



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia political briefing:
Slovakia celebrates its 15th anniversary of joining the European
Union
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EU celebrates 15th anniversary of its largest expansion to date. On May 1, 2004, ten countries joined the European Union in the bloc's largest single expansion to date. The new member states were Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. According to the European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker the decision in 2004 to embrace ten European countries was a great moment for the European continent and a great moment in history. From the perspectives of Slovakia, despite a thorny path to the European family, it is important to consider becoming a part of the EU an important cornerstone that has defined Slovakia's political orientation

The EU evaluates the 2004 enlargement mostly positively:

On 1 May 2019, the European Union (EU) celebrated the 15th anniversary of its first enlargement to include post-communist states in East Central Europe. Some of the statements made on the occasion reflect a particular understanding of the significance of eastern enlargement, namely in terms of the re-unification of the European continent. For example, European Council President Herman Van Rompuy claimed that “finally Europe had become ‘Europe’ again”.

Moreover, such an interpretation resonates with the academic debate about the EU's motivation for its eastern enlargement. This debate suggests that although calculations of the costs and benefits of enlargement played an important role both for the EU members and the then applicant countries, this is not the whole story. Material cost-benefit calculations determined Member State preferences towards enlargement; and the costs for the incumbents explain why the enlargement process took so long and why the accession treaties were rather unfavorable to the new Member States. Yet the EU's collective decision to enlarge eastwards despite the costs involved for some of the Member States – each of which has the power to veto enlargement – can only be fully understood when taking account of the EU's self-ascribed identity as a pan-European community of democracies.

According to figures released by the European Commission, the bloc will, by 2020, have invested €365.2 billion in these ten countries since their accession. Since their accession, GDP per capita — which divides a country's gross domestic product by its total population — has

risen in all these countries. Baltic countries — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — seem to have benefitted the most with GDP per capita doubling in all of them. Unemployment meanwhile has declined in every country except Cyprus where it shot up from 4.9% in 2004 to 11.1% in December 2018.

Population changes present a more nuanced picture. The bloc counted 457 million inhabitants in 2004, whereas over 512 million people now live in the EU. The difference can partly be explained by the accession of three other member states since then — Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 and Croatia in 2013 as well. But in six of the ten countries which joined the bloc in 2004, the number of inhabitants has decreased. These are Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia.

EU discourse has strongly associated the 2004 enlargement with overcoming the division of the continent. The enlargement process made a positive contribution to reducing the east-west gap in democracy, even if the role that the EU can play beyond locking in endogenous democratic reforms should not be overstated. EU institutions are even more constrained in sanctioning democratic backsliding in member states after accession, but 15 years after enlargement, there is no general deterioration of democracy in new Member States.

Fifteen years after the first eastern enlargement, attitudes towards further enlargement have become more negative. However, these changing attitudes cannot be attributed to the impact that enlargement had on the functioning of the EU, either with regard to decision-making or the implementation of common policies. Instead, signs of an ‘enlargement fatigue’ are partly due to structural difficulties in the current candidates that make it more challenging to meet the requirements for EU accession. More worryingly, they are also partly government responses to perceived cultural threats and anti-immigration sentiments in public opinion.

Situation in Slovakia:

As it was mentioned, Slovakia has been a member of the European Union since May 1, 2004. The country became a member of the club together with nine other countries, most of which were eastern European.

We can consider this step as a success story, because Slovakia today is already a member of the Eurozone and the Schengen Area. Slovakia's membership in the EU also guarantees the principles of the rule of law and other democratic standards. Joining the EU meant the fulfillment of fundamental national ambitions to integrate Slovakia into the family of the most

developed European countries, which are anchored in the traditions of humanism, dignity, freedom and peaceful coexistence. EU membership allows Slovakia to plan its future. Furthermore, Slovakia has become a reliable partner of the EU.

The membership of the Slovak Republic in the Euro-Atlantic and European structures is the main determinant of its international position in that it provides adequate opportunities to influence, in line with Slovakia's interests, those international decisions and processes which have an immediate impact on the quality of life of our citizens.

The European Union is the main context which influences everyday life and developments in Slovakia. The anchorage of Slovakia in the European Union enables its citizens to feel safe politically, economically and socially.

The Slovak governments, as governments of certainties for citizens, actively support and further all efforts aimed at ensuring a permanently sustainable development of Europe based on balanced growth, price and monetary stability, and a highly competitive social and environmental market economy. The objective is to improve the quality of life for citizens through high employment, social development, corresponding standards of environmental protection, and strong support of scientific and technological progress.

The European Union represents the primary context for the pursuit of Slovakia's key interests. The governments analyze experiences gained so far and set priorities for Slovakia's future activities in the EU. It bases their considerations on the fact that, upon accession to the Schengen area, adoption of the single European currency and termination of the transitional periods for the free movement of workers, Slovakia has attained the maximum degree of integration.

Slovakia supports decision-making processes based on the common approach of Member States and EU institutions in taking decisions on the rules for the functioning of the EU. The country pays particular attention to the horizontal and multi-annual strategic EU issues which have a direct impact on the implementation of critical tasks in the area of public finance, economy, regional and social development, security and foreign policy of the Slovak Republic. It will focus, among other things, on the implementation of the Europe 2020 strategy, stabilization of the financial environment and the euro, on ways to support further deepening of the single market, on the development of strategies aimed at enhancing energy security, as well as on EU external relations within the context of Slovakia's foreign-policy priorities.

Slovakia has tried to be a responsible and constructive partner within the Eurozone. In view of the debt problems in the Eurozone, it considers enhanced coordination of fiscal policies essential. Based on a thorough analysis experience gained hitherto from Slovakia's membership in the EU, the country will reassess the implementation of policies and instruments for social and regional cohesion and improve the conditions for the effective uptake of EU funds as an important tool for economic, regional and infrastructural development. It strives to include all beneficiaries of support from the structural and cohesion funds in a discussion on the development of policies in this area.

However, the success story of the Union has been overshadowed by a number of crises and terrorist attacks, which populists use to their advantage. Therefore, the European Parliament elections in May 2019 are crucial. These elections are a unique opportunity to influence the future of the EU, because the power of a MEP seat is bigger than many may think.

Good news is that the turnout for the May 25 European Parliament elections may be higher in Slovakia than previous years. About 20 percent of Slovaks would certainly cast their ballot, according to the recent Eurobarometer report.

In addition, a further 19 percent of Slovaks said they would probably participate the EP elections. As a result, altogether 39 percent of Slovaks are interested in the election, what is very positive in a comparison with the last election held in 2014, when the turnout was the lowest in the EU, with only 13.05 percent of eligible voters coming to polling stations. The highest interest in EP elections is among age groups of 25-39 years and over 55 years. The interest is higher in the case of men and university-educated people. It seems that, finally, Slovak citizens understand the importance of the upcoming European Parliament elections.

Slovakia currently has 13 seats in the EP, which are distributed among eight parties. However, it is hard to say how many seats each party would get as it depends on the actual turnout and the total number of votes. Slovakia should have 14 seats after the upcoming EP elections and according to the recent opinion polls it would be also distributed among eight political parties. Bad news for the country is that the far-right People's Party – Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) would score highly in the EP elections.

Even though the election would be won by the senior ruling party Smer-SD, which would win the support of 21.6 percent of the vote, ĽSNS would follow with 12.9 percent. We must add that the preferences for the ĽSNS are slightly overestimated though. Everything will depend on the party's ability to mobilize its voters for this type of election.

The opposition Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party would come third with 11.3 percent, according to the polls. Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OLaNO), Sme Rodina (We Are Family), the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the coalition of Progressive Slovakia and Spolu (Together) would also win seats in the EP, with preferences oscillating between 11 and 8 percent. The Slovak National Party (SNS) would be the last party to pass the 5-percent threshold, and win the seats in the EP. In any case the EP elections in May 2019 will be very important for the country as well as for the European Union.