

Slovakia: Three Months after Mečiar

Vladimir Mečiar's government in Slovakia was repeatedly accused during its period in office (1994-98) of politicising the civil service and the privatisation of the economy, undermining the rule of law and suppressing diversity in the media. For this, Slovakia was declared undemocratic and refused membership of the EU and NATO. The British Helsinki Human Rights Group's observers found these charges to be at best exaggerated in the past. However, today, after the change of government in Slovakia, Western critics of Mečiar seem indifferent to the real symptoms of what, 30 years ago in Slovakia was called "normalisation" as a purge of the public service and the media gathers pace.

The new coalition government that was formed in Slovakia at the end of October 1998 followed the success of opposition parties in the parliamentary election held on 25/25th September. This motley coalition comprises parties of both left and right including the SDK (a union of right and centrist parties), the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL _ former Communists), the SOP, a new party which claims to represent a centrist/business platform but is led by a former top-level Communist, Košice mayor, Rudolf Schuster, and the SMK (Hungarian Coalition). Several well-known dissidents like Jan Čarnogursky are also in the government.

Although it gained the largest percentage of votes in the election (27%) Vladimir Mečiar's HZDS party did not have sufficient support to form a new government and went into opposition. Despite predictions by his professional critics that he would cling to power at all costs and would refuse to resign Mečiar not only handed over power in accordance with the Slovak constitution he also resigned his parliamentary mandate while remaining chairman of the movement/party. This means Mr Mečiar renounced his automatic immunity from arrest, something rather surprising in someone repeatedly threatened with prosecution by the government and its media allies before and after the election.

Foreign governments who had been fiercely hostile to the HZDS government and Mečiar in particular were quick to welcome the changes. Even before the new government had done anything, European politicians were congratulating Slovakia for its rapid return to the fold of Western democracies. It was hoped that the country could even be put on the fast-track to EU entry. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Mikulaš Dzurinda's government can expect an unchallenged and constructive relationship with the West for the foreseeable future. On 14th December 1998 deputy prime minister, Pavel Hamzik, was told by French Senate chairman Christian Poncelet that Slovakia must "confirm the permanence of recent changes" which is presumably short-hand for saying that the HZDS must never be allowed to form a government again.

Such dictation of internal conditions coming from foreign governments is not unknown. Hans van den Broek, the former European commissioner with responsibility for Eastern Europe and the CIS openly called for the Slovaks to remove Mečiar from power, at the ballot box, that is. The general dislike of the Mečiar government was never hidden and the wishes of the Slovak electorate was rebuffed as prime minister by most Western governments - almost uniquely he only met the American ambassador to Slovakia twice. (By contrast, the US Embassy web-page in Bratislava is distinguished by a picture of the former Communist Central Committee member and Mečiar critic, Rudolf Schuster, in a friendly pose with Ambassador Johnson.)

Members of the BHHRG have visited the republic regularly over the past 6 years and have never seen evidence of gross abuses of human rights under the Mečiar government. Yet, during a visit made during the first half of December 1998 the group's rapporteurs were given ample reason to think that the new ruling coalition was behaving in a high-handed and unlawful fashion by unleashing a series of purges against employees in the media, judiciary, arts and culture as well as private business. The Mečiar government has been so vilified that it will be difficult for many to even consider the seriousness of the issues raised by the Slovak opposition. Many, no doubt, will think the following events a good thing. We would invite them to think again.

Dismissals in the judiciary, procuracy and police:

The Christian Democratic Party (KDH) the largest party in the SDK has the portfolios of the Ministries of Justice and the Interior, the Procurary and the security services (SIS) under its control. On 10th December Justice Minister (and former dissident) Jan Čarnogursky dismissed all chairmen of district and regional courts in Slovakia. Čarnogursky claimed that his action would "rule out political pressures" and ensure the independence of the judiciary.

Although there have been criticisms of the high profile criminal investigation of the Kovac junior Case in Slovakia over the past few years no one (including bodies like the Council of Europe) have levelled charges of political bias or incompetence at the Slovak judiciary. This action is an attack on the independence of the judiciary because it means that a whole new slew of judges will feel beholden to its political masters even if appointments are recommended by a supposedly independent 'assembly of courts' as is the case here. Dr. Čarnogursky still makes the final decision who to appoint. The previous government did not appoint or dismiss members of the judiciary in this draconian manner.

About 200 employees of the Ministry of the Interior at managerial level and the chiefs and heads of the police at regional level have been replaced regardless of the provisions of the Police Act of 1998 which made it impossible to remove policemen from their jobs for political reasons. More dismissals at the local level are expected. The security services have been "completely cleared out". When people are asked to leave they are given two options - either they can transfer to a junior position with much lower pay or they can leave and take compensation. When Peter Nemec, the head of the police force, was removed he was told to choose another post. His request to direct the police force in Banska Bystrica was turned down and in the hostile atmosphere that prevailed he decided to quit the force. Within a short period of time he suffered a heart attack. The new director of the SIS, Vladimir Mitro, was director before 1994, his deputy Juraj Kohutiar worked in the former Communist federal apparatus.

The case of Prosecutor General Michal Valo

In early December the Slovak parliament approved an amendment to the 1996 law on the procuracy making it possible to remove the prosecutor-general from office before his 5-year mandate expires in January 2000. 11 examples of Michal Valo's incompetence and 'inactivity' in bringing prosecutions were alleged by Justice Minister Čarnogursky as reasons for this move. However, it is widely understood by everyone including Valo himself, that his main 'offence' was not to have solved the notorious Kovac Junior kidnapping case to the satisfaction of the then opposition.

On 31st August 1998 the son of former Slovak president Michal Kovac was allegedly kidnapped by unknown assailants who forced him to drink a bottle of whisky and then drove him over the border to Austria where he was discovered in his car the next day in the small town of Hainburg. The kidnapping took place in broad daylight on a Friday afternoon on the outskirts of Bratislava, so there were witnesses although there was disagreement about many aspects of the events as they unfolded.

The Slovak president's son was no ordinary victim of a crime for he was under suspicion of criminal activity himself. Kovac Junior was wanted in Germany under an international arrest warrant for alleged fraud and conspiracy to commit fraud. His forcible removal from Slovakia into the jurisdiction of the Austrian courts made it unlikely, however, that extradition proceedings against him would take place: he was returned to Slovakia and later pardoned by his father (the president) for any crimes he might have committed.

As soon as the kidnapping took place the finger of suspicion was pointed at the HZDS-led government and in particular at the opposition's bête noir, Ivan Lexa, head of the SIS. But the police investigation produced no concrete results and no arrests were made.

The new government soon made it abundantly clear that it would reinvestigate the case and possibly seek to implicate not only Lexa but also Vladimir Mečiar himself. Ladislav Pittner, the

new Minister of the Interior has now reopened the inquiry and the removal from office of Michal Valo is probably another stage in this process.

Michal Valo is an experienced procurator with 20 years service both in Czechoslovakia and Slovakia itself. He was involved in investigations into the former federal security apparatus, the StB, including the prosecution of the last head of the Communist-era secret police, General Lorenc after the 'velvet revolution' before returning to newly independent Slovakia. Mr. Valo was keen to point out that he had instigated a system whereby each prosecutor was responsible for his own investigations and not under constant surveillance from the top. So, the prosecutor in charge of the Kovac case would have full responsibility for the conduct of the case. When interviewed by the BHHRG the procurator-general took a non-partisan tone in describing the Kovac enquiry and the problems the police faced, not least the discrepancies in the accounts given by witnesses to the event. He did, however, point out that there was a school of thought that said the kidnapping was a 'put up job'.

It is certainly difficult to see what benefits could accrue to Mečiar, Lexa et al. in kidnapping the president's son. By August 1995 Mečiar was being treated as a major tyrant and his government side-lined by the West. He would only be further vilified by such behaviour. Austria was certain to refuse to extradite to Germany someone forcibly brought into its territory. On the other hand, Mr. Kovac had much to gain: the abandonment of extradition proceedings followed by a presidential pardon from his father/president. Whatever the case, there is no evidence to show that Michal Valo was pawn in the game of the kidnapers.

According to Mr. Valo other employees in the procurator-general's office are also under threat of dismissal. Most people working there had been appointed during the period of the Čarnogursky government - there had been no purge when the HZDS coalition came to power in 1994. It seems that their offence was to remain loyal to the administration after 1994 as they had been to its predecessor. As a result of the overwhelming political pressure, Michal Valo resigned on 18th December 1998.

Cancellation of amnesties

Interference with constitutional rule is also threatened by the lifting of amnesties granted earlier in 1998 by former prime minister Mečiar during the period when he was acting president of the country. Whatever the rights or wrongs of these amnesties it is generally accepted in all countries abiding by the rule of law that an amnesty cannot be overturned.

One of the amnesties in question halted the investigation of suspects in the Michal Kovac Junior kidnapping case. The other referred to the actions of former Interior Minister, Gustav Krajci and other officials who were accused of wrecking the May 1997 referendum which included a question on direct presidential elections. As Slovakia is still without a head of state Dzurinda as acting president, has cancelled these amnesties.

As it is likely that the whole matter will come before the Constitutional Court in Košice sometime in the near future it is somewhat alarming to see that one of its judges has, according to the CTK (Czech Republic) news agency in Prague already opined. In what CTK acknowledges is "an unusual step" Constitutional Court judge, Jan Drgonec has stated that the repeal of the amnesties is not unconstitutional. He gives the somewhat bewildering reason that anything published in the Slovak Law Digest becomes a general legal regulation that can then be changed or cancelled at any time. Presumably, this means that any law can be arbitrarily changed or repealed once it is included in the official legal gazette.

If true, this points to a future situation where total lawlessness and anarchy might prevail. This incident also points to the politicization of at least one constitutional court member. If the CTK report is true Jan Drgonec should stand down from any hearing in this matter.

Dismissals in the sphere of culture and the arts:

30 members of the top management in the Ministry of Culture have been dismissed as have all the directors of organizations under the aegis of the Ministry. Altogether over 200 people have been dismissed by the new Minister of Culture particular animus is directed against those who failed to take part in a strike organized in 1997 by some actors and theatre directors in Slovakia. The aim of the strike was to further blacken the reputation of the Mečiar government although it had little impact at the time - probably because many high-profile Slovak figures in the arts - in particular, in music, ballet and opera - refused to take part. Those who did participate in the strike can anticipate a 'reward' in the form of future promotion under Knazko. Hudec suggested that many actors who joined the strike were associated with dubbing studios in Bratislava that were able to influence (and pay) them to agitate against the government at the time. Such studios handle much American film and television material.

To fully comprehend the extent and nature of the sackings the BHHRG publishes the names and positions of those who have been dismissed in the past two months. Their removal is reminiscent of similar sackings in Albania after the 1997 elections when politically neutral figures from the arts and education (eg. the head of the national archive and directors of national museums) were also dismissed.

Employees of the Ministry of Culture dismissed from leading posts excluding employees at regional and local level.

Dr. Pavol Dinka: head of office
Dr. Pavol Stevcek: general director of planning
Dusan Mikolaj: general director of the regional culture department
JUDr. Milan Ferko: general director of the department for state language and national literature
Mgr. Ivan Secik CSc.: director of the department of public information and director of the national media centre
Ing. Arch. Ivan Moro: general director of the department for national heritage
Dr. Svatopluk Zeman: general director of the department of foreign relations
Ing. Frantisek Krasnansky: finance director
Dr. Jozef Bob: general director of the department of fine arts
Doc. Dr. Emilia Fulkova Csc.: director of ULOV (organization for promoting Slovak crafts)
Mgr. Lidia Bencova: director, House of Minority Culture
Dr. Rastislav Saling: director of the House of Slovaks Abroad
Maria Nagyova: director of the National Design Centre
JUDr. Marian Dobrovic: auditor
Ing. Dusan Stanko: auditor
Marta Podhradská: director of the press department
Mgr. Milan Obuch: general director of administration
Ladislav Tahotny: director of special projects
Mgr. Ivan Machala: director of the department of literature
Mgr. Andrej Matasik: general director of the national theatre centre
Ing. Eugen Huska: ministerial advisor
Michal Godar: ministerial administration
Prof. Dr. Matus Kucera: general director of the Slovak national museums
Edita Godarova: ministerial secretary
Dr. Anton Hrnko CSc.: general director of the National Heritage Centre
Pavol Muska: general director, Slovak galleries
gr. Natasa Belacikova: ministerial secretary
Mgr. Miroslav Pius: general director National educational centre
Mgr. Drahoslav Machala: general director National Literary Centre
Ing. Marian Kovacik: Dr. Jozef Gerboc: general director National Library and university libraries
Dr. Pavol Bagin: general director national music centre
gr. Vlado Droppa: director of documentation at NCMK
Dominik Podhradsky: documentation, cabinet of ministers
Mgr. Juraj Sarvas: general director, Central Slovak state theatre
Miroslav Fischer: general director, Slovak state theatre
Stefan Fejko: general director, East Slovak state theatre

Ozef Tkacik: director, Slovak Philharmonia
Jaroslav Kupco: director, SLUK (Slovak folk dance and music ensemble)
Pavol Corej: director Lucnice
JUDr. Vladimir Lichner: general director of ministry of culture property
Dusan Jarjabek: director of New Scene theatre
Ing. Daniela Bardunova: director of budget, economic dept.
Dr. Samko Bakos: ministerial advisor
PhDr. Zuzana Burdanova: director, dept. local culture
Dr. Peter Mulik: director, dept. of state/church relations.
Dr. Miroslav Holecko: director, church department

Slovak TV and the opposition media

About 20 people have been suspended from work at Slovak TV. Hanka Pravdova, head of news programmes was suspended on 20th November 1998. Although Slovak News was pro-government Pravdova says that no reorganization was undertaken at the station in 1994 when the HZDS government came to power. People were not sacked nor jobs abolished. Yet today the composition of the TV and radio councils has also been changed to favour the governing coalition. Apart from a small, local cable TV station, VTV, the opposition has no broadcast media outlets. Large well-funded private stations like TV Markiza and Radio Twist vocally support the coalition government and engage in sophisticated character-assassination of its opponents or those who fail to toe the Coalition line.

Things are not much better in the printed media. Slovenska Republica is the only newspaper supporting the opposition available at national level. Its pre-election circulation of c.65,000 is increasing and its editor estimates that since the election it might now be 85,000. The largest circulation newspaper is Pravda (100,000-105,000). The problem for all newspapers is that commercial advertisements are decreasing and in the case of Slovenska Republika there is a suspicion that companies are afraid to advertise in a pro-Mečiar newspaper. The new coalition may be bent on constituting a media monopoly for its supporters.

Non-governmental organizations

Although the Mečiar government was constantly being criticized for suppressing non-governmental organizations (NGOs) a large number nevertheless managed to operate in the country during Mečiar's rule. It was no secret that organizations like the Open Society supported the Slovak opposition. However, the title 'non-government' is not entirely accurate: many Western governments (in particular, the United States through USAID and the EU's PHARE programme) have supported the third sector, as it is called, over the past four years.

This involvement in internal Slovak affairs reached its peak before and during the 1998 election. Občianska Kampan (Civic Campaign) was formed in 1997 and involved 58 NGOs. Not only did this organization receive funds from large foreign donors like the Open Society Foundation and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation it also received money from the US, Dutch and British governments. After the election foreign donors and officials of Western aid organisations congratulated themselves on their role in swinging the Slovak vote.

Many activists arrived from abroad to help; groups like Rock Volieb (modelled on the American youth organization, Rock the Vote) held rallies and pop concerts to encourage the young to vote. 200 peace activists arrived in Slovakia to help with the election campaign - they were shown on TV Markiza being 'sworn in' at the American embassy in Bratislava.

Although these campaigns and the assistance offered from abroad was touted as apolitical it was plainly a way of channelling funding and influence to the Slovak opposition and on its behalf. Despite the constant drip of disinformation that the HZDS was all-powerful the government at the time had no such resources at its disposal to fight an election on equal terms.

The outgoing British ambassador, Peter Harborne, described the third sector as "the jewel in the crown of Slovakia". Some might think otherwise. Uncritical praise for NGOs and civil society has become the norm but people ought to sit back and reflect upon the meaning of rule by the 'third sector' - in this case a large group of un-elected individuals funded from overseas. Organizations like Občanske Kampan and many other NGOs may be seen today as perverse modern day simulacrums of the front organizations operated by agents of influence in the former Communist bloc. Only, today the slogans are to do with 'free elections' and 'civil society' rather than 'peace' and 'international brotherhood'. Funding nowadays comes from Washington and London rather than Moscow but the reliance on foreign patronage is common.

Although some of the Slovak NGOs have disappeared now that Meciar has gone (and their name-plates have been replaced by those of freshly-minted commercial entities at NGO house in central Bratislava), Občanske Kampan has remained in being for the December local elections. Others will, no doubt, diversify into business or the state bureaucracy now there is a friendly government in power as has happened elsewhere following a similar scenario of hyper-active foreign-funded NGO campaigning against a government unpopular with aid donors. The fact that Slovakia saw an elephantine growth of the third sector in the period, 1994-98 may not be entirely unconnected with the many dismissals from employment recounted above: many people must feel they deserve a job and/or promotion for the part they played in bringing the HZDS government down. The Slovak taxpayer rather than foreign donors may now be expected to foot the bill for these NGO activists.

Indirect pressure on HZDS-linked companies

Although the HZDS is by far the largest single party in Slovakia its future is not assured. Unsuccessful attempts over the past few years to split the party have failed but recent attacks on its financial base could be more successful.

The new government controls all the instruments of economic and fiscal power. Other regimes with an absolute majority in Parliament have found how easy it is in a capitalist economy to use a government's regulatory powers to stymie the business activities of political opponents or their friends. Banking and business regulations are a convenient tool. Government licenses and quality controls can be selectively utilised.

In the run-up to the local elections and against the background of the growing world economic recession, the government media and regulators put a lot of pressure on the country's main employer, the Košice-based steel-maker VSZ. It presented the only institutional rival to Košice's long-term Communist Party boss now SOP leader, Rudolf Schuster. Furthermore, VSZ is widely believed to fund much of the limited non-Coalition media. With the aid of US banks whose links with the US Administration are well-known, a financial coup was staged against the VSZ board in early December, 1998. The company's economic difficulties might well, formally, justify a shake-up but the enthusiasm of the new regime for a de facto takeover by a foreign rival which might prefer to close a Slovak steel mill rather than one of its own US ones is not clearly in the national interest. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Coalition would prefer to wipe out any source of support for the HZDS regardless of the local cost.

The Coalition government's first three months

Since the SDK became the leading party in the government coalition it has promoted a strict monetarist policy which will result in severe price hikes for both rents and utilities in the new year. Foreign observers seem to have overlooked the fact - or not known - that during the election period the SDK campaigned on a platform of Keynesian-style pump-priming measures promising the Slovak people to double wages, increase student grants and build thousands of new homes within its first year in office. Mečiar's government was widely criticised for Slovakia's relatively high rate of unemployment (12%) which elsewhere would be regarded as an index of reform. It is arguable that the Slovak electorate which had had only eight years of multi-party elections was naïve, even duped, as no effort was made to even begin to fulfil

these promises. Other governments - the first Mitterrand government in France comes to mind - abandoned election promises but usually after they or some part of them have failed when implemented.

The government has also abandoned Slovakia's road building programme while at the same time promising to increase the country's tourist potential. But the two proposals are incompatible: both tourism and the economy will suffer unless communications in the country improve. The Mečiar government was slow to build roads but it was beginning to open sections of motorway between east and west Slovakia. However, some people may not relish ease of communication within the country. Towns like Banská Bystrica and Košice have become veritable fiefdoms and those in charge might prefer to remain isolated from the capital, Bratislava and foreign scrutiny.

However, it would be wrong for the current Slovak opposition to think that the disappointed public will somehow force fresh elections in the near future. Nor, despite internal wrangling, is the governing coalition likely to collapse prematurely. Too many people both in Slovakia and in the West have invested a considerable amount of time and money for that happen so easily.

The opposition must take some of the blame for its present predicament although not for the well-rehearsed reasons. The failure to fully comprehend the nature of the forces that were ranged against it came from weakness and provincialism - few members of the HZDS speak foreign languages, for example. Its public relations arm was weak and badly funded and unable to even begin to contradict the massive propaganda campaign waged against it. NGO supporters of the current regime invariably provided foreign journalists with their first port of call on their rare visits to Slovakia. Almost all interpretation of Slovak reality was and still is interpreted by these narrow parti pris circles.

In the coming months there will be more dismissals in the public domain in Slovakia. At the same time investigations will resume into alleged misdeeds of Vladimir Mečiar and his government. With its financial base under attack and few media outlets the HZDS faces an unpromising future. Its supporters' dismissals are unlikely to excite much foreign sympathy because the channels of communication abroad are in the hands of its opponents as before but now they also control the state as well as the "third sector."

The US government is, no doubt, satisfied by the Slovak Foreign Minister, Edvard Kukan's vocal support for air strikes against Saddam Hussein but Slovakia's former critics turned uncritical admirers might reflect on a situation in which a country's leading opposition party is relentlessly undermined by a Coalition unsatisfied with its three-fifths majority. The Slovak opposition faces effective exclusion from political life by an intolerant majority which is acting in the very spirit it used to denounce so vigorously.

Western admirers of yesterday's supposed anti-Mečiar dissidents should ask themselves whether their silence is honourable. Clearly some of Mečiar's foreign critics had political or economic motives for decrying his government. It resolutely refused to sell the crown jewels of the Slovak economy - its telephone system, utilities, refineries and steel mills - to foreign interests though foreign investment was welcomed. Although Slovakia's utilities may now be bought by foreigners at a knock-down price, ordinary Slovaks will pay for this bargain-basement sale as they did during 45 years of communism - only this time it is cynical Westerners that may well condemn them to poverty in silence.

After the Communist seizure of power in 1948 and again after the Soviet invasion in 1968, the West paid lip-service to its own ideals. Ironically after the fall of Communism when a regime with so many prominent high-ranking former Communists returns to power with massive Western assistance, even that lip-service is replaced by silence. Under the Orwellian slogan of "de-politicisation" the normalisation of Slovakia is under way for the second time in thirty years.

