

Low turnout in Hungarian poll

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early ed.

Susan Vlets in Budapest
and Ian Traynor in Vienna

HUNGARY sealed its shift to parliamentary democracy yesterday in a second round of voting to decide which of the two big parties that emerged a fortnight ago would gain stewardship of the country in the post-communist era.

Poor weather and general saturation with politics contributed to low voter turnout which an hour before the polls closed was 33 per cent. Only 25 per cent participation is needed for this round to be valid.

The centre-right Democratic Forum secured a slim lead over the liberal Free Democrats in the first round and was expected yesterday to lengthen that lead.

The first results were due late last night, but an overall result will not be available until this evening at the earliest.

A probably lengthy period of coalition wrangling will then ensue and it could be weeks before the new government is announced.

Only 125 of the 386 parliamentary seats were decided in the first round, with the Forum gaining 40 to the Free Democrats' 34.

The third-placed party, the Independent Smallholders, holds the ace in deciding whether to join the Forum in a coalition, but in the past two weeks the Smallholders have been riven by internal disputes and their preference may not

become clear until they hold a congress at the end of the month.

While most of the Smallholders' national leadership backed an electoral pact with the Forum for yesterday's vote, many local Smallholders' organisations defied the centre and said they would back the rival Free Democrats.

Jozsef Antall, the Forum leader, marked his 58th birthday yesterday hoping for harder evidence that he will indeed be, as expected, the next prime minister.

While commentators and the Hungarian media are urging the big parties to form a "grand coalition" to generate sufficient broad public support to tackle an economic crisis and implement the post-communist transformation, Mr Antall is holding out for a Forum-dominated coalition with the smaller parties.

The Free Democrats, by contrast, have reversed their earlier antipathy towards a marriage with the Forum.

One point that does seem certain is that neither of the big two will seek to draw on the 11 per cent support for the outgoing Socialist Party.

Its most prominent figure, Imre Pozsgay, who lost his constituency battle a fortnight ago but still gets a seat through proportional representation, indicated at the weekend that the Socialists were resigned to their opposition role.

"Of course this is new for us, but responsibility was taken off our shoulders after the first round," he conceded.

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9 April 1990