

Guest Editorial

Slovakia's Difficult but Promising Task

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I Return to Europe

The events of November 1989 in the former Czechoslovakia, occurred in the context of other far-reaching changes in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, enabling the Czechoslovakians and the Slovaks to begin a revolutionary transition process. During the short period since the collapse of Communist rule, both politicians and citizens were faced with the challenge of creating a new order. This necessitated adapting themselves to new economic and political circumstances created by the existing national and global environment. After the country had emerged from the constricting and rigid 'Communist camp', Czechoslovakia faced a multitude of impulses, pressures, choices and restraints from both within and without.

The 'orientation towards Western Europe' has rapidly appeared to be a central metaphor for all the country's aspirations, summed up in the slogan 'return to Europe'. Such a notion, with all its connotations on 'the return of the lost son', evoked a clear appeal for the admission to the much vaunted Europe. Indeed, soon after the so-called 'Velvet Revolution' the new political elites expressed their interest in Czechoslovakia becoming a member of the European Community (EC). This interest has now become the official Czechoslovakian, and lately a Slovakian foreign policy objective.

At that time, two political mainstreams emerged in Slovakia (it still being a part of Czechoslovakia): on the one hand the integrationist view presumed that the Slovakian national and state identity is closely tied to the European and world context. On the other hand there is the isolationist view, which exaggerated the national uniqueness, preferring Slovakia to distance itself from the ongoing process of European integration. Roots of both approaches can be traced back to the nineteenth century, and their analogies can be found almost all over the Europe. Differences between the 'integrationists' and the 'isolationists'

arise from their visions of the modernization of the Slovakian society. The former is firmly anchored to the European integration process, in which modernization is understood as a mutual process for the creation of democratic institutions, an effective market economy and a fair social system. The latter favours the principle summed up in the slogan 'Let's rely upon ourselves only' and combines the elements of clientelist market economy and authoritarianism.

II Leaving the Past Behind

Three periods can be distinguished in the evolution of the Slovakian/Czechoslovakian integration policy according to which one of the aforementioned mainstreams were dominant at the time.

The first stage, dating from the beginning of 1990s to the break-up of Czechoslovakia at the end of 1992, was characterised by severing the ties with the USSR and the country's Communist past, and attaching the highest priority to establishing better and closer relations with the EC.

At that time, the emphasis of the Czechoslovakian foreign policy was on regional cooperation, which later became known as the Visegrad Group or V-3. The closer collaboration of Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland evolved into negotiations with the EC through a new type of the Association Agreement – the so-called Europe Agreement. Membership of the EC has thus become the core objective of the foreign policies of the Central and Eastern European countries.

The second stage began in 1993 when the independent Slovak Republic emerged, to the parliamentary elections in September 1998. In 1993, the Copenhagen Summit was a real breakthrough for all the Associated Countries for it saw the fulfilment of their wish that their EU membership be officially acknowledged for the first time. On 4 October of the same year, the Europe Agreement between the EU and Slovakia was signed. However, with the exception of a six month interim period of Jozef Moravčík's broad coalition government, Slovakia gradually began to lose its integration momentum due to the Slovak Prime Minister, Vladimir Mečiar's authoritative style of governing the country and the ignoring of the EU's recommendations.

Following the parliamentary elections in October 1994, the opposition, virtually overnight, was deprived of a proper representation in the Parliament and experienced a significant diminution in their influence in other state institutions, including public radio and television. Therefore, the ambassadors of the EU Troika delivered to the Slovak

Government *démarche* regarding the need for further democratic reforms in the country, and the European Parliament (EP) also adopted resolutions with regard to the political situation in Slovakia. Despite such evident concerns, no improvements were made. The Slovak Republic was therefore the only country which failed to meet the Copenhagen political criteria as stated in the Opinion of the Commission of July 1997.

III The 1998 Elections – A Watershed

The third stage began relatively recently, when the new pro-European coalition took office in October 1998 following the September parliamentary elections. This coalition has initiated significant changes to the Slovakian internal policy and to the political culture as a whole, thus enabling the recovery of democratic institutions in the country and their traditional functions, after years of Mečiar's rule. The need for the country's more intense participation in the process of European integration has become a cornerstone of Slovakia's foreign policy, as the Government's declaration states:

Membership of the European Union is a strategic aim and one of the most important political and economic priorities of the Slovak Republic. In order to achieve this aim, the Government will fulfil the political criteria as soon as possible, and undertakes to fulfil other criteria set by the Copenhagen EU summit and resolutions of the joint bodies of the Slovak Republic and the European Union to place the Slovak Republic among the best prepared candidate countries.

The EP was the first to recognise the positive changes in the country following the elections, and in October 1998 adopted a favourable resolution calling upon European institutions to apply a flexible approach towards Slovakia. Although the Commission adopted a relatively cautious response to the EP's initiative – Slovakia will not be among the negotiating countries at the Cologne Summit in June 1999 – it recognized the positive moves and developments being taken in the country, and has confirmed its support for the swift removal of the barriers preventing the eventual opening of negotiations.

This explains the proposal by Commissioner Mr. Hans van den Broek to establish the High Level Working Group between the EU and Slovakia. In this group (which is co-chaired by Deputy Director General of the DG IA and the State Secretary of the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic), representatives of both the EU and Slovakia have been discussing the fulfilment of the pre-accession strategy priorities, and what steps are to be taken in the political, economic, institutional and legislative fields. The group aims to build and promote a new relationship between the Slovakian government and the Commission, which should be, and is, open and direct.

The new government coalition has achieved significant progress in the fulfilment of the short-term priorities to which the Commission has paid great attention. Decisions on salient issues from the past, such as effective opposition participation in parliamentary scrutinizing committees and supervisory boards; the independence of the judiciary; the implementation of policies aimed at tackling internal and external imbalances and sustaining macroeconomic stability; progress on structural reforms; privatization and the restructuring of enterprises; finance, banking, and energy intensive heavy industry; institutional strengthening and the PHARE Programming 99, were achieved within the period of one hundred days after the government had taken office. The law on presidential elections by universal suffrage has now also been adopted, and after being without the Head of State for fourteen months, Slovakia has again got its President following the elections in May of this year. Discussions within the government coalition on the adoption of legislative provisions on minority language use are also proceeding at a pace, and it is expected that a new law will be passed by July 1999.

The above legislative and organizational steps represent a firm basis for the fulfilment of other issues this year. For example, the adoption of framework legislation on conformity and certification; the State Aid Law; the harmonization of legislation on intellectual property; the Public Service Law; preparations for Public Procurement Law and framework legislation in the field of environment. Complying with all these tasks should, it is hoped, enable Slovakia to be included among countries negotiating the accession to the EU.

IV 1999 – The Year of Hope

After the decision of the Vienna Summit which asked the European Commission to prepare a further report on the progress achieved in the fulfilment of membership criteria in 1999, Slovakia is now intensively concentrating on preparations for the Helsinki Summit. The Commission's report of 4 November 1998, unfortunately, could only respond, to a limited extent, on the developments after last year's par-

liamentary elections in Slovakia, which did not provide a sufficient basis for the adoption of a decision on opening negotiations on Slovakia's accession to the EU. However, the European Council did praise the positive changes that had occurred in the country following these elections. Slovakia welcomed the conclusions of the Vienna European Council which stated that the new situation in Slovakia, following the elections, allows for the prospect of opening negotiations on condition that the stable and democratic functioning of its institutions is confirmed. Therefore, Slovakia has reason to hope that it will manage to achieve its strategic foreign policy goal of 1999: inclusion among the negotiating countries this year.

Equally, joint bodies set up on the basis of the Europe Agreement provide a firm support of our integration efforts. Following the parliamentary elections, the 7th meeting of the Joint Parliamentary Committee between the EU and the Slovak Republic on 20–22 January 1999, welcomed the significant progress that Slovakia had made in the political area. The Association Committee, held on 28 January 1999, also took place in a considerably altered environment, now characterized by the mutual understanding of partners and a clear will to resolve issues concerning the integration of Slovakia into the EU. The highest joint body – the Association Council – is also expected to welcome the country's progress.

The effective coordination of all the actors involved in the integration process constitutes an important prerequisite for successful policy implementation. Since the former system of coordination proved to be rather cumbersome, extensive changes have been made to the structure of the institutions responsible for European integration.

The Ministerial Council for European Integration has been established, which is a coordination and advisory body of the Slovakian government consisting of the Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration (President of the Council), and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs (Vice-President), Economy, Finance, Agriculture, Interior and the State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the Chief Negotiator. The Council prepares solutions for politically relevant issues and coordinates the relevant bodies of the state administration involved in the process of European integration. It's Working Committee aims to solve the technical aspects of Slovakia's preparations for membership to the EU. Reporting to the Council, the Committee is chaired by the Chief Negotiator (thereby continuity between the Council and the Committee is preserved) and consists of Director-Generals or Directors of the Office of Government, Ministries and Central Bodies of the State Administration who are in charge of

European integration, as well the heads of twenty-nine working groups whose agenda corresponds with the expected negotiation chapters. Furthermore, the transformation of the European integration departments into sections or divisions is also an integral part of the aforementioned changes.

A significant step towards strengthening the civic dimension of the integration process is confirmed by the creation of the Consultative Committee of the Ministerial Council for European Integration whereby scientific institutions, trade unions, employers associations and non-governmental organizations are all represented. It is a unique body in which, under the chairmanship of the Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration, not only official but rather independent views can be aired and discussed.

V Utilizing Pre-Accession Tools

Despite the fact that Slovakia did not succeed in Luxembourg due to its failure to fulfil the political criteria as defined at the Copenhagen Summit, merely complying with these prerequisites would not be a satisfactory argument when evaluating the country's preparedness for EU membership. Regular Reports of the European Commission have illustrated that there has been an overall loss of momentum in Slovakia in the realization of the pre-accession strategy. Slovakia needs to take concrete steps in the economic area; the approximation of legislation; the strengthening of its administrative capacity regarding the enforcement of EU legislation and reinforcing relevant institutional structures.

Departing from the Copenhagen criteria and the priorities defined in the Accession Partnership, the Commission's reports have mapped out in detail Slovakia's shortcomings in its preparation for the EU accession. In order to meet the strategic goal of the Slovakian foreign policy, it was necessary to project the priorities into particular tasks to be completed by the end of 1999. The result of such an approach has been the preparation and adoption of the 'Timetable of Tasks Resulting from the Regular report of the European Commission on Progress of Slovakia towards the EU Membership'. It constitutes an action plan in the field of European integration for 1999 covering key areas of the pre-accession strategy. Its implementation consists of measures to be taken, in for example, the political sphere, economic policy, the approximation of legislation and public administration reform.

In 1998 the National Programme for the Adoption of the *Acquis Communautaire* (NPAA) was prepared and adopted. It is the substantial document of the pre-accession strategy drawing upon the Pre-Accession Partnership priorities, consisting of both legislative tasks and a plan for financial, institutional and administrative coverage of the implementation of EU legislation. On the basis of its own analysis, the Commission signalled some defects of the NPAA, namely its extensiveness and financial underestimation. Both these shortcomings and the proceeding integration process demand that the NPAA must be updated by June 1999.

The ability to come to terms with the competition pressures of the single market is one of the key prerequisites for the EU integration. In this area Slovakia needs to resolve its transition problems and eliminate failures of its past economic policy. It is in Slovakia's vital interest to revive and improve its economy in order to operate effectively within the single market. The restoration of an economic equilibrium, alongside a process of restructuring in the economy and its financial and banking sectors is the first priority of the pre-accession strategy.

The concept of inclusiveness of the enlargement process enables the countries in the so-called second group to take steps which must be completed even before accession negotiations can begin. Both groups of associated countries have been undergoing *acquis* screening, consisting of its multilateral and bilateral phases. With regard to starting accession negotiations, bilateral screening is of crucial importance since its goal is to identify outstanding issues which are to be negotiated. Slovakia is currently undergoing this stage. Its successful completion, along with a positive decision at the Helsinki Summit, would make it possible to open accession negotiations between Slovakia and the EU without any further intermediary steps. During this process the state administration is taking decisive steps towards the fulfilment of the Accession Partnership and the NPAA priorities. The government will present all its achievements which should then be reflected in the updated European Commission's Regular report.

VI Conclusion

All the political parties of the current government coalition clearly advocate a pro-European and pro-integration policy. Our partners in the EU therefore, compared to the past, have no difficulties in identifying the unequivocal intentions of the Slovak government. This policy

has obtained the support of 67 per cent of the electorate and constitutes one of the key prerequisites for its successful implementation.

For Slovakia, EU membership is the highest foreign policy priority of the present government. Since the preparation for membership is a complex process, we have formulated a set of tasks in the political, economic, institutional and legislative areas. Slovakia realises that their fulfilment will not be simple. However, I am convinced that with the backing of the majority of the Slovak voters who favour EU integration, the current government has the necessary resolve, determination and abilities to successfully carry them out. Another positive element in this respect is that the Slovakian government enjoys the confidence and support of its EU partners and European institutions.

The government of the Slovak Republic is taking firm steps to intensify contacts and to strengthen partnership relations with the EU Member States as well as with its neighbouring Associated Countries – the Republic of Hungary, the Czech Republic and the Republic of Poland – including the revival of cooperation within the V-4 group.

On the basis of their close cooperation, the Central European countries could enter the EU as a single group of countries in the early years of the next century. This, in our view, would be advantageous for each of our countries and for the Central European region, as well as for the EU as a whole.