

FIDESZ - 'POLISH DEBACLE WAS A WARNING SIGN'

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In an interview with EPP News, Zoltan POKORNI [*pictured right*] - 39-year-old chairman of Hungary's Young Democrats' (Fidesz) talks about the crucial April parliamentary elections.

Last weekend's XIV party congress in Budapest launched the campaign. It departed from the sober mood of the past. Loud pop music ('Listen to Your Heart') erupted from loudspeakers as Prime Minister Viktor ORBAN suddenly unveiled an outsize "Contract with the Nation" at the close of the congress. It was signed by Orban, then by a long queue of congress delegates. "A touch of plagiarism," says self-confessed 'election warhorse' Pokorni.



"BERLUSCONI did something like this four years ago...we'll thank him when he visits Hungary." For all the razzmatazz, there was plenty of substance in Fidesz's proposed contract, including a promise to double wages by the time of the next elections in 2006, and to invest heavily in education, jobs, housing, and in tax breaks for families.

As reported in [EPPN 2](#), Fidesz has also for the first time brought representatives of Hungary's 500,000 - 600, 000 gypsies into its electoral coalition. The election campaign was given a vigorous boost in a keynote address by CSU leader Edmund STOIBER. Himself campaigning to become Chancellor of Germany in the federal elections in September, Stoiber promised - if he is elected - to reverse the current plan to pay new members of the Union only 25% of the rate of subsidies paid to the existing 15. There must never be first- and second-class EU member states, he said.

EPP News: What is the mood in the country? How do the polls look?

Zoltan POKORNI: For the past five or six weeks we have been about 4% ahead. There's been a steady increase in support, especially since the agreement last August to bring the MDF, the Hungarian Democratic Forum into the government. [The MDF is a fellow associate of the EPP]

EPPN: The MDF is not a large party these days: with 16 deputies in parliament against your 144.

ZP: Strangely enough the MDF agreement brought more than just the support of their MPs. The party stood at around 3% in the polls. After the deal their support doubled - more than doubled. In politics one + one occasionally equals three!

EPPN: But what decided you to conclude the alliance at this stage?

ZP: The Polish elections were a warning sign for all the parties of the centre-right: that we had to cooperate. [Poland's fractious coalition of parties close to the EPP collapsed in the 2001 elections]. Soon afterwards - December, January - the socialists began a negative campaign about the Hungarian Status Law, and about our agreement with Romania about how it should be applied. They were breaking the consensus. President MARTENS' statements on this were a great help to us...

EPPN: Hungary's EU negotiating position has also come under attack in the pre-campaign.

ZP: Which we regard as breaking another taboo. You don't play party politics with national negotiations.

EPP: The Socialists are boycotting parliament until the elections. The campaign looks like being unusually fierce.

ZP: Yes, because it's also very significant, not just for Hungary. If we win - and for the moment, all the signs are good - then it will be the first time since the systemic change of 1989/90 that a reformist, anti-Communist party, wins a second term anywhere in the former Communist countries. So it's a campaign we want to win. We are going to break the vicious circle. The elections of 1990 were about breaking with the past. These are about the future.

EPPN: The Hungarian Status Law essentially concerns Hungarians who don't live here, and don't have a vote. Why is this issue so prominent? Some observers accuse you of exploiting nationalism, of playing the national card...

EPPN: Nationalism lingers around Hungarian politics. Unavoidably. The roots are in our history. The peace treaty 80 years ago ...

EPPN: Trianon ...

ZP: Which put two-thirds of Hungary outside Hungary's national boundaries, along with about half the then population. It's no secret that part of our population supports joining the EU because people believe that somehow - in addition to better living standards and so on - in the Union communities will be able to find each other again...For us it's undeniably a national matter to support the European ambitions of neighbours like Romania and Slovakia. Only inside the Union can these scars be healed. We will have to reckon with a relatively short period, three, perhaps six or eight years, until they are both in the EU.

EPPN: After which there will, I imagine, be very disruptive population movement? Hungary will be a magnet, not just because of its culture, but for its more dynamic economy...

ZP: Of course we need well-trained workers. But we are anxious to avoid any exaggerated level of immigration to Hungary. We need to mobilise financial resources to encourage Hungarians to stay where they live, while preserving their cultural identity. [The most significant diaspora population is in Romania (1.5 - 2m people) and Slovakia (1m). Ed]

EPPN: This powerful cultural solidarity is very interesting and unusual. In Poland I notice there has been a marked fall in the national cultural sense, especially among young people.

ZP: there has been a remarkable turnaround in attitudes here. About 75-80% of Hungarians accept that Hungarian communities outside Hungary must be supported from the national budget. There were no opinion polls on this 10 or 15 years ago. But attitudes then were exactly the reverse....Which is not, of course, to say that Hungarians would be happy to compete for jobs with Hungarians from the other side. Or to be pushed to the back of the queue at the doctor's. But there is a profound sense of solidarity, and of obligation...

EPPN: But the Socialists have raised the spectre of floods of Romanian workers.

ZP: Which was deliberate, wilful, misunderstanding. We asked the Romanians to explain exactly what were their objections to the Status Law, and dealt with each of them in turn. One of the main things was that they wanted Romanians as well as ethnic Hungarians to be allowed to work in Hungary. We did extend that right. But it is still highly-restricted - to a period of maximum three

month, and it involves five different procedures. The Socialists have cynically stirred up anxiety on these issues.

EPPN: With some success, it has to be said...

ZP: You have to realise the crisis Hungarians have gone through these last 10 years. Unemployment is only 5.6%, but under Communism it was supposed not to exist. Since the change of system unemployment is a trauma that's burned into people's souls, even if it's actually less of a problem than in most of the EU.

EPPN: One aspect of your campaign is the inclusion for the first time of the gypsies. One of their leaders, Florian FARKAS, President of the National Roma Minority Self_Government, addressed your congress. His party will field 10 candidates.

ZP: The Left was caught off-guard by this. They don't know how to handle it. They like to present Fidesz as a party that's indifferent to social issues, as willing to exclude certain groups.

EPPN: I understand [Hungarian-born philanthropist] George SOROS is supporting the left-wing gypsy groups...

ZP: It's positive - normal - if the Socialists find their own partners among the Roma. But we fundamentally disagree with Soros's interpretation of the gypsy problem. He sees the issues as legal protection for them, and ending discrimination. Hungarian prejudice is supposed to be the root of everything. Of course, over decades, centuries, bad things were done to the gypsies. But we see the solution not in a separate ethnic party, or special treatment, but above all in social integration and education. As Mr Farkas said at the congress today " removing illiteracy is one of the best investments we can possibly make in our society." And property - gypsies need property. And they need sources of finance to buy it. I'm quite sure there will one day be a gypsy middle-class. Partly this will be a matter of time. Partly we can help the process: over the past four years we have provided 15 times as many scholarships for gypsies as before.

Quote Unquote: Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban - whose party formerly belonged to the Liberal International - to his party congress: "If God had been a Liberal there wouldn't have been 10 Commandments but 10 Proposals".