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Slovakia heads for the EU: what was accomplished and what lies ahead

Introduction

A decade or so after the establishing its independence Slovakia is close to accomplishing its two principal strategic goals: achieving full-fledged membership in the European Union and NATO. The road to integration was long, and not always sunny. There were several painful setbacks on the way. But after the disappointments of Madrid and Luxembourg 1997 came Prague and Copenhagen 2002. The outcome of 2002 general election confirmed the continuity of the integration-oriented foreign policy. Slovakia was able to close the negotiations by December 2002 along with 9 other applicant countries and the accession agreement was signed - symbolically enough - in Athens on April 16, 2003. After the EU referendum, which brought a clear “yes“ vote, there is no obstacle on the “road back to Europe.” However, the majority of the work still remains to be done – to be a part of the EU does not end at the accession - it is just the beginning.

This article discusses the main milestones on the Slovakia’s integration track, outlines the main outcomes of the negotiations, explores the public debate on EU membership, its main actors and the public perception, including the voting in the EU referendum held in May 2003. It also points out the bottlenecks in the smooth transition from a candidate to an accession and member country. The analysis does not go into detail of economic, social¹, and fiscal aspects of integration, nor does it address the complex issue of EU funding.

From Helsinki to Copenhagen and Athens - Road map to membership

As the consequence of domestic political development under the third Mečiar government (1994-98) Slovakia was marginalized from the mainstream of integration processes. The international image of Slovakia had deteriorated and several demarches had been delivered to the Slovak government. In spite of the official declaration of integration goals, the government and the Prime Minister himself were the obstructions on the road to Brussels. The domestic development was characterized by democratic deficits and the foreign policy orientation of the country became nontransparent.

¹ The comprehensive analysis of social and economic consequences of EU membership has been elaborated by the Slovak Academy of Science and released in July 2002. See: Economic and Social Impact of Slovakia’s EU accession – benefits and risks. (www.vlada.gov.sk/eu/ekon_soc_vstup_eu.html)

In July 1997 the EU Commission recommended to open membership negotiations with Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Cyprus and Estonia, but not with Slovakia because the country did not fulfill the political conditions. Other reasons included instability of constitutional institutions and the shortcomings in the functioning of democracy. General elections held in 1998 unseated Mečiar and opened the door for catching up with V4 neighbors. The broad coalition led by Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda has taken a good advantage of this opportunity that has presented itself. Following the December 1999 Helsinki summit the relations between Slovakia and EU reached a qualitatively new level. In February next year, Slovakia opened the accession negotiations with EU and did very well in closing chapters of *acquis communautaire*. In summer 2001, at the end of Swedish presidency Slovakia had concluded 20 chapters – an achievement comparable with other three Visegrad countries which started the negotiations process almost two years earlier. The “midterm assessment” had shown that Slovakia was in a good position for completing the whole process together with other candidates.

During the 1998-2002 election period Slovakia accomplished also very important steps to increase the country’s internal preparedness to join the EU. The most crucial was the Constitutional Amendment adopted in 2001 which paved the way also for other necessary reforms. Among these were the public administration reform (creation of 8 administrative entities and decentralization of self government and public administration financing), necessary to increase the country’s ability to allocate EU pre-accession funds.

The year 2002 was expected with mixed feelings. In the parliamentary election Slovakia was supposed to confirm the pro-EU and pro- NATO track. The election held shortly before the decisive summits could set Slovakia back if the Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) would come back to power. Unacceptability of Mečiar and HZDS as well as SNS had been repeatedly stressed by the representatives of both EU and NATO. Although scenario according to which HZDS would be in the government was not very likely, Slovak voters were appealed to make their decision in favor of those politicians who could guarantee the continuity. In fact this scenario was confirmed – four center right parties won a close majority and created the most pro-reform and pro-integration government Slovakia ever had.

In 2002, Slovakia continued at the remarkable speed in closing the negotiation chapters. The final marathon started with the meeting of the so-called Laeken group during the Danish presidency in October 2002. Politically the most sensitive chapters of the *acquis: Financial and Budgetary Provisions and Agriculture* and the debate about the most important issue – money – was on the agenda. However, all divergences disagreements had been settled at the Copenhagen summit and 10 candidate countries – Slovakia among them – were invited to join the EU in 2004.

What will Slovakia get?

In Slovakia, the outcome of the negotiations had been accepted with satisfaction but without any enthusiasm. The general public was not very much aware of the negotiated content and

the negotiators were not welcomed as the “heroes from Copenhagen” who fought for our better future. The Copenhagen summit success was very quickly overshadowed by minor domestic political scandals. The luke-warm response from the public was also the consequence of how the whole negotiations process had been communicated. Technical and bureaucratic aspects (for example number of closed chapters) dominated over the content of what had been negotiated. The “catch up strategy” which was adopted after the 1998 general elections put less emphasis on “what” and instead concentrated on “if”.

Overall support for Slovakia in the period 2004-06 comprises 2.603 million EURO. The net financial position looks relatively good with the net positive balance of 831 million EURO for the fiscal period 2004-06 (Slovakia will contribute 934 million EURO) that means 154 EURO per capita².

Table 1: EU’s financial support for Slovakia 2004 – 2006 (in mil EURO)

	2004- 2006 (in mil EURO)
1. Agriculture	627
Market intervention measures	114
Direct payments	161
Rural development	352
2. Structural support	1.560
Structural funds	1.050
Cohesion fund	510
3. Internal Policies	330
Existing policies	167
Jaslovské Bohunice (nuclear safety)	90
Strengthening of institutions	25
Schengen	48
4. Budgetary compensation	86
Total	2.603

Source: Figel’-Adamiš, 2003: 99

In the final five rounds of negotiations which took place between November 4 and December 9, 2002 Slovakia had negotiated some additional benefits. For example, increase of financial means for rural development by 90 million up to 352 million euro for the 3 years period 2004-2006; increase of support for closing the nuclear power plant in Jaslovské Bohunice so now the final support for nuclear safety comprises 90 mil. EURO for the years 2004-2006. The implementation of Schengen will be supported by 47,8 mil. EURO in 3 years, in addition a compensation in amount of 63 mil. EURO was agreed to.

Also in terms of production quotas in priority areas – isoglucose, milk, sheep and cows the increase has been negotiated³. Also three additional years of transition period for purchase of agricultural land was negotiated- that means the full transition period has been extended up

² For more detailed description of the negotiations’ outcomes see Figel’-Adamiša, 2003.

³ Slovakia reached the total quota for isoglucose up to the level 42.547 tons, milk up to the level 1,013 316 tons in years 2004 and 2005 and 1,040 788 tons since 2006, sheep and cows 305 756 and cows without market milk production 28.080. (Figel’-Adamiša, 2003: 142-151)

to 10 years. Furthermore, agreement on a very sensitive issue - using the brand of Tokaj wine for the Slovak wine region has been reached.

Slovakia like other accession countries can top up the direct payments from the national budget to reach 55 % – 60 % – 65 % levels of direct payments. During the next financial period (2007 – 2013) the direct payments from the EU budget can be topped by additional 30% from the national budget. The compensation represents a 22,7 mil EURO in addition the ceiling negotiated in Berlin ⁴. Furthermore, during the final stage of the negotiations marathon also some favorable changes in Slovakia's contributions calendar have been achieved.

In terms of economic impact, optimism highly prevails. According to the economic analysts "compared to other accession countries Slovak economy can be evaluated as that of a typical candidate. It is a very small economy, with performance reaching approximately half of current EU members' average. However, such a small economy has a potential to converge with the union faster, because the investment necessary to increase its competitiveness are only a fraction compared to some of the present EU members. When looking for the most appropriate adjective for Slovakia's outlook within the EU, the best one that comes to mind seems to be 'promising'." (Ekonomické... 2003, www.euroservis.sk)

What are the major risks for Slovakia on the way of becoming a consolidated and prosperous EU country? The analysis published shortly prior to the EU referendum have underscored that the most relevant risks are hidden in the capacities of Slovakia to prepare projects to qualify for the financial support from EU funds. Also, the insufficient capacity to absorb the support can have the effect of decreasing the amount of available financial resources. The critique from the European Commission came shortly after the successful referendum – the commissioner for regional policy Luiz Riera characterized Slovakia as "the least prepared accession country in terms of ability to draw from the structural funds, which in his words could result in a decline of the overall financial support for the country". (SITA, May 28, 2003). If no changes take place in the upcoming next months, situation can have negative consequences for Slovakia, because the regional cohesion is a high priority as the country faces deep regional disparities.

Delayed public debate – decisive "yes" with few buts...

Compared to other V4 countries the public debate about EU integration had been delayed in Slovakia. This was mainly because of the development on the domestic political scene – at least until the fall of 1998, the question stood as not whether we want to join the EU but if the EU wants us to join. After the government change and the first integration successes of the first Dzurinda's government the priority was to catch up in the accession process- not to question it.

⁴ For more detailed description of negotiations outcomes see Figel'-Adamiša, 2003.

At the level of political parties there was a broad consensus on EU integration. Accession was approached as a goal without any other alternative. The opposition parties concentrated their criticism on the way the government negotiated with the EU (“is selling Slovakia too cheap by making concessions”) but not the integration itself.

The way integration has been treated by the media had not been very attractive for the general public. The discussion was not very structured, and specific. It was very general, technical and bureaucratic in nature. Presentation of concrete “pros” and “cons” lacked and the language used to communicate the EU to the public was too abstract and over-politicized. The debate was practically void of any conflicting positions— there were no EU opponents who could present arguments to counter those of the supporters. The position characterized by the statement “EU yes, but...” was more prevalent⁵.

The most loudly voiced BUTs were presented by the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) - one of the parties of the ruling coalition. KDH strived to bolster its profile as a conservative party and called for defending “our sovereignty” in the EU. The document entitled *Declaration on the Sovereignty of EU Member States and Candidate Countries on Cultural and Ethical Issues* was submitted to the parliament in January 2002. Even though the cabinet had previously refused to approve the proposal, it was passed in the parliament after 59 out of 101 MPs present in the 150-seat legislature approved it.

The aim of the Declaration was to appeal to the European Union to “respect the sovereignty of EU member states and countries aspiring to join the EU on cultural and ethical issues. In practice, this would mean leaving decisions on cultural and ethical issues exclusively within the authority of EU member states and candidate countries.” The issues covered by the Declaration included the protection of life and human dignity from the time of conception to death, protection of the family and the institution of marriage as the basis of society, as well as related issues in health care and education, (www.kdh.sk). As several authors pointed out: “The Declaration was meant merely to express a position, and is not legally binding. Thus, a question is in order of the purpose for adopting it. At the moment, the European Union does not apply any common standards to cultural and ethical issues. The Declaration thus only negatively defines Slovakia *vis a vis* the European Union, and contains no positive impulses for coming generations. Since the Declaration does not explicitly say how cultural and ethical issues should be treated (it declares only that decisions on these issues should be left up to member states and candidate countries), according to some critics it is unnecessary and even misleading. (Bilčík, 2003: 338)

The KDH initiative continued after 2002 elections (KDH sustained to be a coalition party) with a proposal to accept the Declaration of Sovereignty in the field of direct taxes, security and foreign policy, in the field of criminal code, in the system of pensions, education and cultural and ethical issues. However, the party was less successful in finding the support among coalition partners. According to KDH representatives the objective is to clearly define what will be decided in Bratislava and in Brussels. Similarly, with Declaration the problem is

⁵ For comprehensive analysis of the EU debate platforms see: Gyárfášová, O.: *From Defense Against the „Others“ to the Formulation of its own interests*. In: Drulák, Petr (ed.) *National and European Identities in EU Enlargement*. Prague: IIR 2001

that many of the proposed issues are in competence of member states, decision about others are accepted by consensus. This means that once Slovakia is a full member of the EU, it will have a right of veto in these matters.

The initiative is in line with KDH platform and its profiling as a typical conservative party. It illustrates that the emerging conservative vs. liberal divide is becoming stronger and more visible in Slovakia after the 1990s were dominated by the conflict around the fundamental nature of politics.

Political parties – present and future actors in the public debate

As it has been mentioned earlier, in general, there is a broad political consensus on EU membership. In a more detailed typology we can distinguish four groups of political parties:

1. **Europhile parties**, which fully support EU membership - Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU), Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK), Alliance of a New Citizen (ANO), Social Democratic Alternative (SDA);
2. **conditional Europhile parties**, which support EU membership on a general level but are critical on individual points relating to economic interest or sovereignty - Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), party Smer;
3. **phony Europhiles** – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS), Slovak National Party (SNS) parties which declares pro-EU views in order to make themselves seem as internationally recognized, but have done little to conduct their domestic political behavior in a way that would make them acceptable partners for current EU members.
4. **Europhobes** – Real Slovak National Party (PSNS), Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) parties at the extreme left and right which are openly hostile to EU membership but have begun to accept that it will happen and concentrate on the need to fight for national interests (Henderson, 2002).

How will the political scene develop after the EU accession and who will take on the eu-skeptic or eu-critical agenda? After 2002 general elections, the nationalistic parties became marginalized after 2002 and they will likely not be able to recover in the future. On the other side the unreformed Communist Party of Slovakia has received 6% of votes and entered the parliament. In its party manifesto the communists focus on protection of national interests in the process of entry negotiations and once in the EU. Their position is “EU yes, but only when Slovakia is prepared at all levels in order to prevent the shock associated with joining of the strong and weak economy with negative repercussions on the population”. (Party manifesto, www.kss.sk)

However, it is very unlikely, that the nationalists or the communists would have a decisive impact on the EU debate once Slovakia becomes a member. Considering the political scene shortly after the eu-referendum it seems that parties which can be included in the category of “conditional Europhiles” or EU critics (KDH and Smer) might have significant voice in the domestic political debate in the upcoming years:

1. as was mentioned above, even before the referendum the Christian Democratic Movement profiled itself as a eu-critical party, its critical standpoint is rooted in

traditional conservative positions. It is very likely that this party will represent a eu-skeptical and eu-critical voice in the Slovak society. There are two main reservations of KDH directed at the EU:

- a. EU poses a liberal threat to Slovak traditional Christian values (position of the *Declaration on the Sovereignty of EU Member States and Candidate Countries On Cultural and Ethical Issues*)
 - b. EU is too socialist on issues of redistribution, taxation etc. this position is similar to that of the Czech Civic Democratic Party as presented in the Manifesto of the Czech Eu-realism.
2. The strongest opposition party Smer is in favor of EU integration, but since it was established in 1999 it is very critical of the government's ability to defend Slovakia's interests in the EU. Smer's conditionality on Slovakia's EU membership is „sufficient preparation“. If Slovakia is not prepared for entry, in Smer's view, it is the government's responsibility. However, the critics in the opposition goes further and their criticism is related to the government's shortcomings in the posting of the deputy prime minister for integration Pal Csáky who is from Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK). The critics used the ethnic background of Mr. Csáky to suggest that it might be in the interest of Hungary for Slovakia to be as weak and poor EU member as possible. The participation of SMK in the government coalition is questioned and directly labeled as a „Trojan horse of Hungarian interests“ (Press release of party Smer, May 30, 2003, www.strana-smer.sk). Smer party will probably assume the position of unconditional critics of the government when it is in opposition. Its position is likely to change when and if it takes governmental responsibility.

Slovakia's EU future

Except for the debate of costs and benefits, the dialogue about the future of European Union itself should be fostered in member and candidate countries. Following the Nice summit Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided to set up the National Convention on the European Future of Slovakia. The ambition was to initiate and promote the nation's public discussion on the issues raised in the process of preparation of IGC as well as on issues which will affect the nation's own interests and integration goals. The composition of the National convention should reflect the broad spectrum of society. The Convention is comprised of representatives of political parties, academia, churches, various interest groups, trade unions, local and regional governments as well as NGOs. The first founding meeting took place in May 2001. However, the meetings did not become a real vehicle for public debate with greater outreach. EU Constitution was on the agenda in December 2002 during the 5th meeting of the Convention. The Convention formulated a very vague position on this hot issue “welcoming the endeavor aimed at simplifying the legal framework of the Union by adopting a single constitutional treaty, by conferring legal personality on the EU and by merging its three pillars. We support steps that will enhance transparency of decision-making and bring the Union closer to its citizens.” (www.convention.sk).

The Convention doesn't support in its statement the creation of new institutions, and the post of an elected President of the European Council. It argues that: "...there is a chance for such reform of the existing system of rotating presidency that will maintain the balance between the larger and smaller member states and that will not unsettle the balance within the institutional framework. Therefore, we support that the six-month rotation of the Presidency of the European Council and the General Affairs and External Relations Council be retained."(www.convention.sk)

The positions of the key political actors on the crucial topics of the institutional reform and future of EU are of low profile⁶. Shortly after the EU's constitutional convention approved the definitive proposal of the future constitutional agreement Ján Figel' (EU convention member and Slovakia's former chief EU negotiator) said that the „wording is a good basis for talks in the intergovernmental commission“ but he found the result in no way „ideal“. (SITA, June 13, 2003) Slovakia's official position is still not clear, the discussion on the very crucial document about the EU future is still ahead.

The Slovak public and the European Union or - what the referendum revealed

From the very beginning of the 1990s the public support for membership in the EU has always been steady and high - at the level of 70 – 75 %, without almost any changes over time. However, the support was relatively shallow at the same time, since the debate has not been developed properly. Compared to other candidate countries, public support in Slovakia has been about the same as in Hungary but higher than in Poland or the Czech Republic. The high public support has been encouraged by the consensus among major political parties and the country's elite on Slovakia's integration into the EU. However, the part of the explanation for the Slovak's "EU-phoria" lies in the lack of relevant actors who would oppose the membership and/or would highlight also the disadvantages. In general, citizens' expectations of the future economic and social benefits of joining the EU have been high.

Most citizens expected that the main benefit of EU membership would be a general improvement in the country's economy; strengthening Slovakia's international position, and increased funding from EU member states. As far as the disadvantages, people mentioned a growth in the prices of goods and services. This fear has been shared by an increasing number of people as the membership approached (in October 2002 it was 48 %, while a prior it was 29%, Gyárfášová-Velšic, 2003: 234).

People seem to distinguish between the short-term and long-term implications of EU membership for their standard of living. In the first two or three years after Slovakia's accession, most respondents (48%) expect a general deterioration, while only 7% expect an improvement; in the long term, however, the ratio of optimists and pessimists is the opposite (Gyárfášová-Velšic, 2003: 235).

Another way of looking at the expected implications of the country's EU membership is to analyze the public's perception of the impact of accession from the perspective of Slovakia in general, their particular region of Slovakia, and finally themselves and their families. The table below shows that positive expectations decline as the focus shifts from a general to an

⁶ For more detailed analysis see Bilčík 2002 and Bilčík 2003.

individual perspective. On the personal level respondents most frequently stated neutral or negative expectations, as well as the answer “I don’t know.” These findings indicates that people don’t have enough information to form an opinion on how integration will affect them, even though the impact on people’s individual lives is the most decisive factor in their support for EU membership.

Table 2: Expected implications of Slovakia’s EU integration immediately after accession (%)

Expected implications:	Slovakia’s accession to the EU – expected implications for...		
	Slovakia	my region of Slovakia	me and my family
Improvement	31	22	16
No change	23	32	35
Deterioration	40	37	34
I don’t know	6	9	15

Source: ÚVKVM NOC, June 2002.

Pro-integration and anti-integration attitudes are not evenly distributed throughout the Slovak society. Surveys have long shown that Slovakia’s integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions is more frequently supported by younger and middle-age people with university education who feel they are part of the upper class. Whether people endorse or disapprove of integration is also related to their overall level of openness toward the outside world, their interest in public affairs, and their sophistication. In terms of Slovakia’s EU membership, people’s attitudes also reflect expectations of new possibilities on the one hand and fears of negative implications on the other. How people balance the possible gains and losses depends especially on factors such as age, qualification, mobility, adaptability, etc. While the younger generation sees new opportunities in Slovakia’s European future, the older generation perceives it as somewhat of a threat.

However, the greatest differences among people’s attitudes toward integration are determined by their partisan affiliation. The supporters of ruling coalition parties, especially SDKÚ and SMK exhibit prevailing positive attitudes ; adherents of the extreme left and extreme right wing parties (KSS, PSNS, and SNS) exhibit prevailing negative attitudes.

On May 16 and 17 the referendum on EU accession was held in Slovakia. The result was very positive - 93 % of YES votes, however, the turnout was “only” 52 %. Although it was the first valid referendum in Slovakia since 1993⁷, there was a widespread embarrassment regarding relatively low interest of the citizens to show up and to cast their vote on such important issue. The problem of mobilization seems to be the general trend in Central and Eastern European countries⁸. Not only Slovakia has had problems with mobilizing people for the idea that was the symbol celebrated so enthusiastically few years ago.

As for Slovakia, the voting pattern shows that inhabitants of large cities, supporters of coalition parties, middle-aged and elderly participated to a greater extent in the referendum,

⁷ According to the legal requirements for a valid referendum the turnout has to be more than 50% of eligible voters. Referendum on EU accession was the fifth referendum in Slovakia and the first which was valid.

⁸ In Hungary, the turnout in the EU referendum was 46%, in Poland 59 %, and the Czech Republic 55 %.

while those from the marginalized regions tended to stay home more. The outcome also reflects the specific character of the public debate dominated by lack of the competition between *yes* and *no* adherents. In addition to the dissatisfaction with the government and the social situation, which contributed to apathy of a significant part of population. The referendum was mainly perceived as the government's referendum. Unlike in many other crucial votes in Slovakia the NGO sector has not been involved to the extent as before. Moreover, according the NGO representative Kamil Sládek the campaign has been "grey, impersonal, and bureaucratic". (SITA, May 30, 2003).

Nevertheless, the referendum was valid with overwhelming *yes* for the EU. The factors which negatively effected the turnout can be summarized as follows: previous negative experiences with referenda; the decrease of referendum's credibility in the eyes of the citizens; so called voting fatigue due to the frequent elections (general, local elections had been held few months ago), perception of Slovakia as a country which already passed all important tests, critical evaluation of the recent social development; and non- participation as a protest against the government; declarations of politicians that even in the case the referendum is invalid the accession agreement can be ratified by the parliament; non-competitive character of the pre-referendum communication; the strategic decision on part of the opponents not to participate instead of saying "no"; and last but not least weaker mobilization activity by political parties (Mesežnikov 2003).

All in all the voting (and above all – non-voting) has shown that the absence of conflicting positions in regards to membership in the EU. This absence in fruitful discourse has had a demobilizing effect on the voters. However, the debate, which can shape different positions on EU issues and can make also the Slovak voice in the EU heard definitely has to take place.

It is just a beginning

To enter the European Union does not automatically mean full integration, it is "a big step on the journey toward observing common rules and putting concrete measures such as adopting the single currency or joining the Schengen Agreement into practice. For Meeting EU standards will require that Slovakia's domestic institutions and coordinating structures are adequate. Making domestic decision mechanisms more European in nature remains a long-term challenge" (Bilčík 2003: 340).

What are the main critical points of the smooth transition from a candidate country to a full-fledged member? The changes will affect the whole spectrum of issues starting with changing the way of thinking about our own place on the European scene. The EU foreign policy has to be "domestified" and Slovakia has to think more of becoming also a policy contributor not just a recipient. As analyst Vladimír Bilčík points out, even the government's program manifesto itself does not regard Slovakia's integration into the EU primarily as a concern of domestic politics, as it states that co-ordination of the country's European policy as part of its foreign policy will be provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in close co-operation with other central state bodies." (Bilčík 2003: 340).

Problems which demand priority are mostly around the readiness of the state administration and judiciary to implement the EU legislation, competitiveness of the Slovak economy, but also preparedness to adopt to the EU funding policy and utilize the funds. But all in all Slovakia is back in Europe, where it belongs.

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