*Information about interviewee:*

*Ferenc Zsoldos is a member of National Council of the Hungarian Ethnic Minority and a member of Magyar Mozgalom, an ethnic Hungarian political party in Serbia. The interview was conducted in Senta, Serbia.*

*R= Respondent – Ferenc Zsoldos*

*I=Interviewer – Sam Wrighton*

I: What is the biggest challenge facing your community?

R: Undoubtedly it is the increased levels of emigration, but this is not a new phenomenon as we can see three waves in our contemporary history. The first wave occurred under Tito but was not permanent as people returned after 10-20 years. The second wave in the 90s because of the war was permanent, as people fled the war and the third wave, the current wave, is by far the biggest, occurred in 2011.

I: Why?

R: The 2011 double citizenship law was a very important factor, but it is not the only one. I can also see a political and economic reason for this mass emigration. In Vojvodina and in Serbia in general, the politicians no longer care about the issues of the communities living here. They only campaign to get elected and get their seat and then abandon their pledges. This is also related to the economic problems, as the political elite only use the money they receive for campaigning. People started to realise this, and they leave. The welfare of these people is considered as the least important consideration of the politicians and people can’t see a future in Vojvodina and the situation is only getting worse. The political parties representing the Hungarians like to think that the best place for them is in a coalition government, but this is costly as when they get into government, they abandon their communities and only think about votes. The VMSZ got into government, but nothing changed. The Hungarian movement is a civil organisation with a wide range of ideologies and we are not concerned with political power but wish to do good for our community. We work with Serbs but believe that the organisations representing communities should be done along ethnic lines.

I: What role does the Hungarian National Minority Council play in Serbian politics?

R: It used to be made up of 50% VMS and 50% Civil organisations and in 2010 it was running well and functioning under the leadership of Mr. Korshak and independent politician who implemented 8 good strategies aimed at improving the schooling, culture, media, children etc. He oversaw small groups or commissions with 15-18 experts who decided what was best for these communities and there was multi-lateral party cooperation.

However, this changed when Mr. Pastor became leader of the VMS. He didn’t want partnership, he wanted power and he saw the other parties as political barriers. Mr Pastor’s girlfriend became head of the commission and she was highly prone to conflict. The problems with the Hungarian national council are not structural or systemic but down to people politics. This we saw in 2013 when a Hungarian language university was tabled by Mr. Koretz. The people of Vojvodina wanted this university, but Mr Pasztor didn’t. He saw Mr. Koretz as a problem, as he was more popular than Mr. Pasztor. VMS was unpopular and the council popular and this was a threat. He and his girlfriend wanted to centralise political power and it is for this reason the VMS do not want autonomy, as with increasing autonomy, the potential control decreases. In 2014 the voting for the council was conducted in October and it is at this point that the VMS became a dictatorship. There was absolutely no democratic process. It was disgusting. Ten people left the office. The power was centralised to 5 people, who were no longer experts. Ms Lovash told the council that the they had to do what the VMS wanted. The council became a tool or an extension of the VMS. There were no programmes or strategies aimed at the community, to the detriment of everyone living here. In April 2015 VMS voted for their president and were openly and highly critical of the Council. Lovash controlled the council with rhetoric suggesting that if you are against the VMS you are an enemy of the party. They had absolute control. Eventually she was forced to stand down as a conference between civil and council members expressed their discontent. However, as Pasztor got more and more control it became harder and harder. The Hungarian movement were founded in August 2015 in response to what we saw as a situation getting worse and worse.

I: To what extent is the VMSZ controlled by Fidesz?

R: They have two controllers. Fidesz and SNS.

Financially Fidesz support the VMS through the Prosperitati Foundation and the VMS serves as a contact point between Fidesz and VMS. Previously Fidesz did not like VMS as they did not want them to be close to SNS, but 7-8 years ago this changed. They used to want territorial autonomy but no longer. In fact, the Agostom Andnes was the strategic partner with Fidesz in Vojvodina. The VMSZ control over the politics here in Vojvodina is so absolute that the Hungarian movement has been classified as an ‘an enemy of the Hungarian community’. The Hungarian government used to have contact with all organisations and now, this is no longer. Just one. Just VMS.

I: Why do they want centralised power?

R: Our movement is not consolidated; the ideology is not homogenous and the we are not compact. It is harder to gain complete control on us. We were founded in order to confront the dictatorship of Pastzor and Lovash. Even some VMS members agree with us. Others see the opportunities for political and financial gain from being part of a dictatorship.

They have complete and total control over the media here in Vojvodina.

It is worse than propaganda. They do not publish stories that are negative to the image of the region. They prohibit journalists from doing this. It is awful.

I: Does Fidesz financially support the VMS?

R: [Laughs] No question. The new building of the VMS in Subotica is absolutely financed by Fidesz. Where else did they get the 1 million euros from? Another form of finance the VMS receives from Fidesz is the Prosperitati. It is hard to prove that there is high level corruption here, but we all know of the micro-corruption. In one village, it became known that if you paid 500euros you could win the grant. A list was leaked a few years ago which had the names of the people who would get the money. Nearly all of these people were connected to the VMS. István Pásztor [President of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians] already knows who is going to get the big money, and the application process is just a façade. The selection committee is itself, selected by Pásztor. He will release the money just before the election to remind everyone who they should vote for. The Prosperitati is very important to the VMS, without this it would fail. It is also very important for the Fidesz, the need to become the biggest power in Eastern Europe. This is their goal along with the votes coming from their surrounding regions. The biggest question is whether they will have enough power? That is why their biggest priority is to mobiles the Hungarian community in the neighbouring territories. The big economic game is done very professionally, and because of this professionalism it means the three things most important to our movement. Freedom, community and language, are not considered important by Fidesz or VMS. It is all about money and power. VMS are completely controlled, and we cannot be. This explains the different relationship between the Hungarian state and VMS and the Hungarian state and us. We are an enemy to them. The VMSZ control over the politics here in Vojvodina is so absolute that the Magyar movement [a Vojvodina civic party in opposition to VMSZ] has been classified as an ‘an enemy of the Hungarian community’. The Hungarian government used to have contact with all organisations and now, this is no longer. Just one. Just VMSZ.

This is not just a problem for Hungary, but for the whole of Eastern Europe. Power consolidation and centralisation is occurring across all post-communist states. Fragmented political parties are considered wasted power that could be focused. Our civil organisations are developing slowly, and the political parties do not need to cooperate with civil organisations because they get their money from oligarchs are from centralised power figures. We have Autocratic systems that have not had time to develop. However, we believe that the civil organisations are extremely important for the community. There is big money for a few individuals but no money for community projects. These projects don’t yield any tangible political capital.