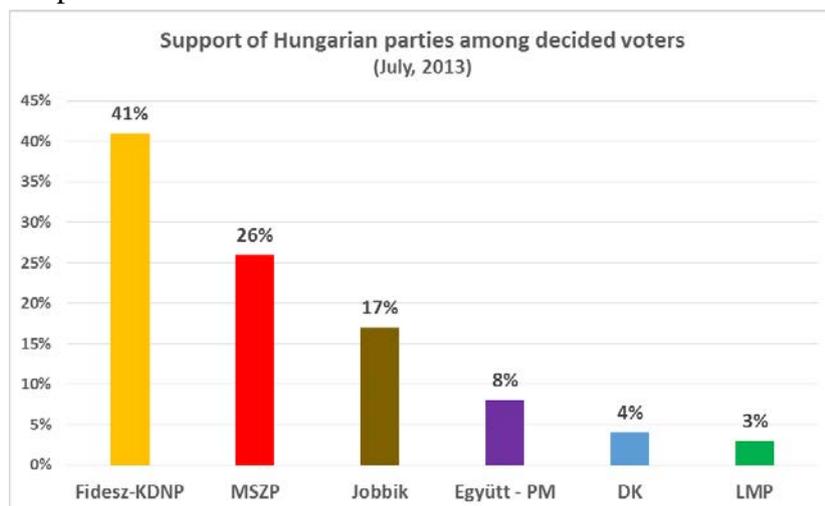
In 2011, **Ferenc Gyurcsány**, former MSZP prime minister left the Socialist Party, and founded a new political movement, the **Democratic Coalition (DK)**. One year later, in 2012, the successor of Ferenc Gyurcsány, **Gordon Bajnai**, who was prime minister in 2009-2010,

also returned to the political arena and launched the **Együtt 2014 (Together 2014) movement**. The movement's objective was to unite the left-wing opposition and run Gordon Bajnai as prime ministerial candidate at the 2014 elections. Meanwhile, **LMP split into two** as those MPs and other local politicians who wanted to join Gordon Bajnai's new movement left the party, and formed the **Dialogue for Hungary (PM)** party. Gordon Bajnai's party and those politicians who left the LMP established together the **Együtt-PM election coalition in March 2012**. This fragmented, nevertheless interdependent, opposition started their preparation for the next election campaign in 2013. The first step of this preparation should have been a conclusion of an electoral agreement.

The Road to an Electoral Agreement

Less than a year before the elections, we were able to witness three different trends in terms of support for the various parties. **The governing party, Fidesz, was able to stabilize its voters and retained a significant advantage over the opposition parties.** The party can expect 41% of all those who are sure to vote to support it. In the meantime, **MSZP, the largest opposition party, was able to achieve a slow growth in popularity.** This made it clear that while the Socialists will certainly be Viktor Orbán's main challengers, they will have to cooperate with other opposition parties. MSZP is in the second place, 15 points behind Fidesz. It stands at 26%. **Gordon Bajnai's Együtt-PM coalition was not able to endear itself to the masses,** and thus it can only reserve a right to be a minority member in the alliance. At the same time, the party's 8% and the MSZP splinter group Democratic Coalition's (DK) 4% **make the left a capable adversary.**¹

Graph 2



Source: http://www.policysolutions.hu/hireink-olvas/_politikai_trendek

Electoral preparations were hindered by the fact that the electoral system favors large electoral blocks. This forced the fragmented left to work together. **The agreement, which was meant to**

¹ Source: Policy Solutions opinion poll, www.policysolutions.hu

be concluded during the summer months by the parties involved, was supposed to result in conclusions in three areas.

1. Though in terms of maximizing support it is not the most significant issue, **the main focus of the media and political enthusiasts was whether MSZP president Mr. Mesterházy or ex-prime minister Gordon Bajnai from Együtt-PM will be the candidate for the top office.** Attila Mesterházy relied on the strength of the party behind him to support his claim, while Gordon Bajnai cited his previous experience in office and widespread support among the intelligentsia when arguing for his own candidacy.
2. The second matter on the agenda was whether **the parties will run on a single ticket as MSZP-Együtt-PM or, instead, will choose to compete with each other.** The advantage of the common list is the narrowing of electoral choices. In such a scenario, the voters are explicitly choosing between the right (Fidesz), the left (MSZP-Együtt-PM), and the extreme right (Jobbik). A problem with the common list is MSZP's high rate of rejection among certain segments of undecided voters.
3. The third cardinal issue was whether **the parties will support a single candidate in single-member districts.** 106 of the 199 mandates available at the next legislative elections will be decided through single-member districts. In these areas, it is sufficient for the candidate to achieve a relative majority. Consequently, competing opposition hopefuls in single-member districts can easily and obviously cause the left's electoral defeat.

The agreement, made in the last days of August, simply meant the burying of the hatchet in the first two respects. A decision beneficial to governmental change was made only with regards to the third set of issues. The statement of cooperation records that the parties will not have a joint candidate for the office of prime minister. Attila Mesterházy will top MSZP's, while Gordon Bajnai will head Együtt-PM's electoral list. The parties also agreed not to have a joint opposition list, so they will fight to gain electoral support separately on the national level. At the same time, the parties were able to divide the country's 106 single-member constituencies. MSZP will compete in 71 of them, while Együtt-PM will contest 35. **In such a manner, the opposition's alliance does in fact function in the most crucial aspect of the elections: single-member districts. In this area, parties will not deploy competing nominees.**

Attila Mesterházy or Gordon Bajnai?

When in October 2012 Gordon Bajnai announced that he wishes to lead the opposition coalition, many saw in him Viktor Orbán's chief opponent as opposed to the stalling Hungarian Socialist Party. However, over the last year Mr. Bajnai had to reconsider this ambition several times. First it became clear that no party will rally behind his person. He was

forced to create his own organization, Együtt 2014 (Together 2014). Over the summer, it was evidenced that, in terms of popularity, his party cannot produce even half of the numbers behind the Hungarian Socialist Party. Mr. Bajnai's positions for negotiation thus became consistently weaker, and the possibility of him being chosen as the opposition's sole leader began to seem more and more distant. **In the meantime, MSZP was able to minimally increase the number of its supporters, and party chairman Mr. Mesterházy's approval rating reached Gordon Bajnai's.** Coincidentally, opposition talks seemed to be without remarkable prospects during this time. **Neither party wanted to withdraw to benefit the other, but they were also unable to bring about each other's swift defeat.**

This standoff resulted in the decision that the parties will not name a mutual nominee for the executive branch's top office. **Whichever party collects the most votes will earn the right to select a prime minister. This “communicational draw,” however, means Attila Mesterházy's personal victory in the practical realm, since it is rather unfathomable that Együtt-PM will triple its supporters in the coming months.** Should this unlikely scenario take place, MSZP's parliamentary group would still be significantly larger than that of Mr. Bajnai's party, since the competitors fixed single-member districts 2:1 in favor of the Socialists.

When all is said and done, Attila Mesterházy and Gordon Bajnai were able to avoid announcing the winner and the loser of their duel. On one hand, this enables them to work together as partners in the campaign. On the other, this conflict made those constituents who seek an uncontested opponent for Viktor Orbán rather nervous.

MSZP or Együtt-PM?

While – though it remains unstated - the contest between Mr. Mesterházy and Mr. Bajnai seems to finally yield a result, the nature of the relationship between the parties on the left could take on very different forms in the future. **Because the parties are running on separate lists, the competition between them remains, essentially, ongoing.** Simultaneously, due to the agreement on single-member districts, **they have to both compete and pretend to be in the same boat.** This paradox, though possibly effective in reaching potential Együtt-PM supporters who are weary of MSZP and potential MSZP voters who disfavor Mr. Bajnai, could certainly place an obstacle in the left's showing unity and strength. **This relationship between the parties could result in a minimum of three different possible plots.**

1. **The best scenario for Együtt-PM** consists of a turn of events in which their base increases in a manner that allows the difference between the two parties to decrease. In this case, it is easily possible that the debates between the two organizations will, once again, become heated, since Gordon Bajnai might ask for a redistribution of single-member constituencies based on the new balance of power. In addition to that, because the overlap between MSZP and Együtt-PM voters is notable, it could cause issues if Együtt-PM is strengthened by MSZP's loss of voters.

2. **The optimal outcome for MSZP** is growth to such an extent, that cooperation with Együtt-PM will become utterly unnecessary. By this book, the Socialists are able to create a communicational situation where electors will identify the party as Viktor Orbán's undebatable challenger. In this version of events, Gordon Bajnai's coalition will not reach the parliamentary threshold of 10% (the threshold is 10% for joint lists). MSZP could then become empowered to run on its own. This is something to be avoided, because losing Együtt-PM's votes if the party fails to make it into Parliament could be a fatal blow. In a more preferable endgame, the formations will return to and run on a joint list. This scenario also makes the re-imagining of the agreement distinct prospect.
3. **In terms of an electoral victory, the best possibility** is to have both parties gain momentum independently and in their own right. If this were to occur, it is quite probable that their pact could last until the next elections to be held in the spring of 2014. This story arc entails that the organizations would gain new adherents from the approximately 1.5 million undecided voters.

Other potential partners

Apart from Együtt-PM, some other left-wing and liberal parties can also be considered as real and/or self-appointed partners of the Hungarian Socialist Party. **Ferenc Gyurcsány's DK party, which is supported by some 100.000-150.000 voters,** is the most relevant of them². While these voters are desperately needed by the opposition alliance for electoral victory, Ferenc Gyurcsány himself is still the least popular politician in the country, thus can endanger the renewal of the Hungarian Socialist Party. **Should MSZP and DK have a joint list with Ferenc Gyurcsány on it, undecided voters can easily turn towards Együtt-PM instead of MSZP. Therefore, it is unlikely that such an alliance will be formed.** The other potential partners of the Socialists include **The Liberals and the Social Democratic Party of Hungary (MSZDP)**. Forming an alliance with these parties is more symbolic than useful: their support is less than 1% of the total Hungarian population.

Could the Opposition Win?

When considering electoral techniques, the MSZP-Együtt-PM alliance is far from optimal. However, it also fails to pose a significant threat to a change in government. **The key for victory lies within the undecided voter, or to be exact, every fourth elector.** This demographic was courted unsuccessfully by all political parties for the last three years. Fidesz is currently two million voters strong.³ This is 800,000 heads more than the number of those who prefer MSZP, but it is predictably not enough to win the elections. **In the last decades,**

² Source: Ipsos opinion polls, 2012-2013, www.ipsos.hu

³ Source: Ipsos opinion poll, August, 2013, www.ipsos.hu

Hungarian elections typically featured five million voters at the polls, which means that Fidesz has to convince a lot of people if it wants to make its victory in 2014 a certainty. At the same time, the voters on the left number 1.6 million in total. We can deduct from this that the opposition needs to acquire less than half of all undecided votes. The results of the 2014 elections will be significantly impacted by the far-right Jobbik party, which appeals to almost 700,000 citizens. This party consists both of potential supporters of political change and Fidesz's more radical friends.

The agreement allows parties on the left to outline their system of values without compromises. It is quite probable that the **Socialists will decide to air strong left-wing messages and to appear as a party of the people.** Együtt-PM will most likely try to strengthen its base by addressing liberal and apolitical voters. Whether this will be enough to combat the current government's politics based on decreases in utility costs, pay raises, and rhetoric bashing the banks and the European Union will only become unequivocally clear next spring. **Since almost two-thirds of voters believe that, despite all of Fidesz's popular measures, the country is headed in the wrong direction⁴, the game is not even close to being over.**

About the author:

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⁴ Source: Median opinion poll, July, 2013, www.median.hu