

Free Democrats pledge to quit Warsaw Pact if elected

Hungarian parties in fight for late votes

24.3.90 Pg 6

Ian Traynor, Nick Dallman and Susan Viets in Budapest

HUNGARY closed its first free election campaign in decades yesterday with one of the front-running parties, the Free Democrats, sweeping westwards bearing a message of prompt withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact if elected and declaring any Soviet presence in Hungary illegal.

In an attempt to drum up last minute support ahead of tomorrow's general elections, a motorcade started out from Budapest, doubling its size by the time it had crossed the rolling flatlands and reached the town of Sopron on the Austrian border.

Amid brass bands and ballad singers, the Free Democrats' leader, Janos Kis, told a couple of thousand supporters gathered on a Sopron square that if his party was successful, the new government would immediately declare "Hungary's independence. We hope for ever."

"It is not necessary to step out of the Warsaw Pact because Hungary did that on November 1, 1956," he said in reference to the unilateral withdrawal declared by the late prime minister, Imre Nagy, during that year's Hungarian uprising.

"We want that declaration reactivated and Hungary will not be in the Warsaw Pact. We don't need to negotiate about leaving the Warsaw Pact. We have to settle our problems with them [Moscow] but not as members of the Warsaw Pact," said Mr Kis to cheers.

Turning to the fighting between Romanians and ethnic Hungarians in Transylvania — the issue that has dominated the final days of the campaign — Mr Kis, who is one of a trio of Free Democrat candidates for prime minister, said his party was seeking to generate international pressure on Romania and support for the real advocates of democracy there.

The Free Democrats had contacted six countries, including

parity with the Democratic Forum at the top of the opinion polls. The Free Democrats are strongest in the capital with around 40 per cent support, but are trailing in the villages and smaller towns.

Hence yesterday's seven hour whistle stop tour. Decked out in the party's campaign logo of three doves flying free and bearing the "We know, we dare, we do," slogan, the convoy scattered leaflets in the villages, hoping to pick up support in its weakest sector.

Stopping to address the lunch time crowds on the streets of Gyoer, Peter Tolgyessy, another of the potential prime ministers, pledged quick local elections to clear the town halls of the "communist kings and princes".

While Mr Kis reassured several hundred assembled in the town of Csorna, of the wealthier safety net a Free Democrat government would provide to protect those that suffered from the impact of privatisation and economic reform, he conceded privately that unemployment could rise from virtually zero to

Democratic Forum rules out any role in the coalition for the Socialist Party of Imre Pozsgay

up to 500,000 under his party's plans to fight inflation and wreak the transformation from a centrally planned to a market economy.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Forum closed its election campaign at Lakitelek where it began life in 1987 in a borrowed wedding marquee.

The party's president, Jozsef Antall, was bubbling with optimism. He said he expected his party to forge ahead in the first

Mures and the Romanian government's apparent helplessness or unwillingness to enforce the peace, is bound to strike a chord among voters.

Its decision to send relief supplies to beleaguered Hungarians in Romania underlines its determination to be seen as a party of action. Other parties are no less concerned with the events in Transylvania, but they were less able to focus on this issue which has taken people's minds off tomorrow's polling.

Both the Forum and the Free Democrats are running level at just over 20 per cent in the opinion polls.

The last of the big trio is the Independent Smallholders' Party which was reborn last year after four decades. It won an outright victory in the last free elections in 1945, an achievement it will not be able to repeat. Its leader, Vince Voros, is a retired agronomist, aged 79, and the party, its rivals claim, is suffering from hardening of the arteries. But there is younger blood waiting to take over at a congress next month.

As more than 50 parties have sprouted here — 28 of them are competing tomorrow — as part of the process spawned by the fall of the communists, the usefulness of orthodox political labelling has been rendered doubtful.

The confusion of identities is apparent from the main issues in the campaign which have largely been economic.

The ends are largely identical among the contenders, but they differ slightly over the means. The Forum stresses that privatisation and the end of central planning have to be "controlled," with a guaranteed safety net for the inevitably hefty list of casualties and hints that domination of the economy should remain in Hungarian hands.

The Free Democrats in pursuit of the same ultimate results prefer "a sharp, clean break" with the past and are less averse to the prospect of