

Highlights

- ★ Slovenians believe that they mostly benefit in terms of mobility (no/less border controls), cheaper mobile calls and improved consumer rights. In opposition to these concrete EU-membership related benefits, however, the generally positive assessment of the EU dropped immensely following the European economic and financial crisis.
- ★ The Slovenian debate on the EU can broadly be summarised in two ways: the complementarity between deepening and widening the EU; and the need to strive for policies that serve the society (economic growth etc.) and citizens (for instance reinforce the EMU's social dimension).
- ★ Slovenia supports the development of common EU curricula in primary school, but also for other education paths, such as lifelong learning. The country also supports high standards of food safety, an EU-wide universal access to public health, measures favourable to small and medium size enterprises, and the enlargement to the Western Balkans.

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.

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This project is supported by the Europe for Citizens programme of the European Union.

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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

The perception of Slovenian society regarding the benefits Slovenia would gain from its EU membership was quite uncritical during the accession process. The general public, politicians and mainstream academics all predominantly expected absolute gains in terms of business opportunities, higher quality of life and economic prosperity¹ on the one hand, and political assurance of democracy and the rule of law on the other hand. This pre-accession perspective has remained very much present to this day (see table 1).² Slovenians believe that they mostly benefit in terms of mobility (no/less border controls), cheaper mobile calls and improved consumer rights. All these benefits are perceived far more importantly by Slovenians than by the average citizen across the 28 Member States. Additionally, Slovenians claim that they benefit more from all measures that the EU offers (compared to the EU average), except for air traffic services.

crisis. The latter hit Slovenia particularly hard, when in mid-2013 the state was on the verge of having to accept a bailout, and had to introduce several restrictive budgetary measures. As a consequence, the general perception of the EU became predominantly negative. Before the accession in 2003 the Spring Eurobarometer poll recorded that 57% of Slovenians believed “the EU [to be] a good thing” (equal to the combined average of the then 15 Member States and all the candidate states at that time),³ whereas only 5% thought “it was a bad thing” (compared to a 10%

EU-average). This attitude was practically the same in the 2006 poll.⁴ Conversely, the first wave of the crisis in 2009 diminished Slovenian EU-enthusiasts to 48% (compared to a 53% EU average) and increased the negative perception of the EU to 14% (compare to a 15% EU average).⁵ Along these lines, the perception that Slovenia does benefit from the EU has dropped from 68% in 2006 to 64% in 2009 and the percentage of those who do not see benefits from the EU has risen from 25% in 2006 to 34% in 2009.⁶

	No/less border controls when traveling abroad	Cheaper mobile calls in another EU country	Improved consumers rights when buying products/ services in another EU country	Less expensive flights, wider choices of airlines	Strengthened rights of air transport passengers in the EU	Living in another EU country	Receiving medical assistance in another EU country	Working in another EU country	Studying in another EU country
Slovenia	77%	62%	47%	31%	28%	25%	24%	16%	11%
EU average	52%	32%	24%	33%	22%	14%	16%	14%	11%

Table 1 Response to the question “for each of the following achievements could you tell me whether you have benefited?” in 2014 (Source: Eurostat)

In opposition to these concrete membership related benefits, however, the generally positive assessment of the EU dropped immensely following the European economic and financial

This inconsistency between individual perception of EU benefits and the general view of the EU could have partly been the result of domestic media coverage of the fiscal

consolidation problem, since it was often described as “Brussels wants...”, or even worse, “Brussels demands...” – which could have created a belief among Slovenians that EU membership was not only hindering Slovenia, but was in fact forcing the country down a much harder road.⁷ Thus, in terms of trusting the EU, the perception of integration has been the most affected, as in 2006 63% of Slovenians trusted the EU and the trust kept dropping to 50% in 2009, 40% in 2012 and is currently at its lowest ebb on 37% (2014). Additionally, the percentage of individuals not trusting the EU has risen highly from 30% in 2006 to 45% in 2009, and has been level at 57% in 2012 and 2014.⁸

The above interpretation, of course, did not reflect on the fact that Slovenian authorities in the EU were co-shaping EU decisions, including austerity measures. This uncritical understanding of EU policy-making suited the domestic political elite, because it was reinforcing a perception in the public’s opinion that positive policy outcomes are always the result of domestic politics, whereas unpopular reforms are the requirements of the Commission/the EU.

Recognising that this is not the case, the perception in the Slovenian polity is now slowly changing towards an understanding that Slovenia has to seek beneficial outcomes from EU policies via a much more active engagement in EU policy-making on its issues of key interest. A recent move in this direction can be seen in the government’s more proactive stand towards the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations, whereby the Ministry of Economic Development and Technology has ordered a study on the impact of the TTIP on the Slovenian economy⁹ to enable a better formulation of the Slovenian position. It is unlikely that this study would otherwise have

been undertaken as the government would have been satisfied with a position of a policy-taker in a coalition of small Member States. Additionally, as a result of the crisis, a debate on the logic of EU policies and their benefits for Slovenia has been opened (e.g. Economic and Monetary Union, Stability and Growth Pact, fiscal consolidation, social-cohesion funds, Common Agricultural Policy, energy union). Namely, questions are now raised as to whether these policies provide results on grounds such as effectiveness, solidarity, economic growth and assuring positive benefits for all Member States – not only for the big ones at the expense of smaller states.

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

To identify the positions of the Slovenian state and society on the future orientation of the European integration project, we need to look at the interpretation of two issues, namely the internal EU policies and EU external action. The perception on these two very broad long-term EU focuses is measurable thanks to sources including the published positions of the national political parties, data from the Spring 2014 Eurobarometer and in current specially broadcast debates on EU affairs on national TV. We show that according to the Slovenian perception, the internal focus on EU policies is much more present in comparison to the EU’s role as a global actor, except in the case of enlargement to the Western Balkans. The two core elements that define the EU as a clear project in both aspects however, are a) its values and rules which were jointly established by the EU society, and b) its economic integration, as well as the strong social dimension for individuals and the solidarity principle among Member States.

Looking at the national political parties' programmes of action for the current parliamentary mandate (2014–2018), one can firmly claim that they pay very little attention to EU affairs. There are differences between parliamentary parties, which also have Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) among their partisans, and those that do not, as well as differences between parliamentary and non-parliamentary parties. There are four parliamentary parties who also have MEPs, namely: *Demokratična stranka upokojenцев Slovenije* – DESUS (Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia), *Nova Slovenija* – NSi (New Slovenia), *Socialni Demokrati* – SD (Social Democrats) and *Slovenska demokratska stranka* – SDS (Slovenian Democratic Party). Their programmes only refer marginally to the EU and even the SDS mostly concentrates on the role of Slovenia in the EU and not on the perspective of the EU as an integration project in itself. However, some inclinations towards the understanding of the core nature and goals of the EU project can still be identified (see below). The other four parliamentary parties, who do not have MEPs among their own membership, hardly pay attention to the EU at all save for *Zavezništvo Alenke Bratušek* – ZAB (The Alenka Bratušek Alliance). The other three are *Stranka Modernega Centra* – SMC (Party of the Modern Centre), *Pozitivna Slovenija* – PS (Positive Slovenia) and *Združena levica* – ZL (The United Left). Two political parties have MEPs but do not participate in the national parliament, *Slovenska ljudska stranka* – SLS (Slovenian People's Party) and *Verjamem* (I believe). The latter, very surprisingly, does not even mention the EU in its manifesto.

In terms of the EU internal integration (process and policies), political parties mostly express the role of the EU as a guarantor of peace in Europe. This corresponds with 54% of the

general public who believe this is the most positive result of the EU.¹⁰ In this value-based context, parties also express the EU's role in assuring democratic values (DESUS,¹¹ NSi,¹² SD,¹³ SDS¹⁴). Another equally important focus of the EU project is economic integration which provides for prosperity on the basis of the solidarity and social security of citizens, and is emphasised by both right and left leaning parties (NSi, SD). This view is supported by the general public; 63% of citizens state that internal market freedoms are the most important result of the EU, including the euro (43%), and the economic power of the EU (26%), which are all about 10% higher than EU average.¹⁵ The level of social welfare already achieved is however perceived as the most positive result by only 17% of the population (18% being the EU average) The single market, economic and monetary policy and social policy were also the most important areas for the EU's potential future orientation according to Slovenian citizens in 2012 (all far above the EU average).¹⁶

The parties thus definitely agree that, in its future policy-making, the EU needs to find a necessary balance between deeper economic integration and solidarity, while both policies need to assure individual citizen's social security. Other issues expressed in terms of the future orientation of the EU internal integration project are, its values of cultural diversity in Europe (NSi),¹⁷ and necessary changes in its policy process regarding institutional rationalisation, in order to make the EU more accessible and understandable to its citizens (DESUS)¹⁸ (SLS).¹⁹

In terms of the EU as a global actor, parties focus much less on this aspect of the EU. Other than the fact that it should have a stronger say in the world, for example strengthening its role

as a global actor through strategic partnerships and international organisations (SLS),²⁰ the parties do not have a unified perception of which fields the EU should prioritise in its external action. Left wing parties express the EU's global responsibility for balanced international development (SD²¹ and DESUS²²), whereas other parties focus more on the EU's neighbourhood, believing the EU should focus on enlargement to Southeastern Europe (SDS),²³ and become a proactive actor striving for peace along its external borders (ZAB).²⁴

To illustrate the current (expert) civil society perception of where the EU project is headed, we will analyse the most relevant programme about international relations in Slovenia, called "Globus".²⁵ In 2015, 24 shows were broadcast of which 11 focused on the EU. The largest audience (6,365 views) followed the broadcast about wiretapping in The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in May 2015. This was related to the EU enlargement context, which has been a high priority on the domestic agenda as a result of strong links across civil society, business and culture.

The rest of this analysis will focus on three EU internal integration issues: "Grexit" with 642 views, "Luxleaks" with 254 views and "Brexit" with 185 views. On 6 January 2015²⁶ the focus was on the Luxembourg Leaks with Jean-Claude Juncker at the centre of attention. Slovenian civil society was concerned because Juncker was talking about introducing more ethical standards into European tax regimes, while multinational corporations in Luxembourg had established sophisticated systems through which they avoided paying taxes, which had led to unfair competition in the field of taxation during Juncker's premiership.

The second broadcast, held on 17 February 2015, presented a discussion about the new government in Greece.²⁷ The focal point was its unwillingness to compromise with the EU, trying to play off the EU institutions and Member States, to no avail. There was a strong common view expressed that, while Slovenia is actively dealing with its own financial consolidation, it can also show a high level of solidarity with Greeks, but it will not tolerate rule breaking, which should be binding for all. In Slovenia, fiscal consolidation has been taken very seriously, and it is clear that the government follows EU advice very thoroughly, having introduced the fiscal "golden rule" into the Constitution in 2013. Thus, "Grexit" scenarios and the referendum on EMU have exposed a hardened stance among Slovenian citizens and the government towards Greek inclinations to avoid reform efforts. Slovenia does deliver on the principle of solidarity, however, and believes that Greece should similarly perform its membership obligations. As the Slovenian Prime Minister Miro Cerar noted, "The European rules and principles should apply to all."²⁸ Along these lines the third broadcast, on 12 May 2015, centred on "Brexit",²⁹ showing that the British exit is not supported by Slovenian society, as people understand that cherry-picking from EU policies on the basis of national interest is no way to build an EU that is strong internally and externally.

The EU should thus assure that its future orientation is evident and recognisable to domestic and foreign publics and that respect of its rules is assured and it is clear when they are binding on all EU Member States, irrespective of their size or *de facto* influence. Of key importance for Slovenians are rules on the social security of individuals and interstate solidarity, which should not be abused.

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

Two grand debates illustrate the Slovenian discussion on the desired degree of EU integration; deepening vs. widening of the EU and fostering prosperity of society vs. the individual. They both stem from the perspective of Slovenia as a small power globally and within the EU, as well as being an export-oriented economy and having a Central European and Mediterranean identity. The above dilemmas are mainstreamed in Slovenian debates on internal EU policy issues and EU external action, and are thus taken into consideration in more detail below.

Deepening vs. widening of the EU. The most up-to-date national strategy on foreign policy identifies (in the Preamble) the EU as “the fundamental value-based and political framework for assurance of prosperity and basic rights.”³⁰ Additionally, it lists “a competitive, deepened and widened EU being a key global actor” as one of the six Slovenian general foreign policy goals. Furthermore, explicit support for the EU enlargement in the Western Balkans is accentuated as a more concrete priority area of action. These general foreign policy stances point to Slovenian support for both the enlargement and deepening of the European integration process. They were confirmed as complementary processes in the national Declaration on guidelines for Slovenia’s action in the EU institutions in 2015,³¹ which stresses that “as [the] Slovenian economy is export-oriented, support for deepening the Union is of key importance”.³² Furthermore it states that Slovenia will strive for suitable EU attention to be given to the Western Balkans enlargement.

Slovenia would especially like to see a deeper EU integration in four areas. It would welcome more fiscal integration, coordination of economic policies and strengthening of the economic and monetary union, including the strengthening of its social dimension. It supports the completion of the internal market of goods and services, especially fostering a positive business environment for small and medium sized enterprises. It backs a more ambitious research and innovation policy. Slovenia intends to commit at least 3% of GDP to research and development, and will try to fully profit from the existing EU instruments, such as Horizon 2020, through flexibility. Slovenia wants the complete integration of the internal energy market, and promote a holistic approach to energy policy in all aspects, including foreign policy.

On the other hand, Slovenia would like to see the implementation of the principle of flexibility in three areas. In the environmental policy, the EU should take into consideration the specific economic and financial situation of individual Member States. Slovenia would like a more flexible climate-energy legal framework, which would take into consideration national particularities and the specifics of individual sectors when determining the measures for individual Member States. Lastly, Slovenia has succeeded in building a coalition of new Member States to gain support for the initiative Widening participation within Horizon 2020 that assures new Member States (which joined in 2004, 2007, 2013) extra funds in research projects due to their objective limitations for equal participation in research networks and projects.³³

Fostering prosperity of society vs. the individual. Another political trade-off that Slovenia wants to see passed within the EU is the prosperity of society vs. the individual. The Slovenian state

will support all policies aimed at economic growth and employment that assure the sustainable development of society and individuals.³⁴ For example, Slovenia believes that the further implementation of Strategy Europe 2020 and the European Semester would lead to greater economic growth and competitiveness, while at the same time improving the labour market conditions and social welfare of Slovenian citizens. Similarly, the state will highly promote strengthening the economic and monetary union under the condition that it includes the strengthening of its social dimension.³⁵ The national Declaration refers to one of its goals as “Republic of Slovenia for the Union custom made for an individual,” where it explicitly states that solidarity and austerity are not mutually exclusive, but have to be made complementary.³⁶

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

In Slovenia, EU affairs are covered by media (TV and internet news providers) within foreign policy issues and only one internet portal provides a special section of news on the European Union – the national multimedia portal Radio-Television of Slovenia Multimedia Centre (RTV MMC). The latter offers individual sub-pages in political affairs titled Slovenia, the World and the European Union. However, the visits to the World section far surpass those for the European Union. Statistical data from RTV MMC shows that during the March-June 2015 period, the Slovenia sub-page listed 777,327 visitors compared to virtually the same number of visitors for the World news subpage (705,123), but the EU sub-page only registered around one-fifth of these visitors (166,414).³⁷ Additionally, the time spent on the individual

subpage shows a similar lower interest in EU affairs; Slovenia and the World news being read on average for about three minutes by individual visitors and the EU news only for two minutes.³⁸ This points to a finding that the media still perceives the EU to be a foreign issue and that Slovenian citizens do not pay attention to EU politics or EU policies in the context of Slovenian involvement, but rather think about the EU in an external political context, as imposed from outside the national space.

This situation does not only pertain to Slovenia but is generally (re)produced by media nationalism; mass media have always been inclined to produce a unitary national public. “Even today, when confronted with the increasing fragmentation of media spheres, mass media continue to guarantee the symbolic integration of the nation as a community of communication that talks or that ‘gossips’ about the same topics of relevance.”³⁹ To surpass this problem, what is needed is not necessarily a new medium, but a new form of media coverage, as some analysts have duly noted: “A decentralised and cosmopolitan system of governance without centralised power should be supported by [a] transnational public sphere as an arena for public debate, focused on social interaction promoting solidarity.”⁴⁰ This means that first, the national coverage on EU affairs should change the view of EU affairs from an external to internal issue, and second, the substance of the coverage should be EU-wide on cross-national issues. For example, student life in any EU Member State is of relevance to other students no matter their EU citizenship. Other such EU-wide news target groups could be young people, job seekers, farmers, SMEs, all public service officials, consumers, etc.

Another example pertains to the possibility of national governments’ involvement in the

transnationalisation of the public landscape, namely via common coverage of debates among *Spitzenkandidaten* before European Parliament elections on all national public TV networks. Perhaps this would also make sense with more periodical events, such as the closing of the EU budget in the European parliament every year. The effect of this one-time-a-year EU event could be compared to the symbolic integration effect of the Eurovision song contest broadcast.

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

Some ideas on policies which would largely help legitimise the European project among its citizens are identified on the basis of Eurobarometer 2014 results and the national strategy for action in the EU institutions in 2015. Initially, it is relevant to point out that, not only policy areas, but the policy process itself needs legitimation for individual policy measures to bring *de facto* positive results, and the latter's positive perception with the EU citizens. This pertains to Slovenian support for "stronger mechanisms for assuring democratic legitimacy and responsibility of decisions in the common union,"⁴¹ and "for a greater efficiency and transparency of EU action, e.g. simplification of rules and lowering the administration burdens at the EU and at the national levels".⁴² These ideas include the following areas.

*Common EU curricula in primary schools, education (e.g. more university joint degree programmes), professional qualifications, and lifelong learning.*⁴³ Slovenian universities have been actively participating in the Jean Monet 'EU at school' programme, initiated in 2011, which provides lifelong learning on EU affairs to teachers and students in primary and secondary schools, and which has a very wide dissemination.⁴⁴

High standards of food safety. Slovenian agricultural goals include self-sufficiency, especially in terms of ensuring sustainable development and promoting the green economy, which are two areas where both producers' and consumers' values coincide. The state will "most firmly stand against lowering the already achieved standards of food safety and quality to protect the environment and consumers".⁴⁵

EU-wide universal access to public health. Slovenia sides with those EU Member States that argue for the principle of universal EU-wide public health, accessible to all citizens.⁴⁶ According to the October 2014 data published in Eurobarometer on cross-border health-care in the EU, 59% of Slovenians would be interested in travelling to another EU Member State to receive medical treatment, compared to 33% for the EU28 average.⁴⁷

Positive measures for small and medium sized enterprises (SME) pertains to the peculiarities of the Slovenian domestic landscape, as a small and open economy. The measures might include better participation in large research projects on technology innovation where Member States pay contributions, but where smaller (financially weaker) Member States fail to do so (e.g. European Space Agency).

Enlargement to the Western Balkans pertains to the strong societal links between peoples from the Western Balkans and Slovenian citizens. There is strong support in Slovenia for a visa-free regime with non-member Western Balkan states, which would definitely further support measures to bring the citizens of this area closer into line with the EU market and society during the accession processes of the applicant/candidate states, in the spirit of a united Europe.

Endnotes

1. See a quality debate on the EU membership and alternatives from the perspective of Slovenia as a small open economy in Irena Brinar and Marjan Svetličič, "Enlargement of the European Union: the case of Slovenia", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 6, No. 5, pp. 802-821, 1999.
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13. Programme of political party Social Democrats (SD) for the period 2014–2018 (in Slovenian), 2014, <http://www.socialnidemokrati.si/>.
14. Programme of Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) for the period 2012–2015 (in Slovenian), 2012, <http://www.sds.si/>.
15. European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer, No. 81, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-123.
16. European Commission, Standard Eurobarometer, No. 77, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90. Q: In your opinion, which aspects should be emphasized by the European institutions in the coming years, to strengthen the EU in the future? Slovenia: The single market 33% (15% in EU-27), social policy 36% (26% in EU-27) and economic and monetary policy 46% (43% in EU-27).
17. Programme of political party New Slovenia (NSi), *op. cit.*, p. 30.
18. Programme of Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia (DESUS), *op. cit.*, p. 12.
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23. Programme of Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), *op. cit.*, p. 17.
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