

ESTONIAN PARTY VOTES TO RETURN TO THE FUTURE

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At its congress last weekend, the Belgian Parti Social Chrétien (PSC) voted to remove the word "Christian" from the party name and substitute the word "Humanist". "The amalgam of religion and politics is rejected in our secularised society," said party leader Joëlle MILQUET. A few thousand kilometers away in Estonia, northernmost of the three Baltic states, the Pro Patria Union (PPU) congress opened with prayers and hymns, and decided for the first time to include explicit Christian references in the party programme, committing it to state support for the (Lutheran) church, and arguing that "religious education is one guarantee of a people's ethical and moral development." The new programme will be the basis for the election campaigns in the October regional polls and in the March 2003 parliamentary elections. The congress also re-elected party leader Mart LAAR, 41, by an astonishing 88%. Laar, a historian who narrowly avoided becoming the last political prisoner in the old USSR, has served two highly successful terms as prime minister since independence in 1991. Author of a new book on the collapse of Communism, *Back to the Future*, he talks to Edward STEEN about why he thinks that a stress on Christian values is doubly important in a period of globalisation. And he also clears up a political mystery - how Estonia's rising tide of Euroscepticism was put into reverse.

EPP News: *What is your reaction to the Czech elections on June 16? [The Left won 30.20%, defeating former prime minister ex-premier Vaclav KLAUS'S Civic Democrats, which won just under 25%. The Coalition, a two-party centrist alliance and most likely ally for the Social Democrats, polled 14.27%.]*

Bela BUGAR: The election success of the Communists last weekend is a surprise. It's also a wake-up call for all democratic forces not just in the Czech Republic but in the whole region.

EPPN: *The politics here in the future countries of the EU seem to be quite different from in the existing 15. You are for instance in a coalition with the Socialist SDL as well as with the Christian Democrats and Dzurinda's SKD.*

BB: Our political structure has not yet crystallised. Following the 1998 parliamentary elections a broad coalition was needed to set the country on the path towards NATO and EU membership. Unfortunately that, in practice, meant a coalition with the Party of Democratic Left-SDL, and this slowed down the whole reform process. But one result of their muddled and ambiguous policies is that they are unlikely to get past the 5% threshold to enter parliament in the elections in September.

EPPN: *Those look like being a watershed for Slovakia?*

BB: The Slovak Republic has never been so close to joining NATO as it is now. So these elections are crucial, yes. As in 1998, Meciar's party will emerge as the largest in September election. Both he personally and his party are untrustworthy, and unacceptable for the Euro-Atlantic structures. So we will do our best to form a coalition after those elections which excludes both of them.

EPPN: *An ethnically-based party like yours sets a natural limit to how far it can grow. Is it realistic*

to aim at becoming a more broadly-based party of the centre?

BB: The SMK-MKP does not just appeal to the Hungarians living in Slovakia. It's important to realise that 80% of our election programme is not based on minority issues. The current polls also show that 2% of the 11% who are our supporters are non-Hungarians. Unfortunately, apart from the SMK-MKP there is not a single party in Slovakia addresses the concerns of minorities - in total 14.2% of the Slovak population.

EPPN: *The term "Hungary's cultural nation" - meaning the 5m or so people like you outside Hungary's post-1919 borders - makes sense to anyone who know Central Europe's history. But isn't it often seen as a kind of threat? A ghost from the past? After all, Bratislava was once the capital of Hungary....*

BB: We have to build on our historical experiences and not to be afraid of them. We as Hungarians living in Slovakia enrich Slovakia's culture, and we represent a bridge in improving the Slovak - Hungarian relations. Our goal is to create our common Europe, not to change any borders.

EPPN: *But the Orban government's Status Law for Hungarians outside Hungary's borders - was that in retrospect really a good idea? It seems to have been misunderstood as a kind of revanchism.*

BB: The Law on Hungarians Living in Neighbouring Countries is in itself good and necessary, and there are eight or nine similar laws in Europe. Its main opponents for the most part criticise the provisions for educational support. But without that the minority will continue to shrink. In the last decade our numbers have sunk by 50,000. In the 2001 census the proportion of Hungarians was exactly 9.7%. Slovakia must either support education in Hungarian or accept Hungary's help. How such support is implemented is something on which I believe Slovakia and Hungary will reach agreement.

EPPN: *You are proud of your unity as a party which united three different Hungarian factions. How was that achieved?*

BB: By being aware of the fact that only in unity can we achieve our goals in the most effective way. Misunderstandings must be handled by searching for the best possible compromise.

EPPN: *You have been the most solid partner in the Dzurinda government. What advantages has this coalition brought, do you think?*

BB: The biggest advantage is that Slovaks, non-Hungarians, trust the policy of SMK-MKP as well as Hungarians. The SMK-MKP Ministers of Construction and of Environment, our Deputy Prime Minister, and all 15 of our MPs, have all contributed a great deal to the trustworthy, stabilizing reputation of the SMK-MKP. When the party gives its word, we do not change it. For us a deal is binding.

EPPN: *But of course the whole edifice, and international confidence, would be badly damaged by the return of Meciar. How do you see the election prospects?*

BB: For a long time all the polls have suggested six parties would reach the 5 % threshold: Meciar's HZDS 25-30%, Fico's SMER 15-18%, SMK-MKP 11-11.5%, SDKU 8-9%, ANO 6-8%, KDH 5-7%. So it is clear that a coalition without Meciar and his HZDS is perfectly possible. Party leaders must accept their responsibilities: Slovakia needs a stable, trustworthy government. And the SMK-MKP is fully aware that Slovakia's NATO membership depends on this.

EPPN: *In our last newsletter Mart Laar, the Estonian party leader, said that values - meaning Christian values - were doubly important in a time of globalisation. How do you see this issue? Is*

Christianity an explicit part of your programme?

BB: Christian values are at the core not only of our election programme but of our daily political activities. A number of laws which strengthen the Christian system of values have been adopted by parliament thanks to our support. I refer to the Treaty with the Vatican, agreements with Slovakia's different churches, provision of religious instruction, and putting church schools on the same level as state schools.