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## **A New Member State – Political Discourse and Public Perception of the EU: the Case of Slovakia**

Process of European integration has several dimensions. Firstly, it is a process, which unites European nations and states that had in the past quite rich experience with conflicts and wars. Secondly, it is a process of creation of the common political, legal and economic space, providing stability, peace and prosperity in the continent. And thirdly, since the end of eighties, it is a process, which contributed to dismantling the dividing lines inherited by Europe from the age of bipolarity and which helped to transform societies in Central and East European countries.

After the collapse of the communist regimes in 1989 the most popular slogan in CEE countries became the slogan of “Return to Europe”. Although not many people in these countries at that time had a clear idea about what the formal aspects of such a “return to Europe” would entail, almost all seemed to understand that the gist of it was building the foundations of a societal order that had already existed in developed Western European countries. It was quite clear to everybody that the people of these countries must begin to build their society anew and construct it on the pillars of liberty, democracy, market economy, respect for human rights and personal responsibility.

For most Central and East European countries, the “return to Europe” quickly became synonymous with joining a community of states which symbolized the idea of a united Europe. The general social transformation and the endeavor to join the EU (as well as NATO as an organization of collective security) became two sides of the same coin.

### **European Integration and Reform Process in CEE Countries**

The close interconnection between the process of European integration and societal transformation in CEE countries has demonstrated the significance of international factors for development of these countries during a period of crucial societal changes. Jacques Rupnik, French political scientist, noted that „in no other region of the world has the impact of international factors on democratization been so apparent as in Central and Eastern Europe. The prospects of integration into Western institutions began to act as an external democratizing force.”<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rupnik has summarized the four basic dimensions of the Central Europeans’ attempts to become the constituent parts of the united Europe:

1. Cultural: “Central Europeans ...emphasized the shared European culture, civilization and democratic values that had survived crumbling ideologies”
2. Political: “They saw integration into the EU as an indicator of the success and irreversibility of their democratic transition”
3. Economic: “The EU was seen as a club not only of democracies, but also of prosperous countries”

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rupnik: Eastern Europe: The International Context in: Journal of Democracy, April 2000, Volume 11. No. 2, p. 115 - 116

4. Security: “The EU has a more „preventive“(or indirect) security purpose – to create such a web of interdependence among member state as to make conflict unthinkable”.<sup>2</sup>

After the collapse of the communist regimes the nations of CEE countries were confronted with a necessity to carry out fundamental changes in their societies. These groundbreaking changes included the following:

- elimination of the legacy inherited from the communist regimes (a number of deformations). CEE countries passed through the process of political and judicial rehabilitations, property restitutions, screening procedures (lustrations) etc.
- formation of political system based on pluralism and democracy. CEE countries introduced efficient mechanisms of checks and balances, rule of law, multiparty political system, free and fair elections etc.
- creation of functioning system of protection of human and minority rights. All these countries have become members of Council of Europe at the beginning of nineties, all of them ratified the European Convention on Human Rights,
- formation of the modern civil society,
- introduction of principles of market economy (privatization of state-owned property, liberalization of economic relations). As a result of reforms in all post-communist countries the private sector became a dominant sector in the economy as it drives the GDP production.
- introduction of the reform of public administration and decentralization, development of local-government, local democracy and subsidiarity.

Effort to join EU became a tool for deepening the reform processes in CEE countries. Requirements for membership, defined by EU for the applicant countries, served as a set of criteria for reforms in political and socio-economic areas. Consequently, participation of CEE countries in the integration process became a constituent part of their domestic political and public discourse. Not surprisingly, EU became a sort of “domestic political actor” influencing relations between political parties and politicians and shaping public attitudes to EU.

### **Slovakia: How EU Conditionality Worked, EU as a Catalyst of Reforms**

The Slovak Republic is a new EU member state alongside with other nine states which joined EU in May 2004. However its way to the union substantially differed from the integration path of neighboring (Visegrad 4) countries. After the collapse of communist regime in 1989, Slovakia as a part of Czechoslovak Federation started the process of internal political and economic transformation which should led to the inclusion into European integration structures. However, after Slovakia became an independent states, namely in mid-nineties, this process got complicated tremendously.

During the period of 1993 – 1998, the clash over the future character of Slovakia’s political regime became its fundamental problem. The ruling coalition of nationalist

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<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 123 - 124

and populist parties established after the 1994 parliamentary elections has brought the deviant trends in the country's internal development. In general, its activity was aimed at forming a semi-authoritarian regime with elements of non-liberal democracy. Between 1994 and 1998, Slovakia's internal development featured numerous "democratic deficits" that spoiled its ambitions to become a full-fledged member of EU. During the first five years after gaining independence, Slovakia's domestic political situation was characterized by the following features:

- perceptible aggravation of the conflict between main political players;
- efforts to concentrate power in the hands of dominant political forces;
- insufficient stability of institutions;
- power and institutional confrontation;
- general political polarization.

In 1994 – 1998 Slovak Republic as a candidate state was a recipient of many critical messages (demarches) from particular European institutions, including European Commission and European Parliament, in which EU insisted that Slovakia was deviating from the integration path and did not meet criteria for membership in the union. As a result of the mentioned problems Slovakia was not included in 1997 to the list of candidate states which EU started the direct negotiations about membership (the so called "Luxembourg group"). Exclusion of Slovakia from the integration processes lead to high mobilization of those societal and political forces which offered to the public the real alternative to authoritarian and antireform governance. Thanks to creation of the wide pro-democratic and pro-European alliances and as a result of the 1998 parliamentary elections the key power change took place. The broad democratic coalition government was formed, which removed all democratic deficits and launched the ambitious plan of reforms. In 1999 Slovakia started accession negotiations with EU, these negotiations were accompanied by internal reform steps in various areas. The course of reforms was strengthened after 2002 elections, in which center-right parties won and form programmatically homogeneous. In the years 1999 – 2005 the following reforms were implemented in Slovakia: constitutional reform, restructuring the bank sector, privatization of natural monopolies, tax reform, reform of pension system and system of social security, public administration reform, reform of labor law, health care reform, reform of criminal law, military forces reforms. Thanks to EU-conditionality (the so called "integration pressure") Slovakia entered EU as more democratic and decentralized state with free economy and efficient protection of human rights and political freedoms.

### **Slovakia: Political Discourse on EU in the Applicant Country**

For Slovakia as well as for other Central and Eastern European countries the process of European integration acted as an irreplaceable catalyst of democratic and market reforms during the nineties.. Important supportive factor for successful transformation during the accession period was a high popular support for idea of membership in EU. This idea enjoyed an exceptionally strong support in Slovakia. Every government since 1993 declared the goal of becoming a full-fledged EU member a top priority, the support of Slovakia's EU accession has become the main determinant of public opinion in the field of foreign policy orientation and has consistently reached very high values. As an institution, the EU has always enjoyed

a great amount of confidence among Slovak citizens and public opinion polls have repeatedly showed trust in the EU clearly prevailing over distrust.

In 1994-1998, there was a high support for entry into the EU in Slovakia. This was despite the fact there was a significant worsening of Slovakia's position towards the EU as a result of democratic deficits and failure to comply with the political criteria for entry. Slovak Republic was not invited to join the first wave of applicant states with which the EU held accession talks. One could witness a paradoxical situation in Slovakia that time. While the government officially declared its intention to join the EU, it carried out the style of politics in contradiction with this proclaimed goal. The EU institutions criticized the Slovak government for its politics. Yet the population strongly supported Slovakia's membership in the Union. In April 1998, at the end of the term of Vladimir Mečiar's cabinet, the support reached its highest point - 79 percent.

Understandably, direct link that existed between the country's internal policy developments and its position in the EU enlargement caused increased public interest to European integration. As a result citizens and the media perceived the process of EU integration as part of the "internal politics" agenda. During the period of accession, media in Slovakia paid attention mostly to stability of democracy, the approximation of law and compatibility of country's economy with the EU system, and to the progress of governmental institutions in the EU negotiations. Less attention was paid to other issues that take place in the EU.

Such attitude had of course advantages and disadvantages. On one hand, the public awareness about some important aspects of European integration and what it meant for the EU applicant state remained fairly low. On the other hand, it strengthened the citizens' view that the EU integration was a priority task due to internal political development.

The media in Slovakia played dual role in presenting the issues of European integration. First, media provided information on the European integration process and its content and various aspects. Second, they allocated space for presentation of attitudes of politicians to the issues connected with European integration. It was the attitudes of the politicians that had quite important opinion-forming role, as they often gave guidance to citizens, especially to those who support a given political party. Moreover, views presented by politicians were more comprehensible for citizens than analytical expert documents on the European integration that were published in the media.

For attitudes of all relevant political parties in Slovakia a verbal support of the country's membership in the Union was characteristic during the whole accession period. It was even often said that a national consensus in this issue existed. What was a reality?

Survey on the publicized reactions of Slovakia's political parties and their representatives to the so called "communication events" related to the process of Slovakia's integration into EU during the most tough period when Slovakia was criticized by EU for its internal problems (these communication events included sessions of the common integration bodies of EU and SR and results of the debates,

carried out within them, the published statements of the EU organs - European Commission, European Parliament - which regarded the level of preparedness of SR to begin negotiations about Slovakia's entrance into EU, the decisions of EU organs, visits of EU representatives to Slovakia, statements of EU representatives and politicians from key EU member countries) showed that as far as European integration issue, political parties in Slovakia could be that time divided into the two groups. The first was comprised of political formations with a clear pro-integration orientation (the so-called euro-enthusiasts). This parties referred to the following factors justifying the necessity for Slovakia to enter EU:

- Slovakia's cultural and civilization belonging to Europe, adherence to the common values of democracy, rule of law, protection of human rights, free market economy, etc.,
- prevailing orientation of the Slovak economy to the EU markets,
- expected economic advantages connected with the full openness of the EU market for Slovak producers,
- possibility to get financial support from the EU funds designed for new members,
- rise of credibility of the country among foreign investors,
- possibility to influence directly the important decisions of EU organs dealing with Slovakia,
- strengthening the democratic institutions inside the country and more favorable prospects for general stabilization of political life in the country.

Politicians from the “euro-enthusiast” parties agreed with critical evaluation of the different aspects of domestic development in Slovakia by the EU representatives and institutions in the years 1994-1998. There were no negative reactions of these parties to decisions of EU dealing with SR.

The second group consisted of political formations that, despite their officially declared support to the idea of joining the EU, often criticized the integration processes in Europe. Representatives of these “euro-critical” parties quite frequently expressed their negative (or very often, intentionally unclear) opinions on the idea of Slovakia's membership in EU, justified their approach using the following arguments:

- Slovakia is the state that has won its full independence just in recent past and in case of becoming EU member would have to give up the substantial part of its sovereignty,
- process of integration in Europe is advantageous mainly for big states and Slovakia would get into a submissive position being a member of EU,
- integration process is ruled by pragmatic “euro-bureaucracy” that does not take in consideration the peculiarities of cultural and spiritual development of small countries like Slovakia,
- EU is an insufficiently stabilized organization from the point of view of its internal mechanisms, that is why the eventual entrance to EU comprises a big risk for SR,
- excessive ties to cosmopolitan western Europe can threaten “traditional Slovak Christian value orientation”,

- EU does not respect enough the social dimension of economic development and tries to transplant such economic solutions (like “shock therapy”, for example), which are inconvenient for SR,
- EU insufficiently takes into consideration the new social challenges (necessity of struggle against organized criminality and drugs, for example), that is why Slovakia's eventual membership in EU and the broader country's openness toward foreign countries can strengthen the above mentioned social infirmities.

The most controversial feature about relations between SR and EU that time was the level of Slovakia's preparedness for membership in EU. Arguments used by the representatives of the then ruling euro-skeptic parties opposing to statements and decisions of EU and justifying their own attitude among the domestic audience can be summarized as following:

- SR fulfils the criteria for entrance to EU as good as other associated countries,
- EU representatives use for evaluation of SR the “double standard” in comparison with other associated countries, EU demonstrates non-balanced approach,
- EU prefers the political criteria to economic ones,
- EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament) are not sufficiently informed about current development in SR,
- EU bodies obtained information which served as a base for critical evaluation of development in SR, from representatives of the then opposition parties in Slovakia,
- EU does not keep up dialogue with SR on an adequate level,
- critical reactions of EU to the development in Slovakia were the interference to internal affairs of SR,
- EU members themselves do not fulfill the criteria for membership in EU,
- principle of division of associated countries into two groups is not objective

### **Public Perception of EU in Slovakia**

What did Slovak citizens expect of their country's EU membership? Perhaps the most optimistic finding was that their positive expectations prevailed over their fears of possibly negative implications. 61% of them believed that Slovakia would benefit from its EU membership, while 30% believed the contrary and 9% did not have a clear view on the issue. The most widely expected benefits of EU membership included the country's overall economic boost, strengthening its international position, new job opportunities at home, structural assistance from the Union and a possibility to find job in other EU member states. As far as negative expectations, most Slovaks cited a possible price increase, foreign owners taking control of Slovak enterprises, increased pressure on the state budget, restricting the country's state sovereignty and delegating powers from national institutions onto EU organs.

A semantic analysis showed that most Slovak citizens ascribe the following attributes to the European Union: self-confidence, prosperity, democratic spirit, clear perspective, willingness to help others and modernity.

In the referendum on Slovakia's EU accession, 92% of participating voters endorsed the country's EU membership. It was the highest rate of support among all candidate states (turn out was 52%). In absolute terms, 48% of Slovakia's adult population supported its EU membership in the referendum, which was the highest

support rate among the Visegrad countries (followed by Poland's 45%, Czech Republic's 45% and Hungary's 38%). The attitude of Slovak citizens to the EU can be clearly illustrated by their views of Slovakia's co-operation with various countries before accession to EU. When responding to the question of "What countries do you believe Slovakia should intensify its political co-operation with?" 77% respondents cited other V4 countries, 75% EU member states, 57% the United States and 32% mentioned Russia.

How do Slovak citizens perceive today the European Union and position of its own country in the union? What attributions do they ascribe to EU and what advantages or disadvantages from the membership in EU do they see? What is their opinion on further EU enlargement? Public opinion polls revealed that:

- One year after Slovakia's accession to EU 83% of Slovak citizens supported membership in EU (it is the highest support among V4 countries and it is 6% more than year ago - see PP slide 1).
- Substantially higher portion of the respondents considers decision to join EU as good step than those respondents who has and opposite opinion (PP slide 2).
- Interesting shifts occurred in public perception of advantages and disadvantages of membership in EU during the first year of membership. The impact of the initial experience to peoples views is evident (PP slides 3, 4 a 5)
- Slovaks consider EU as more democratic entity than their own country (PP slide 6).
- EU has high credit among Slovak citizens. Slovaks ascribe to EU more positive attributions that to their own countries (PP slide 7)
- Degree of self-confidence of Slovaks as citizens of a new member state increased, however it still lower than average self-confidence of EU citizens (PP slide 8).
- Slovaks are quite comfortable with the idea of EU constitution (PP slide 9), they should vote yes in referendum should it be held (PP slide 10).
- High level of confidence to European parliament was not transformed into the high turnout in the first EP elections in Slovakia in June 2004 (PP slide 11)
- Slovaks make difference between further applicant countries, main reason can be their personal experience (PP slide 12)