

Slovak vote in the EP election in broader context of the EU perception

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Abstract

Slovak citizens introduced themselves on the European scene with critically low turnout - only 17% of eligible voters participated in the selection of 14 Slovak EP members. On the other hand - in spite of mid-term unpopularity, the election was successful mainly for pro-European coalition parties and not for parties which would really mobilize the voters by appealing the anti-EU sentiments. That means the trend in Slovakia did not follow the prevailing EU pattern – strengthening the opposition and voting for smaller euro-skeptical or anti-EU parties. Euro-phobes like communists or nationalists failed completely. More mobilized have been voters who stand for Europe/European union, not only as the winners of EU integration. The traditionally better mobilized constituencies of national populist parties were not motivated by the idea of Europe. This issue has lower salience for them, they perceive it rather ambivalently. The differentiated mobilizations lead to the success of coalition parties.

The voting pattern of EP election in Slovakia represents one case study out of 8 post-communist countries that joined the Union in 2004. What differentiates the newcomers from the established EU15 and how the second-order model works in the new member states has been analyzed by Marsh (2005) and Schmitt (2005)? My paper will look comparatively at Slovakia and other EEC in the broader context of EU membership perception and the EU issues in the party competition before and after the accession.

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I. EU–issue in domestic politics – short overview

Delayed and weak pre-accession public debate

Compared to other Visegrad 4 countries the public and political debate about EU integration was delayed in Slovakia. This was mainly due to the fact that the EU-discourse was overshadowed by debates about the quality/nature of democracy in Slovakia. Although not absent until the fall/autumn of 1998, European issues took a back seat to a domestic conflict over the government's illiberal ruling style. The European dimension mattered during this period in providing external validation (or lack of) for the government's/opposition's policies. The broad (anti-Mečiar) coalition government (1998-2002) managed to eliminate doubts about the political stability of Slovakia, and this resulted in rather technical issues of the accession process and closing the negotiation chapters. The black-or-white question „yes or no“ was replaced with the question “when” Slovakia will join the EU.

The stated absence of a broader discussion on the EU at both the level of the political elite and the public was caused also by more general reasons - in post communist countries the EU membership has been perceived as an ultimate objective which has no alternative. Between 1998 and 2002, the attitude of Slovakia's political and social elite toward European issues could be described as “Euro-determinism” or “consensus without discussion”, which made a genuine public debate virtually impossible. It is worth stressing that during this period, indeed from the mid-1990s onwards, virtually all political parties in their declarations and all governments in their program declarations advocated entry. HZDS declared its belief in EU membership and Mečiar himself submitted Slovakia's application. In the other V4 countries politicians such as Klaus, Orbán and to a lesser extent Lepper were prominent critics of the EU, but there was no-one similar to that in Slovakia. Euroscepticism has not been explicitly appealed.

Parliamentary Election 2002

Slovakia has been successfully negotiating the EU membership, catching up with the neighbors and in 2002 stood in front of the EU door. There was one barrier to overcome – the parliamentary election held in September 2002. This election was not as critical as that in 1998 but still there was a question mark – what happened if Mečiar would manage a comeback? The EU and NATO representatives as well as foreign diplomats argued that in such case Slovakia may fail the “integration train”. The coalition parties – but above all the Dzurinda's Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ) - campaigned for Slovakia's euro-Atlantic integration. Maintaining the course of Slovakia's foreign policy was extremely important to SDKÚ voters [and leading party figures]; so it was a priority stressed by the party. In addition, SDKÚ wanted to position itself as the strongest guarantor of integration as well as to present itself as THE party which made the “catching up process” possible and smooth. The oppositional Smer party positioned itself between the coalition and the opposition utilizing the dominant political conflict. The appeal to voters was based on the claim of novelty, modernity, sober pragmatism, and critique and blaming of the established parties. The party took a pro-EU position but wanted to distance itself from the coalition integration effort – the bottom line was – integration yes, but not at all costs. All in all – EU issue was a ‘valence issue’.

EU accession referendum 2003

Positive public perception of EU membership provided ideal conditions for the straightforward course of the euro-referendum. It turned out that the main problem was not the final outcome, but

sufficient voter participation (there is a 50% turnout quorum in Slovakia), and consequently, the validity of the plebiscite. Eventually, voter turnout reached 52% of eligible voters, which was less than in Poland and the Czech Republic, but more than in Hungary. The “yes” to Slovakia’s EU membership was more than resounding, as 92% of those voters who came to polling stations endorsed the country’s integration².

The experience of other candidates confirmed that within countries where public debates lacked a more articulated opposition to EU integration, and public support for integration was high in the long term but also relatively shallow and impersonal, total voter participation in the euro-referendum was lower, and the share of “no” votes was totally negligible. Other factors that caused people’s low interest in the referendum specifically in Slovakia included previous negative experience with referenda in Slovakia, generally critical perception of recent societal development, understanding of non-participation as a demonstrative disapproval of government’s policies, people’s reliance on a positive result, and inadequate mobilization activities of political parties. Last but not least, it was the lackluster campaign that reflected the non-competitive nature of the issue, poor structure, and excessive generality of the public debate.

II. European Parliament election – parallels and differences with the second-order-election model

May 1, 2004, Slovakia became full-fledged member of the European Union. The first “test” of new EU citizens came shortly after the accession in form of election for the European Parliament MPs elected by voters in 25 EU member states. Majority of new member states witnessed an extremely low turnout in their first EP election. Slovak citizens introduced themselves on the European scene with critically low turnout - only 16,97 % of eligible voters came to cast their vote and to choose 14 EP members. This is an absolute “record” not only in 2004 EP election, but in the history of this election as well. Voters participation under 30% was recorded also in Poland (20,5 %), Estonia (26,8 %), Slovenia (28,3 %), and in the Czech Republic (28,3 %) contrasting very high participation in Belgium (90,8%), and Luxembourg (89,0 %), both with compulsory voting. The average participation across EU 25 marked 45,7 %, however, with this extraordinary high range which stretches from over 90 % to less than 17 %.

Since the first election to the European Parliament in 1979 a lot of comparative electoral studies have been elaborated to describe the main differences of this „second-order elections“ in comparison to other types of elections. The European election differs from the “first-order” election mostly in:

- lower participation
- loss of government parties
- loss of big parties.³

Let’s examine the first EP election in Slovakia from this perspective.

² In the accession referenda only in two of eight new EU members from CEE a majority of the entire electorate came out to support EU membership: 58% of the electorate in Lithuania and 54% in Slovenia. In Slovakia despite of the high „yes vote voters”, the “yes electorate” represented 48% (see: Mudde, Cas: EU Accession and a New Populist Center-Periphery Cleavage in Central and Eastern Europe. Center for European Studies CEE, Working Paper No. 62, p. 2.

³ See also Hermann Schmitt (2005) The European Parliament Election of June 2004: Still Second-order? (Paper available at www.europeanelection.net)

Table 1: Results of EP election in Slovakia

Political party	% of valid votes	EP seats	% vote in 2002 election
Government parties			
Slovak Democratic and Christian Coalition (SDKÚ)	17,09	3	15,09
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	16,19	3	8,25
Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK)	13,24	2	11,06
Alliance of a New Citizen (ANO)	4,65	0	8,01
Total government parties	51,20	8	42,52
Opposition Parties			
Movement for a Democratic Slovakia	17,04	3	19,50
SMER	16,89	3	13,46
Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS)	4,54	0	6,32
Total opposition parties	38,46	6	39,29
Extra-parliamentary/breakaway parties			
Free Forum (SF)	3,25	0	-
Coalition Slovak National Party / Real Slovak National Party (SNS/PSNS)	2,01	0	3,65/3,32
Coalition Movement for Democracy/People's Union (HZD/LÚ)	1,69	0	3,28/-
Civic Conservative Party (OKS)	1,00	0	0,32
Other (6 parties)	2,35	0	7,60
Total parties not elected to the parliament in 2002	10,32	0	18,19

Source: Statistical Office of the SR, see also Henderson 2004: 10.

The results of the EP elections in Slovakia don't comply with two out of three above-mentioned differences associated with the European elections in general. Eight candidates of three government parties, namely the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ), the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK), won the seats in the European Parliament. In general, the most successful party was the SDKÚ with 17.09% of votes and three out of 14 mandates in the EP. More than 16% of voters voted for KDH that gained three seats in the EP. The KDH recorded the best election result since the 1992 parliamentary elections. The SMK won 13% of the popular vote and gained two seats in the EP. In total the ruling coalition parties received more votes than in parliamentary elections 2002. All MEPs from ruling coalition became members of the EPP-ED fraction in the EP. In total the opposition parties received 38.5% of the popular vote (the KSS failed to win the 5% of votes) and six seats in the EP, three seats for Smer and three seats for the ĽS-HZDS.

Smaller parties did not succeed in the elections. Despite all expectations, two parliamentary parties, namely the Alliance of the New Citizen (ANO) and opposition Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS), did not manage to exceed the required 5% of the popular vote. The newly unified coalition of the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Real Slovak National Party (PSNS) received only a tiny proportion of the voter support both parties usually receive in national elections.

In terms of the election results it should be mentioned that contrary to many other EU member states, the elections to the European Parliament in Slovakia was successful for pro-European ruling coalition parties rather than for the parties mobilizing voters through EU skeptical or EU critical

attitudes. Yet given the very low voter turnout it is not possible to draw any conclusions or make any prognosis for other elections from the electoral behavior of voters.

As shown by the studies carried out in the old EU member states, the voters are less and less partisan and more and more often decide for each type of elections autonomously and therefore also often vote for different political party. Based on the results of the first EP elections and very low voter turnout in Slovakia one can say that voting decision was to a large extent consistent with retrospectively declared behavior in parliamentary elections 2002 (in case of Smer, the SMK and the KDH more than 85% voted identically, in case of the HZDS it was 75%, and in case of the SDKÚ 69%). These findings also indicate that the election results were determined mainly by very differentiated voter turnout that was not based on the difference between the rural and urban environment, but on the mobilizing strength of the issue of the EU (the SDKÚ) and the combination of loyalty and significance of the subject (the KDH).

Table 2: Participation in the EP election – breakdowns by party preferences

	Did participate	Did not participate
SDKÚ	42,9	57,1
KDH	42,4	57,6
SMK	29,2	70,8
ĽS-HZDS	26,0	74,0
ANO	24,1	75,9
SNS	17,9	82,1
SMER	14,2	85,8
KSS	13,0	87,0

Source: EES post-election survey June 2004 – Slovakia

Empirical data prove the general assumption that the voters' perception has been more focused on national politics than on the European one. More than 40% of absenting respondents replied that they "do not trust the politicians, they feel election fatigue and they are disconcert by the national politics". Only 12% gave reasons related specifically to the European politics or institutions and 15% were not enough familiar with the candidates, party manifestos etc. Voters' indifference resulted also from poor presence of the European agenda in public debate in Slovakia and poor interest of political parties⁴ and media. This fact became apparent in feeble election competition and insufficiently visible campaign. Although nearly 12% of respondents justified their absence from the elections by specific objections to the EU, this reason did not dominate in general. The Slovak public is typical of large support for the EU membership and positive evaluation of its impacts. The image of the European Union among the Slovak public is positive as well.

Table 3

"Could you tell me, why did not you take a part in this election?" (Open-ended question, one response possible, filter question n= 859) (%)

Disinterest in the election, politics, election fatigue	22
Disillusion, frustration with the politics, "it does not matter, has no sense", distrust to politicians in general	19
"Objective" reasons, being abroad, ill, etc.	19
Missing information about the candidates, weak campaign, lack of information	15

⁴ On average, political parties spent one tenth of the amount of money on campaigns for EP elections than they did for national elections (Bilčík, 2004: 446).

EU or EP specific critique („nothing will change”, “EP is too distant”, “I do not care about the EU”, “it does not matter which of the incapable will represent us”, “and EU does not help us”.....)	12
I did not want to go (without giving any reason)	1
„Sunday“ (inappropriate day)	1
Other reasons	3
DK	10

Source: EES post election survey June 2004 – Slovakia

One of the main reasons for the low voter participation was the absence of controversial issues, and thereby also the absence of mobilizing debate. Paradoxically, the issue of the European elections has become controversial only after the elections when the politicians looked for reason for low voter turnout. Compared to the previous (especially parliamentary) elections, the Euro-elections were also influenced by the absence of the fear of the loss. In case of European elections, the voters were not emotionally mobilized by the fear that the favored heading of the country will change.

In general we may state that the pattern of voter mobilization and voting decision in EP elections differs from that in national elections. The most motivated were the voters for who the EU means something (at the level of the value in itself rather than the instrumental one). Traditionally loyal supporters of opposition parties (especially the HZDS and the KSS) were not mobilized for the European elections. They are not familiar with this issue and they perceive Slovakia’s EU membership in negative or ambivalent rather than considerably positive way. The overall victory of the ruling coalition resulted also from this distribution of interest in the elections. The ruling coalition won the elections in spite of the fact that it was suffering the *mid-term unpopularity*. However the voters of government parties (in particular the SDKÚ) highly appreciate the country’s EU membership and the subject of European integration is mobilizing for them.

The analysis of *European Election Study*⁵ data shows that new member states (namely eight post-communist countries) vary in many aspects from examined and described models of electoral behavior in the countries of EU 15. First of all, the model of the “mid-term dissatisfaction” according to which the ruling parties in Euro-elections lose their support especially when these are held in the middle of a national election cycle cannot be applied in general. As for eight new member states, any unifying pattern of election gains and losses depending on election cycle emerged. The dispersion of cases and fluctuations was much larger than within former EU 15 (Marsh, 2005). Provided that the model also includes the voter participation, which reached an average of 32% in eight new member states compared to 57 % in other EU countries⁶, one may assume that the absence from the elections express voters’ dissatisfaction with the government performance, especially when there is a lack of the EU skeptical opposition political parties.

Similarly, the findings did not confirm the model that larger parties do worse and smaller parties do better in Euro-elections. On the other hand, any of the countries of EU 15 has not experienced such massive losses and gains of voter support as some new member states. As an example we can state the Czech Republic and the slide in voter support for ruling ČSSD from 30% in parliamentary elections to 9% in Euro-elections, or Poland where the voter support for the SDL-UP dropped from 41% to 9%. On the other hand, Latvian party TB/LNKK received 30% of votes compared to 5% in the previous parliamentary elections and the support for Moodukad party in Estonia increased from 7% to 37% of votes. Similarly, all the most considerable cases with significant losses of votes have occurred in post-communist countries (Marsh, 2005:155).

⁵ Home page of the project European Election Study: www.europeanelection.net

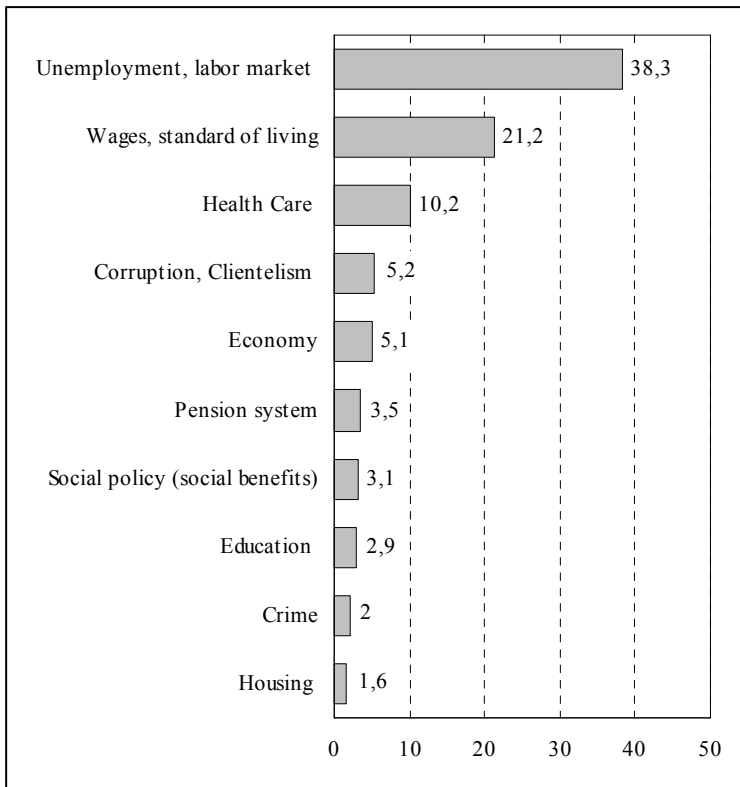
⁶ 17 EU member states excluding new members from Central and Eastern Europe

Slovakia did not see such dramatic changes in the election results. The results ranged from + 7.94 of percentage point (the KDH) to 3.36 of percentage point (the ANO). According to the findings of the survey conducted immediately after the EP elections, the voting in Euro-elections was to a large extent consistent with the voting in national elections. Therefore we may state that Slovakia does not copy the model for new EU Members described by Egmond (2005) according to which the changes in results of the Euro-elections are based on election fluctuations rather than on differentiated voter turnout. In Slovakia it was just the differentiated voter turnout that resulted in different results compared to the previous parliamentary elections. The main reason for an exceptionally low voter turnout in historically first Euro-elections in Slovakia can be considered the absence of controversial issues, and thereby also the absence of mobilizing debate.

III. Social climate - most urgent problems in the national vs. EU level perspective

In Slovakia -as any other transformation country - hierarchy of urgent social problems is dominated by unemployment, followed by wages, low standard of living and the health care system (Graph 1). Though the popular acceptance of the historical changes realized since November 1989 slightly increased in 2004 (Bútorová-Gyárfášová-Velšic, 2005) the general perception of economic and social situation remains relatively pessimistic. These trends are accompanied by a gradual deepening in differences of opinion among various socio-demographic and political groupings. In fact regional disparities are deep and the differences are becoming even sharper due to the implementation of liberal reforms. Residents of the Bratislava region seem well aware of their better opportunities, while residents of eastern parts of the country display a very strong feeling of deprivation. Generally, the frustration of inhabitants tends to increase from west to east.

Graph 1: „Which of the issue you have specified – do you consider most crucial, most significant? (Specify just one.)



Source: EES post-election survey June 2004 – Slovakia

Who is dealing and should deal with the most pressing problems? According to the respondents, the urgent social problems are dealt with especially at national, not regional or European level (Table 4). Even when respondents think the EU competence should be strengthening the state-wide national level is seen as the key for dealing with the problems.

Table 4 To your opinion, the most significant issue is today mainly dealt by regional, state-wide or European level vs. the issue should be dealt at regional, state-wide or European level?

	The issue is dealt:			The issue should be dealt:		
	regional	state-wide	European	regional	state-wide	European
Unemployment, labor market	17	44	14	23	46	19
Wages, standard of living	11	48	9	16	53	18
Health care	7	68	5	17	60	11
Corruption	7	46	22	9	52	28
Economy	12	58	14	12	50	29
Pension system	8	61	8	17	53	19
Social benefits	16	59	13	13	55	32
Education	31	38	14	3	57	30

Note: Bold = significant shifts between „is“ and „should be“.

Source: EES post-election survey June 2004 – Slovakia

The displeasure with the economic and social situation turns most often against the Government. The public uses to access the Government's performance often through their „own purse's view“. In Slovakia, critical attitudes prevail – almost 2/3 disagree with that what the Government has done so far. The Government's job was positively evaluated just by 22% of the respondents.

IV. Satisfied but indifferent - some paradoxes of the EU membership's perception

Based on several empirical surveys we can say that Slovaks are satisfied and optimistic regarding their country's EU membership.⁷ Approximately half a year after Slovakia joined the EU its citizens continued to be enthusiastic about the move, as nearly four in five respondents (79%) approved of it (Bútorová – Gyárfášová – Velšic, 2005, p. 268). In months that followed, the support increased even further. A survey conducted shortly before the first anniversary of Slovakia's EU accession put the share of supporters at 83%, the highest level among all Visegrad Four (V4) countries.⁸ Similarly, a survey conducted by the MVK agency showed that one year after Slovakia's EU accession, 73% of Slovak citizens viewed it as the right move.⁹

The findings of surveys by the FOCUS agency provide a more structured overview of Slovaks' positive and negative expectations before their country's EU accession, and to what extent these expectations were met after the first year of EU membership. The findings show that after one year in the EU, Slovaks believed that their country was really getting four out of the five most widely expected benefits of EU membership. On the other hand, three out of the five most widely expected fears have not come true to the extent expected before EU accession (see Tables). However, we can observe certain ambivalence towards that new phenomenon which is most frequently related to EU accession. For example – free movement – on the one hand new opportunities for travel and work abroad, on the other – threat of brain drain and influx of cheap labor force to our labor market. For instance, 48% of respondents in April 2004 expected more opportunities to work abroad, while in May 2005 59% of respondents said these opportunities really existed. On the other hand, 52% of respondents in April 2004 feared the use of cheap labor in Slovakia, while in May 2005 the figure was 46%. Increased bureaucracy is the only area where Slovaks' fears have worsened significantly over the past year.

Table 5 “What benefits do you expect from Slovakia's EU membership?” (April 2004, %) “What benefits is Slovakia getting from its EU membership?” (May 2005, %)

	April 2004	May 2005	Trend
Opportunities to work abroad	48	59	↑
Possibility to travel without passport/visa	40	46	↑
Better chances for young people	44	40	↓
Arrival of foreign investors, creation of new jobs	28	34	↑
Chances to draw financial aid from EU funds	20	24	↑
Acceptance of Slovakia in Europe and in the world	12	14	↑
Increased competition	9	10	↑
Improved standard of living for Slovak citizens	19	8	↓
Better chances for domestic producers to export to EU markets	13	8	↓

⁷ Positive attitude of Slovaks toward European integration was confirmed by the Eurobarometer survey in fall 2004, which was the first such survey following the May enlargement. The survey showed that the Slovaks enjoy being part of the Union and that they trust it: 57 percent of respondents said EU membership was “a good thing” (the average for new member states was 50%) and 62% connected it with benefits (the average for new member states was 54%). The Slovaks also showed a high level of trust toward EU institutions; for instance 70% of respondents said they trusted the European Parliament, which placed Slovakia second among all EU member states (*Eurobarometer*, fall 2004).

⁸ Opinions of V4 Citizens Regarding their Countries' EU Membership, a FOCUS press release from April 27, 2005; www.focus-research.sk.

⁹ A public opinion poll for the *Sme* daily conducted by the MVK agency between March 17 and 23, 2005, on a representative sample of 1,200 respondents (quoted according to *Sme*, April 30, 2005, p. 4).

Improved security for Slovakia	8	8	
Stronger democracy	7	7	
Harmonization of Slovak legislation with EU legislation	7	3	↓

Source: FOCUS, 2004, 2005.

Table 6 “What negatives do you expect from Slovakia’s EU membership?” (April 2004, %) “What are the negatives of Slovakia’s EU membership?” (May 2005, %)

	April 2004	May 2005	Trend
Use of cheap labor in Slovakia	52	46	↓
Departure of professionals and young people for abroad (brain drain)	43	37	↓
Lower standard of living for Slovak citizens	39	33	↓
Influx of products from other EU member states to our market	27	29	↑
Reduced security for Slovakia	21	23	↑
Increased bureaucracy	15	23	↑
Inflow of foreigners from other EU member states	24	17	↓
Adoption of “Western” lifestyle	13	16	↑
Obligation to adhere to EU laws, directives and guidelines	10	16	↑
Surrender of certain decision-making powers – loss of independence	15	15	
Increased unemployment	9	12	↑
Increased competition	7	6	↓

Source: FOCUS, 2004, 2005.

So, one may conclude that the Slovaks are generally happy when looking back at the first year of their country’s EU membership. This has to do with several circumstances. Most importantly, the negative scenarios that foretold a dramatic increase in prices of foodstuffs, services and other commodities did not come true. Macroeconomic data even indicated an improvement in 2004 against the previous year. Slovakia recorded the highest GDP growth of all V4 countries; real wages saw a moderate increase; inflation remained low and some consumer prices (e.g. foodstuffs or clothes) even showed a certain decline. Of course, this favorable macroeconomic development was not brought about solely by Slovakia’s EU membership.

However, the high public support for Slovakia’s EU membership is driven not only by economic and social grounds BUT also by the conviction that Slovakia and its citizens have obtained a ticket into a solid and prestigious club in term of more social sensitivity, better prospects for the future, more democracy, more tolerance towards the minorities. Of course free movement, Europe without borders, final farewell to Yalta play important role as well.

Last but not least - most probably, this has to do with “cautious optimism” of Slovak citizens’ pre-accession expectations: first, people expected mostly advantages for the country as a whole, as opposed to themselves; second, they situated their positive expectations to rather distant time horizons.

Similarly to other countries – the support is among younger, better educated, urban dwellers.

The differences among social groups are deep, how the main gap is according to the party orientation having the constituencies of the center right coalition parties strongly on the “yes” side and the extreme left (Communist party) on the other (Table 7).

Table 7: Attitudes towards EU membership – breakdowns by demographics and party preference

	Good thing	Neither good nor bad	Bad thing
AGE			
18 - 24	50,8	40,1	5,6
25 - 34	39,2	44,3	6,1
35 - 44	38,8	46,6	8,3
45 - 54	31,8	51,3	10,8
55 - 59	17,5	55,6	15,9
60 and more	22,9	56,2	10,5
EDUCATION			
Elementary	26,4	50,6	13,8
Vocational	32,3	48,7	8,0
Secondary (high school)	37,9	50,7	7,0
University	57,4	34,3	3,7
PROFFESION			
Unqualified workers	18,8	50,0	20,8
Qualified workers	34,8	52,0	7,8
Executive professionals	43,5	48,3	4,8
Creative professionals	62,3	30,4	2,9
Entrepreneurs	48,8	32,1	9,5
Pensioners	21,7	54,8	12,6
Student	60,0	33,8	4,6
In the household, maternity leaf	44,2	44,2	0,0
Unemployed	23,3	57,0	9,3
PARTY PREFERENCE			
ANO	55,2	37,9	6,9
KDH	51,7	38,3	3,3
KSS	17,9	46,4	19,6
ĽS-HZDS	20,6	56,9	11,8
SDKÚ	75,0	20,8	4,2
SMER	40,0	50,0	5,5
SMK	46,7	44,0	1,3
SNS (Slovak National Party)	34,5	41,4	17,2
Non-voters	21,9	59,4	10,4
Undecided voters	44,1	36,9	9,0
Slovak average population	35,3	48,4	8,5

Note: bold = significant deviations from the average population.

Source: EES post-election survey June 2004 – Slovakia

The majority of the Slovak public is in favor of a continuing integration process. Just a small part thinks that the „integration went already too far“. The average reached 5,90 and the median 5,48, what means clearly at the pro-integration side for the future.

Micro- macro level gap

Slovaks are prevalingly optimistic when it comes to possible impacts of their country's EU membership. Less than one in seven Slovak citizens expects more disadvantages for Slovakia or their particular region of residence during the first two or three years of EU membership (13% and 14%, respectively). The share of those who expect some sort of detriment in their personal lives is slightly higher, but at 21% it still represents a minority (please, see Table 1). When anticipating the implications of their country's EU membership, the Slovaks stick to the pre-accession model of expectations, i.e. more advantages for the nation as a whole, fewer for me and my family.

Table 8

“Do you believe that Slovakia's EU membership in the next two or three years will bring more benefits or more costs to the following subjects?” (%)

	To Slovakia	To your region	To you and your family
More benefits	45	36	26
Equally many benefits and costs	36	41	45
More costs	13	14	21
Don't know	6	9	8

Source: Institute for Public Affairs, November 2004.

Representation vs. participation

Despite the extremely low turnout, nine in ten respondents taking part in the post-election survey said it was good that “Slovak citizens have their representatives in the European Parliament” (Gyárfášová 2005, p. 82). So, the Slovaks' perception of their country's EU membership may be described as representation without participation. In regard of the EP election, high trust to the European Parliament combined with unusual low turnout – in all new member states – however, with the deepest gap in Slovakia.

Also other indicators show that in Slovak EU perception lower awareness and lower information level knowledge is combined with higher than average verbal support. A special Barometer focused on public perception of EU constitution treaty shows that Slovak respondents are placed in the middle in the “knowledge test”. On the other hand as for the public support for the European constitution, the document was endorsed by 61% and disapproved by 11% of Slovaks, while the average ratio in the EU-25 was 49% to 16%. The highest public support for the European constitution was recorded in Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands, followed by Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia. On the opposite pole were Great Britain, Cyprus, Sweden and Ireland where public support did not exceed 30%. So in Slovakia, an average knowledge of the European constitution's actual content was in Slovakia combined with above-average support for its adoption (The Future Constitutional Treaty, 2005, pp. 7-15).

Conclusion

Slovakia "introduced" itself on the European scene especially by its low participation level in the elections for the European Parliament. The reason for that is not a reservation against the EU or European politics. The opposite is the case - the Slovak public is satisfied with the EU membership and perceives the related impacts as positive. We can say that this disinterest is based on certain **indifference, unconcern and not on the dissatisfaction or even protest against the membership.** The differential mobilization has shown that the salience of EU membership and the party loyalty were the most relevant motivators.

The full membership in the EU was a strategic priority not just for the political elites - since this direction had been desired by the prevailing majority of Slovakia's citizens. The first months of this „true-come dream“ show that the pre-accession adaptation definitely does not represent „a closed chapter“, but it will be rather a dynamic and non-linear process. The Slovak public faces new challenges and the factor of an increased openness of the country will play an increasingly significant role. From the view point of our future acting within the European Union it would be desirable if the Slovak public would adopt a more active attitude towards European issues, even for the price that it would be more critical to certain aspects of the EU membership. After two years of membership the EU issue is less salient than it was before May 1, 2004 but probably also less than it will be in the future, when EU will be more perceived as something more related to the everyday life.

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