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EUROPESSIMISM, EUROSCEPTICISM AND POPULISM IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: CASE OF SLOVAKIA

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Five years passed since the last most robust EU enlargement in 2004, which were a period of important internal developments within the EU – it was time of adaptation of new member states to their full-fledged membership (in political, economic and social areas), adaptation of the old member states to the enlarged union and to its new members, and efforts to elaborate the new regulations and rules for the process of deepening the EU integration (it is still unfinished business – Constitutional Treaty was not accepted due to failure of plebiscites in France and Netherland, and the Reform (Lisbon) Treaty is still not valid because of political troubles in Ireland, Czech Republic, Poland and Germany (the reasons, however, are different in each of the mentioned countries). Central European (as well as Baltic) states entered Schengen zone at the end of 2007, two of them – Slovenia and Slovakia – also introduced the common European currency.

Today – together with Slovenia – Slovakia is the most integrated part of the former communist block into the EU. Only one exclusion exists – provisional limitations at the labor markets of four old member states (Austria, Germany, Belgium and Denmark), which makes Slovakia's status different from the old member states. In all other areas, including membership in Schengen zone and Euro-zone, Slovakia has the same status. Having in mind that a decade ago Slovakia suffered from its backwardness in the integration process, it is, undoubtedly, a remarkable fact which should not be underestimated. However, some broader questions arise as far as Slovakia's European future are concerned.

What are the reasons of the country's integration successes? What are the consequences of EU membership for the population and political actors? Are Slovaks and their current political representatives the real, genuine Euro-optimists? Who are the genuine Slovak Euro-skeptics? Do they really exist in the country championing the list indicating the level of trust to EU and its institutions? Is it really the fact that the biggest populists are the most vocal Euro-skeptics or Euro-pessimists or the situation is quite opposite?

Let me mention one example to illustrate Slovakia's peculiarity. Official campaign for the elections to the European Parliament was launched on Saturday, May 16, but few weeks before a coalition of two parties has installed its billboard throughout Slovakia as a part of the image campaign (however in visible way connected with the forthcoming elections). The slogan on the billboard was "Slovakia first, and Europe after". The assumption that this billboard belonged to the most populist or nationalist political force would be wrong. Billboards that expresses the preference of motherland Slovakia at the expense of Europe were installed by, maybe, the least

populist force in the country, so non-populist that it failed to address in public opinion polls more than 0,3%. It is a coalition of two salon conservative groups – party Conservative Democrats of Slovakia (KDS), which is political formation of Christian conservatives and Civic Conservative Party (OKS), group of civic conservatives. Representatives of both formations played a role of leading persons in Velvet Revolution of 1989 and were among proponents of initial systemic reforms. After Mečiar’s government was removed from the office, these politicians helped to renew country’s integration positions and to launch important sector reforms. Today, politically and electorally almost irrelevant, these people claimed Slovak citizens to favour more their national state than EU and European integration. Both parties opposed ratification of Lisbon Treaty, arguing that deepening the integration process not only would worsen positions of new member states in the Union, but also would endanger democratic character of political order in Europe.

But who are the post “pro-European” political forces today in Slovakia? Ironically enough, among them there are two parties which systematically destroyed fundamentals of liberal democratic regime while serving as ruling parties in mid-90s (HZDS/Movement for a Democratic Slovakia of Vladimir Mečiar and SNS/Slovak National Party, the radical nationalist formation) and the biggest political formation, the self-declared social democratic party (Smer-SD), which blamed the previous government in betrayal of national interests during the accession process, accusing then the ruling coalition of doing integration policies being on its “knees” under the dictate from EU. Among the most “pronounced” Slovak Euro-optimists are nationalist and populist formations.

How could it happen?

For better understanding of EU integration discourse in Slovakia we have to take into account three basic elements:

1. Slovakia’s accession story to the EU in the context of overall post-communist transformation, pre- and post-accession developments,
2. performance of political actors,
3. public attitudes to the EU, perception, evaluation, level of trust etc.

During the pre-accession period Slovakia became an object of EU-conditionality in both of its modes – positive and negative.

– Slovakia was the only associated state which did not fulfill political criteria as a result of internal institutional instability and authoritarian tendencies. It was the only Central European country in which after the collapse of communism the alternation of liberal and illiberal democracy occurred. In mid-90s Slovakia was disqualified to be a member of EU as well as NATO.

- Risk of the total failure in the integration process mobilized democratic part of the electorate to support pro-European political forces. This made possible the principle political change in 1998. Since that time many people in Slovakia have fixed in their minds this ties – between necessity of positive changes in internal

democracy and the EU. This narrative is very strong, despite all efforts of the current ruling parties to diminish it or to change the accents.

- After integration chances were restored, during the short period of time the radical sector's reforms were launched in Slovakia. Some of these reforms (tax, pension, labor law etc.) even went by its liberal character beyond the framework given by the European social model. It is another quite important narrative in Slovakia – in order to be in Europe we had to implement profound reforms.

Important factor, indeed, is the public attitude. Trust to EU and its institutions as well as support for country's membership in EU are extraordinary high in Slovakia. Slovakia is one of the most Euro-optimistic countries in the whole union. Before 2004, the year of Slovakia's accession to the EU, no real relevant Euro-skeptic (or anti-European) parties operated in the country. To be openly against the EU membership at that time would mean for any serious party or politician to commit political suicide. Even such parties as authoritarian HZDS and radical nationalist SNS, which caused Slovakia's disqualification in the integration process, or anti-systemic KSS/Communist party of Slovakia and confessional conservative KDH/Christian Democratic Movement – all these parties officially supported the country's membership in the EU, albeit the practical politics of some of these parties or some key postulates of their ideological and programmatic credos either differed from the EU principles/policies or directly contradicted to them.

In Slovakia, the EU accession process and subsequent EU full-fledged membership created a situation that may be described as a dominance of European standards in the process of elaborating and pursuing policies in a number of areas (the overall modus operandi of the country's constitutional system, respect for human and minority rights, social policy, select sectors of macroeconomic policy, foreign and security policy etc.). This factor affects activities of political parties and determines their attitudes to tackling social problems.

So, conclusion can be made, that there is no serious political as well as social background – at least for the time being – for the relevant Euro-skeptic politics in Slovakia. All attempts to import and subsequently to implant the models of Euro-skepticism or Euro-pessimism from outside into Slovakia's political discourse were unsuccessful. Important factor was indeed that European partners of all Slovak parliamentary parties are not Euro-skeptic (PES, EPP).

Slovakia's entrance to the EU in 2004 coincided in time with two important trends in society:

1. increasing tendency in the area of socio-economic developments (high rate of GDP growth, influx of FDI, decline of unemployment, rise of employment, domestic consumption growth etc.).

2. strengthening positions of nationalist and populist political forces, which succeeded to mobilize their electorate in the parliamentary elections of 2006 and formed the new ruling coalition after the elections.

Both tendencies were directly related to the EU accession process and the operation of EU-conditionality mechanism.

The rise of Slovakia's economy was a result of:

- radical improvement of country's status as a stable area for economic activities by the very fact that it was accepted by EU as a hopeful candidate for membership,
- numerous sector's reforms, which improved the business environment and were introduced by the pro-reform forces with the justification that their implementation were needed for completing the accession process and without these reforms the fast gaining of membership is not possible.

Strengthening of populist and nationalist forces should be understood on one hand as a reaction of part of the population to impact of reforms, on the other hand as a consequence of the shifts within the party system, namely in the area of interactions between particular parties. These shifts can be attributed to the fact that since Slovakia's EU accession the intensity of EU-conditionality has decreased, particularly at the level of party politics, including parties' coalition strategies. In other words, 'mainstream' political actors are simply tending to ignore the factor of international (or European) acceptance (or non-acceptance) of their coalition alliances with radical, nationalist and populist parties, which was one of the basic reasons why a ruling coalition comprising populist and nationalist parties was formed in Slovakia after the 2006 parliamentary elections.

Since Slovakia's EU accession, there have been no relevant direct attempts by nationalist and populist parties to portray European standards applied in Slovakia as restrictions to democracy. This situation has not changed after the most recent parliamentary elections in 2006.

Firstly, public endorsement of the country's EU membership sustains at relatively high levels and a majority of the population positively views initial experiences with country's EU membership. A very important factor in this respect is that Slovakia is benefiting from the European solidarity model. Drawing extensive financial aid from EU funds often helps even the most remote rural areas where local leaders appreciate investments into infrastructure development. In this situation, presenting Slovakia's EU membership and European norms in an unambiguously negative light would mean contradicting a majority opinion.

Secondly, the nationalist and populist parties are currently in government. The executive responsibility forces them to take into consideration the EU membership and integration factor. For example Fico's government kept the line drawn by the previous government in fulfilling Maastricht criteria as a pre-condition to enter Euro-zone.

Due to development in the previous years when the center-right administration introduced important structural reforms, the expert (and partially the public) discourse in Slovakia portrayed EU as a factor that limited in some areas the implementation of more radical socio-economic reforms, particularly in the field of taxation, labor law, social policy, etc. Since the main proponents of these radical

(‘neo-liberal’) reforms between 1998 and 2006 were the center-right ruling parties and their main opponents were either left or populist and nationalist opposition parties, these parties forming the incumbent administration today are unable to play the open anti-reform and the open anti-EU card at the same time. In this area they are using rather „pro-EU“ card, criticizing their opponents that their „neo-liberal“ policies in the previous years allegedly contradicted to values and principles of the European social model (now they even interpret in the same manner the reasons of the global financial crisis). This is most likely a specific feature of Slovakia, which in this form cannot be found in other post-communist countries.

Indeed, reservations regarding certain trends originating in the EU have been raised by some political forces whose representatives present themselves as defenders of “Slovakia’s national interests”. Here we can identify two basic approaches to the argumentation: the traditionalist and the modernist ones.

The adherents of the ‘traditionalist’ approach emphasize inevitability of preserving traditional (ethno-national or religious) social values that they see as threatened by boundless European secularism and liberalism. In the cultural-ethical area, their reservations focus mostly on the EU’s liberal positions on reproductive rights, bio-ethical agenda, the role of religion and church in society; here, the most radical objections have been presented by the conservatives, mostly Christian Democratic Movement (KDH).

The proponent of the ‘modernist’ approach criticize the EU for inflexibility in dealing with globalization challenges, inadequate reactions to signals about the need for the Union’s internal reform and insufficient emphasis on market mechanisms. In the field of economy, their reservations are aimed against basic elements of the European social model that are criticized for excessive etatism, planning and redistribution, but also against planned harmonization of taxation rules. This criticism is most frequently presented by some prominent liberally-oriented economists and representatives of center-right parties, e. g. the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ-DS), extra-parliamentary minor Civic Conservative Party (OKS), but also some people from the KDH that otherwise stand primarily on the traditionalistic platform.

So far, neither traditionalist nor modernist criticism of the EU has gained intensity that might be used as a tool for open voter mobilization. Likewise, it has not yet taken on the form of anti-European resentment and has not gone beyond the limit of rational formulations. A serious limitation factor is that main stream parties’ voters are too EU-oriented, as a result of which excessive criticism of the EU might easily turn counterproductive in terms of maintaining or increasing voters support.

Considering different reactions to EU integration process on political level we should address not only the question of Euro-skeptic politics and its impact to the society, but also a sort of mimicry (imitation) of Euro-optimism, which decorates the policies that often contradict the EU norms, rules and values. It is a case of the parties of current ruling coalition in Slovakia, whose declared “Euro-optimism” can be labeled rather as the “situational quasi-Euro-optimism”.