

Robert Fico argues that economic liberalism has gone too far and benefits the rich while leaving disadvantaging the poor. Political analysts are likely to watch Slovakia closely during 2007 to see whether this shift in domestic policies will signal a change in foreign policy, especially in relations with the EU.

Early concerns were triggered by Fico's choice of coalition partners; his own left-wing Smer party teamed up with the authoritarian-populist Movement for a Democratic Slovakia led by Vladimír Mečiar, and with the radical nationalists' Slovak National Party (SNS) whose leader is Ján Slota. Mečiar was Prime Minister in the years immediately after the country split from its Czech neighbour in 1993. Under his premiership, Slovakia became much criticised for its lack both of democratic reform and of respect for minority rights. At one point it was disqualified from EU accession talks because of this democratic deficit.

Fears that Slovakia might never be allowed into the EU mobilised opposition to

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BRATISLAVA **Slovakia's** **political lurch** **casts doubt on its** **pro-EU stance**

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Slovakia's latest political U-turn raised eyebrows throughout Europe when Mikuláš Dzurinda's europhile pro-market government was replaced last year by a leftist-led coalition that pledged to redistribute national wealth. Incoming Prime Minister

Mečiar, culminating in the 1998 election victory for an alliance of pro-democracy parties. EU accession negotiations were opened in earnest in 1999 and Slovakia joined in the “big bang” enlargement that brought in 10 new member states in May 2004.

This process consolidated Slovakia’s democracy and created a functioning market economy, a modern decentralised system of government and a more developed civil society. The twin processes of socio-economic reform at home and EU accession have become so closely aligned in the Slovak psyche that most people see the transformation of their society and entry into the European “family of democratic nations” as two sides of the same coin.

When Mikuláš Dzurinda was Prime Minister, Slovakia was a vocal advocate of European integration and of the European constitution. But his government was ousted in last June’s general election.

None of the present coalition’s three ruling parties had been known for

their visionary approach to European integration or international issues in general. On the contrary, their introvert tendencies seemed to border on isolationism. Today, their international contacts remain rather limited, and the situation was aggravated last year when the Party of European Socialists (PES) suspended Smer’s membership because of its alliance with the radical nationalist SNS.

The new government’s EU priorities are still rather vague, but at least suggest that worst-case fears about a change of foreign policy direction in Slovakia may be overdone. The government’s manifesto says it will continue many of the European policies it inherited from the previous administration. It subscribes to deepening “partnership and strategic cooperation” within the EU and “acceleration of the European integration process”. It also declares Slovakia’s willingness to participate in shaping and implementing the Common Foreign and Security Policy and advocates continued ratification of the constitutional treaty and

further EU enlargement. The most tangible of the resolutions in the new government’s manifesto was its pledge to stick to the plan to adopt the euro in 2009.

A number of economists have warned that the incoming government’s leftist socio-economic policies may retard or even reverse the country’s strong growth, but so far the signs are that the economic momentum inherited from the previous administration will be enough to maintain public finances. This should allow social welfare programmes to be funded without pushing the budget deficit above the Maastricht convergence criterion of 3% of Gross Domestic Product, and would thus keep Slovakia on track to join the eurozone in 2009.

The coalition’s performance to date suggests that its main priorities in 2007 will in any case be domestic. As well as parcelling out political and administrative powers, the three-party coalition has been setting out its legislative strategy. The new government has halted the selling-

out of state property, with the 2007 budget showing no privatisation revenues, and is also planning to strengthening the state's role in the running of regulatory agencies that had been largely independent. It also intends to revise the Labour Code, which it considers overly liberal and too biased in favour of employers, and it wants to raise domestic wages, help socially disadvantaged groups, increase civil servants' salaries, assist young families and improve public pensions. Other programmes include developing the "knowledge economy" and more public spending on agriculture.

Slovakia is one of the EU's most europhile countries, with more than 80% of its citizens supporting its membership of the Union. But it still remains to be seen whether the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has seen the fewest personnel changes since the government's inauguration and which is led by an experienced diplomat, Ján Kubiš, will be able to prevent Slovakia from neglecting its EU and international commitments.

For the time being most observers agree that the days when Slovakia strove to take initiatives within the EU and other international organisations are over. □

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