

LMP vs. traditional politics: 1:1

After a spectacular start, LMP's political overdrive comes to a screeching halt

One really has to understand just how hard the Hungarian party system is to crack to fully appreciate the rapid success of Hungary's new green party, 'Politics Can Be Different' (LMP). In the period of regime transition, most of the countries in the region were aflush with new parties that they kept exchanging at a rapid pace. Due to a variety of factors, the Hungarian political system in contrast was virtually impossible to penetrate for new parliamentary parties (the exception was the extreme right MIÉP in 1998, though it failed to duplicate this feat later).

For a bunch of young and generally unknown activists, establishing a 7.5% parliamentary party from scratch was a major success, even if the political context was as favourable as it could possibly be – witness the even greater success of Jobbik, for which the groundwork was laid earlier, however, and which consequently found itself better prepared and more established when the historic opportunity of the 2010 elections arose.

There have of course been minor glitches in the LMP's success story; the 2009 EP election result was somewhat below expectations, money was often scarce and endorsement sheets routinely posed a greater obstacle for LMP than for the better organised parties. But overall, the parliamentary election result was an impressive vindication for the party's optimists and in the celebration the glitches were – or at least appeared – forgotten.

Much too early, it turns out, for some of these problems have returned with a vengeance now. While LMP's performance in the upcoming municipal elections remains to be seen, regardless of the results achieved by the candidates in running, the party is so far the greatest loser of this election: in most of the country it failed to clear the higher qualification hurdles set by Fidesz and will be absent from the vast majority of county assemblies and mayoral races (it has only five county lists – including Budapest – out of 20 and a mere 26 mayoral candidates nationwide).

It turns out that the government factions' amendments to the municipal election law, analysed in our newsletter Week 35, have been very efficient in keeping the upstart from solidifying its position in most parts of the country. In retrospect, LMP's vehement protest against these amendments appears to have been prescient not only with regard to the generally undemocratic nature of the more onerous burdens on parties and candidates, but also in view of the obstacles they pose for LMP itself.

Even in Budapest, the party's stronghold (with less than half as many votes as Jobbik nationally, LMP outpolled Jobbik in Budapest in April), it barely managed to collect enough

signatures to field a city-wide mayoral candidate and, even more surprisingly, it has no mayoral candidates in several districts where its candidates performed well in April: 4th district (13.07%), 9th district (14.75%), 17th district (8.35%), 18th district (10.1%), 19th district (11.25%) and 22nd district (10.85%).

The party's problems stem from two sources: the closed, Budapest-centred circle of its founders who lack strong ties outside the capital and LMP's problematic relationship with money – meaning the party appears determined to abide by the official campaign finance regulations, unrealistic as they may be in the Hungarian political context, and lacks a network of stable donors to keep its operations going consistently.

As for the first, conventional wisdom suggests that flashy successes may be conceivable with a good idea, favourable timing and a solid execution, but to become entrenched and expand as a party it is necessary to build a national base of local leaders and activists who introduce the party locally and give voters something more tangible than news reports to associate the party with. This is crucial not only in terms of getting votes, but also in terms of actually getting on the ballot. Conventional wisdom appears right on this one.

The complex Hungarian electoral system for the national parliament rewards both, votes cast for the party list (~40% of parliamentary seats) and votes cast for individual candidates who fail to carry their constituency (15%). To have a shot at these, it takes activists who roam the country and collect endorsements sheets to ensure that voters can actually vote for the party's lists and candidates.

Already back in April LMP ran into massive difficulties in this regard, failing to field candidates in 83 of the country's 176 electoral constituencies and struggling – but ultimately succeeding – to run in all counties. Now, with Fidesz raising the bar, the 'LMP-free' zone of the country has expanded vastly, which – unless it effectively uses the next couple of years to expand its organisation – augurs ill for LMP if Fidesz undertakes similar restrictions for the national elections.

The suggestion that campaign activists can be temporarily exported from strongholds to areas with lower levels of organisation holds with extreme limitations only: just now, LMP has not even been able to do this outside Budapest's city centre, in spite of already having a sizeable pool of potential voters in the outer districts and in the countryside as well.

As outsiders, we find it difficult to ascertain whether LMP's organisational shortcomings remained this deep because the challenge itself was overwhelming or whether the party simply failed to recognise and address the problem in a timely manner. Either way, now the depth of the problem is apparent to everyone.

Though it can't replace a full-fledged national organisation, money could mitigate some of these problems, and is in any case necessary for most aspects of a successful campaign. Unfortunately for LMP, money appears in even shorter supply than activists; so rather than serving as a potential source for mitigating its woes, the dearth of money exacerbates it.

The money issue is complex and worthy of a column of its own. But the essence is that the system works as if designed to malfunction. Citizens are loath to give money to political parties, state funding is insufficient and spending caps on campaigns are unrealistic. To keep up, parties must therefore find illicit ways to raise money, which they do mostly through kickbacks on public contracts, and spend considerably more than they would be allowed by law. The system is defunct and hypocritical, but for the established parties there is little incentive to change it (though Fidesz will have less of an excuse now with a two-thirds majority to back up any design it chooses).

One of LMP's main promises, the *raison d'être* implicit in its name, is that there is a different way of handling these things. The party emphasises its refusal of illicit funds (though without casting doubt on the sincerity of this assertion it must be said that it is unlikely to be offered any without access to some relevant positions) and its adherence to spending limits. At the same time it castigates the other parties for their alleged – and indeed very likely – abuses of the aforementioned rules.

Yet, if politics would work differently, LMP would have to have enough money to campaign and operate. Instead, campaign manager Gergely Karácsony has announced – not for the first time – that the party is out of money and won't have enough to campaign on in the final week before the election. Regardless of whether the call stems from genuine desperation or is an election gimmick aimed at drawing more media attention and also more money from voters, the fact is that it suggests that LMP has not gotten very far in overhauling politics overall.

For the time being, LMP has only changed politics to the extent that it has entered parliament and demonstrated a new political behaviour. To effect more serious change, it will face a number of strategic issues, including ideological choices and most crucially the question of political alliances, without which LMP cannot hope to achieve overarching change in politics.

The one choice that for better or worse eludes it is to dabble in the 'traditional' forms of party financing, for persistent news of that would undermine the party's most basic message, which was more instrumental in garnering support than its detailed programme or its novel public policy and ideological tenets. As of now, operating successfully with this approach appears more challenging than LMP's leaders seem to have assumed.