

Hungary's Left attempts to challenge Orban

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On 14 January, Hungary's main liberal and leftist parties announced an electoral alliance ahead of the country's parliamentary election. The alliance consists of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) and the recently formed: Együtt 2014 (Together 2014), led by former prime minister Gordon Bajnai, and the Democratic Coalition, headed by Bajnai's predecessor - Ferenc Gyurcsany. The parties will run a joint national list and joint candidates for single-member constituencies. MSZP's leader, Attila Mesterhazy, has been selected as the alliance's joint candidate for prime minister. According to a recent opinion poll carried out by Ipsos, the parties in the centre-left electoral alliance currently enjoy the support of 22% of the electorate, while the ruling Fidesz party remains in the lead with 28%. The poll shows that Hungary's far-right party, Jobbik could also win seats in the next parliament, with 6% of the vote. A significant number of respondents remain undecided (25%) or do not intend to vote (16%). On 18 January, the president announced that the elections would be held on 6 April - the earliest possible date under the constitution.

Comment

- Although the electoral alliance increases the chances the parties of the centre-left have of securing a strong election result, it is unlikely they will beat Fidesz. The centre-left has taken a long time to unite and win over the voters disillusioned with Viktor Orban's leadership. Moreover, this objective has been seriously compromised by the addition to the electoral list of Gyurcsany (prime minister between 2004-2009), who has a large negative electorate and who the ruling camp blames for Hungary's economic crisis. The dominant position within the alliance belongs to the post-communist MSZP. Although its new leader, the 40-year-old Mesterhazy, has not previously held high public office, the left will nonetheless find it hard to distance itself from its incompetent leadership in the previous government, which ended in defeat in the election of 2010.
- Fidesz remains a clear favourite in the upcoming elections. Although the party has lost some of its support since its landslide victory four years ago, it continues to lead in all of the polls. Fidesz's chances are helped by the signs of a gradually improving economy and by the recent easing in tensions between Budapest and the European institutions; these have criticised Orban for an excessive concentration of power. The party is also likely to benefit from a new electoral law, passed in 2011, which favours the winning party. Finally, Fidesz can count on the votes of the Hungarian minority living in the neighbouring countries since the government has made it much easier for ethnic Hungarians living

outside Hungary to apply for Hungarian citizenship. Although Orban's party is unlikely to retain its two-thirds majority, it will probably be able to form a government without the need for a coalition partner.

- In addition to criticism aimed at the government's economic policy and accusations that attempts have been made to dismantle Hungary's parliamentary democracy, the opposition has also voiced strong objections to the government's agreement with Russia on the expansion of the Paks nuclear power plant. As leader of the opposition, Orban used to criticise the Socialists for their pro-Russian policies; now the same criticism is being levelled at Orban by the left. Fidesz argues that the expansion of the power plant would provide Hungary with many years of cheap energy. The argument reflects the fact that the ruling party has been campaigning on the promise of more affordable energy: in 2013, the government slashed the price of gas, electricity and central heating for households by 20% - Fidesz has promised further reductions after the elections.