

### Highlights

- ★ Slovakia might be perceived as a “latecomer” in preparing for EU accession only in the 1990s, but it caught up rapidly. Among its chief objectives was for Slovaks to achieve higher living standards and gain an external system of checks and balances, which would improve the country’s democratic processes and public administration.
- ★ The country today faces the “Slovak paradox”, a reflection of a high enthusiasm for the EU and very low participation in European elections. There is little discussion in Slovakia about the EU’s future and Slovakia’s role in it. Taking a utilitarian perspective of passive consumption of EU policies, the overarching narrative is “being *part of*” the EU, rather than “being” the EU.
- ★ A European Social Model would help further legitimise the EU in Slovakia as it would aim to address the issues of unemployment and inefficiencies in public services and healthcare. Relatedly, a Fiscal Union with strong accountability mechanisms carries favour with Slovaks.

### Building Bridges project

This paper is part of the Building Bridges Paper Series. The series looks at how the Member States perceive the EU and what they expect from it. It is composed of 28 contributions, one from each Member State. The publications aim to be both analytical and educational in order to be available to a wider public. All the contributions and the full volume *The European Union in The Fog* are available [here](#).



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### About Building Bridges

Called “Building Bridges Between National Perspectives on the European Union”, the project aims to stimulate the public debate around national experts on the relationship between their Member State and the EU and on the future of the Union. This project confronts their visions with others’ from different member states, but also those of people from different horizons via workshops in Warsaw, Madrid, Paris and Brussels, which took place in 2015 gathering experts and local citizens.

The project is coordinated by the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) with three major partners: the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Real Instituto Elcano and EUROPEUM—European Institute for European Policy. The project has also benefited from the support of institutes in each Member State.

You can find all the information and publications about the project at this address: <http://www.ifri.org/en/recherche/zones-geographiques/europe/projet-building-bridges>.



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## **What does your country hope to gain from its membership to the European Union?**

Belonging to the Soviet bloc left a discrepancy between Slovakia's national identity - linked to the belonging to the West - and the post-Velvet Revolution reality of Vladimír Mečiar's semi-authoritarian government in the 1990s. In the context of the 2004 enlargement process, Slovakia was rather late in its integration into both NATO and the EU, posing a challenge to Slovak society's self-perception as a European country.<sup>1</sup> If Slovakia was indeed a "latecomer" to the EU family, its accession process was marked by a rapid adaptation to the accession negotiation conditions and modernisation programme. Led by the subsequent pro-Western coalition of Mikuláš Dzurinda,<sup>2</sup> Slovak citizens were driven by the hope of higher living standards and more opportunities for economic growth. Moreover, they saw the EU as a benchmark for economic and democratic norms.

A year after the accession, for Slovak citizens, the EU mostly meant the freedom to work and travel anywhere within the EU, as well as economic prosperity and peace. The euro was - and continues to be - one of the strongest symbols of the EU in Slovakia. The economic and debt crisis created a shift in the Slovak perception of the EU, however, their trust in its institutions remains. The EU maintains a positive image in Slovakia, albeit with an upward shift in the number of citizens who perceived it negatively in mid-2011 (23% - an 11 point change since the end of 2009) and a 5% increase in those who find its image neutral (42%).<sup>3</sup> The EU's slip from Slovak pedestal can be attributed to several events: the Greek sovereign debt crisis and the EU's strategy for handling it, followed by the Ukrainian and the refugee crises, and most recently the terrorist

attacks in Paris. Despite a drop in the levels of trust Slovak citizens place in the European Union since 2010, EU membership continues to be perceived as an important economic and political framework for Slovak society. In 2011, 72% of Slovaks felt they had benefitted from EU membership. In 2014, 75% of Slovaks considered the free movement of people, goods and services within the EU to be the most positive result of their country's membership in the EU.<sup>4</sup> "Peace among the Member States of the EU" was identified by 47% of Slovaks as one of the positive results of membership,<sup>5</sup> as well as benefitting from improved consumer rights and cheaper roaming fees.<sup>6</sup>

When thinking about values that the EU represents, peace, democracy, solidarity, and human rights top the Slovak list, all four well above the EU-average.<sup>7</sup> "Solidarity" has been a value much debated in Slovakia and outside of it, especially in the context of both the Greek and refugee crises. When considering Slovak perceptions of the EU, solidarity could be seen through the prism of the EU acting as a normative leader. A 2009 study revealed, for example, a positive correlation between "solidarity" and levels of trust in national institutions in (then) new EU member states with a socialist past. When compared to older EU members, trust in domestic political institutions was three times lower in newer member states. Moreover, citizens of the states entering the EU in the 2004 enlargement seem to trust the EU institutions more than they trust their national political institutions.<sup>8</sup> The latter remains the case in the Slovak Republic. For instance, a majority of Slovak citizens (51%) agree that more decisions ought to be taken at the EU-level.<sup>9</sup>

Corruption is still a pervasive problem. Slovakia ranks 54<sup>th</sup> out of 175 countries investigated by Transparency International,

leaving it at the very end of the EU and Western Europe cluster – number 26 out of 31 countries.<sup>10</sup> Petty corruption strongly influences one’s satisfaction with democracy.<sup>11</sup> It directly affects citizens’ lives via healthcare, the judicial system, policing efforts, the work of inspectors, and education. It is striking that these are the issues of most concern to Slovak citizens in comparison to the rest of the European member states, showing that Slovak perception of widespread domestic corruption is well above the EU average.<sup>12</sup>

accountability, functioning, and transparency of all branches of power.

**Do you think that the European Union appears to be a clear project in your country? If not, what are the main reasons?**

Despite growing competences of the only directly elected EU institution - the European Parliament (EP) - along with an increasing number of venues for the public to participate in the decision-making processes, citizens’

What does the EU mean to you personally? <sup>7</sup>			
Slovakia (05/2005 and 11/2015)			
2005			2015
19%	Freedom to travel, study and work anywhere in the EU		17%
11%	Euro		15%
	Economic prosperity		
10%	Peace	Not enough control at the external borders	10%
9%	More crime		
8%	Democracy	Waste of money	8%
		Bureaucracy	
		More crime	
6%	Stronger say in the world		7%
	Cultural diversity		
		Peace	
5%	Waste of money	Unemployment	5%
	Bureaucracy	Economic prosperity	
4%	Loss of our cultural identity		3%
	Social protection		2%

Figure 1 Comparison between 2005 and 2015 in Slovakia to the question "What does the EU mean to you personally?" (Source: Eurobarometer)

By becoming EU citizens, Slovaks had hoped to gain an external system of checks and balances, whereby the soft power of the EU would have held a mirror up to the internal democratic processes and public administration. The EU was seen as an entity able to incur positive change in the

active involvement in the democratic process at the EU level is weaker and weaker. Turnout in the elections to the EP has been on a declining trend ever since its first elections in 1979. A democratic deficit has been accredited to the EU’s remoteness from its citizens - the lack of a European *demos*, a shared identity, a European

public sphere, and a common language. Almost eight out of ten Europeans feel that the EU needs a clearer message, Slovakia ranking a bit below the EU average.<sup>13</sup>

Joining the EU and adopting the euro have been seen as two milestones denoting Slovakia's successful democratisation process and transition into a free market economy. The debate at the time was not centred on *if* the country should join the EU, but *how* - reforming the economy was a sacrifice Slovakia was willing to make to complete the accession requirements and catch up with the rest of the 2004 candidate countries. The EU re-entered Slovak public discourse at the end of 2008 and 2009 when Slovakia joined the Economic and Monetary Union and adopted the euro. From spring 2010 onwards, the Greek debt crisis compelled Slovak political parties to take a position on an EU issue for the first time. The central narrative of the debate was European solidarity and the question of fairness in providing financial assistance to Greece.<sup>14</sup> At the end of 2011, Iveta Radičová's centre-right government was given a vote of no-confidence, which was coupled with the vote for providing financial assistance to Greece through the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF). The Greek bailout was a sensitive topic for the Slovak public, as it was communicated through an image of fiscally responsible Slovakia being pressured into reallocating resources to an "irresponsible" member state (Greece), whose citizens' incomes are much higher than that of the average Slovak.<sup>15</sup> The financial package was also perceived as a breach into Slovak sovereignty and a direct intrusion into the Slovak taxpayer's wallet. Questioning the relationship with the EU began at this point, as European topics slowly made it into Slovak public arena.<sup>16</sup>

Discussing Europe is mostly confined to the circle of political and business elites. In the public sphere, however, the EU is at times discussed as a source of income to the state finances and as "a 'scapegoat' if something goes wrong at the national level, or else as an excuse for unpopular decisions taken by national leaders."<sup>17</sup> The lack of transparency and the corruption related to the use of the EU's Cohesion and Structural Funds pervade to the detriment of public deliberation on strategic investment.<sup>18</sup> There is little public discussion on just how Slovakia could proactively initiate policies at the EU level or become a thought leader in certain policy areas. Slovak politicians still discuss the EU as something to benefit from, rather than to contribute to. Slovakia will hold its first Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2016. A function which has not made significant news in Slovakia yet, despite preparations starting already in 2012.

Slovakia holds the record for the lowest participation in the history of supra-national elections, as only 13.05% of the population cast their vote in the 2014 EP elections.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, the 2003 referendum on Slovakia's accession to the EU had the highest participation in the history of Slovak referenda as more than half of eligible voters went to the poll.<sup>20</sup> High enthusiasm for the EU and low participation now denoted as the "Slovak paradox", serves as a reflection of Slovak citizens' disconnection to domestic political actors and the political debate they are able to facilitate. Gyárfášová attributes low turnout to the political parties' perception of the EP elections as inferior. Voters' perspectives are shaped by the "frustration with national politics, diffused dissatisfaction and dis-attachment" alongside the scant interaction of Slovak Members of the

European Parliament (MEP) in their domestic constituencies.<sup>21</sup> The lack of a healthy debate about Slovakia as an integral part of the Union with capacities to proactively contribute to the decision-making processes leaves Slovak citizens feeling paralysed. Despite a strong Slovak Parliament, policies are shaped mostly at the level of experts from the government, with little direct civic input.<sup>22</sup>

### **Which degree of integration seems adequate to the position and ambitions of your country both politically and economically?**

A political union in the form of a European federation does not seem to be an optimal outcome in the eyes of the Slovak public, even though the country finds itself on the pro-federation side of the EU average.<sup>23</sup> When asked about what their desired objectives are in the development of the EU, Slovak respondents prioritise improving living standards for all EU citizens, developing the EU's economy and boosting growth, followed by maintaining peace and stability, and protecting European citizens against the negative effects of globalisation.<sup>24</sup>

The 2012-2016 manifesto of the Slovak government speaks of a clear pro-European strategy. The EU should act as the "primary context for the pursuit of Slovakia's key interests," in favour of deeper political and economic integration.<sup>25</sup> The document notes several key priorities in the scope of Slovak foreign and European policy, such as implementation of the "Europe 2020" objectives, deepening the Single Market and stabilisation of the Eurozone and financial environment. Security and defence are mainly contextualised within an EU-NATO-Slovakia triangle. Support for increased cooperation between member states on migration, defence, and security is also reflected in public opinion

polls. In terms of economic integration, Slovakia continues to be a pro-European member, endorsing the banking union, completion of the Single Market and increased coordination of budgetary policies.<sup>26</sup> The EU regulating financial services (e.g. Financial Transaction Tax), fines for member states in debt, and overseeing state budgets are seen as effective ways to deal with the financial and economic crisis. At the end of 2014, Slovak public opinion was in favour of Economic and Monetary Union (79%), and 71% of respondents felt banking union would also be needed.<sup>27</sup>

The accession of the Western Balkan countries to the EU and a stable Eastern neighbourhood are two key foreign policy priorities for Slovakia. On its eastern border, Slovakia tries to balance support for Ukrainian sovereignty and its economic interests with Russia. Although public opinion condemns the Russian breach of Ukrainian sovereignty,<sup>28</sup> the Slovak public does not deem it necessary to change Slovak relations with Russia. The EU's imposed economic sanctions are seen as indirectly harmful for the Slovak economy.<sup>29</sup> Slovakia is still dependent on Russian gas, hence the diversification of energy resources, alternative energy sources, and innovation are considered pivotal. This explains Slovakia's support for the Energy Union.

Even before the outbreak of the refugee crisis, Slovaks had been wary of the economic and cultural impact of immigration on their society. The percentage of immigrants in Slovakia is low (4%), contrary to the average estimate citizens, themselves, make (9.4%).<sup>30</sup> A June 2015 survey asked respondents whether Slovakia should receive refugees from the Middle East and North Africa based on the quotas proposed by the EU. 70.1% of the respondents said "No", out of which 33.8%

answered “Absolutely not”. 63.4% of the respondents see the refugees as a threat to Slovak national security.<sup>31</sup> Prime Minister Fico has taken a firm stance against the quotas, vocally refusing to take in the 2287 refugees the country should welcome under the EU quota-system, and has agreed to accept only 200 Syrian asylum seekers, under the condition that they be Christian. Slovakia is challenging the decision on the relocation of the incoming refugees at the European Court of Justice. Apart from several civic-led initiatives, welcoming support for and offering aid to the refugees, the discourse has taken nationalistic and populist tones. The fears and concerns of citizens have played a key role in the campaign for the Parliamentary elections in March 2016, notably resulting in 8.64% votes given to the nationalist Slovak National Party and 8.04% to far-right radical People’s Party of Marian Kotleba.

**According to you, how could we strengthen the idea of belonging to a common European public sphere among your national citizens?**

There are many barriers to a shared European public sphere, which have to do with the nature of the Union decision-making processes itself. In practice, the EU is an entity whose legitimacy primarily stems from the accountability of national governments to their domestic constituency. Member states’ interests are represented in the Council, and ought to reflect domestic support for the decisions made at the EU level. The growing role of the EP resonates only slightly among the EU citizens.

Slovak public sphere is mostly only involved in EU matters when European topics have a visible and immediate effect on the daily life of Slovak citizens. Political parties espouse few opinions on shared European questions, or merely resort to declarative statements with

scarce content.<sup>32</sup> The overarching narrative is “being *part of*” the EU, rather than “being” the EU. Deliberation on European matters is confined to closed circles of professional decision-makers, mostly exempting the public and social partners.

Over half of Slovak citizens feel that they are not well informed of European matters, and less than half feel that they understand how the EU works - both indicators being somewhat above the EU average.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Slovak citizens feel the need to have more information about the functioning of the European institutions embedded in the school curriculum. Demand for information on European topics exists, however, the media and political elites are hesitant to create a more meaningful conversation. A new approach in civic education, would therefore be constructive.

There is also a case for building a European sphere among those citizens who have lived and worked in another EU member state for a while, or have been in touch with citizens of other member states.<sup>34</sup> Not only does this break down the barriers between cultural differences, fostering understanding and acceptance of a different way of living, it also forces the involved parties to reflect on their own identities and practices. Exchanges in higher education, such as the Erasmus Plus programme for both students and teachers, can bring promising results in fostering a “European” identity. The Erasmus programme is considered by Slovaks as the fourth most positive result of the EU.

Lack of information and substantial debate, however, only partially account for the absence of a European public sphere and the EU’s democratic deficit. Public support for the EU, its democratic process, functioning of institutions, and perceived benefits on the one

hand, and lack of trust in domestic political actors and decision-making processes on the other, make a case for a deficit at the domestic level, rather than a lack of democratic legitimacy at the level of European Union. Domestic democratic deficit manifests itself through citizens' distrust in almost all Slovak democratic institutions.<sup>35</sup> The EU, therefore, serves as a balancing actor, a compensation of a sort, to frame the parameters within which domestic politicians ought to be manoeuvring.

### **Which policies would you deem essential to conduct at the EU level in order to better legitimise the European project?**

When asked about the important issues facing Slovakia at the end of 2015, 24% of Slovaks responded with unemployment, 12% with health and social security, 11% said inflation and the economic situation, and 10% immigration. At the EU level, 39% of Slovak respondents to the Eurobarometer survey considered immigration to be the EU's major problem, followed by terrorism (21%), the state of Member States' public finances, and unemployment.

A European Social Model would certainly legitimise the EU in the eyes of Slovak citizens, as their country faces 13% unemployment, with vast differences across the regions and social groups. Inefficiencies in public services and healthcare weigh down the economy and increase public debt. Further fiscal harmonisation among the member states enjoys Slovak support. A Fiscal Union,

therefore, with strong accountability mechanisms would be a step forward.

A "Small Business Act" could further contribute to the growth of Small and Medium Sized Enterprises, which are drivers of economic growth across Europe. Structural and Cohesion Funds are the major source for public investments, and continue to be Slovak's image of European solidarity. The Slovak educational system is in dire need of a deep reform and structural change, and European funds should certainly contribute to this.

The EU ought to take a more structured approach in its anti-corruption efforts by preparing adequate legislation to help Slovakia improve its judicial independence, reform funding of political parties, public procurement, and especially misuse of EU funds.<sup>36</sup> The Commission's Anti-corruption Report is a step forward. Nevertheless, countries still rely on international legal sources to tackle domestic corruption.

Considering all the challenges brought about by globalisation - organised crime and terrorism, along with destabilised states in northern Africa and the Middle East, resulting in the humanitarian crisis that has direct and indirect consequences for Europe - we are failing to stand "united in diversity". Events at the EU's borders and a lack of consensus on the EU's approach to aid refugees speaks of a need for a more consolidated political agreement on common migration, security, defence, and foreign policies.

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