

titul Mr. Mečiar - Reformed Champion of Democracy?
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zdroj IVO, 1.2.2002



Mr. Mečiar - Reformed Champion of Democracy?

Vladimír Mečiar, the leader of HZDS is undoubtedly a skillful politician, otherwise he would not be boasting over thirty percent approval ratings in the polls. The question remains what his party under his leadership could offer to the people of Slovakia in this crucial time when the country stands on the brink of NATO enlargement and is on par with other Visegrad countries in the accession process in to the E.U. Mr. Mečiar got a chance in an interview conducted by a Czech television on January 20th, among other things, to express his view on country's accession to NATO. He stated, "Slovakia has no other option." This is entirely in line with Mr. Mečiar party's political platform; in fact Slovakia's accession to NATO has always been party's stated foreign policy goal. During Mr. Mečiar's Premiership in 1994 the foreign policy strategy has been anything but clearly stated-it varied from "Slovakia-the bridge between the east and the west" to "if NATO won't accept us, we will turn to the east." Other factors aside, such wavering foreign policy goals then, certainly did not contribute to the country's prospects of joining the alliance along with Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary in the first wave of expansion.

Undoubtedly, the world is a different place than it was during Mr. Mečiar's last government. America and its allies are waging a war against terrorism, Russia, in the words of President Bush has turned from a "strategic competitor" to a "strategic partner." Perhaps Mr. Mečiar has factored in these changes and gained a new appreciation of the alliance and its new expanded role. Most importantly, perhaps he is ready to show a sense of self-reflection and take full responsibility for the setbacks and political isolation the country suffered under his leadership, but judging by the interview this seems hardly the case.

On the surface his support of Slovakia joining NATO seems as a dramatic positive improvement in the political rhetoric of this political entity and its leader. Mr. Mečiar has even engaged himself recently in an initiative to gather statements of support for the continuation of the country's pro-integration trend for after the fall elections. To achieve this, he has stated that his party would welcome such statement to come in a "unified manner" from all the parties represented in the parliament, or from individual members and has even approached president Schuster to support him in his crusade. Mr. Mečiar has even gone so far as to point a finger at the current Prime minister Mr. Dzurinda in a criticism for his refusal to do so and stated that political parties refusing to make such an official declaration "will have to suffer the consequences in explaining their position to the outside world."

A question offers itself: What is the true motive for such an increased lobbying by Mr. Mečiar? Why is the leader of HZDS placing so much emphasis on some document given his former government's poor track record of adherence to democratic principles? After all, this poor record has been cited over and over as a factor disqualifying Slovakia from first wave of NATO enlargement. Mečiar's sudden outburst of activism

cannot be comprehended in any other way, than a populist practice by a leader of an opportunist political party who has done more than any other in harming the interests of this country. When asked in the same interview why so many foreign leaders have expressed reservations about him, Mr. Mečiar replied: “Whose fault is it that other political parties are going through a crisis and are losing support?” Mr. Mečiar has in the past, and is continuing to demonstrate that he is as skillful at playing the pre-election game as ever. Another thing remains certain, however—regardless of what Mr. Mečiar proclaims, he has long ago lost the trust in the circles in which the future of Slovakia will be decided. Now he is trying to reap the political benefits of the government that has put the country back on track in the process of NATO and EU enlargement.