

Tuesday, Sep. 19, 2006

The Hungarian Uprising Redux

"We screwed up," the prime minister tells the nation, trying to prepare it for economic austerity. Instead he sparks street protests reminiscent of 1956

By ANDREW PURVIS AND JOHN NADLER/BUDAPEST

Next month is the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian uprising, the first popular revolt against Soviet domination in eastern Europe. Young Hungarians took to the streets of their capital on the Danube to raise their fist against communist rule before being crushed by Soviet tanks. Back then, in the midst of the uprising, the editors of Hungarian state radio announced to the country's stunned citizens that they had been lied to about the state of the economy and the activities of the government.

Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany may not have recognized the historical parallels that he was invoking when he told a meeting of his party members in May essentially the same thing: that the government had been lying to Hungarians about the state of the economy and their own activities for the past two years. "We lied in the morning, we lied in the evening," Gyurcsany said. "We screwed up. Not a little, a lot. No European country has done something as boneheaded as we have... Evidently, we lied throughout the last year and a half, two years."

But when a transcript of that speech was leaked to the press over the weekend, it produced another outpouring of public revulsion. Protestors took to the same streets, including the Parliament buildings and the famous Szabadsag, or Freedom, Square, where Soviet tanks clashed with demonstrators almost exactly one half century ago.

However inadvertently, Gyurcsany was "invoking a revolutionary spirit," said Laszlo Csaba, a professor of economics and European studies at Budapest's Central European University. "I think it shows that the situation here is serious, and that the Prime Minister has not taken into consideration the... popular revulsion that his words have created."

Last night, crowds overwhelmed riot police, torched cars, and occupied the headquarters of Hungarian state TV. An estimated 100 were injured. While such

popular protests are common in some European countries, such as France, they remain the exception in the post-communist East, which makes the current outburst all the more surprising. The mob called for his resignation but Gyurcsany vowed not to submit. "Radical street action will not lead to a solution," he told Hungary's TV2 news. "This is no longer an expression of democratic opinion." Gyurcsany also slammed the opposition Fidesz party for a statement published yesterday sympathizing with the disillusionment that triggered the protests.

The crisis was triggered by Gyurcsany's attempt to prepare his party faithful for a radical austerity package and tax hike that he is introducing in order to get the country's public finances back on track. In addition to admitting the lies, he told the party gathering, "You cannot quote any significant government measure we can be proud of, other than at the end we managed to bring the government back from the brink. Nothing. If we have to give account to the country about what we did for four years, then what do we say?"

Gyurcsany, a successful businessman with little experience in politics before taking over as leader of Hungary's post-communist Socialist party and becoming Prime Minister in 2004, was reelected in general elections earlier this year.

Publication of his comments triggered protests in several other Hungarian cities. They intensified in the capital Budapest on Monday after protestors, in another echo of the 1956 uprising, were refused access to national television to broadcast their views.

The protests were eagerly endorsed by Gyurcsany's political foes, including the right-wing Fidesz, or Alliance of Young Democrats, and appear to be rooted in public outrage at politicians' duplicity rather than opposition to reforms. In Eastern Europe voters still have high hopes for the change that democracy might bring. "It is a question of morals, how people are treated, and Hungary's democratic culture," Csaba said. "In this new democracy the people were reminding him just who is in power."

There is no sign that Gyurcsany will step down or that his party will remove him as leader. He says he regrets what he said but will stick with reforms. Some analysts have even praised his candor. The real difference from 1956 is that back then, the protests were crushed in two weeks. This time the Prime Minister has no choice but to listen.