

ELECTORAL BEHAVIOR OF SLOVAK VOTERS IN THE FIRST EURO-ELECTIONS AND BROADER CONTEXT OF EU MEMBERSHIP PERCEPTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2004, Slovakia's ambition to join the EU has been finally successful. Subsequently, the EU membership got reflected in the first elections of Slovakia's representatives in the European Parliament. This election reflected relentlessly Slovakia's interest in „European issues“. In spite of the fact that the declared support for the EU membership maintained high values (in a long run), on June 13, 2004 just about 17% of the eligible voters actually participated in the election for the European Parliament.

The following research study focuses on the European elections (electoral behaviour, the assessment of the campaign and reasons for abstaining). It views them in the broader context of European integration, the assessment of the current social situation, the relationship towards political parties and numerous other factors. The analysis is based **on the results of the post-election public opinion research** - i.e. the **European Election Study 2004**. The coordinator of this research in Slovakia is the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO), an independent analytical think tank. The research has been conducted thanks to the funding via European Commission's grant for the project „Towards Better Understanding of European Union“. The processing and analysis of the extensive empirical material was generously supported by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

The data collection was conducted by the FOCUS agency in the period June 15 – 22, 2004, on a representative sample of 1063 respondents.

Euro-elections 2004 – participation, outcomes, campaign

The examination of the reasons and causes of this low participation has multiple levels. In the level of immediate reasons, there should be mentioned especially the **electoral fatigue** – it was the third voting already in a relatively short period of time (the presidential elections in two rounds and the referendum on the shortening of the electoral period). The other explanatory level has a somewhat more complicated background – since even the **political**

parties and the elites in general have shown their disinterest in those elections. Within the agenda of the political parties, the European elections were of **secondary significance**, what was evident also from their listing of candidates as well as from their campaign. The campaign lacked the mobilising conflict and the parties practically lacked **any differentiation in their attitudes**. From the elections point of view we ought to note that unlike in many other member countries, the Slovak elections for the European Parliament were successful mainly for pro-European coalition parties and not for parties which would really mobilise the voters by pouring oil into anti-EU sentiments.

The campaign before the EP elections raised no notable interest with the public. According to the research, just 1% of the respondents stated to be „very“ interested in this campaign, 7% were "rather" (somewhat) interested and 39% declared to be "little" interested in it. But more than half of the qualified voters were **completely uninterested about the campaign**. Adequately to this interest (or rather non-interest) watched the individual activities focussing on the elections for the EU. At least occasionally - they viewed especially TV broadcasts dealing with the elections or the respective articles in papers. We can assume that this was not a dedicated search for this type of information, it were rather „random encounters“ when watching other TV programs or reading other articles.

The assessment of the campaign by the public is very critical. In the opinion of the majority of the respondents - the candidates were very superficial in their argumentation and (at the same time) up to 60% of the respondents agreed with the statement „The campaign was rather about advertising strategies than about content (substance)“.

Social Climate

In the hierarchy of urgent social problems are dominated by unemployment, followed by the low standard of living and the health care system. According to the respondents, the urgent social problems should be dealt with especially at national level (not regional or European). The attitude of the Slovak public is critical towards the current social and economic situation. This applies also to the development assessment and comparison to other countries. According to 61% of the respondents, the situation worsened compared to the situation one year ago, only 11% declared an improvement. This attitude is significantly affected by age and generation gaps. This is logical and closely associated not just with the better

preparedness of young people for economic changes related to the change-over from the plan-based communist economy to market-economy, but also with the European integration. For the older generation, the new conditions of increased competition are much harder to accept, it much more difficult for them to adapt. The older generation perceives the changes rather as a threat and not as a new challenge or opportunity. The reason for this is the fact that young people are better equipped with „skills“ substantial for individual success in the international competitive environment. Many of the young already achieved international education and international experience, they have the necessary language skills what provides them with more natural self-confidence.

The displeasure with the economic and social situation turns most often against the Government. The public uses to assess 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.

Trust in democracy and institutions

For the citizens of the SR, the European institutions are more trustworthy than the national institutions. Consequently - people are more satisfied with the democracy at European level than at national level. The new democracies represent a specific case when it comes to the ratio between the satisfaction/dissatisfaction with democracy at European level and national level - in comparison with the "old" Member Countries. While in the "old" Member Countries satisfaction with the national democracy prevails - the situation with the "newcomers" is exactly the opposite. We may assume that the reason is limited experience with the practical execution of politics and democracy in the EU. On the other hand, the new democracies face the consolidation of the national political situation.

EU membership, new citizenship, new identity

In June 2004, Slovakia's EU membership was considered to be a "good thing" by 35% of the respondents, a neutral attitude (neither good nor bad thing) was adopted by almost one half of respondents and as a "bad thing" it was taken just by 9%. We get a slightly more sceptical perception of the EU when viewing the trust of the people in EU decisions. We feel a certain

reservation (carefulness) in the views of the public – the most frequent statement on both questions (regarding decisions from Slovakia and for myself) is: „I have just little trust“. Extreme values of trust and distrust are less frequent. This is understandable, when bearing in mind that in June 2004, the citizens of SR had just minimum immediate experience with EU decisions.

Shortly after the accession to the EU approx. half of Slovakia's citizens feels to be exclusively Slovaks, the other half thinks of themselves as EU citizens. One third feels to be not just EU citizens, but they are even adequately proud of this fact.

The majority of the Slovak public is in favour of a continuing integration process. Just a small part thinks that the „integration went already too far“.

From among all European nations, the Slovak public trusts (apart from the own nation) most the Czechs, followed (with a certain gap) by another Slavic neighbouring nation - the Polish. Most of the Western-European nations are in the range of a 2/3 trust. The "tail-light" of this chart are the Turks. This reservation is caused especially by their different religion and culture.

And what about the future?

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, carelessness and not on the dissatisfaction or even protest against the membership.**

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.