

titul Unity in the Union
autor Grigorij Mesežnikov
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At the Freedom House conference "Bridging the New East-West Divide," former Prime Minister of Hungary Dr. Viktor Orban, speaking on the challenges of reconciling Euro-Atlantic integration with the national interest, made a number of critical observations about how much Euro-Atlantic institutions have changed since Central Europe's integration process began in 1990. NGO News asked Grigorij Mesežnikov of the Institute for Public Affairs in Bratislava to offer a Slovak perspective of the same process of integration. What follows is his view of the "road back to Europe," along with excerpts from Dr. Orban's remarks.

UNITY IN THE UNION

In November 1989, when thousands of people crowded the main Bratislava square in protest against the communist regime, one of the most popular slogans at public rallies was "Back to Europe."

Although back then not many people in Slovakia had a clear idea about formal aspects of such a "return to Europe," almost all seemed to understand that the gist of it was building the foundations of a social order that had already existed in developed Western European countries. It was quite clear to everybody that the Slovaks must begin to build their new society on the pillars of liberty, independence, democracy, market economy, respect for human rights and personal responsibility.

For most Central and Eastern European countries, the "return to Europe" quickly became a synonym for the endeavour to join a community of states that embodied the idea of a united Europe, namely the European Union (EU). For Slovakia, the general social transformation and the endeavour to join the EU (but also NATO) became two sides of the same coin.

The lofty ideas that were at the root of European integration have never lost their meaning, and since Maastricht they have remained the chief point of reference for all aspirants to EU membership. Their practical approximation to the Union, however, has gradually changed into a process with strict formal rules, players (e.g., institutions and their representatives, politicians and bureaucrats) and technocratic background. For candidate countries, the keyword became compliance as their principal attention had to focus on standards and criteria, quotas and deadlines, numbers of opened and closed chapters. For the Union, the keyword became preparedness as it began to prepare for its eastward enlargement by implementing a series of institutional reforms in order to adapt to changed conditions. But these conditions were changing not only in Europe but in the wider world as well.

“The question of integration into the various international organizations, including the European Union and NATO, was – was – one of the hottest topics in Central Europe until September 11. The popular attitude among Central Europeans toward integration has, at once, remained unchanged and changed considerably. What do we mean by this? For us, I mean, for Hungarians, integration and accession since 1990, as well as membership in international organizations has had two dimensions. The first was the dimension of values. Integration meant that we wanted to belong to a community of values, such as freedom, independence, national sovereignty, democracy, individual responsibility, respect for human and minority rights, private enterprise, and so on. The second is the dimension of institutions. Our attitude toward the former has not changed. Hungarians continue to believe in the same values, and want to be part of the European and the trans-Atlantic community. We would like to be part of it because we feel at home there. But concerning the latter, we have to note the change that has taken place in the institutions themselves. Today the general feeling of Hungarians is that integration has already taken place. But by the time the integration process was completed, the whole world had changed. And, as part of this major change, the very institutions we wanted to join changed as well. As a result, previously unthinkable developments are now facts of life. Let me give you a few examples. Who would have imagined that any NATO member would choose to launch a military action after being attacked without first encouraging and enlisting the full participation of its supportive and sympathetic allies? After September 11, Article 5 was invoked by several NATO members but the subsequent military action failed to take advantage of the unifying effect presented by this opportunity. The need for rapid military action may be understandable, but the loss of long-term strategic cohesion, as is evident now with the disunity within Europe, is an unfortunate and probably unnecessary cost.”

Viktor Orbán

At the recent Freedom House conference entitled, “Bridging the New East West Divide,” Former Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, speaking on the challenges of reconciling integration with the national interest, criticized the most recent stage in the accession process. Now that European integration is finally becoming a reality, he observed, the fundamental rules seem to have changed.

He was right of course. At the beginning of the 90s, when the process of EU accession was launched, no one possibly have predicted that the first former Eastern Bloc countries would sign accession treaties in the same year as one of the most significant, and for the EU internally divisive, events in world politics, the war in Iraq. No one could possibly have anticipated that several weeks before signing accession treaties, all EU candidate countries would take a joint stand contrary to that of two of the largest EU member states, France and Germany, and that this fact – perhaps more than the war in Iraq itself – would launch a fierce debate over the relevance of the transatlantic partnership.

In 2003, the community of European democratic states faces new challenges whose outcomes remain unclear. It is becoming obvious that shaping common policies in certain areas, particularly in the field of foreign policy and security, will be much more difficult than architects of the united Europe ever assumed. It is also true that negotiations between the EU and candidate countries toward the end of the accession process gives ammunition to arguments that the Union’s offer to the current accession states is not overly generous, a point also raised by Prime Minister Orbán at the Budapest conference.

“Another such previously unthinkable development relates to the European Union. We have known it as an institution based on cooperation of equal members. Especially for us, satellites subordinated to what was an oppressive regime, the respect for sovereignty that we observed among the European states was especially attractive. This is one of the reasons why we thought we should join and, indeed, could join it without any particular heading. And what do we see now, as we are entering the EU? Hungary, as a new member, is going to receive 49 Euro per capita out of the common budget, 49 Euro per capita, when Ireland gets 418 Euro per capita or Greece 437 Euro per capita, but our contribution in percentage of the GDP to the common budget is the same. A French farmer, for instance, is going to get four times, four times as much financial support as his Hungarian counterpart in the first year of integration, and 2.5 times as much subsidy from the EU budget during the first ten years after enlargement, which is well known as the most difficult period after joining. So, all members are equal, or so the principle goes, but has Europe become the place where some countries are more equal than others? The problem is that this is all too familiar to the Hungarians, Central Europeans based on the experience of our past 45 years... As I recall, when we first started to dream about joining the European integration process, one key concern of the Europeans themselves was to keep it a community of equal states.”

Viktor Orbán

However, I believe that on the eve of EU enlargement, something else is much more important. Regardless of what one may think about the generosity of financial transfers from the Union to new member states, the benefits of these countries' full-fledged EU membership will clearly outweigh any financial transfers, not only for candidate countries but also for the Union itself. The accession of new member states finally transforms into reality the notion of a united Europe free of dictatorship and military conflicts and built on democracy and co-operation. The most recent accession process confirmed once again that the project of European integration, perhaps the most ambitious project of its kind in Europe's entire history, continues to be a viable initiative able to cope with even the most demanding challenges.

Throughout the 90s, the process of European integration acted as an irreplaceable catalyst of the transition in all post-communist countries. Slovakia is an excellent example of how the process of EU enlargement has fundamentally affected the country's domestic development. The Slovak Republic was the only Visegrad country that after the communist regime's 1989 collapse had to undergo a new struggle for democracy and the principal character of its political regime. Due to its troubled domestic development between 1994 and 1998, Slovakia failed to comply with political criteria for EU and NATO membership and was left outside the first wave of NATO enlargement and the so-called Helsinki group of EU candidate countries.

But seeing the country's integration ambitions jeopardized, the democratic forces galvanized their resistance to the authoritarian government and eventually changed the direction of society's development. The victory of democratic forces in the 1998 elections and subsequent restoration of previous integration positions created favourable conditions for implementation of inevitable reforms in a number of areas. Radical changes in the country's economy, social sphere and constitutional system were implemented parallel to the progress in accession negotiations with the Union.

Yes, the world and especially Europe have changed over the past decade; simultaneously, though, we must not forget that countries standing on the verge of joining the EU have also changed. The decades of communist totalitarianism seriously spoiled these countries' social

capital, which increasingly lagged behind developed western countries. It is difficult to imagine that the process of restoring that capital after the communist regime's collapse in these countries could be so prompt, smooth and successful without the motivating effect of European integration processes.

Along with seven other post-communist countries, Slovakia will join the EU in 2004 as a full-fledged member with a stable institutional system, a sufficient standard of human rights protection and functioning market economy. It is fully understandable that these countries will initially be largely on the Union's periphery; it would be misguided to expect that they could immediately play an equal partner to countries that initiated the process of European integration and have been the main engine behind integration processes for decades. New member states will be able to draw from the common experience of the original member states, providing another strong impetus for their reform processes.

Of ten newcomers that are scheduled to join the Union in 2004, the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic are the youngest countries. In January 1993, they both became independent states and in May 2004, they are expected to surrender a significant part of their national sovereignty in favour of a common Union.

The European idea enjoys an exceptionally strong support in Slovakia. An overwhelming majority of Slovak citizens support their country's accession to the EU. Naturally, they are not indifferent to what kind of a Union their country will join. On the eve of a referendum on EU accession, Slovakia is holding a public debate on the myriad implications that its full-fledged EU membership may bring. Naturally, concerns are voiced too, urging Slovakia's leaders to maintain the country's sovereignty in this or that sphere; however, not a single relevant political party opposes Slovakia's EU membership. For many years, Slovakia's political scene has been strongly polarized but neither politicians nor citizens have ever been divided over the issue of EU membership. Like their V4 neighbours, the Slovaks consider themselves Europeans, and EU membership will only strengthen that feeling.