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REFERENDUM BRIEFING NO 7
THE SLOVAK EU ACCESSION REFERENDUM
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Key points:

- The Slovak Republic proved to be the most unanimously pro-EU candidate state, with 93.71% of valid referendum votes in favour of membership.
- After Slovakia's earlier difficulties in the accession process, all significant political parties supported EU membership. The 'No' campaign was non-existent.
- The cross-party collaboration on the EU campaign marked the end to the bitter political polarisation that had characterised Slovakia in the 1990s.
- The campaign concentrated on 'getting the vote out', as a 50% turnout was necessary in order for the referendum to be valid. This condition was only met in the last hour of voting, with a final turnout of 52.15%.
- Political arguments during the referendum campaign revolved around domestic political questions, such as the government's competence in running the campaign.

Background

Slovakia's path to EU membership was the most fraught of the current candidate states. Although all Slovak governments have been in favour of membership, the EU refused to start detailed accession negotiations in 1998 because of the country's internal political situation. The third Meciar government, which had submitted Slovakia's application to

join the EU in June 1995, contained two small extremist parties of the right and left, while his own Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) showed extreme hostility to both the parliamentary opposition and the president, and appeared intent on concentrating all political and economic power in its own hands. The European Commission thus decided in its July 1997 opinion on Slovakia's membership application that it did not fulfil the democratic criteria to join, and that this was the *sine qua non* for starting negotiations.

The political situation changed rapidly after Meciar's electoral defeat in September 1998. The first Dzurinda government, a broad left-right coalition, made very quick progress in closing chapters once negotiations started in February 2000, and it soon became clear that Slovakia would be ready to join at the same time as the rest of the Visegrad Four. The September 2002 elections confirmed the country's political direction. Although HZDS remained the largest single party in parliament, its support had been eroded, and its only possible coalition partner, the Slovak National Party, had been eliminated from parliament. Because of a simultaneous decline in the left, Dzurinda was able to form a second government comprising four centre-right parties.

The country's 1997 exclusion from the European integration process threw the spotlight of the EU debate in Slovakia on to domestic politics to a far greater extent than anywhere else in the post-communist world. All governments had stated the desire to join the EU, but one of them had failed in its attempt because of its own faults. The ability to obtain EU membership therefore became the hallmark of political competence. The vital question for Slovaks was not whether they wanted the EU, but whether the EU wanted them. This focus tended to prevent the development of any complex discourse about the advantages and disadvantages of membership. Having been faced with the stark prospect of international isolation, with the EU's external Schengen border surrounding them on almost every side and cutting them off even from their former compatriots in the Czech Republic, most Slovaks were well aware that there was simply no alternative to EU membership. To be anti-EU was, quite simply, to oppose the country's vital interests, and was not regarded as a legitimate viewpoint. People were usually realistic enough to be aware that accession would not be unproblematic, but that was not the issue. Once the accession hurdle had been overcome, there would be plenty of time to see what happened and sort it out.

Attitudes to the EU in Slovakia

Slovak attitudes to the EU have been monitored closely since the mid-1990s, and a considerable amount of data is available about the links between citizens views' on the EU, and their demographic characteristics and party sympathies.[1] There has been a consistent correlation between governing coalitions and their voters' attitudes towards the EU. Parties wholeheartedly in favour of the economic and political reforms of the post-communist period tend to have voters strongly in favour of EU membership, and at least

[1] The Institute of Public Opinion Research of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (ÚVVM pri ŠÚ SR) and the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) have regularly published results of public opinion polls on the subject.

three-quarters of their sympathisers say that they would vote for accession. This was true of all the centre-right parties in the two Dzurinda governments. However, the more nationally oriented parties who participated in the third Meciar government from 1994 till 1998 – Meciar's HZDS, the Slovak National Party and the Association of Workers of Slovakia – had voters more ambivalent about membership, with only about a half supporting it. Left-wing parties, such as the post-communist Party of the Democratic Left that was in parliament until 2002 and participated as an awkward partner in Dzurinda's first government, and also the populist and leftist *Smer* ('Direction') party of Robert Fico that entered parliament as the third largest party in 2002, hovered somewhere in between.

There were also correlations between the demographic profile of voters and their attitudes to the EU. Broadly speaking, the 'transition winners' who had been in a position to benefit from the post-communist transition, such as younger people, the more highly educated, city dwellers, and to some extent also men rather than women, were more likely to favour the EU. They were also less likely to vote for Meciar. The 'fit' was not, however, always precise. Of the centre-right parties, the Christian Democratic Movement, which was a mainstay of every non-Meciar government, tended to have an older and more rural core electorate containing more women whose staunch support of the political and economic reform project was founded on an anti-communism partly rooted in religious belief.

Outright opposition to the EU was never articulated by any political party. Even Meciar's far left and far right coalition partners signed up to his January 1995 government programme that highlighted European integration as a major aim in its first section. The problem was that the third Meciar government was not prepared to compromise its domestic political aims to the exigencies of meeting EU entry conditions, convincing itself and its voters until late 1997 that the EU was bound to take Slovakia because of its important geopolitical position. In fact, its relations with all the EU institutions were highly problematic, not helped by the fact that none of the three coalition partners had international party links with members of the European Parliament.

After its exclusion from government in 1998, HZDS began to take more trouble in projecting itself as a strong supporter of EU (and NATO) membership, but its wholly unconstructive role in opposition, as well as Meciar's continued dominance of its party structures, lent little credence to the notion that its attitudes had changed. It remained a pariah, and the international community was rather undiplomatically blunt in the run-up to the 2002 election that the participation of either Meciar or his party in a post-election government would exclude Slovakia from both the EU and NATO. Only after the 2002 election, when HZDS found itself yet again unable to form a government although the largest single party in parliament, did its mode of political behaviour show signs of changing. Its former coalition partners were now no longer in parliament. The far left mantle had been given by discontented voters to the Communist Party of Slovakia, a rump of the pre-1989 ruling communists who had refused to 'social democratise'. Feeling that Slovakia's economy had declined too far since 1989 for survival outside the EU to be a credible option, the Communists supported a 'Yes' vote in the referendum, but their distaste for both post-communist economic reform and the EU was frequently manifest.

What attitudes to the EU in Slovakia were not about was the actual shape of the EU as an institution. Joining the EU was about the success or failure of Slovakia as a country, and attaining membership was the sign of the success of failure of a Slovak government. It is notable that the EU was understood by most of the electorate primarily as an economic project. When public opinion surveys of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic asked respondents to list up to three advantages and disadvantages of EU membership, economic arguments prevailed. This tendency actually increased over the years from June 1995, when Slovakia applied to join, to May 2003, when the referendum took place, as can been seen from the table below:

Table 1: Expected advantages and disadvantages of EU membership (percentage of respondents mentioning each issues)

	June 1995	**May 2003**
Advantages		
Possibility for our citizens to work in any EU country	14	30
General economic growth of Slovakia	30	29
Strengthening of Slovakia's international position	32	24
New job opportunities in Slovakia	11	21
Development of tourism	16	15
Increase in the living standard of Slovak citizens	13	13
Broadening possibilities to export our products to markets in EU countries	20	12
Harmonising the Slovak legal system with the EU legal system	12	10
Inclusion of Slovakia as an equal partner in the building of new European institutions	14	5
Don't know	26	7
Disadvantages		
Increase in prices of goods and services	21	55
Decline of agriculture	11	32
Increased financial demands on the Slovak budget	17	23
Limiting production in Slovak factories	29	21
Control of economically important Slovak factories by foreign entrepreneurs	14	17
Need to submit to the EU legal system	21	16
Growth of unemployment in Slovakia	12	14
Limiting of the economic development of Slovakia	8	11
Some limitation of state sovereignty	14	10
Don't know	31	6

Source: Adapted from *Názory*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2003, pp. 49-50.

It should be noted that unemployment had increased notably after the first Dzurinda government came to power in 1998, although it was already declining in the run-up to the referendum. Whether the EU was going to bring jobs, at home or abroad, was what mattered most to many families.

Referendums in Slovakia

Although no referendum was held on the division of Czechoslovakia in 1992, the independent Slovakia had held a number of referendums since then. The constitution (Art. 93) allows a referendum to be held on any important issue of public interest other than basic rights and freedoms, and tax and budgetary matters. A referendum is called by the president if he is presented with a petition signed by at least 350,000 citizens or a resolution from parliament, although he is permitted first to check the constitutionality of the referendum with the Constitutional Court (Art. 95). A referendum is also used to confirm a constitutional law on entering or leaving a union with other states, and it was for this reason that a referendum on EU accession had to take place (Art. 7, Art. 93).

While the legal provisions for holding referendums may seem relatively clear, the polarised atmosphere of Slovakia in the 1990s had led to chaos surrounding referendums on more than one occasion, and several of the articles on referendums were fine-tuned as part of the constitutional amendments that came into force in June 2001. Nevertheless, there was still room for dispute about the legal force of the possible result in a referendum on EU accession. This related to the fact that referendums were only valid if more than 50% of voters took part, and more than 50% of these voted 'Yes'.

On the four occasions in which referendums had been held in the past, there had never been a turnout of more than 50%. Even when a referendum had been held on a general election day, in 1998, only 44% of the electorate took part (compared to 84% in the parliamentary election). 84% of the participants agreed that there should be no privatisations of strategically important enterprises. In November 2000, 95% of referendum participants favoured early elections (although the government still had a three-fifths parliamentary majority!), but only 20% of the electorate had taken part. Voting in referendums was clearly the preserve of 'Yes' voters. Referendum questions could most effectively be vetoed by their opponents by the simple expedient of staying home so that a low turnout made the referendum invalid.

The chances of getting a 50% turnout in the May 2003 EU referendum were considerably higher because unlike earlier referendums, which had been part of the struggle between government and opposition, joining the EU was supported by all the political parties. However, given that referendums generally attract lower turnouts than parliamentary elections, and that the 50% turnout stipulation gave the 'No' vote a strong incentive to stay at home, there was considerable concern that parliament would be left in the awkward position of having a strong 'Yes' vote in a referendum that was not valid. In the early months of 2003, Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic surveys showed that

around 42% of the electorate said they would definitely take part, while another quarter thought they were more likely to than not.[2]

It is highly likely that in the case of an invalid vote, parliament would have gone ahead with EU accession, providing that this was legitimated by a strong 'Yes' vote and a turnout approaching 50%. The dilemma was that this could not be stated unequivocally in advance, since emphasising that the 50% turnout was in Slovakia's vital national interest was the most effective way of getting the vote out. There is no doubt, however, that the final result, with a 52.15% participation rate, saved a lot of messy argument in the wake of the referendum.

The EU referendum was also saved one further complication. In the early months of 2003, an attempt was made to collect the 350,000 signatures necessary to force a referendum on NATO accession. NATO had always been far more unpopular than the EU, with support often below 50%, so any attempt to connect the two issues was unhelpful to the EU referendum campaign. The anti-NATO campaigners hoped their referendum would be called for the same day as the EU one, though President Schuster would not have chosen to do this. In the event, an insufficient number of signatures were collected. Unlike all previous campaigns to collect signatures demanding a referendum, this one was not supported by any major political party. What the NATO referendum project did do, however, was provide a useful distraction and channel for the energies and frustrations of Europhobic nationalists and communists whose party leaders were not prepared to oppose EU membership. As such, it may have helped the smooth progress of the EU referendum campaign.

The Campaign

The campaign was heavily influenced by two factors: the broad consensus among political elites that the Slovak Republic needed to join the EU, and the urgent need to ensure a good turnout, both in order to clear the 50% turnout hurdle, and to convince a still occasionally sceptical international community of the country's enthusiasm for European integration.

In many respects, Slovakia was exceptionally well prepared for running a very effective 'get the vote out' campaign. In the run-up to both the 1998 and 2002 elections, Slovak NGOs had run very active voter mobilisation campaign, which reached a high level of sophistication and diversity in 2002. While notionally unpolitical, they had a clear political underpinning, since young people had a tendency not to vote, but a strong tendency not to vote Meciar if they did. The campaigns had left the country with almost unparalleled experience of how to print T-shirts, run concerts in the town square, organise debates in village halls and target specific sections of the electorate. The government's referendum strategy, as published on the Government Office website, appeared well designed to exploit this strength, and targeted 11 million Slovak crowns

[2] See: *Názory*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2003, p. 23. Data is also available at http://www.statistics.sk/webdata/slov/infor/uvvm/uvvm0503c.htm.

(over 250,000 euros) for small projects; had strategies for communicating with different sections of the population; and planned to concentrate its campaign in the last three weeks to prevent peaking too early.[3] The mere fact that, unlike in an election campaign, the Government Office could play a major role in both financing activities and taking a partisan pro-EU stance, should also have assisted. In the light of this, what happened in April and May 2003 was a major disappointment.

The referendum campaign ended up having a fairly low profile in comparison to those in Slovakia's three Visegrad neighbours. There were several reasons for this. One was that the financial resources provided were not particularly large, and campaign organisation was not exemplary. The fact that the government member in charge of the campaign, the Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration, Pál Csáky, was a member of the Party of the Hungarian Coalition, which represented Slovakia's 10% Hungarian minority, was perhaps not an asset in a country where nationalism tended to be rooted in phobia against Hungarians, who had been Slovakia's pre-1918 imperial rulers. Csáky's leadership of the campaign was also certainly far from faultless: the original campaign song put Slovak words to an old Hungarian pop hit, and was speedily withdrawn when it was discovered that (nationalist protests aside), they had infringed copyright by using it.

A more serious problem, however, was that any political community has limits to the frequency and intensity with which the public can be mobilised. The referendum campaign took place little more than six months after a parliamentary election campaign, where, despite huge amounts of foreign aid, a monumental 'get the vote out' effort had only achieved a 70% turnout, compared to 84% in 1998. In May 2003, what Slovakia lacked was the sense of urgency that exists in profoundly polarised societies where election results hang on a knife-edge. Both the 84% turnout in 1998, and the highest turnout ever in neighbouring Hungary in its 2002 election, had been the products of huge tensions in society. The Slovak referendum, on the other hand, was uncontested. There was no 'No' campaign, because there was no one to run one. The Government Office could not give financial support to a 'No' campaign, because, with every party that had received 5% of the democratic vote in September 2002 (and almost all that had received less as well) in favour of EU accession, there could be no legitimate recipient of such finance. Any anti-EU feeling was indicated by opposition politicians in the most subtle way possible by suggesting that the campaign was not doing enough to provide balanced debate of the disadvantages as well as the advantages that awaited citizens after accession. While this subliminally suggested that there were, indeed, some problems with being in the EU, the thrust of the argument was also a domestic political one criticising the government's running of the campaign.

With no one to argue with, the 'Yes' campaign could only concentrate on public information, increasing awareness of what EU membership meant, and convincing the electorate that it really did matter that they took part in the referendum. It was successful up to a point, and research indicated that by May 2003 98% of voters knew that the referendum was going to take place.[4] Some 9% thought they had been encouraged to vote

[3] See the official referendum website, www.eureferendum.sk.
[4] See: *Názory, op. cit.*, p. 22.

by the campaign, though 3% said it had put them off.[5] Numerous television debates attempted worthily to discuss different aspects of EU membership; there were programmes about current member states, and social provisions in the EU; and various ambassadors and prominent EU politicians encouraged Slovaks to vote to join. The campaign came up with slogans such as 'Better inside than out', 'We've got the future in our hands' and 'Don't leave it other people'. But as far as many voters were concerned, they had settled the issue of EU accession in the previous two parliamentary elections. A 52% turnout was quite respectable for a relatively uncontentious referendum in which 'No' voters were encouraged to stay home by the stipulation that a 50% turnout was necessary for the result to be binding.

In the nearest the media came to a real argument during the referendum campaign, the subject of contestation was not the EU, but, as so often in the past, domestic politics. While Meciar and other HZDS politicians did their best to cultivate their new image of being responsible politicians and good Europeans, the leader of the second largest opposition party, *Smer*'s Fico, tried to get Csáky dismissed for his incompetence in running the campaign. Other debates revolved around whether the prime minister and the government should resign if the turnout fell below 50%.

The most symbolic event in the whole campaign, however, took place on the last day before the 48 hour campaign moratorium started, when the country's leading politicians sat round a table together in a café. The presence of President Schuster and Prime Minister Dzurinda was less remarkable than that of ex-President Kovác and ex-Prime Minister Meciar, the arch-enemies whose protracted personal, political and institutional battles had been the object of such strong criticism by the EU in the dark days of 1997. That the referendum campaign seemed finally to have laid to rest the bitter polarisation of Slovak politics in the 1990s was the most positive omen for the country's European future.

The Results

Table 2: Result of the 2003 EU accession referendum in the Slovak Republic

	Total	% of Registered Voters	% of Valid Votes
Registered voters	4 174 097	100.00	
Ballot papers issued	2 176 990	52.15	
Votes cast	2 175 389	52.12	
Valid votes	2 147 901	51.46	
Yes	2 012 870	48.22	93.71
No	135 031	3.23	6.29

Source: Calculated with data from Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, www.statistics.sk

[5] Ibid., p. 43.

The hugely high 'Yes' vote was not a surprise given the acute awareness that the right to EU membership could not be taken for granted, the elite consensus on the need for accession, and the incentive for 'No' voters to stay at home in an attempt to invalidate the inevitable 'Yes' vote through low turnout. However, some interesting information can still be gleaned from the distribution of votes in the referendum.

Firstly, there were distinct regional patterns both in turnout, and in the casting of 'No' votes. Of the eight regions, the Bratislava region – containing the capital, which enjoys a standard of living equal to the EU average – had both the highest turnout (59.54%) and the lowest 'No' vote (3.86%). The lowest turnouts, of 48.00% and 47.65%, were found in the Trencín and Žilina regions, which are the most strongly pro-HZDS in the country. Trencín region also had the highest average 'No' vote, at 7.97%. At district level, it is even more noticeable that the three districts with turnouts below 40% were Cadca, Bytca and Kysucké Nové Mesto, which, of all 79 districts, were the same three that produced the highest HZDS vote in both 1998 and 2002 parliamentary elections. This corresponds with the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic opinion poll in May 2003, showing that HZDS supporters were least likely to state that they would definitely take part in the referendum (25.2%, compared with a national average of 47.4%).[6] While a leading HZDS politician blamed the low turnout on the fact that the opposition had been squeezed out of the campaign,[7] there had always been a strong minority of EU opponents among HZDS sympathisers. With a party leadership supporting membership, withdrawing from politics by staying at home was an understandable reaction among such voters. When asked why they were not going to take part in the referendum, 64% of respondents in the May opinion poll stated that they were fed up with political developments in Slovakia.[8]

Looking at the 'No' voters, the percentage tops 10% in ten districts, and tends to correlate with a high Communist vote in the 2002 election. Most conspicuously, the highest 'No' vote, 13.42%, was in Medzilaborce in eastern Slovakia, which in 2002 recorded by far the highest Communist vote at 24.91% – 10% higher than in any other district. When President Schuster took a side swipe at the government by blaming the referendum result on high unemployment,[9] there is likely to have been some truth in his assertion. It is rural areas with few employment opportunities, particularly in the East of the country where nationalism has never been strong, that tended to produce a high Communist vote. Communist voters appear to have been more willing to convert their resistance to the hardships of post-communist transition into a vote against the EU than the supporters of other parties.

In some senses, the 52% turnout in the referendum was a considerable achievement. When asked about the most important problems in Slovakia, foreign policy consistently

[6] Ibid., p. 25.
[7] Sergej Kozlík, deputy chair of HZDS. See *Sme*, 20 May 2003.
[8] See: *Názory*, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
[9] See: *Pravda*, 19 May 2003.

comes near the bottom of the list, with unemployment and standards of living at the top.[10] Yet other evidence suggests that, on the contrary, foreign policy has mattered very much to the Slovaks. Dzurinda's success in the 2002 election, and his reappointment as prime minister of a government of four centre-right parties, came as a surprise to opinion pollsters. His Slovak Christian and Democratic Union's vote was considerably higher than predicted, making it the second largest party in parliament (after the opposition HZDS, which later fragmented). It is therefore worth noting that when Slovaks are asked in opinion polls to evaluate the performance of the Dzurinda governments, foreign policy comes out as its most marked success.[11] Despite the day-to-day preoccupation with domestic economic hardships, there is also an awareness among many Slovaks that EU membership is more likely to be a solution than a problem.

Future developments

The high level of elite consensus on the need for EU accession leaves considerable scope for rapid development of Eurosceptic views once politicians are freed from the overwhelming 'national interest' argument of gaining membership. Two strands of such arguments were already clearly visible before the referendum. The first is led by Fico and *Smer*, and concentrates on the need to defend national interest against the EU. This is an argument most easily pursued while in opposition, when the proponents are not confronted with the necessity of actually negotiating with other member states. It is likely, however, to become more marked after accession. The second is led by the Christian Democratic Movement, which became a far more essentially Catholic party after Dzurinda's Slovak Democratic and Christian Union split off from the Christian Democrats and joined with the more liberal Democratic Union during the first Dzurinda government. At a domestic level, the Christian Democrats have come near to tearing the second Dzurinda government apart with arguments about the Vatican Treaty and abortion laws, where their major sparring partner is ANO, the only liberal party in the four-party government coalition. At a European level, however, they fit in with a Euroscepticism which rejects the secular, and consumerist, nature of West European society, and seeks to put 'God' into the new European Constitution.

Just as important, however, is the fact that the beginning of real debates about how to handle membership are becoming visible, particularly as the details of financial arrangements are discussed. The distribution of subsidies becomes important, and both farmers and trade unionists begin to stake their claims within the European arena. What is likely to emerge, at last, is a debate about EU affairs that actually relates to the EU and not to the major struggles of Slovakia as a new state. Domestic politics will still be an important factor, as it is elsewhere in the EU, but it will not tower over everything else as it has done hitherto.

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[10] IVO data can be found in Olga Gyárfášová & Marián Velšic, 'Verejná mienka', in Mirolslav Kollár & Grigorij Mesežnikov (eds), *Slovensko 2002: Súhrnná správa o stave spolocnosti I* (Bratislava: Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 2002), p. 294.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 298; Marián Velšic, '100 Days of Mikuláš Dzurinda's Government in the Mirror of Public Opinion', in G. Mesežnikov (ed.), *Slovakia after the Elections: Public Opinion, Political Players, Media* (Bratislava: Institute of Public Affairs/International Republican Institute, 2003), p. 11.

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