

Secret CIA Jails in Lithuania: Legacy of Nazi Collaborationism

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The «Amber Rebuff» was the code name of the operation jointly carried out by the CIA and Lithuania's Department of Homeland Security during which they transferred supposed Al Qaeda militants captured in Afghanistan to the country. In Lithuania, they were subjected to interrogation with tortures with the goal of obtaining information about Muslim extremist groups.

The Lithuanian parliament's inquiry into the hosting of secret CIA jails is unbelievably perfunctory, if at all trustworthy. The findings are inconclusive: the jails did exist but it is unknown whether inmates were actually brought to them, and aircrafts of undeclared origin did land in Lithuania, but it has not been proven that they were used to carry Al Qaeda militants. Since no complaints have been received from the supposed victims of abuse, there is essentially nothing to discuss.

In contrast, the facts unearthed by the Lithuanian media prior to the parliamentary inquiry were quite serious. It appears that at least two secret jails concealed from the public and the human rights watchers were illegally operated in Lithuania in 2002-2005 by the CIA.

One of the jails was sited in Rudnikai and disguised as a part of a special training center of the Public Security Service of the Ministry of Interior, the other - in Antaviliai, a village where residences are owned by influential politicians and businessmen. The distances between Vilnius and the jails were 40 and 20 km respectively, and the CIA operatives together with their Lithuanian partners mainly used the Antaviliai center, evidently to save time on commuting. The site used to be a riding complex which its former owners were - under pressure from the authorities - forced to sell to ELITE-LLC, a company created by the CIA with the help of its residents in Panama (Start Finance Group and INK Holding).

The CIA had to resolve several serious problems to organize the "Amber Rebuff". Rolandas Paksas, then President of Lithuania, opposed the plan on the grounds that it breached the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and the European Human Rights Convention, both of which have been signed by Lithuania. Moreover, under Lithuanian law arrests without court warrants - least tortures - are illegal.

It took the CIA little time to get rid of the defiant Paksas. Less than a year after being elected, he was impeached due to allegations of corrupt ties with the Russian business and of other types of mischief. Roughly at the same time, three Russian diplomats in Lithuania were accused of spying and deported from the country, quite likely on the US initiative to

prevent the «Amber rebuff» from being watched. Valdas Adamkus, a senior-aged US citizen and a big fan of G. Bush, was elected as the new Lithuanian President. His creed was that Lithuania must contribute to the US cause regardless of any objections. Besides, Adamkus felt that Lithuania was indebted to the US for supporting its bid for the NATO membership.

Interestingly, in 2003-2006 the US Embassy to Lithuania was headed by Stephen Donald Mull, a career CIA operative who played an important role in Poland in the Solidarity epoch. At that time Mull served as the Political Counselor at the U.S. Embassy in Warsaw and was regarded as a major trouble-maker by the Polish security for his active involvement with local dissenters. The climate in which he worked in Lithuania was absolutely different — the country's leadership is both friendly to the US and receptive to material stimuli (Lithuanian journalists still wonder how the \$5 mln delivered to the country at the initial phase of the «Amber rebuff» were spent. Mull certainly knows the answer, but he will never tell).

Mull was in charge of the whole operation involving the secret CIA jails in Lithuania. The Lithuanian side was represented by Arvydas Pocius и Mecys Laurinkas, who at different times served as heads of the Department of Homeland Security, and by its deputy director Dainius Dabasinskas. Only the most trusted Lithuanian agents were employed in the operation, some of them assisting the US operatives in conducting interrogations with noise and light tortures, electric shocks, watering, putting plastic bags on the victims' heads, etc. Lithuanians tried to do their best for the their bosses (this is how Lithuanian operatives privately call their US colleagues).

An old friend of mine — a Lithuanian journalist — told me about the reasons for «pessimism and panic» among the Lithuanian security agents who were involved in the «Amber rebuff». He has information, which he cannot make available to the public due to concerns over his own safety, that there is no clarity what eventually happened to some of the inmates of the secret CIA jails in Lithuania. What if the information surfaces? My friend says such is the explanation behind the nervous reaction of the Lithuanian authorities to the publicity now surrounding the whole story. If the EU starts to investigate it, chances are the world is going to face revelations about the Vilnius analog of Abu Ghraib.

Perhaps, this is the reason why President Dalia Grybauskaitė keeps reiterating she had nothing to do with the story of the CIA jails in Lithuania, despite having «indirect suspicions» concerning the matter. She even expressed the noteworthy view that a thorough investigation could make Lithuania a target for international terrorists. Previously, a similar hypothesis was aired by a CIA spokesman who said that commenting on the information about the secret jails in Lithuania would pose a threat to the lives of millions of people and would thus be irresponsible.

The exact number of inmates who had been to the CIA jails in Lithuania is unknown. In most cases, eight individuals are reported to have been held in the Antaviliai torture chamber by the time it was closed in November, 2005. The truth is that chartered planes from Afghanistan came to Lithuania with certain regularity, and the number of people tortured had probably been some ten times higher. When the parliamentary inquiry was in process, Arvydas Anusauskas, the head of the parliament's National Security and Defense Committee, said some of the facts about the CIA jails could not be made public due to national security regards and obligations to the US partners.

The US Embassy and the CIA station in Lithuania (Daniel Gage, head of the economy

department of the US Embassy to Lithuania is particularly active) are taking urgent measures to block the efforts made by the parliament and the media to find out more about the torture centers in Lithuania. President Dalia Grybauskaitė is confronted with increasing pressure from the rightists conservative (pro-US) media. She is charged with the authoritarian style, the pro-Russian orientation, and the communist past simply because she has no intention to sacrifice her reputation to help the cover-up.

Prime Minister Andrius Kubilius and former presidents Algirdas Brazauskas and Valdas Adamkus are among the politicians who adopted a defensive stance in connection with the matter (saying the jails could have existed but no inmates were held, saying neither «yes» nor «no», etc.). They are trying to convince the public that the information about the secret CIA jails in Lithuania is all «myths and fantasies». Arvydas Anusauskas, the head of the National Security and Defense Committee, is secretly playing on their side.

It is getting increasingly clear that the imitation of an inquiry by the Lithuanian legislators will not make the European Parliament happy. The position of the EU over the case is harsh: European Commissioner for Justice Franco Frattini said if the facilities were indeed hosted, it was a serious violation of the EU norms and the country in question would face sanctions. Dick Marty, a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, called for achieving full clarity concerning the problem. He said that unwarranted secrecy should not preclude the complete disclosure of the information about what had been going on near Vilnius, and everyone involved must finally come clean. Only time will show what results can a potential EU investigation yield.

One should keep in mind that - on Mull's request - in late 2005 the Department of Homeland Security urgently destroyed all documents and evidence pertaining to the secret CIA jails where inmates had been tortured. Late at night fragments of the equipment were dumped into the Neman. In 2007, the Antaviliai secret jail was taken over by the Department of Homeland Security: - the CIA passed the installation to its partners as a symbol of their cooperation in the name of freedom and democracy.

P.S. A response to the scandal in Internet — just one of many — read: «After some 50 years, nostalgia for the days when Lithuanian collaborationists excelled in the ranks of the Nazi police is still alive. Or is it a prerequisite for the adoption of NATO standards in Lithuania?» INOforum (22.11.09)

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