

Perceptions of European Integration in Slovakia

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ABSTRACT. The study describes and analyses Slovakia's path to membership in the European Union depicting the milestones of the Slovak integration process. It analyses the background of national and European identities at the theoretical level ("return of identity") and shows the main features of both in Slovakia. The expectations of the citizens have been high and focused mainly on social and economic improvement. However, as numerous public opinion polls have indicated, the benefits are seen in the mid- or long-term perspective. Positive perceptions of EU membership provided ideal conditions for the smooth course of the euro-referendum. However, turnout (52 percent) reached only slightly more than the necessary quorum, while 92 percent voted in favour of becoming a member of the organisation. By becoming the full-fledged member of the European Union, the ultimate goal has been fulfilled. However, new member states witnessed an extremely low turnout in their first election for the European Parliament. The author concludes with an evaluation of the extremely low turnout and the outcomes of the historic election for the European Parliament in Slovakia.

Key words: NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN IDENTITY, SLOVAKIA'S PATH TO THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION, REFERENDUM ON THE EU ACCESSION, ELECTION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT.

European vs. national?

At the time of integration and globalisation on the one side, and "regionalisation" and decentralisation on the other, the national identity faces new challenge. In this section we will focus mainly on national, ethnic, and European identities, their main components and main interactions in four countries in central Europe.

In modern sociology the concept of identity is used widely and loosely in reference to one's sense of self and one's feelings and ideas about oneself. Identity is not just there, it must always be established, it has to be bound with the verb "to identify," associating oneself with something or someone, classifying a group of things or people.

National identity, the dominant collective identity, fulfils various functions. One of the most important is the integrating function that creates a spirit of solidarity among particular members of the community, their feeling of togetherness that can also function as a unifying and mobilising factor. Identity of a

nation is a set of self-perceptions, shared memories and experiences (history), traditions, and the geographical and cultural predisposition of a nation. It usually defines itself in terms of difference, in terms of distinctiveness of one nation from another. It is constructed in the opposition to those perceived as “the other,” on the basis of “we-ness” *versus* “other-ness”.

The national identity encompasses a common historical memory and experience; it represents the continuity of tradition and forms a cultural link between generations; it enhances the integration of the community that is predetermined by the common language as well as self-reflection of national communities that currently continue to develop within the framework of states (Sedová 1997: 11). Every identity is based on a symbolic representation that must be communicated.

Recent works on identity – mainly in the context of international relations and European integration – articulate *a return of identity*. Petr Drulák picks up several examples and authors to illustrate this tendency (Drulák 2001: 11-13). However, he argues that the notion of return should not imply that the concept of identity in the 1990s is the same as it was in the 1960s. On the contrary, *the very identity of identity* is being hotly contested. Drulák also correctly points out that identity is not just an analytical but also a political concept:

Moreover, this political concept gained unprecedented attention and influence in the 1990s. During the Cold War, when Europe was divided into two blocs, identities had to be subordinated to the strategic demands of bloc leaders. The opening of identities, whether on the European, national or regional level could lead to an internal weakening of the bloc and was thus deemed undesirable. The end of bloc politics in Europe brought about the return of identity to European politics. This return thus coincided with a “return to Europe” of the post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the two returns having the same origins in the end of the Cold War and being different expressions of the same striving to cope with regained freedom (Drulák 2001: 13).

The very notion of European identity seems to be widely discussed in the candidate countries even more than in the EU itself. Drulák sees two reasons for that: First, the rise and the fall of totalitarian rule put the collective identities of the people in the region into doubt. The identities are therefore accompanied by a question mark, inviting a discussion that the EU has not experienced to such an extent. Second, the claim of European identity of the candidate countries presents one of a few good arguments for their EU membership for from an economic point of view, they do not have much to offer. Rather, the other way around (Drulák 2001: 14).

The need for national togetherness in the early years of post-communist transformation was high. The fall of the Communist regime opened a Pandora’s box of frozen tensions and historical injustices. Related to the national and the Euro-

pean identity, the latter was expressed by the figurative slogan “Back to Europe!” (where we always belonged but where we were prevented from being). However, the European discourse has not been further developed. The absolute priority was given to re-defining national identity. The processes of transition and consolidation of democracy were intensified with globalisation processes, leading to a shared form of identities. A first reaction to this is often a reinforced neo-nationalism in defense against globalistic and supranationalist tendencies (Bayer 2001: 7).

The decline of totalitarian regimes in central and eastern Europe was accompanied by seeking and forming a new identity, a new definition of oneself and a newly defined comparison with “the others.” Jacques Rupnik expressed it very precisely when he spoke about the search for a “useable past”. Moreover, the more fragile the national identity is, the more intensive the search becomes. The rediscovering of history is a common feature across the post-communist world, a natural reaction to the communist misinterpretation.

Slovakia at the doorstep of EU membership

Slovakia is the most ethnically heterogeneous country among the Visegrad (V4) countries. According to the 2001 census, 14 percent of Slovak citizens declared an ethnicity other than Slovak. Hungarians are the largest minority followed by the Roma. Ethnic dimension plays an important, though not the most crucial, role in the public debate on EU membership.

Compared to other V4 countries, the public debate about EU integration was delayed in Slovakia. This was mainly because of developments on the domestic political scene. At least until the fall of 1998, the question stood as not whether Slovakia wanted to join the EU, but whether the EU wanted Slovakia. After the change in government and the first integration successes of Dzurinda’s first government the priority was to catch up in the accession process, not to question it.

At the level of political parties, there was a broad consensus on EU integration. Accession was approached as a goal without any other alternative. The debate was practically void of any conflicting positions. There were no EU opponents who could present arguments to counter those of the supporters. The position characterised by the statement “EU – yes, but...” was more prevalent.

In the long term, public support for Slovakia’s EU integration exceeded 70 percent, and the share of integration opponents has always been irrelevant. This public perception was partly influenced by the fact that public debate on Slovakia’s European future has been quite lacklustre compared to other candidate countries. The “debate without conflicts” also predetermined the referendum on the country’s EU integration. More pronounced positions did not begin to surface until summer 2003, when a draft of the European constitution was

discussed. The continuously high consensus regarding Slovakia's EU integration between political parties and other segments of the country's elite has also helped predetermine the unequivocal public support.

Expected impact of EU membership

From the very beginning of the 1990s the public support for Slovakia's membership in the EU has always been steady and high – at the level of 70–75 percent – almost without any changes over time. However, the support was relatively shallow at the same time, since the debate had not been developed properly. Compared to neighbour candidate countries, public support in Slovakia has been about the same as in Hungary but higher than in Poland or the Czech Republic.

There are several explanations for the Slovak “EU-phoria,” the most important of which is the fact that true public debate on Slovakia's European future, which would also highlight the disadvantages, has not yet really begun. People also have high expectations of the future economic and social benefits. The high public support has been encouraged by the consensus among major political parties and the country's elite on Slovakia's integration into the EU.

Slovak citizens are becoming increasingly interested in the implications of EU membership, just as they are increasingly aware of the lack of information on this issue. In October 2002, two in five Slovaks (40 percent) said they did not have enough information on the subject. Those who complained of a lack of information wanted to know more about the benefits (67 percent) and costs (62 percent) of EU membership, its impact on the standard of living (50 percent), the unemployment rate (39 percent) the economy (37 percent), and the rights and obligations of EU members (Institute for Public Opinion Research (IPOR), October 2002).

Most respondents (38 percent) expected that the main benefit of EU membership would be a general improvement in the country's economy; more than one in four (28 percent) believed that the main benefit would be the strengthening Slovakia's international position, while more than one in five (22 percent) cited increased funding from EU member states. As for the disadvantages, one in two respondents (48 percent) mentioned a growth in the prices of goods and services, a fear that is shared by more and more people (in March 2002 it was 33 percent, while a year before it had been 29 percent). Other disadvantages mentioned frequently included increased costs for the state budget (25 percent), damage to the country's agricultural sector (19 percent), the takeover of important Slovak industrial enterprises by foreign firms (18 percent), and a subsequent cutback in output at these enterprises (18 percent; IPOR, October 2002).

Compared to a similar survey from the first half of 2001, there has been a substantial shift in people's perception of the benefits and disadvantages of Slovakia's EU membership, as seen in the increase in people who fear a rise in the prices of goods and services. Respondents also more frequently cite problems for Slovakia's agricultural sector and production cuts at industrial enterprises, anxieties that previously did not rank among the principal perceived disadvantages of EU membership. On the other hand, arguments that Slovakia will become "subordinate to the dictates of Brussels" or "lose its national identity" have virtually disappeared. These are clear signals that the Slovak public is slowly beginning to see EU membership in much more concrete economic and social terms. People's expectations are likely to become even more concrete, which may cause a slight decline in public support for Slovakia's accession to the Union; support should not, however, drop below 50 percent.

People seem to distinguish between the short-term and long-term implications of EU membership for their standard of living. In the first two or three years after Slovakia's accession, most respondents (48 percent) expect a general deterioration, while only 7 percent expect an improvement; in the long term, however, the ratio of optimists and pessimists is the opposite (see Table 1).

As Table 2 illustrates, the expected implications of Slovakia's EU membership among "euro-optimists" and "euro-sceptics" differ particularly in the long-term perspective. Two in three respondents who support Slovakia's accession to the EU expect an improvement in their standard of living in the long term. On the other hand, opponents of Slovakia's EU integration tend to be sceptical in the short-term as well as the long-term perspective.

Another way of looking at the expected implications of the country's EU membership is to analyse how people perceive them from the viewpoint of Slovakia in general, their region of Slovakia, and themselves and their families. Table 3 shows that positive expectations fall as the focus shifts from a general to an individual perspective. On the personal level respondents most frequently stated neutral or negative expectations, as well as the answer "I don't know". This indicates that people don't have enough information to form an opinion

TABLE 1. What effect do you expect Slovakia's accession admission to the EU will have on the standard of living of people like you? The standard of living will... (percentages)

	Within first two–three years after accession	Later
Improve	7	46
Not change	33	18
Worsen	48	16
I don't know	12	20

The most frequent answers have been highlighted.

Source: Institute for Public Affairs, June 2002.

TABLE 2. Expected effects of Slovakia's EU accession on the standard of living among supporters and opponents of EU membership (percentages)

Expected effects on standard of living	Within first two or three years after accession		Later	
	Supporters of EU membership	Opponents of EU membership	Supporters of EU membership	Opponents of EU membership
Improvement	11	1	65	5
No change	40	17	15	27
Deterioration	40	75	6	44
I don't know	9	7	14	24

The most frequent answers have been highlighted.

Source: Institute for Public Affairs, June 2002.

TABLE 3. Expected implications of Slovakia's EU integration immediately after accession (percentages)

Expected implications:	Slovakia's accession to the EU – expected implications for...		
	Slovakia	my region	me and my family
Improvement	31	22	16
No change	23	32	35
Deterioration	40	37	34
I don't know	6	9	15

Source: Institute for Research of Culture and Public Opinion National Education Center, June 2002.

on how integration will affect them, even though the impact on people's individual lives is the most decisive factor in their support for EU membership.

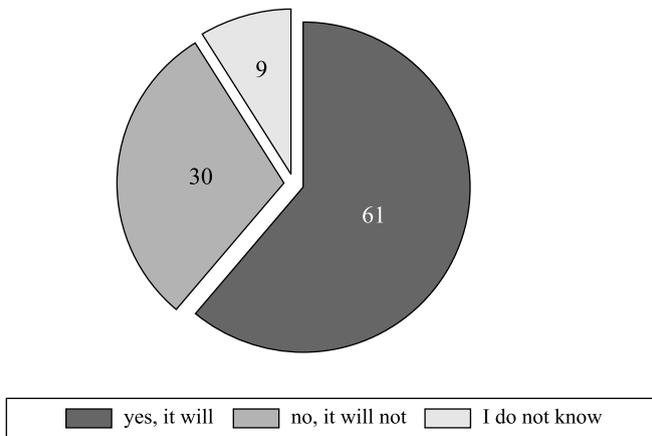
Similar to other countries, pro-integration and anti-integration attitudes are not evenly distributed throughout the Slovak society. Surveys have repeatedly shown that Slovakia's integration into the EU and NATO is more frequently supported by younger and middle-age people with university education, and urban dwellers. Whether people endorse or disapprove of integration is also related to their overall level of openness toward the outside world, their interest in public affairs, and their sophistication. In terms of Slovakia's EU membership, people's attitudes also reflect expectations of new possibilities on the one hand and fears of negative implications on the other. How people balance the possible gains and losses depends especially on factors such as age, education, mobility, adaptability, etc. While the younger generation sees new opportunities in Slovakia's European future, the older generation perceives it as a kind of threat.

However, the greatest differences among people's attitudes toward integration are determined by their partisan affiliation. The supporters of ruling coalition parties, especially Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ) and

Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) exhibit prevalingly positive attitudes; adherents of the extreme left and extreme right wing parties (Communist Party of Slovakia and nationalistic parties) show prevalingly negative attitudes.

The Slovaks perceive possible implications of this event favourably, but realistically at the same time. Compared to several years ago, their expectations are currently based on information rather than emotion. Perhaps this is the main reason why one in three respondents (34 percent) recently admitted that their expectations have diminished compared to five years ago (IPOR, August 2003). About half a year before Slovakia's scheduled accession into the EU, 61 percent of respondents believed that the country's EU membership would benefit Slovak citizens while 30 percent expected the opposite (Graph 1).

GRAPH 1. "In your opinion, will Slovakia's membership in the EU benefit Slovak citizens or not?" (percentages)



Source: Institute for Public Opinion Research (IPOR), October 2003

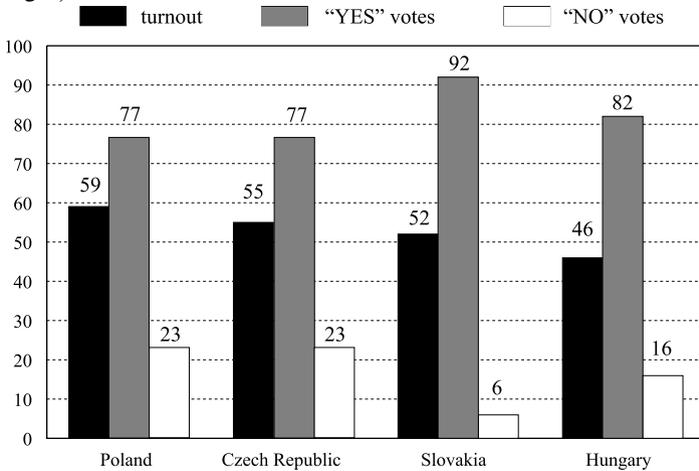
The generally positive expectations of citizens are seemingly in contrast with the fact that nine in ten respondents realise the inevitability of price increases of some goods and services following accession (IPOR, October 2003). This finding indicates that most people seem to realise that benefits and losses of accession have different time horizons, with benefits coming farther down the integration path.

Voting on EU membership

The positive perception of EU membership provided ideal conditions for the smooth course of the euro-referendum. However, public opinion polls conducted in spring 2003 signaled that the main problem would not be the final

outcome, but sufficient voter participation, and consequently, the validity of the plebiscite. Eventually, voter turnout reached 52 percent of eligible voters, which was less than in Poland and the Czech Republic, but more than in Hungary (see Graph 2). The “yes” to Slovakia’s EU membership was more than resounding, as 92 percent of those voters who came to polling stations endorsed the country’s integration.

GRAPH 2. Official results of referendums on EU accession in V4 countries (percentages)



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 (e.g. Hungary and Slovakia, Graph 2), 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 included previous negative experiences with referenda in Slovakia, generally critical perceptions of recent societal developments, understanding of non-participation as a demonstrative disapproval of government’s policies, people’s reliance on a positive result, and inadequate mobilisation activities of political parties (Mesežnikov 2003; Velšic 2003). Last but not least, it was the lacklustre campaign that reflected the non-competitive nature of the issue, poor structure, and excessive generality of the public debate.

Statistical data on voter participation in particular regions and districts speak volumes on voter behavioural patterns. Voter participation in large cities was clearly higher than in smaller towns and villages. The absolute highest turnout was recorded in Bratislava I (64.6 percent), followed by Bratislava IV (63.3 percent) and Bratislava III (61.2 percent). Outside Bratislava, the highest turnout was recorded in Košice I (59.4 percent). This regional distribution

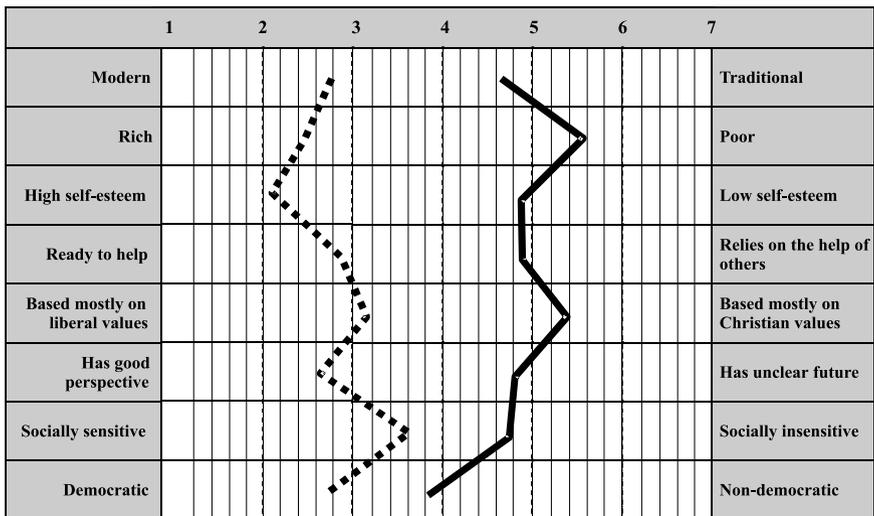
of voter mobilisation indicates that their decision-making on whether to participate or not had two basic dimensions: first, perception of potential socio-economic benefits of European integration; second, understanding that integration occurs not only on the instrumental level, but on the level of values as well.

Image of EU

What is the image of EU? How does the public compare Slovak society with the EU? A survey conducted in September 2003 attempted to define the image of the European Union in the eyes of the Slovak public. The results of the semantic differential showed that the general perception was exceptionally favourable. The most distinct EU features perceived by the Slovak public include self-confidence and wealth, a democratic spirit, clear perspective, and modernity (Graph 3).

The positive perception of the EU is in sharp contrast with how people perceive Slovakia, which they most frequently describe as poor, timid, lacking a clear perspective, and relying on somebody else's help. Also, Slovakia is generally perceived as a country that is built on Christian values while the EU is perceived as a community based on liberal principles. A significant gap between

GRAPH 3. "How do you perceive current Slovak society and the European Union?" (average evaluations of select characteristics on a seven-point scale)



Legend:
 ——— Slovak society
 - - - - - European Union

Source: Institute for Public Affairs, September 2003

the nations of Slovakia and the nations of the EU exists in the minds of the Slovak people. At the same time, the image of the Union is very attractive and seems to compensate for those deficits that Slovak citizens perceive negatively in respect to their own country.

Emerging pattern of European voting behaviour?

On 1 May 2004 Slovakia became a full-fledged member of the European Union. The ultimate goal has been fulfilled. However, the festivities and the celebrative atmosphere were more imposed by the official authorities than coming authentically from the population. Membership became a part of everyday life, and the EU started to be perceived more critically or vaguely. The first “test” of new EU citizens came shortly after accession in the form of elections for the European Parliament.

Surprisingly or not, a majority of the new member states witnessed an extremely low turnout in their first EP election. In Slovakia, even though according to the polls many people believe that Slovakia’s accession to the EU was a good decision and will be beneficial for their country, their attitude towards EU institutions and the candidates running for the EP seem to be strongly influenced by the lack of trust in Slovak politicians and institutions. Slovak citizens introduced themselves on the European scene with critically low turnout. Only 17 percent of eligible voters came to cast their vote and to choose 14 EP members. This is an absolute “triumph” not only in the 2004 EP election, but in the history of this election as well. Slovak citizens could vote for one of 17 political parties or coalitions running for European Parliament (EP) deputy posts.

The ruling Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU) won 17.09 percent of votes. The SDKU was followed by the opposition People’s Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (LS-HZDS), which gained the backing of 17.04 percent of voters. The opposition party SMER ended up in third place with 16.89 percent, and the Christian-Democratic Movement (KDH) got 16.19 percent. The Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) won 13.24 percent of the vote. The first four parties won three EP seats each, while the SMK will have two deputies in the European Parliament. Alliance of New Citizens, the fourth member of the governing coalition, missed the 5 percent threshold by 2000 votes. SDKU’s first place can be attributed to two factors: its identification with EU entry and the selection of former hockey star Peter Stastny as No. 1 on the party’s candidate list for the race. He attracted both the undecided voters and those who did not want to take part. However, to make broader generalisation about the voting pattern in the case of such low turnout is not very reliable. Just 17 percent of votes were cast and the attitude of 83 percent of the voters remains a mystery (Table 4).

TABLE 4. Valid Votes in EP Elections and Number of Seats

Political party	Share of valid votes (in %)	Seats (out of 14) + EP faction
Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU) (<i>govern. coalition</i>)	17.09	3 (EPP/ED)
People's Party – Movement for Democratic Slovakia (LS-HZDS) (<i>opposition</i>)	17.04	3
SMER (<i>opposition</i>)	16.89	3 (PES)
Christian-Democratic Movement (KDH) (<i>govern. coalition</i>)	16.19	3 (EPP/ED)
Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) (<i>govern. coalition</i>)	13.24	2 (EPP/ED)

Three parties of the governing coalition (SDKU, KDH, and SMK) with eight seats in the European Parliament will strengthen the ranks of the European People's Party (EPP), SMER will join the Party of European Socialists, while the LS-HZDS is not a member of a political group in the European Parliament yet. That means the trend in Slovakia did not follow the prevailing EU pattern – strengthening the opposition and voting for EU-sceptical or anti-EU parties. Neither the Communist party nor nationalists reached 5 percent threshold. In this respect the election results in Slovakia did not follow the general EU pattern, since in many countries EU-sceptical and EU-phobic parties have been very successful.

The central question in the Slovak EP election is the extremely low turnout. In explaining it we can distinguish three levels: 1) the most obvious, superficial reasons, 2) middle range explanation, 3) deeper roots of alienation between public and the EU and politics in general.

- 1) Many argued that there was election fatigue because it was fourth election within a short period of time (two rounds of presidential plus referendum on early election). Others said that it was because the election day was Sunday and it used to be Friday and/or Saturday earlier.
- 2) The mid-level arguments included:
 - Nobody is interested in the EU (including the political elite), no EU issues, no political debate, no competition – which means no emotions, no positions of political parties on EU policies – very shallow attitudes,
 - Nobody was able to say *why* should people vote in EP election,
 - Third rank politicians on the candidate list,
 - Weak communication between political parties and constituencies (NGOs were not involved to mobilise).
 - Low coverage by media,
 - Euro-vote was not just about EU issues but reflected the position on the domestic political scene, which is a source of frustration and disinterest.

- 3) Searching for even deeper reasons we cannot ignore that the relation of Slovaks to the EU is indifferent and very superficial. In this respect already the outcome of EU referenda should have been a wake up call (second lowest turnout but highest percentage of “yes” votes). The “catching up” strategy caused that while the other countries deliberating membership in the EU were discussing more substantial issues, Slovaks were focused on chapters of the *aquis* and speaking about them in very formal and bureaucratic language. EU membership was perceived as the final goal, Slovakia had to overcome the complex of being excluded, and nobody was thinking beyond the horizon of membership. Now, after May 1, after a long marathon and short gallop (in form of the accession referenda), many want to relax. Slovak society still has not gone through the change of perspective – that Brussels is not “they” anymore, but “we”.

Looking even deeper into cultural background and historical legacy, we would find a historical pattern of provincialism, the tradition not to think outside one’s own narrow borders (international issues had always been decided in Vienna, Budapest, Prague, or Moscow, not in Bratislava).

In a post-election survey¹ conducted by the Institute for Public Affairs, we asked about the reasons for not participating in the election. Empirical data prove the general assumption that the voters’ perception is more focused on national politics than on European politics. More than 40 percent of those who did not take part in the European Parliament election replied that they “do not trust the politicians, they feel election fatigue and they are dissatisfied by the national politics”. Only 12 percent gave reasons related specifically to the European policies or institutions and 15 percent were not familiar enough with the candidates, party manifestos, etc.

However, not only have citizens not matured enough to act as EU citizens. Slovak political parties have shown low readiness. Some of the relevant political parties have not prepared a manifesto for the European Parliament election (for example, Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, HZDS). Most political party manifestos were very general, superficial, oriented to political marketing. They featured just one slogan: “We will protect / defend / enforce Slovak / Slovakia’s interests in the EU / Brussels”.

Conclusion

It is very likely that many aspects of Slovakia’s European future that have not taken any definite shape so far, will continue to surface and will thus have to be addressed as the country advances. For instance, the final draft of the EU Con-

¹ European Election Study survey has been conducted in all 25 EU member states. In Slovakia the coordinator has been the Institute for Public Affairs.

stitutional Treaty and its ratification are likely to become the principal focus of the domestic public debate or even a struggle between political parties.

Of course, the general public is more interested in the socio-economic implications of integration. For the time being, realistic optimism seems to prevail in people's expectations. Whether this optimism continues or yields to euro-critical or even euro-sceptical moods will depend mainly on the first experience of Slovak citizen's with their new European reality and its interpretation by political parties, trade unions, and other decisive social players. Nevertheless, on 1 May 2004 Slovak citizens began to write a new chapter in their own European identity.

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POŽIŪRIAI Į EUROPOS INTEGRACIJĄ SLOVAKIJOJE

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SANTRAUKA. Straipsnyje aptariamos tautinio, etninio ir europinio identitetų sampratos, jų pagrindiniai komponentai, funkcijos ir tarpusavio sąveika. Apžvelgiama, kaip Slovakija ruošėsi stojimui į ES, kokia buvo vyriausybės politika, šalies partijų nuostatos dėl šalies narystės ES ir jų pasiruošimas veikti ES lygmenyje. Svarstoma, kokios priežastys lėmė integracijai palankias visuomenės nuostatas. Empiriniai duomenys, viešosios nuomonės apklausos rodo, kad didžiausi „eurooptimistai“ Slovakijoje yra jaunesni ir vidutinio amžiaus respondentai, turintys universitetinį išsilavinimą ir gyvenantys mieste. Bet pastebima ir tai, kad Slovakijos gyventojai miglotai įsivaizdavo, kaip stojimas į ES paveiks jų asmeninį gyvenimą: jiems trūko išsamios informacijos apie ES, jos teikiamą ekonominę paramą bei narių teises ir įsipareigojimus. 2003 m. Viešųjų reikalų instituto Slovakijoje atlikto tyrimo duomenys rodo, kad dauguma šalies gyventojų palankiai vertina ES ir apibūdina ją kaip modernią, demokratišką, turtingą ir t.t. Slovakija, priešingai, buvo apibūdinama kaip neturtinga, neturinti aiškios ateities perspektyvos, tradicinė, nedemokratiška ir pan.

Gauta 2004 metų rugsėjį
Įteikta spaudai 2004 metų gruodį