

Vladimir Mečiar's Dawn Arrest, 20th April 2000

On the morning of Thursday, 20th April 2000 the former prime minister of Slovakia, Vladimir Mečiar, was arrested by police commandos in an operation strikingly similar to that launched two days later in Miami Florida to seize the Cuban boy, Elian Gonzales. A BHHRG representative was in Slovakia at the time and interviewed Mr. Mečiar the preceding evening. Here follows a first hand account of the raid and its aftermath.

INTRODUCTION

The BHHRG sent a representative to Slovakia to observe the political situation, particularly in connection with developments surrounding the virtual house arrest of Mr. Mečiar, Chairman of the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS). Mr. Mečiar's villa in the town of Trenčianske Teplice, in the foothills of the Carpathians about an hour and twenty minutes northeast of the capital city of Bratislava, had been surrounded by local and state police agents for several weeks. Mr. Mečiar had been summoned by the office of the Chief Investigator of Slovakia for questioning in connection with various charges brought against him and others from his former government. However, because Mr. Mečiar had, thus far, refused to honour the subpoena on the grounds that the cases against former members of his government were illegal (he had granted amnesties to them as head of state in accordance with the Slovak Constitution), uniformed and plain-clothes police had waited for him outside his home in the hope of seizing and transporting him back to Bratislava.

CHANGES IN HZDS

BHHRG's representative visited Mr. Mečiar in his home on the evening of 19 April and talked with him for about two hours. Among the subjects discussed were the recent transformation of HZDS from a "movement" to a "party," and the inclusion of certain points in the party programme which had hitherto not been part of the HZDS agenda. These points included the objective of NATO membership for Slovakia and an increased rate of privatization for Slovak industry. Mr. Mečiar commented that the move from "movement" to "party" was made primarily for practical reasons, although the overall popularity of the tactic was in doubt. He said that under current Slovak law, a "movement" did not enjoy a legal status that entitled it to establish foreign affiliates or "sister parties" in other countries. Only a party had this right.

Regarding increased privatization, Mr. Mečiar was unequivocal that this had very little support among Slovaks. However, because tremendous foreign pressure had been exerted on Slovakia to "privatize" much of its industry (often in the form of Western-financed media campaigns against HZDS), the question now appeared to be not whether privatization would take place, but rather under whose tenure it would occur.

Mr. Mečiar pointed to the fact that U.S. Steel had been competing with a French company to buy Slovakia's largest steel plant, VSZ Košice. Evidence has emerged that Prime Minister Mikulaš Dzurinda personally had presided over this process which had the effect of removing control from shareholders usually said to be pro-HZDS and transferring it to others closer to his government. The lack of transparency about the "tender" and allegations of an "unofficial payment" upfront from the French company to the tune of several million dollars as part of the "bid" as well as accusations of sleaze against local representatives of the US bidders have tarnished the process. This was an example of the ineptitude and messy handling of privatization by the current government. Without more competent leadership in this area, further debacles would follow.

Mr. Mečiar said he was not fixated on his return to power, but that if his country called, he would be ready to participate in the formation of a new government. But as chairman of the largest and most popular political party in the country, he was ready to play a role in the future political life of Slovakia.

Following the visit to Mr. Mečiar's home, the car in which BHHRG's representative was riding was stopped in the street by police, who asked for identification.

THE ARREST OF MECIAR

Early in the morning on the day after his meeting with BHHRG's representative, masked functionaries of the state police broke into Mr. Mečiar's home using explosives. Mr. Mečiar did not resist arrest, and was not handcuffed as he was led to the police vehicle for transport back to Bratislava. During the few hours of his

detention for questioning, the HZDS held a press conference at the party's headquarters in Bratislava. Several members of parliament from the HZDS appeared, including the former Speaker of Parliament, Ivan Gasparovic. Also prominent were the HZDS Party Secretary, Jozef Grapa, and the HZDS Vice Chairman for Foreign Relations, Zdenka Kramplova. The HZDS leadership offered a joint statement that the illegal arrest (without warrant) of Mr. Mečiar represented the first step in the abandonment of the rule of law in Slovakia. They called on Prime Minister Dzurinda to resign, and for all foreign government representatives to protest the act.

Also, during Mr. Mečiar's detention, several Slovak political leaders not aligned with the HZDS made statements of disapproval regarding the incident. The current Speaker of Parliament and Chairman of the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL), Jozef Migas, criticized the way in which the police acted in arresting Mr. Mečiar. Robert Fico, a former member of SDL who recently formed his own party, *Sme* "Direction", publicly commented that the arrest of Mr. Mečiar without warrant was merely the latest example of the abandonment of the rule of law in Slovakia. Mr. Fico's party has witnessed its popularity rise in inverse proportion to the loss of popularity by the SDL, one of the coalition partners in Mr. Dzurinda's government. It is now estimated that the support for *Sme* in Slovakia is second only to HZDS. Even the President, Rudolf Schuster, said that the police action was too "hasty," and that the government should have waited for Mr. Mečiar to come and give testimony to the police of his own free will. However, members of HZDS told BHHRG that Schuster had commented quite differently on the subject to others. It is notable that the Czech Republic's Speaker of Parliament, Vaclav Klaus, publicly announced that with the arrest of Mr. Mečiar, the Slovak government had excluded Slovakia from the "family of civilized nations."

THE RELEASE OF MECIAR AND SUBSEQUENT EVENTS

Mr. Mečiar was released from custody after a few hours. He gave a press conference at HZDS party headquarters shortly thereafter, saying he had refused to offer any testimony to the police concerning their illegal investigations. One of the most recent charges brought against him by the Dzurinda government - that he had paid bonuses to members of his cabinet that had to be repaid - was dismissed by Mr. Mečiar out of hand. He pointed out that Mr. Dzurinda had paid bonuses to members of his own cabinet who were not even eligible for such payments, including one to a minister who had been ill and therefore unable to even appear for work.

Following the press conference, a video was shown that had been filmed from inside Mr. Mečiar's villa of the arrest. First, a spokesman for the police contingent called to Mr. Mečiar with a bullhorn from a considerable distance out in the street, announcing that he was required to submit to arrest immediately on charges of paying illegal bonuses to members of his government. One of the police functionaries was filmed leaning against a car with shaved head and studded leather jacket, identifiable as a police agent only by the word "police" on his breast.

Next, in broad daylight, several masked and black-clothed "police" entered the compound unobstructed through the front gate, and crept along the wall outside the entrance at the terraced side of Mr. Mečiar's house. These police were filmed placing an explosive device under the glass door and detonating it. The resulting blast smashed not only the glass door but also most of the large glass-enclosed area in which Mr. Mečiar and his family usually congregated.

The bizarrely "stealth-like" affair was made even more strange by the fact that no guards of any kind had been placed anywhere near the entrance of Mr. Mečiar's home, making the whole operation absurdly destructive and unnecessary. Mr. Mečiar himself said afterward that he would have cooperated without resistance had they decided to come to the front door and ring the bell, and that he was upstairs reading the paper at the time of the blast. The government account said the police had rung the doorbell, yet there was no evidence of this on the video. In any case, at very worst the police should have broken the glass in the front door to enter the house without having to blow the place up. There was no visible excuse for the sort of destruction wreaked by the "Keystone Cops" of the Slovak government.

When the police entered the house, they demanded that everyone inside lie on their stomachs on the floor, and that Mr. Mečiar come with them at once. Upon emerging, Mr. Mečiar spoke briefly with the police in a calm and collected manner, and was escorted out to the police vehicle unharmed. Mr. Mečiar said his wife remained with him the whole time, but that he had sent the rest of his family including his 2-year-old granddaughter away before the incident in anticipation of possible violence. He said he would return to his villa to begin repairs, but that he hoped the government would reimburse him for the damages to his home.

PRO-MECIAR DEMONSTRATIONS

On Good Friday, 21st April, a demonstration of several thousand took place in central Bratislava (official estimates were between 3,000-5,000, but television news coverage indicated possibly more). The largest private TV channel, *Markiza*, which broadcast the footage, showed interviews with demonstrators, many of whom had come to Bratislava from central Slovakia to show their support. Although the crowd was fairly large, it was much smaller than originally planned. If Mr. Mečiar had not been released, a hundred thousand or more people were expected on the streets.

Several HZDS leaders made speeches before the enraged crowd, and a large placard with a caricature of Mikulaš Dzurinda ripped down the middle was waved about. The HZDS announced that it would call for a special session of parliament on 27th April: the only item on the agenda would be a discussion of the methods of the Minister of the Interior, Ladislav Pittner, and a proposal for his removal.

Also shown was an interview with a functionary of the Ministry of the Interior, who said that a grenade had exploded outside the ministry earlier in the day. The official said that a white Renault was seen leaving the scene. It is widely known that one of the HZDS cars is a white Renault, and HZDS described this identification by the police as a direct "provocation." No one was hurt in the alleged blast.

CONCLUSION

The recent events in Slovakia appear to be evidence that the country is sliding back into the era of political trials and witch hunts very rapidly. The government campaign against Vladimir Mečiar, who is still regarded as a national hero by millions within Slovakia, reeks of a political vendetta. However, the motive for this vendetta may be less revenge for past wrongs (after all the alleged transgressions are fairly minor) but because the current government faces a catastrophic fall in support following the savage economic downturn, rising unemployment and cost of living since it came to power promising the opposite. It looks as if the Dzurinda government is simply carrying out its witch hunt as "revenge" for Mr. Mečiar's enduring popularity. The current government is trying to discredit Mr. Mečiar using any means at its disposal, including brute force.

Compared with its eagle-eye searching for any human rights flaws under Mr Mečiar's government (1994-98), it is discouraging to see the Western media's bland and low profile reporting of blatant violations of the rule of law in Slovakia. Wire reports from the BBC, AP and Reuters covered the arrest of Mr. Mečiar quickly, but the reporting universally gave unsubstantiated accounts of Western accusations that Mr. Mečiar had failed to "respect the rule of law," and had been guilty of authoritarianism and "backsliding" on "reforms." Interestingly, such reports always conclude with a reference to HZDS as "by far the most popular single party in Slovakia," as well as to Mr. Mečiar's widespread popularity (the reports always refer condescendingly to his supporters as being among the "elderly" and "rural," however).

The juxtaposition of reports showing that Mr. Mečiar is the most popular politician in Slovakia with (unsubstantiated) allegations about his character is tantamount to a slur against the Slovak people. The fact that a country's former leader has pursued policies that have confounded the West's objectives of political integration and "privatization on the cheap" for foreign investors should not detract from that leader's domestic democratic legitimacy.

It is to be hoped that the West will rethink its irrational opposition to Vladimir Mečiar. Neither he nor any member of his party has ever advocated aggression against any foreign country, and the peaceful way in which Mr. Mečiar presided over Slovakia's transformation into a sovereign, independent state should provide a role model for other ex-Communist countries that have undergone "growing pains." It is essential for the fate of rule-of-law democracy not only in Slovakia but in Central Europe as a whole that political leaders who enjoy genuine popular support in their countries be treated with the respect appropriate for elected politicians.

