

MARTENS WELCOMES 'HISTORIC' AGREEMENT WITH ROMA

Brussels, March 5, 2002

Following a meeting today with Flórián FARKAS, leader of the main Hungarian Roma organisation, Lungo Drom, EPP President Wilfried MARTENS said: "I am delighted that at long last the Hungarian gypsies are being properly included in society; this is surely one of the best and most imaginative achievements of our political friends now in government in Hungary."

Farkas' Lungo Drom National Gypsy and Civic Alliance is the largest of the Roma organisations in Hungary, representing a majority of Hungary's gypsy population.

Under an agreement reached by the two main EPP parties in Hungary, Fidesz and the MDF, ahead of the April parliamentary elections 10 Roma candidates will campaign under Fidesz-MDF colours.

Farkas himself has pointed out that it is unprecedented not only in Hungary but anywhere in Europe for a major political force determinedly to support integration of the gypsy population. The agreement would bring "spiritual peace and economic and social takeoff, as well as political representation" to the gypsy population.

Fidesz party leader Zoltán POKORNI, who brokered the deal, argues that it is better for the gypsies to be included in the mainstream parties rather than in a separate ethnic group.

The key areas which the government plans to promote are education and employment. Already over the past three years, scholarships for gypsy children have increased from 800 to 12,000, and it is hoped to increase this to 23,000 - 25,000.

Pokorni argues: "The question is not whether there will be a gypsy middle class, because it is sure that there will be one with the passing of time. The real question is what that middle class will be like. Will it be a force pursuing a policy of separation, full of grievances, or a force able to co-operate with mainstream society."