



Strengthening Social Democracy in the Visegrad Countries

The Position of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) in the Hungarian Political Landscape

András Bíró-Nagy – Tibor Kadlót
November 2016

- The Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) was established on October 7, 1989 as the successor to the MSZMP, the party that had ruled the former communist one-party state. Based on its performance at the polls since the regime change, the MSZP may be described as the most successful Hungarian political party, with two catastrophic periods. The Socialists won three elections and spent 12 years in power between 1994 and 2010. With the exception of a 10.9% showing at the polls in 1990, when it finished fourth, the MSZP has always finished in first or second place in parliamentary elections (in 2014 it ran as part of a multi-party coalition). The last governing period between 2006 and 2010 ended in a steep decline.
- The MSZP was the most adversely affected by changes in the Hungarian party system, losing the status of being able to present an independent political alternative. Suddenly, the socialists are facing challengers from both right and left. The MSZP not only has to face the governing Fidesz from an opposition position, but it also has to fight for the title of the leading opposition party against the far-right Jobbik, all the while facing new parties and having to compete for the attention of opposition voters on its home turf, fraught with division.
- Among the left-wing and liberal parties, the Hungarian socialists still have the competitive advantage of having a national infrastructure and a relatively large, albeit ageing membership. At the same time, it remains a problem that the party is unable to attract new members and the current composition of the MSZP voter base cannot be sustained in demographic terms. Looking forward, the continued appeal of left-wing values in Hungary offers perhaps the best potential for the Hungarian Socialist Party. The main question is whether the party manages to become the most credible advocate of left-wing values in Hungarian politics.

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1. The MSZP - a brief history, achievements and organisational structure

The Hungarian Socialist Party (Magyar Szocialista Párt, MSZP) was established on October 7, 1989 as the successor to the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party (Magyar Szocialista Munkáspárt, MSZMP), the party that ruled the former communist one-party state. The acceptance of the role of successor party was preceded by careful deliberation, and eventually the former party's deep social roots and infrastructural background were factors leading the new party to accept the consequences of political continuity. Despite the legal continuity, in a fundamental sense the formation of the MSZP resulted in a radical shift. Socialist party politicians considered themselves the heirs to a reform movement within the MSZMP and distanced themselves from the party's orthodox wing, which rejected the need for change. The MSZP subscribed not only to a multi-party system, but also accepted a limited form of capitalism with a "human face" and considered itself to be part of the community of Western European social democratic parties. According to its self-definition in the 1990s, the MSZP protected the interests of wage earners, and set out to narrow social differences and increase opportunities for social mobility.

The history of the MSZP following the regime change may be divided into three phases. In the first period (1990-1994) the socialists had to come to terms with becoming a small party, and breaking out of total political isolation presented the biggest challenge. In the second period, lasting some 15 years (1994-2008) and in an environment gradually evolving into a two-party system, the MSZP evolved into a people's party fully integrating the left, in close cooperation with the liberal party, the Alliance of Free Democrats (Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége – a Magyar Liberális Párt, SZDSZ), its coalition partner in all three terms in power. The final break with the liberals ushered in the third period (2008-) lasting to this day, when the MSZP again found itself without a partner and, indeed, had to face rivals following a fragmentation of the left. Following major defeats in the 2009 EP and the 2010 parliamentary elections when it lost over half of its voters, after 2010 it had to set about restructuring and looking for allies as a medium-sized party.

From its inception in 1989, the Hungarian Socialist Party has existed as an alliance of several power centres, and it has preserved its polyarchic nature to this day. At no time in the history of the party has power been concentrated in one pair of hands; there have always been alternative power centres, even when the posts of party president and premier were held by the same person (by Gyula Horn in 1994-1998, and in 2007-2009). This structural feature is one of the reasons the MSZP's political culture may be described as a form of "permanent bargaining" (Lakner 2011). The MSZP's chief policymaking body is the National Presidium, elected for a two-year term, whose members include the party president, his/her deputy, the vice presidents, the caucus leader and members delegated by the congress. As well as appointing party leaders, the party Congress, as the top decision-making forum, also votes on the party's national list, on its candidates for state president and prime minister, the election platform and party statutes. However, delegates constituting the top decision-making forum come with a mandate granted by local organisations. Local chapters have considerable autonomy within the MSZP: they make decisions on parliamentary and local government candidates in individual constituencies, on mayoral candidates, as well as local government list candidates. The power enjoyed by members should not be underestimated: turning their back on the party's National Presidium, in 2004 Congress delegates chose Ferenc Gyurcsány as prime minister. The "party's parliament", the Committee, is also responsible for developing intra-party strategy.

Based on its performance at the polls since the regime change, the MSZP may be described in the following terms: the most successful Hungarian political party with two catastrophic periods (see Table 1). With the exception of its 10.9% showing at the polls in 1990, when it finished fourth, the MSZP has always finished in first or second place in parliamentary elections (in 2014 it ran as part of a multi-party coalition). Initially a small

party, the MSZP became a major player on the Hungarian political scene following the 1994 election, when with 33% of the vote it won 54% of the parliamentary seats. This was the only time when the MSZP was able to win an absolute majority of the mandates on its own, although in order to boost its legitimacy it decided to form a coalition government with the liberals. In terms of the distribution of list votes, in 1998 the MSZP again finished first among the parties, yet it lost the election. This is explained by developments in the conservative camp: four years earlier, the MSZP had had an easy victory over a fragmented right. However, in 1998 a right-wing election alliance defeated the socialists in the second round. After four years in opposition and in an extremely tight race, in 2002 the MSZP won the highest number of votes in its history (2.3 million), just enough to claim victory. In 2006 the MSZP and Fidesz (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége – Alliance of Young Democrats) fought a similarly bitter fight and in terms of list votes the difference came to only 1% in favour of the socialists. In a close contest, the MSZP failed to win a majority by itself. Following both elections, a coalition agreement was signed with the SZDSZ, which had barely made the 5% parliamentary threshold. The concentration of the Hungarian party system reached its peak in the 2006 election: 85% of the electorate cast its vote for the two major parties. That in 2006 the MSZP managed to win two elections in a row came as a surprise for two reasons: after the summer of 2003, it had never topped the public opinion polls – in the 2004 EPA election it finished only in second place – and surpassed its rival only in the last phase of the campaign. Moreover, no other party in the entire post-communist region had managed to win two successive parliamentary elections.

Popular support for the MSZP started to decline in the summer of 2006 in the wake of austerity measures implemented by the Gyurcsány cabinet, resulting in the biggest loss of public support over the past ten years. A leaked speech by Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány at Öszöd, in which he said that during the campaign he had lied deliberately to win the election, made his earlier unpopularity stick. This was followed by a slow and gradual erosion, and a steady decline first led to the resignation of Gyurcsány in March 2009, and later to a major electoral defeat in 2010. Ineffective and unpopular reforms (education and healthcare), a failed social referendum, the economic crisis that dominated the second half of the term, corruption scandals and a resounding defeat in the 2009 European Parliamentary election were the major signposts along this downward spiral (Bíró-Nagy – Róna, 2012). In the 2010 election – where Fidesz captured over two thirds of the mandates by itself – the MSZP lost 58% of the voters it had had four years earlier, although its 19.3% showing was sufficient for it to come in ahead of the far-right Jobbik (Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom – Movement for a Better Hungary) and form the largest opposition group in Parliament. Support for the party following the 2010 election failed to lift it above the medium-size party category, clearly demonstrated in 2014 when the coalition it formed with other left-wing and liberal political parties received barely 25% of the vote. Between 2010 and 2016 three party chairmen (Attila Mesterházy, József Tóbiás and Gyula Molnár) made attempts to boost public support for the party, but with little to show for it by the autumn of 2016.

Table 1. Hungarian Socialist Party election results, 1990-2014

Year	Election	Number of list votes	List votes (%)	Distribution of mandates (%)	Government/ opposition
1990	Parliamentary	535 064	10.89%	8.55%	Opposition
1994	Parliamentary	1 780 009	32.99%	54.14%	Government
1998	Parliamentary	1 497 231	32.92%	34.72%	Opposition
2002	Parliamentary	2 361 997	42.05%	46.11%	Government
2004	European parliamentary	1 054 921	34.3%	37.5%	2.
2006	Parliamentary	2 336 705	43.21%	48.19%	Government
2009	European parliamentary	503 140	17.37 %	16.67%	2.
2010	Parliamentary	990 428	19.3%	15.28%	Opposition
2014	Parliamentary	1 290 806*	25.67%	19.1% (of this MSZP 14.6%)	Opposition
2014	European parliamentary	252 751	10.9%	9.52%	3.

*In the 2014 parliamentary election the MSZP, DK, Együtt-PM and MLP ran on a joint list.

Source: <http://www.valasztas.hu/>

At the end of 2011, the MSZP had a membership of 30,000 (MSZP 2011), a huge drop compared to the numbers reported 10 years earlier when the party still had 39,000 registered members. Since 2010, party membership numbers have shown significant variation in different parts of the country. Relative to the size of the population in each county, the largest number of members is found in Budapest and Baranya County, and the lowest in Western and Central Trans-Danubia, as well as in Pest and Hajdú-Bihar counties. Men represent a substantial majority in the MSZP and account for over 60% of all the members. The shrinking size of the membership and the growing inactivity of members has not stopped since 2010: while the party did not publish official data in 2016, estimates put the current MSZP membership at 15-20 thousand individuals, which may still be considered large on the left, although the far-right Jobbik already has as many members as does the leading force on the left (Népszabadság 2016).

In the years since 2010, the average age of MSZP members has been 56 years, which is extremely high when one considers that the average age of the Hungarian population is 40 years. In short, MSZP followers are relatively old and may be said to be highly educated: in 2011 40% of MSZP members had a college education and 25% a high school diploma.

The socialists' electoral successes have been based on two factors: an exceptionally strong showing in the country's most disadvantaged counties in north-eastern Hungary and in the country's most liberal city, Budapest. The key role played by the latter is well illustrated by the fact that in the 2000 and 2006 elections MSZP candidates or candidates supported by the party won in 28 out of 32 Budapest districts. By 2010 the MSZP had mostly lost its north-eastern strongholds (losing 30 percentage points in Borsod and Szabolcs counties) and all the indications are that unless it regains its influence in these crisis regions it has no chance of defeating Fidesz. The age of its supporters, the most salient feature of the voter base, presents a serious challenge for the party: close to half its voters are over the age of 60. In this age category the MSZP and the governing Fidesz enjoy the same rate of support, while the fact that the MSZP has consistently failed to present an attractive alternative for a younger generation has created a chronic problem.

2. The MSZP's value system

Since 2010 the MSZP has entered election campaigns with an election platform befitting a left-wing popular party. The party tried to hold together and mobilize its heavily-eroded support base, which had stabilised at a low level, with decidedly left wing economic policy promises. Sounding self-critical at times, it also promised to make a shift from the liberal policies preferred by the Gyurcsány administration. Coming out in support of public intervention in the economy, making a commitment to the less fortunate members of society, and making employment and the social welfare system the centrepiece of its policies, the party attempted to return to the ideological base occupied by its supporters.

The MSZP is a secular party, strongly opposed to any rapprochement between the church and the state. The MSZP also has the political option of co-opting a culturally liberal issue, i.e. gender equality. Women's policy is one of the areas where right-left self-definitions are consistent with the values represented by party elites, an area where, along with the party's diehard supporters, the majority of the public tends to share the MSZP position.

Following 2010, the disconnection between the party's program and its voters went beyond economic issues, always a central issue in the minds of Hungarian voters. The most apparent contradiction characterizing the MSZP is its attitude towards the Roma population and law-and-order issues. The MSZP rejects all forms of segregation, discrimination and incitement to hatred. However, in its communications the party has made repeated attempts to respond to rising ethnic problems in some parts of the country and tensions arising within its camp. This indicates that the MSZP leadership is also aware of the gap between the party's liberal policies and the attitudes of its sympathizers. Many socialist voters hold strongly anti-Roma attitudes, and in this respect they are not different from conservative voters (Ipsos 2014). The party ran into a similar problem in 2015 and 2016 when it had to take a position on the migration issue. Like right-wing voters, the majority of socialist voters oppose migration (Závecz 2016a). On this issue they reject liberal and tolerant policies, causing a severe headache for the party leadership. The latter, in turn, has come out with a series of confusing positions and announcements.

Today, embracing the cause of environmental protection is considered mandatory for all parties. On this issue, MSZP politicians and the party's supporters are roughly on the same wavelength: while they recognize the importance of green issues, they do not share the views of the most ardent supporters. However, in the past few years the MSZP has put more emphasis on the environment, treating the issue as a shared minimum for cooperation between the new left and the greens.

Considering that over the past 20 years MSZP has been a staunch supporter of Hungary's Euro-Atlantic integration, it is not surprising that support for the country's EU membership and integration has remained at the centre of the party's program throughout the 2010s. MSZP voters are also seen as solid supporters of European Union membership: in 2016 three quarters would vote for EU membership again.

3. The MSZP's position within the Hungarian party system

While the years following the regime change were characterised by the flourishing of many parties, the stabilisation of voters' party preferences meant that Hungarian political culture gradually adopted a bloc mentality and evolved into a two-party system, eventually resulting in a system where for over two decades a conservative right and a social democratic left took turns at governing the country. In 1994 the MSZP and in 1998 Fidesz formed a government, then in 2002 the socialists returned to power and, for the first time in Hungary's political history in the modern era, managed to win a second term and rule the country for the next eight years. However, since 2006 the party has lost many of its voters and suffered a major loss of credibility, a defeat from which the MSZP has still to recover. The critical 2010 election led to the fundamental restructuring of the political landscape, which by 2006 had been showing all the symptoms of sclerosis; apart from helping Fidesz to win a second term, it also led to the emergence of protest parties on both the right and left. The success of the anti-establishment green party Politics Can Be Different (Lehet Más a Politika, LMP) and the far-right Jobbik at the parliamentary election, and the latter's return to parliament in 2014, may be attributed to the public's disappointment in mainstream parties and a pervasive lack of confidence in the political system as a whole that, along with disaffection with the government's performance and overall living standards, has been fuelled by corruption charges and scandals. With the rise of Jobbik as a viable political force, the once solid two-party system collapsed, and following 2010 a number of new parties and movements emerged suddenly on the left as well. After breaking with the MSZP, the Democratic Coalition (Demokratikus Koalíció, DK) was established by the former prime minister, Ferenc Gyurcsány; Együtt (Together) emerged first as a movement and later reconstituted itself as a party under the leadership of Gordon Bajnai, also a former prime minister supported by the MSZP, and after a split from the LMP a formation called Párbeszéd Magyarország (Dialogue for Hungary) was established, completing the fragmentation of the left-liberal political spectrum. These shifts in the political arena had the most adverse effect on the MSZP, as the organisation, facing a serious credibility crisis, lost its status of independent political alternative and found new challengers on both right and left.

Reflecting the current balance of political power, the MSZP not only has to face the governing Fidesz from the position of opposition, it also has to fight for the title of the leading opposition party against the far-right Jobbik and, simultaneously, to face new parties compete for the attention of opposition voters on its home turf, fraught with division. In short, instead of the right-left rivalry that characterised previous years, today the Hungarian Socialist Party must hold its ground on three fronts.

As an alternative political force, the currently-governing Fidesz-KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party) has always been the MSZP's main political rival, and, in opposition, socialist politics are determined by criticism and questioning of government policies. This is only natural, because by the next election the party must offer its voters an acceptable and attractive alternative to that offered by those currently in power. However, there are major differences in public support for the two parties: the conservative governing party has led the MSZP in popularity for the past 10 years and has consistently been the most popular Hungarian political formation throughout that period. Fidesz continues to preserve its large-party status and in most cases enjoys the confidence of one quarter to one third of the entire population, and close to half of the decided voters. Meanwhile, the MSZP has shrunk to the size of a medium-size party. For years it has been unable to break out of the 10-15% range within the entire population, and it typically manages to attract only 20% of decided voters. While the ability to govern is an important issue and positioning the MSZP against the governing party is an important part of recapturing the status of an alternative political force, currently the party's position within the opposition is not as stable as it once was. In 2016, Jobbik and left-wing parties pose a more direct challenge to the MSZP than does Fidesz.

While Jobbik, which has a number of far-right characteristics and follows radical and populist policies, is ideologically light years from the Hungarian Socialist Party, its programme shares a number of left-wing elements with that of the socialists that means it addresses the less fortunate members of society, including potentially left-wing voters. Jobbik's efforts at consolidation, i.e., a policy of moderation started in 2013, pose an additional challenge for the MSZP; it offers an alternative for disgruntled opposition voters that so far have rejected Jobbik due to its radical positions. Moreover, as an anti-establishment party, Jobbik takes a position not only against the governing party but also against the MSZP. Its final objective is to become the challenger of Fidesz in the current tripartite political arena, which means that in the race to become the number one opposition party it poses a direct threat to the MSZP. In this context, the middle of 2014 may be considered a turning point: in opinion polls conducted immediately after the May EP election Jobbik surpassed the MSZP for the first time. Public support for the two parties has remained within the same range ever since.

However, the most daunting challenge facing the MSZP does not come from the right but from a fragmented left. After 2010, a number of new parties, for the most part espousing social democratic and liberal values, entered the political scene in response to the MSZP's decline, determined to offer an alternative for left-wing voters alienated from the MSZP. In 2011, the first to emerge from one of the platforms of the Hungarian Socialist Party was the Democratic Coalition (DK) under the leadership of former Socialist Party premier Ferenc Gyurcsány. Originally, the platform was established to reform the MSZP so as to broaden the party's base, make it more inclusive and, in addition to addressing voters with social democratic leanings, appeal to those who had lost faith with the right-wing conservative government. Following the party split, the DK became an independent player in Hungarian political life. Within the population as a whole it has public support of 5% and among decided voters 5 to 10%, i.e., its popularity rating is solid enough to guarantee a seat in parliament.

Együtt (Together) started out as a left-wing umbrella organisation and later morphed into a political party in 2013 with the help of several liberal and left-wing movements. The leadership of the new party was assumed by another former prime minister, Gordon Bajnai. Like DK, the centrist party, it advocated more liberal policies than the MSZP, and also wished to appeal to a broad voter base intent on replacing the Fidesz-KDNP government. However, following an initial surge in popularity, support for the organisation dropped below the parliamentary threshold. A likely cause of this was the party's inability to maintain consensus among its founding organisations, which in turn led to internal cracks. In the middle of 2016, support for the party measured by pollsters came under the 5% parliamentary threshold.

The third new-left formation, Párbeszéd Magyarországért (Dialogue for Hungary) emerged in 2013 following a split from Lehet Más a Politika (Politics Can Be Different) when some members decided to leave because the LMP refused to enter into an alliance with Együtt. Subsequently, Párbeszéd, defining itself as a left-wing green party, formed an alliance with Gordon Bajnai's organisation. Following the 2014 elections, Párbeszéd went its own way. However, like its former ally, the left-wing green party also failed to attract followers in sufficient numbers and today its support base is negligible.

In other words, the appearance of these new organisations means that in the past few years the MSZP has acquired a number of political rivals who come from its own political hinterland. In addition to traditional left-wing tenets, these organisations subscribe to new-left and liberal ideologies, i.e., they do not position themselves against the MSZP purely on the basis of social democratic values, and supporters tend to move freely between the various parties. The fragmentation of the left through the division of its voter base has led to a situation where today the party has to fight for every committed left-wing voter. Within the left, MSZP is still considered to be the most socially-embedded formation with the strongest organisational and institutional background, and its following is still larger than that of the three other organisations combined. Still,

the presence of left-wing rivals and the resulting fragmentation of the left-wing camp is steadily eroding the party's voter base and prestige.

The situation is even more complicated by the new election system with a single round (replacing the previous two rounds), plus the further consolidation of the majority system, which leaves left-wing parties no alternative but to cooperate and optimise their election results by entering into election alliances or by withdrawing their candidates for the benefit of another party. At the same time, experience so far indicates that these political formations have been unable to galvanise the left and have failed to recruit at least half the voting-age population described as undecided, having no party preference, disappointed or non-voting. Whether running separately or as a bloc, the parties have failed to win more sympathizers, and instead what we see is a constant migration of left-wing voters that, in fact, undermines the MSZP's and the entire left-wing and liberal side's chances of forming a new government.

In addition to the fragmentation of the left, the MSZP's consolidation and chances of returning to power are undermined by problems specific to the party. The most troublesome problem is a confidence and legitimacy deficit that has bedevilled the party since 2006. The cornerstones of the party's woes are the Öszöd speech, which became a symbol of voter deception, the fact that the party stood by an extremely unpopular premier, Ferenc Gyurcsány, to the very end, and its abandonment of social democratic values and its simultaneous adoption of liberal and free-market policies. On top of this, corruption cases tied to the MSZP just before the 2010 and 2014 elections contributed not only to the party losing public support on a scale and for a duration without precedent, but also to its inability to offset its crisis of legitimacy even by making policy shifts and personnel changes. It is safe to conclude that the image of the MSZP suffered a severe blow that continues to cast a shadow over its public reception and acceptance.

Consequently, it is not surprising that the public remains extremely sceptical of the party. To this day, the MSZP has been unable to break free of the corruption accusations (Medián 2016). Even though the recent corruption charges levelled at the current government are more numerous and vastly more severe, according to a 2016 Medián survey respondents tend to see Fidesz and the MSZP as equally corrupt. As a rule, the electorate is unsatisfied with the performance of the MSZP and the opposition in general, and the public's perception of the governing party and opposition parties is equally unfavourable, indicating a general pessimism regarding politics and disillusionment with the political elite. Moreover, the party's own voters are also dissatisfied with its performance, with only slightly over 50% claiming to be satisfied. Addressing undecided and passive voters is made all the more difficult by the fact that this segment of the public has an even worse opinion of the opposition and sees the governing party as still more effective than its potential challengers (Závecz 2016b).

4. The MSZP's domestic and international relations and collaborations

The MSZP is a member of several major international social democratic political organisations, including the historic Socialist International and the Progressive Alliance, established in 2013. The Hungarian Socialist Party is a member of the Party of European Socialists (PES), an umbrella organisation for European social democratic parties, and since Hungary's accession to the European Union the party's European parliamentary representatives have sat with the socialist faction (PES, later S&D) in the European Parliament. The party's European integration is well illustrated by the fact that PES' most recent conference was held in Budapest in 2015, attended by Europe's leading left-wing politicians. Leaders of the party also regularly meet and consult the heads of EU institutions in Brussels. Based on the level of interaction with these organisations, it is reasonable to conclude that the party cultivates close ties with international left-wing institutions.

Along with its close ties to international social democratic institutions, the Hungarian Socialist Party is also eager to maintain contact with other European parties and organisations committed to a shared ideological background. There are contacts and cooperation primarily with the V₄ group and neighbouring countries, i.e., left-wing organisations in the East-Central European region. In terms of the EU's 'core' countries, traditionally the MSZP maintains close ties to the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD).

Typically, regional ties take the form of sporadic meetings between party leaders, although in the past few years such meetings have taken place with more regularity. In many cases, these meetings coincide with major social democratic party events, conferences, party elections and campaign events. They also serve to inspire and motivate, as well as to demonstrate unity, and to the public act as an expression of solidarity between parties promoting similar ideologies. Within the V₄ group, in the case of Poland and the Czech Republic there are more relaxed and symbolic gestures of cooperation, such as the 2012 attendance by former party leader Attila Mesterházy of the CSSD (Czech Social Democratic Party) and SLD (Democratic Left Alliance) conferences in Prague and Warsaw respectively. Cooperation with neighbouring Slovakia is slightly more structured; it is a relationship that also deepened during Mr. Mesterházy's tenure. The socialist politician met the leader of Smer (Direction – Social Democracy), Robert Fico, several times on neutral territory, as well as in Budapest and Slovakia.

In addition to V₄ members, the party has been looking for partnership with regional organisations where social democracy has a strong base. Accordingly, it made overtures to the Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP) and the Romanian Social Democratic Party (PSD) when the two parties were in power. In 2012 Zoran Milanovic met MSZP leaders in Zagreb, where they agreed to regularly coordinate their positions concerning issues related to the European Union. Two years later, the Croatian prime minister visited Budapest to support the party's candidate for prime minister, Attila Mesterházy, at a campaign kickoff meeting organised by the opposition. The MSZP has maintained a similar relationship with the Romanian Social Democratic Party, whose leader at the time, Victor Ponta, participated in a MSZP rally in 2013, and one year later the Hungarian party leader returned the gesture by attending a PSD EP-campaign opener. In the past few years the MSZP has established contact with RMDSZ, the largest party representing ethnic Hungarians living in Romania, in an effort to demonstrate its commitment to national politics and Hungarian minorities living across the border. Since the regime change, of all the leading European countries the MSZP has traditionally maintained a close relationship with the German social democratic SPD.

In contrast to foreign organisations, MSZP's relationship with the other Hungarian left-wing parties is fairly ambivalent. Some of the newly-formed left-wing organisations emerged after splitting from the Hungarian Socialist Party and were conceived as an alternative to the party, i.e., they act as rivals to the MSZP in the

race for left-wing voters. In the 2014 parliamentary election left-wing parties formed an election alliance, and following their electoral defeat they tried to coordinate their respective election strategies, again without much success. In by-elections there are efforts to stand joint candidates and to withdraw for the benefit of another party, although there are also examples of the parties competing against each other. To date no political strategy has significantly increased the left's electoral base, and, over the long term, half-hearted cooperation has not served the interests of other parties either, i.e., there is half-hearted cooperation between Hungarian left-wing and liberal parties.

Cooperation and ties between labour unions and the MSZP is currently significantly weaker than in the past or in other member states. The MSZP's cooperation with NGOs is also limited, although the party and these organisations often share positions regarding human rights and social issues. This is explained by the fact that citizens try to keep a distance from all political parties. That cooperation is not inconceivable at times of emergency was demonstrated by the 2015 migrant crisis, when the MSZP turned over its Budapest headquarters building to civic organisations providing assistance to migrants.

5. Conclusion – the major challenges facing the MSZP

Looking forward, the Hungarian Socialist Party's perhaps biggest potential lies in the popularity of left-wing values in Hungary. In other words, the key question is who emerges as the most credible representative of left-wing values in Hungarian politics. The MSZP's left-wing credentials were severely damaged during its term in office, although if the party could position itself again as the most credible representative of labour interests, solidarity, justice and social mobility, it could potentially regain its former stature. However, with the fragmentation of the left, in the medium term the MSZP cannot realistically expect to defeat Fidesz single-handedly. Instead, as the leader of the opposition camp, it should focus on entering into an alliance with any number of parties keen to defeat the incumbent government.

In the field of left-wing and liberal parties, the Hungarian socialists continue to enjoy the relative competitive advantage of having a national infrastructure and a membership that is still large in the context of Hungarian politics. Thanks to this advantage, the MSZP faces fewer of the administrative/mobilisation hurdles that make survival extremely difficult or all but impossible for the new political formations. In cooperation with others, the party's comparatively large membership and its highly organised structure may make it indispensable. In addition to membership, the party's well-established media contacts and financial background (notwithstanding the substantial debt accrued over the years) are more solid than those available to other opposition parties and civic organisations, and international ties provide a firm ground for organising an effective opposition.

As well as its left-wing image being dented, perceptions regarding the party's ability to govern were also eroded between 2006 and 2010. Since the MSZP has not done much since to improve that image, it is essential that, through focused policy work, the party attempt to regain its lost credibility and minimize public rejection.

The party's politicians tend to refer to the MSZP as a diverse democratic party, which tolerates a wide variety of views and sees that as a virtue. However, the other side of this is that since the regime change the MSZP has often been seen as the "party of bickering". In many cases, the socialists would settle their internal scuffles in the media, instead of focusing on the most important task of any political party: setting the course for the future of Hungary. Even after six years in opposition, leaks and reports on the MSZP's internal affairs are common. This "tradition" may have to be abandoned in order to ensure that coverage of the MSZP focuses on criticism of the government and the party's alternative solutions.

For the MSZP to recapture its former status, it must not only promise social protection and predictability, but must also present young voters with an attractive alternative. The current level of the MSZP's membership and the demographic composition of its support base cannot be sustained.

Aside from all the above, the party's financial position poses an entirely different problem. The MSZP amassed considerable debt that, in financial terms, leaves the party with few options. This also makes it extremely difficult to step up from the medium-size category. By the end of 2010 the party held a debt of around HUF 2 billion, most of it made up of loans taken to pay for the headquarters building and other real estate projects. According to the party, most of the debt has already been repaid, although its outstanding debt portfolio remains considerable. This represents a huge liability, especially given that poor results in subsequent elections in the past six years mean that state subsidies, accounting for a large percentage of party revenues, have shrunk by 50% compared to the period before 2010.

Not only the MSZP, but the entire left opposition is being crushed by a restructured media market dominated by the government, leading to a situation where parties advocating social democratic values find it increas-

ingly difficult to deliver their messages to voters. Since its inauguration in 2010, the governing party has used the public media to spread government propaganda and, as the result of a deliberate strategy, an increasing number of commercial media have come under the control of business interests closely affiliated with the government. At the same time, the opposition, and left-wing parties in particular, has access to fewer and fewer media outlets.

The above problems present a complex set of challenges for the Hungarian Socialist Party and also explain the party's current status on the Hungarian political landscape. However, the MSZP cannot avoid confronting these issues and must respond to all these challenges if it is to consolidate its position on the left and within the opposition camp, and become a political force capable of leading the country again and of regaining the trust and support of broad sections of society.

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