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"My greatest disappointment since 1998 has been that those politicians in whom voters invested so much hope have failed to make good. I really hadn't expected it could fall this low."

Grigorij Mesežnikov

Grigorij Mesežnikov, president of the independent think tank Institute for Public Affairs, is no Dryasdust academic. When The Slovak Spectator arrived to interview him in his office June 6, he was playing tunes by the Russian rock band Čajf (short for 'Tea Factory'), music he described as "making an aesthetic of the alternative lifestyle". Mesežnikov, who is Russian by birth, confesses to a sometimes overwhelming nostalgia for the culture of his former country, although not one strong enough to send him back east.

He also has seven children. Why? Is it some statement of belief in Slovakia's future? "My wife had an idea she wanted many children, although we had no exact number in mind," he says. "Now they're here we're very happy." Nevertheless, he continues, he finds it very difficult to come to terms with how little time he has to spend with his kids - something he calls "a personal failing".

But it's as an academic that Mesežnikov continues to make his mark. He is widely quoted in the Slovak press, and is sought out by experts for his political and social judgements. He's neither a radical critic of government policy nor an apologist for the cabinet. He declared he was uncomfortable being the focus of the following interview, but agreed to talk over a beer at a neighborhood pub.

The Slovak Spectator (TSS): You were born in Russia. What kind of childhood did you have?

Grigorij Mesežnikov (GM): I was born in the town of Oriol, 400 kilometres south of Moscow. I come from an ordinary family, and had an average Soviet upbringing.

TSS: Were you a good student?

GM: Yes, I did well, I had straight 'A's in high school, and then pretty good marks at university, even though I didn't take a 'red diploma' [issued to the top students - ed. note].

TSS: Were you affected by Communism in any way?

GM: I was greatly affected by the environment I grew up in, like other citizens, because it wasn't pluralistic. Communism was the only official ideology. Some parts of it aroused certain doubts in me. For example, I was often confronted with the fact that I was part of a minority group. The official ideology of international socialism was often at odds with how the elite and the average citizen handled the question of nationality. I quickly was made to feel that I didn't belong to the majority nationality.

TSS: What minority group were you a part of?

GM: I was born into a Jewish family. I was irritated most not by the everyday anti-Semitism I encountered from ordinary citizens, but by anti-Semitism at the state level. In 1967, after the war in the Middle East, anti-Semitic elements began to appear in relations between Jews and Soviet state organs. From my point of view, it fractured the collective approach of Communism, and along with questions regarding social justice eventually led to the downfall of Communism.

TSS: Why did you emigrate to Czechoslovakia in 1981?

GM: I married a Czechoslovak citizen. By the time we decided to leave the Soviet Union we had two children, so our decision was heavily influenced by economic survival, by my knowledge that my family would have a better standard of living in Czechoslovakia. But it wasn't at all a political emigration, because I moved to another socialist country. In fact, after some measure of change in the Soviet Union in the 1980s, I even realized that I would be better off there in some ways, because the Czechoslovak communist regime was so deeply conservative. I was disquieted to see the Soviet Union moving towards liberalisation while nothing was changing in Czechoslovakia.

TSS: What effect have Russian values had on Slovakia?

GM: Slovak society is a western society, and through hundreds of years has belonged to a Catholic belt linking it to western civilisation. A certain part of the intellectual and political elite here does look to the east for inspiration, but that isn't reflected among the public, where opinion polls show an overwhelming orientation towards western political ideals. Compare 70% support for EU entry and around 45-50% support for NATO entry to the ratio who favour joining Russia - about 4%.

TSS: Why hasn't capitalism worked in Russia so far?

GM: Russia after the collapse of Communism chose a different model of social transformation. In Russia there are no deep-rooted democratic traditions like the rule of law, open society, the free market etc. which could have helped the transition from totalitarianism to democracy. Capitalism is being built in Russia, but along lines we could call 'Mafia-nomenclature' - decidedly not democratic capitalism, with the economic transparency and political pluralism one associates with this concept. Russia needs another generation to reach the level of western capitalism.

TSS: You once said that capitalism doesn't work in Russia because the social values it needs to survive don't exist - the most respected figures in villages are still men who manage to steal the most from the state...

GM: Look at the relationship between the citizen and the state. In Russia the state was the master, and the citizen, if he wanted to survive and protect some kind of personal space, had either to hand everything over to the state, or lie to those in authority, because the state was a repressive one. This was true for at least the entire 20th century. Of course, this psychology of stealing and lying came to affect not just relations between the citizen and the state, but also between citizens. There was no room for the formation of ethics that would strengthen the business environment.

What is more, the whole stratum of Russian capitalists was created in the course of only a few years, and was largely formed of the previous nomenclature. These people managed to steal far more from the state than the average citizen. We commonly say that in Slovakia privatisation was uncontrolled, and that injustices occurred, but Russia was many times worse in this regard.

TSS: Do you see any parallels between the mentality of Russian capitalists and that of the 1994 to 1998 Vladimír Mečiar government? Is there any way that Mečiar, like a Russian, might simply have believed that theft and lying were lesser evils compared to what he was trying to do - build an independent state?

GM: No, I'm deeply convinced the behaviour [of the Mečiar government] was entirely cynical, and that their declarations about it all being in the interest of Slovakia were completely dishonest. The privatisation process has been well documented in various think-tank publications. Above all, I move around in the Bratislava environment, and I'm fairly well informed. I've spoken with people who are close to our 'nouveau riche', and I know how cynically they talk about using their political power to enrich themselves.

So no, there was no element there of trying to help Slovakia. They helped themselves, and in disposing of hundreds of billions of crowns in state property to party sympathisers, the Mečiar government violated the very spirit of democratic capitalism.

TSS: How did you respond to the 1989 revolution?

GM: I and my friends wrote a document that was read out on SNP Square in Bratislava - it was called 'The Statement of Soviet Citizens Living in Slovakia', and it supported the Velvet Revolution. I was very happy to see Czechoslovakia's orthodox communist regime fall.

TSS: Were you as active in assisting the divorce of Czechoslovakia in 1993?

GM: No, I regarded the separation as very negative. I was afraid for how things would develop in Slovakia, because we had already seen how those in power had gained their political status, and that the process of democratisation would be complicated. These fears were later borne out.

TSS: What did you object to more - that Mečiar would be leading Slovakia, that there had been no referendum on the split, or that Slovakia didn't have an experienced enough elite to take it through difficult economic and political times?

GM: It was the way in which the HZDS gained power in 1992 - on a wave of anti-reform sentiment among people dissatisfied with federally-imposed reforms. Even then it was apparent that if Czechoslovakia divided - a state with its own history and democratic traditions - Slovakia would be ruled by authoritarian political forces, non-democratic methods.

TSS: Was the experience of Mečiar at all good for Slovakia?

GM: Perhaps, in that it strengthened civil society and made Slovaks more aware than ever before of the rules of the game. Slovak citizens on several occasions made it very clear that they would not stand for any brutal transgression of democratic principles, such as manipulation of election results. Mečiar used what tools he had at his disposal under the Constitution - he changed laws where possible, such as the Election Law, he took presidential powers where possible. But society didn't allow him to flout the rules completely.

TSS: What brought you to the Institute for Public Affairs [IVO]?

GM: I was doing social and political research at the Political Science Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in 1995, and as a part-timer took part in the first Global Report on Slovakia, which was co-published that year by Martin Bútora [co-founder of IVO, who is currently Slovakia's Ambassador to the US in Washington - ed. note]. The Report was intended to map out developments in Slovakia in the course of the foregoing calendar year.

Working on it brought me into contact with people who thought the way I did, and sparked the idea of an institute which could guarantee the continuation of such a project. The institute that was eventually born, I think, has in its six years produced more than a few interesting books, studies and surveys, has organised some important conferences and has increased its status to the point that we are visible in the media and handle requests from both domestic and foreign experts for information.

TSS: Many think tanks have connections to politicians and their parties - the economic think tank MESA 10, after all, was founded by Deputy Prime Minister for Economy Ivan Mikloš, while Comenius University's Soňa Szomolányi and Miroslav Kusý have been active in politics. How difficult is it for these analysts to be objective in their evaluation of political decisions?

GM: It's very important for the group of people working not only in think tanks but also in academic institutions that they follow clear and consistent values. That means that their work as experts is motivated by an effort to promote social solutions that push the country towards greater openness, to a market economy and so on. It's important that they criticise political decisions on this basis, but I don't think you can say that their criticisms are politically motivated. We've seen plenty of criticism of the current government's measures by think tanks like MESA 10, INEKO and so on.

The situation becomes more complicated with evaluations of the political situation, especially when it involves various political parties. It's a very sensitive issue. But I

don't think the political past of some of the commentators or analysts you have mentioned fundamentally influences their evaluations of relationships between political leaders or parties. But it is a very sensitive issue, coming up with a statement that both obeys certain values and that doesn't complicate relations between political parties and personalities. In my opinion, most analysts are successful in bridging these two aims.

TSS: Why isn't there more pluralism of opinion among Slovak think tanks? In the West you have a think tank for every possible part of the political spectrum, while in Slovakia, no academic or professional group advocates the anti-intergration, pro-authoritarian values supported by voters of Mečiar's HZDS party.

GM: I think the group of intellectuals who tend to support the values the HZDS promotes aren't think tank kind of people. They are people accustomed to working in the state sector, and haven't developed the communication skills, the work habits and the western contacts needed for fund-raising, which is an essential part of any think tank's activities. Nor are they willing to take on the risk of failure involved in starting a think tank.

TSS: Is the success and importance of think tanks in Slovakia a reflection of the weakness of the academic sector?

GM: In some areas yes, such as studies of the development of the institutional system, social policy and economics. In these areas the state sector really can't compete with think tanks.

TSS: What has been your biggest disappointment with the current government since 1998?

GM: That those democratic politicians in whom voters invested so much hope have failed to make good on this investment. Also, their very poor mutual levels of communication and trust. I really hadn't expected it could fall as low as it has.

TSS: Have Slovak voters deserved the politicians they've had since 1993?

GM: I think in large measure politicians have reflected the state of society, but in another sense, through their poor communication and cooperation, politicians are currently not offering voters what they most expected. A certain part of Slovak society deserves better. Slovak society is steadily becoming more modern, showing more respect and understanding for democratic principles, and these changes should be reflected in growing maturity among politicians. But the behaviour of politicians frequently shows that the reverse is true.

TSS: Irish poet W.B. Yeats once described a society in which "the worst are full of passionate intensity, and the best lack all conviction". Does that describe Slovak society at the moment?

GM: No. If it did, how would we explain what happened in elections in 1998 [when over 84% of voters turned out, and the Mečiar government was defeated - ed. note]? The country has shown throughout its history since 1993 that through its own strength it

is able to overcome barriers and brakes on its growth. I think Yeats' lines apply better to some Balkan countries, or places to the east of Slovakia.

TSS: Do you have any predictions or fears for 2002 elections?

GM: I expect the HZDS will win with roughly the same support [27%] it gained in 1998. Second place will be fought over by [non-parliamentary party] Smer and some constellation around the SDKÚ [ruling coalition party of PM Mikuláš Dzurinda. Because the HZDS is not likely to find any coalition partners, whoever takes second place will have the job of forming the next government.

The main worry I have is that the parties which have proven their commitment to democratic principles while in power will have less of a role, while a greater role will go to untried parties like Smer. We can't predict what kind of politics they will practice. We should also be worried about what happens if a party gets into power whose people don't have the needed professional qualifications, or whose ideological basis is not deeply rooted. Such parties are by nature unpredictable and can endanger political stability. If a crisis were to arise, we couldn't predict how their members might behave in government or parliament. That's my greatest fear.