

## **POLb1135, Spring 2020**

### **Study Material – V. Mečiar**

Basic information:

Vladimír Mečiar was the leading figure of politics in Slovakia for more than one decade. He started his political career before 1989 and was active in the Communist Party. Although he was expelled from the party after 1968 he is suspected of co-operating with state forces in further years (documents that could either support or deny such claim were destroyed after 1989).

Shortly after 1989, Mečiar became Ministry of Interior by winning a contest due to lack of available candidates. This was his first and only experience as a member of the government without being the Prime Minister. In later years he became Prime Minister for three times – in 1990 after the first free election, after 1992 election and finally after 1994 election. Out of his three periods, he managed to stay in the office until the regular election only once (between 1994 and 1998).

Despite a gradual decline of its support, his party HZDS was able to win the 1998 election, but it went to the opposition where it stayed for eight years. Its final appearance in government was between 2006 and 2010 however now only as a junior coalition partner. Finally, in the 2010 election, the party dropped out of parliament, and in the 2012 election, it scored less than one per cent of votes. Mečiar personally attempted to return to Slovak politics in 2020 however he stepped down from running in the election.

Most important issues on which you should focus:

#### 1. Personal features of Vladimír Mečiar

In the presentation and the readings, you can find indications about the problematic features of Mečiar's person. From the beginning of his career in politics, he was continually making both external and internal enemies regardless they were real or fictional. As a party leader, he never allowed any fractionalization of his party and any members who challenged his leadership or his style of politics were forced to leave the party.

In case of no real enemies, he invented fictional ghosts to increase his electoral gains. During his career, Mečiar announced several attempts of his assassination although in none of the cases anyone was accused and Mečiar was always the only person to possess such information. In 1994 election Mečiar attempted to vote, but his name was not in the registry. The media made a sensational story that probably increased the vote gain of HZDS. In that

time, the elections were held on Friday and Saturday, and Mečiar released this story during Friday.

The most vigorous personal conflict Mečiar ever had was with that time president Kováč. Before 1999, the president was elected in parliament, and Kováč was a nominee and close friend of Mečiar. However, shortly after his election in 1993, Kováč distanced from HZDS and its problematic style of politics (see government 1994-1998). This led to a substantial one-sided conflict between the Prime Minister and the president. In contrary to any other disputes Mečiar experienced, this was a different case as Mečiar, and his government had no constitutional authority to get Kováč out of his seat. The conflict gradually increased and went to an extreme extent. In its final stages, the son of the president was kidnapped to Austria, and this crime was the alleged action of the state secret service chaired by a nominee of HZDS.

## 2. Polarizing effect of Vladimír Mečiar

Based on the previous point, it is easy to observe that Mečiar had a strong polarizing effect on both politics and society. In politics, besides their ideology, each political party could be defined either as standing with Mečiar or against him. In 1998 the Party of Civic Understanding (SOP) of ex-communist official Rudolf Schuster emerged, and it aimed to stand aside from this partisan conflict as some kind of an alternative to both pro-Mečiar and anti-Mečiar blocs. However, the atmosphere before the 1998 election in Slovakia was so tense that the new party was forced to declare allegiance to one of the blocs openly and it chose the latter one.

The polarization of the party system in the half of 90s was so intense that after Kováč ended his mandate as president in 1998 for more than a year the country had no president since there was no way the two party blocs could find the agreement on the same candidate. Note that each of the blocs had less than 90 MPs (out of 150) which was the number necessary to elect the president. The situation was later resolved by the adoption of direct presidential elections in 1999.

The level of polarization in the second half of the 90s was also present in society. As the journalist Marián Leško stated whenever and wherever people in Slovakia had a discussion, sooner or later they talked about Mečiar. The country and the society were completely divided on this issue, and several commentators even spoke about 'two Slovakias' in the same country.

## 3. The government between 1994 and 1998

The presentation contains the most essential features of the government that was in office between 1994 and 1998. You should check these points to get an overall image. Most importantly and taken together, these points show why Slovakia in the half of 90s lost the

status of entirely free democracy and shifted toward some kind of hybrid regime. The control over state media, usage of state resources, level of partisan clientelism etc. showed a substantial decline of quality of democracy. As external evidence, you should note that both EU and NATO delayed or even suspended the integration process of Slovakia. In general, it is primarily the results of this government why Slovakia did not become a member of NATO in 1999 (as the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland did) and why it was invited to begin the entry negotiations with the EU only in the second wave of the invited countries.

#### 4. Legacy of Vladimír Mečiar

Finally, some remarks are needed concerning the legacy of Vladimír Mečiar. First, his rule showed how fragile newly established CEE democracies could be. The long parliamentary night in 1994 showed that political parties with low respect to democratic features in these countries can maintain enormous power instantly and can rule with only limited control from both the media and opposition. Second, Mečiar divided the party system into two blocs, and this division continued even after his demise from the office of Prime Minister. This personal cleavage was later reincarnated by Robert Fico, who also became a polarizing personality although not to such extent than Mečiar. Third and finally, the government that ruled between 1994 and 1998 also created an unwilling test for the independent media and the non-governmental organizations. These institutions had to operate in a hostile atmosphere what forced them to become more resistant to external pressures.

Some notes for discussion or reflection:

- To gain and overall evaluation of the Slovak government between 1994 and 1998 and its PM Mečiar, compare it with the recent development in Hungary or Poland
- To check whether the 'hostility test' for Slovak private media in the 90s had any effect on their ability to keep their independence, compare the situation of main public and private media in all V4 countries.
- Think about other top political representatives in contemporary V4 states to see whether they have a similar polarizing character that once Mečiar had