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REFERENDUM CAMPAIGN ON SLOVAK REPUBLIC'S ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

Andrzej Sawicki*

ABSTRACT

By the end of 2013, ten years will have passed since the end of the process of the integration of the countries of the Eastern Bloc with the European Union. Among those, Slovakia also found its place. The accession constituted a symbolic return to the family of the European countries which became victims of the division of the war trophies of the superpowers in the last war. Joining the elite club of the rich Europe was an act of justice in history. The paper presents the process of the campaign and the accession referendum on the Danube riverside as seen by a Pole who is a research worker of the Institute of Journalism, Warsaw University. The Slovakian campaign was very short and, practically, absent in media and in the streets of towns and villages. An advantage of the Slovakian campaign was reaching, for the first time in the referendum, the 50 percent threshold of attendance. It should also be noted that Bratislava joined the negotiations two years after Poland and Hungary. During the voting an event occurred - totally impossible to envisage in other countries of the former Eastern Bloc. After the first day of voting – fearing a low level of attendance - the media activity was reinforced by major Slovakian politicians: the representatives of the ruling coalition, opposition, and fanatical political opponents. They resolved unequivocally to favour Slovakia's joining the European Union. The consensus was temporal and was pragmatic in character; however, the politicians were able to demonstrate that integration with the EU is a common issue. Such a situation would have been difficult to envisage in any post-Communist country.

Key words: Slovakia, attendance, campaign, constituency, media, referendum, voting

Introduction

The referendum on Slovakia's entering the European Union was held between 16 and 17 of May, 2003. The eligible for voting were asked the following question: *“Do you agree to the Slovak Republic's becoming a Member State of the European Union?”*

The referendum was binding in character. The voting was recognised as

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valid because 50 per cent of eligible citizens participated in it; and, a majority favoured joining the European Union. If a majority of voters had given a negative answer, the referendum could have been held again after three years. In the post-war history, referendum was held for six times. Five of them did not reach the necessary level of attendance; therefore, they did not meet the requirements of validity. The only valid referendum was that for the Slovak Republic's entering the European Union.

1 The Results of the Referendum

The accession referendum for the Republic of Slovakia's entering the European Union was held between 16 and 17 of May, 2003. In the voting, 52.15 per cent of adult inhabitants of Slovakia took part. Among the voters, 92.46 per cent favoured the idea of joining the EU. Only 6.20 per cent of those eligible to voting were against (Dziewulski, Otachel, 1988, 2002). In Slovakia, considerable differences in attendance were noted in different regions. Most people voted in the capital – Bratislava and the whole Bratislava region. There, the level of attendance reached 64.56 per cent (Grabiński, 2003a). A low participation level was observed in the Žilina Region – neighbouring with Poland – only 38.12 per cent. In turn, the county of Čadca revealed the lowest level of participation of the inhabitants in the voting – 36.8 per cent. The lowest level of attendance was reported in Trenčín. It should also be noted that both regions are adjacent to the Czech Republic. It is characteristic of them that, for years, they have supported the HZDS party i.e. **Vladimir Mečiar's** Movement for Democratic Slovakia and Slovakian nationalists. Trenčín also had the largest average index of those voting against the accession, i.e. 7.97 per cent.

Besides the aforesaid Čadca, there were also two counties where the level of attendance was below 40 per cent: it was Bytča and Kysucké Nové Mesto. The supporters of the populist HZDS in 79 constituencies voted in a way similar to that in parliamentary elections. The referendum clearly confirmed their negative attitude towards European integration. **V. Mečiar**, the former Prime Minister, during whose rule Slovakia was clearly detached from Europe, changed his viewpoint on accession; and, shortly before voting, he declared his support for the EU. Such actions of the HZDS are confirmed by the public opinion surveys conducted by the Statistics Bureau of the Republic of Slovakia in May 2003. They demonstrated that only 25.2 per cent of the respondents - supporters of the HZDS - had declared a definite participation in the

referendum; whereas, the average national index reached 47.4 per cent (Opinie, 2004).

One of the leading politicians - **Sergej Kozlik** of "*Movement for the Democratic Slovakia*", in the editorials of the daily "*Sme*" ("*We*"), found the ruling party responsible for a low level of attendance (Kozlik, 2003). According to the aforementioned politician, such behaviour of the party environment was the reason for the exclusion of the opposition, including the HZDS, from the conducting of the information campaign. Moreover, he stated that within the party and its supporters, there has always been a strong minority opposing to the accession. According to him, remaining at home and voting against the accession by the party members was fully justifiable. In answering the question on why the members of the HZDS would not take part in the referendum – 64 per cent of the respondents of the survey of May 2003 stated that they had enough of political changes in Slovakia. (Opinie, 2004)

Over 50 per cent level of attendance was reported in the regions neighbouring with Ukraine, i.e. the regions of Košice and Prešov – 53 per cent each. A relatively high level of participation in referendal voting was registered in the south of Slovakia where the Hungarian population constitute a majority of inhabitants. In those regions, the level of attendance reached 50 per cent and even 70 per cent. For the Hungarians living in a number of Central and Easter Europe joining the EU meant lifting border controls and greater freedom in travelling to their compatriots in the neighbouring countries (Wojnicki, 2007).

Regardless of the attendance in each of the eight regions of Slovakia, over 90 per cent of the population participating in the voting supported integration with the European Union. It turned out that a larger number of seniors took part in the referendum than that of young people. The two-day referendum in Slovakia lasted for 15 hours. It began on Friday, and lasted between 14.00 and 22.00. But on Sunday over five thousand polling stations were opened at seven o'clock and it was possible to cast votes till 14.00. Almost 2 million 177 thousand citizens participated in the voting. A possibility of casting a vote was given to 4 million 174 thousand – eligible for voting. Almost 2 million 13 thousand Slovaks favoured the integration of Slovakia with the European Union. The number of those who were against was only 135 thousand, which means slightly above 3 percent of those eligible for voting (Urząd Statystyczny Republiki Słowackiej, 2009).

Among the eight regions of Slovakia, the Bratislava Region showed one of

the best attendance indexes i.e. 59.54 per cent. The opponents of the integration constituted 3.86 per cent. The capital region is characterised by a high living standard and is comparable with the European average standard. The said region is inhabited by the largest number of wealthy and educated citizens of Slovakia. This determines the support of the process of integration unlike the other regions which are far removed from the rest of the country – bearing in mind the sphere of their economic development. It should be emphasised that reaching the level of 52 per cent of attendance was a considerable success of the coalition government. Despite their internal problems, the Slovaks supported Mikuláš Dzurinda in 2002 and he became Prime Minister again. They also supported him for his skills in foreign policy, the example of which was closing the negotiations with the EU (Gyárfášová, Velšic, 2003).

In the referendum, the Slovaks again voted for the continuation of his internal and external policy. The government received a positive signal that joining the Union is not yet another political turbulence but a way to solve the most important social problems.

2 Information Campaign for the Republic of Slovakia's Entering the European Union

The information campaign in Slovakia proceeded under the influence of two factors. Firstly, there occurred a consolidation of all political powers which favoured entering the European Union. There was no major party that would oppose to accession. Secondly, the coalition government attempted, at any price, to reach the 50 per cent level of attendance in order to convince the international community on Slovakia's support for the united Europe.

The Slovaks were well prepared for effective voting activities after having experienced parliamentary campaigns of 1998 and 2002, as well as local government elections. Considerable experience was acquired, first of all, by young people from social and non-governmental organisations – especially in mobilising the voters, organising concerts, producing gadgets, conducting debates and discussions – directed towards appropriate groups of respondents.

In the campaign, the Governmental Informative Strategy provided for an active engagement of non-governmental organisations allocating 11 million Slovak crowns on the small grants to be allocated on information dissemination reaching various social groups. The said organisations were to begin the

information campaign three weeks before the referendum. The idea was not to reach too soon the expected support for the accession among the groups to which the campaign was directed (Henderson, 2003).

In discussing the information campaign in Slovakia, one should have a deeper insight into the country's situation in May 2003. In other countries, the accession had been discussed for years. On the contrary, in Slovakia, after the election of 1998, the main task was to keep up with the neighbouring countries in the area of negotiations connected with the accession. The European Union invited Slovakia to the negotiating table as late as December 1999 after the Helsinki Summit. At that time it was resolved to begin negotiations with Lithuania, Latvia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Malta (Zięba, 2003).

In fact, only the parliamentary election of 2002 in the autumn led to the disambiguation of Slovakia's Slovaks routes. In May next year, a very important nation-wide referendal voting was to be held. Six months was too short a period of time for a real discussion on the integration and the costs of entering the EU and on the threats to which the Slovaks could be exposed after reaching full membership. It was necessary to mobilise the population quickly to take part in the referendum. According to the survey, 50 percent of the society possessed no knowledge about the European Union (Vašečka, 2003).

In the public opinion surveys conducted in May - just before the referendum - an overwhelming majority of the society openly declared their support for membership in the European Union. Unfortunately, only 42 per cent of the respondents declared participation in voting. In turn, about 20 per cent announced that they would not take part; and, around 20 per cent expressed their hesitation. The information campaign was aimed precisely at that group in order to encourage almost $\frac{1}{4}$ of those eligible for voting to arrive at the polling stations on the 16 and 17 of May.

In comparison with the other countries of the former Eastern Bloc, the campaign in Slovakia was not among those expensive ones. The sum of 50 million Slovak crowns was spent on it. The said campaign constituted an element of the Communication Strategy, which was divided into three phases.

- The information phase: 1999 – 2000. It included conveying basic data concerning the European Union to the citizens of Slovakia, and explaining the stages of the integration process. On the basis of this, the successive stage was structured.
- The pre-referendal phase: 2001 – 2003. With the use of media, organisations,

and governmental institutions, the campaign had to create a pro-integration atmosphere in the Slovak society.

- The mobilisation phase: 2003 and entering the European Union.

The last stage referred to the mobilisation of the society before the referendum on entering the EU (Henderson, 2003). This stage concluded the efforts in the information campaign conducted by all the parties involved.

The first factor that the campaign was dominated by was the attendance. The observers stressed that it would be the most serious problem to overcome. The discouragement towards the campaign could be caused by the opinion surveys which showed an overwhelming superiority of the EU supporters. Slovakia's accession was supported by all main political powers both related to the government and the opposition. The accession was favoured even by the HZDS led by **Vladimir Mečiar** - during whose rule Slovakia was clearly detached from Europe. Therefore, many people could assume that since the result is taken for granted there was no point in going to the polling stations and casting votes.

On the basis of the Governmental Communication Strategy, during the information campaign over one thousand meetings with the inhabitants of Slovakia were organised. The authorities entered an agreement with the mobile telephony operators, and the users received messages with the following text: "*Come; your vote may be decisive.*" An SMS with such a text was received by over 5 million of owners of mobile phones, i. e. half of the number of the inhabitants of the country. Also President Schuster advocated participation in the elections. On a number of occasions, in radio and TV broadcasts, he stressed that the voting is not a support of Mečiar or Dzurinda but a decision on one's future and that of one's own children (Grabiński, 2003c).

In numerous radio and TV broadcasts efforts were made to familiarise the society with the problems of the EU and the integration. Prominent EU politicians, the ambassadors of the EU member states and those of the aspiring countries appeared before TV cameras warmly encouraging the listeners/viewers to join the European community and ensuring the Slovaks that the EU was waiting for them. However, unlike the other aspiring countries, the media broadcasts missed the programmes with the common EU inhabitants who would verify the statements made by the officials and diplomats. In the campaign, there appeared slogans encouraging the population to participate in the forthcoming referendum: "*Our future is in our hands*", "*Better with the Union*

than without it”, “Don’t leave the choice for membership to others”. The symbol of the official EU campaign was the snow-covered Tatra summit of Velký Kriváň surrounded by the twelve European stars. For Slovaks Kriváň means the same as Giewont means for the Poles (Kuraś, 2003)

According to the specialists, the choice of a symbol constituted one of the most important elements of the Slovakian campaign. In presumptions, it was to be altered according to the results of public opinion surveys and intensified towards particular target groups: opinion leaders, youth, adults, seniors, productive age groups living in towns and in rural areas, managers, ethnic minorities, the unemployed, and women. Each of those social groups required a different approach. Therefore, the government allocated over 10 million dollars on media programmes that had to convince the above groups to take part in the referendum.

Among the main communication channels used to address the inhabitants of Slovakia were the electronic media and the press. The Website www.eureferendum.sk emerged. Those interested in the subject-matter could find there current information on the integration process, the European Union, and the referendal campaign.

The Government Office provided daily service on the EU issues. The governmental team had prepared professionally the subject-areas of radio and TV broadcasts and those of numerous events which were organised throughout Slovakia. Owing to the aforesaid activities, an increase of the level of support for membership in the EU was observed i.e. from 62 per cent in November 2000 to 68 per cent in October 2002 (Urząd Statystyczny Republiki Słowackiej, 2010).

A significant communication channel between the organisers and the society was the free infoline – **0/800 11 16 66**, which ensured access to information on all issues related to Slovakia’s entering the EU, co-operation with European Information Centres – both at a regional and local level, and co-operation with the Government’s Office responsible for the integration process. At the same time, the Slovaks had immediate access various printed materials including fact finders, guidebooks, brochures, and leaflets. All those activities were devised to affect a conscious decision during the voting on the day of the referendum. However, in the light of the support given to Slovakia’s membership in the EU by all major political parties and bearing in mind a very high level of support from Slovakia’s citizens, the information campaign was not emotional, and, the information presented did not cause controversies. Therefore, in the view of sociologists, specialists, and citizens, it was ineffective and not convincing. Low

budget allocations on the campaign were stressed – definitely lower than those in Lithuania and Hungary. It should be emphasised that the time of the conducting of the main information activity was very short. It lasted for twelve days only.

One of the reasons of the late beginning of the beginning of the campaign by the government was shortage of time, which was earlier indicated by the sociologist **Michal Vašečka**. The parliamentary election was held at the end of the year 2002. Next, there was the local government election; and, in fact, in the political events calendar, there was not much room for the referendal campaign.

Another reason was maintaining a delusive position in opinion surveys in the weeks preceding the referendum. It was around 70 percent of those declaring their participation in the election. Three fourths of Slovaks intended to go or considered going to the polling stations. The information campaign did not bring the expected results and there appeared a threat of the failure of another referendum in Slovakia.

Facing a possibility of not reaching the required threshold of attendance, the action was reinforced by major Slovakian politicians. Among them, there were the representatives of the ruling coalitions, opposition, as well as radical political opponents. They resolved unequivocally to favour of Slovakia's entering the European Union. The agreement had a temporary character; however, the politicians were able to demonstrate that integration with the EU was a common issue. Such a situation would have been difficult to envisage in any country of the former Eastern Bloc aspiring to join the European Union. A consensus in the Slovakian style would not have been possible - particularly in Poland (Vašečka, 2003).

A similar behaviour was observed with Prime Minister **M. Dzurinda**, President **R. Schuster** and **P. Hrušovský** – Chairman of the Parliament. On Friday before closing the polling stations, they signed a declaration in which they appealed to the Slovaks to take part in the referendum. Similar appeals were issued by Prime Minister **M. Dzurinda** and the leaders of all parliamentary groups. A possibility of issuing similar appeals was agreed between the ruling coalition and the opposition just before the referendum – after obtaining a legal experts' opinion - stating that such activities would not break the pre-referendum moratorium. The observers of the referendum and Public Relation specialists clearly confirmed that such activities contributed to exceeding the required threshold of attendance i.e. 50 per cent.

The official referendum campaign was supported not only by all major

political powers. The accession was also favoured by the Churches of Slovakia which called their compatriots to participate in the referendum. The Chairman of the Ecumenical Council of Churches - Bishop **Julius Filo** from the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession remarked that absence at polling station would mean an equivocal declaration against the EU. The Bishop emphasised that he favoured Slovakia's joining the European Community. He said he wished all Slovak Christians could contribute to creating the canon of common spiritual values in Europe. The Chairman of the Czech Bishops - Bishop **František Tondra** of Spiš also appealed to the congregation to take part in the referendum. However, he did not call to vote "yes" or "no". In his opinion, Catholic bishops should not reveal their attitude towards any voting.¹

Finally, in the two-day voting over 52 per cent of those eligible for voting took part; and, 92.46 per cent were in favour of the integration.

The style and intensity of the information campaign was reflected by the view of the streets of Bratislava a few days before the referendum. Although the Slovaks were to vote a week later – on Friday and Saturday, the information campaign was not so conspicuous – at least in the streets of the capital. That was the comment of **Tomasz Grabiński** – journalist of "Gazeta Wyborcza" in Bratislava. (Grabiński, 2003b)

On the day after the end of the referendum, the editor-in-chief of the daily "SME" remarked that he had had a pleasant surprise with the result of the voting. He did not believe that the Slovaks would mobilise themselves and that the magical threshold of 50 per cent would be surpassed. He regretted that the Slovaks had been unable to have reflections in historic moments. They could have been tired with perpetual discussions on pathos, responsibility, and history, which lasted for years. If the referendum had been held 13 years earlier, the attendance would have reached 100 per cent; and all the votes would have been "yes" votes. The results of the referendum clearly confirm that the Slovaks are becoming more and more detached from politics (Grabiński, 2003a).

¹ In *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 2003, № 21 - 2811

4 Absence of the Campaign of the Opponents of Slovakia's Entering the EU

"Yes, we want Slovakia to join the EU" but "..."

The observers had an unequivocal overview of the Slovakian information campaign – it was boring and its strongest point was an absolute absence of the debate on the Union, and what it would give to or take away from Slovakia. None of the political parties had ever dared to oppose to the process of integration. During the campaign, all disputed were forgotten; and, only the governmental campaign was present in the media. Nobody had ever presented an alternative programme; and, there were no obstacles to organise a decent campaign. However, another course of action occurred. In the information campaign, there were neither the elements of a political dispute nor the debate on the values. Contrary to this, in Estonia and Latvia the issues of independence, freedom, and autarchy constituted the basis for the debates and discussions. In Slovakia, the discussion on those issues was not even raised. The main subject-area of the information on the EU was the material issue. In Slovakia, the membership in the EU was viewed from the perspective of economics and improvement of living standards but not from that concerning national identity or limitations of independence (Vašečka, 2003).

In fact, there was no discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of joining the EU. Also, the term "*Euro-sceptics*" was known neither in Bratislava nor in other regions. The main and the only worry of the government was the attendance. After the first day, it did not look encouraging; therefore, in all electronic media, there appeared almost all major politicians with an appeal to the Slovaks to go to the polling stations on Saturday. Only due to a tremendous mobilisation, was it possible to surpass the required 50 per cent threshold of attendance politics (Grabiński, 2003a).

A very interesting and worthy of attention seems to be the fact that the opponents of integration with the EU had contributed to the success of the government's referendum campaign. Without them, such success would not have been achieved. The work for the Euro-sceptics absent was done by the government in quite a clumsy manner. The information campaign began with a loud false start. In the media there appeared a Euro-hit, which, in fact, was an infringement of copyright of a Hungarian hit of the 1980s. The media exposed that mistake, which was regarded as copyright violation (Petrilak, 2003).

Without contacting the authors and performers of the song from Hungary,

the work was used in the campaign. **Robert Fico**, head of the opposition SMER (Direction) party took advantage of the case of plagiarism exposing it in the media. The case had been given considerable media attention and was instigated by the SMER opposition party. This almost led to a dismissal of the head of information campaign – Deputy Premier **Pál Csáky**. He represented the Hungarian minority in **Dzurinda's** government.

Entrusting a Hungarian with the task of conducting the referendum campaign in the country with strong nationalist traditions was regarded as unfortunate, and as the Prime Minister's mistake. Mass media justified **Dzurinda's** decision as an attempt to consolidate the relations with ethnic minorities in the process of integration with the EU. The criticism of the Deputy Prime Minister and attempts to depose him were the elements of the campaign against the government but not against the EU. From time to time, the "SMER" party and their leader initiated media discussions on the Prime Minister's dismissal in case the 50 per cent level of attendance was not reached (Henderson, 2003).

In Slovakia the word "*Euro-scepticism*" was unfamiliar, or rather dismissed in the mass media. The situation of our southern neighbours can be described with the words of the commentator **Peter Schutz**: "Slovakia has no other alternative but to join the EU quickly. But if under the Tatras all the disputes connected with the Union calm down, we will wake up with a walking stick for the blind (Nosko, 2008).

The Slovakian Euro-scepticism was ornamental rather than expressed in concrete words. Nobody discouraged the voters from entering the Union. The arguments of the Euro-sceptics were expressed in the following way: "*Yes, we want our country to enter the EU, but ...*". Just like the Czech Republic, the extremist parties were against entering the European Union.

The Nationalist Party of Slovakia expressed their opposition to the accession in an original manner. The leaders declared that they had never been against joining the EU and that they would respect the results of the referendum. Also the Communist Party of Slovakia finally supported the accession to the European Union and recommended their members to vote "yes" in the referendum. The communists feared that their refusal of the accession would exclude their party from political life. HZDS, besides their opposition to **M. Dzurinda**, finally supported the integration process. The populist formation of **R. Fico** which in the campaign assumed the role of the defender of national interests and declared the revision of the already finished negotiations with the

EU eventually supported joining the European Community. Obviously, they had criticised the government and its bad information campaign but not the accession itself. It was in the interest of the SMER party to take an opportunity to express their criticism after Slovakia's accession into the EU in order to gain the political capital in the forthcoming parliamentary election. The ruling coalition supported entering the EU and the also appealed to their sympathisers to vote "yes".

It turned out then that the only "adversary" of the official information campaign was the non-governmental organisation "Our Europe 2000". They were the only group which reported a breach of law and sued part of the media that had broadcast the appeals of politicians during the referendum moratorium. (Petrilák, 2003)

5 Public Opinion vs. the Accession

It should be borne in mind that the Government of the Republic of Slovakia submitted an application for membership in the European Union as late as 27 June (Kisiel – Łowczyc, 2001).

In the mid 1990's, Slovakia had problems with the direction of the country's development. The cause of that was attributed to the ruling bloc. Only after the deposal of **Vladimir Mečiar** it was possible to discuss the new political direction in Slovakia, i.e. that towards the Euro-Atlantic structures. It should also be remarked that as a result of the absence of the European debate, the number of Euro-sceptics was limited.

In the years 1997 – 2002, the level of the society's objection to the Union oscillated between 8 and 13 per cent of adult inhabitants of Slovakia². 75 per cent of the Slovaks supporting centre-right parties, of which **Mikuláš Dzurinda's** government was composed, declared their positive attitude towards the integration. In turn, 50 per cent of the supporters of Mečiar's HZDS, Slovakian nationalists and post-Communists, favoured the EU. The populist and leftist **Robert Fico's** SMER ("*Direction*") occupied a position between the two of the above-mentioned groups.

Another criterion of support for the integration with the EU is the demographic profile. Just like in the preceding countries, the largest number of the supporters of the accession was among those who would benefit from the

² Zuba K., Środowisko eurosceptyczne w państwach Europy Środkowo – Wschodniej, [w:] Cichosz M.

post-Communist transformation. One should mention here young, well educated people, living in towns and not voting for Mečiar's party. The EU was favoured by men rather than women. Such a model did not suit the supporters of the centre-right parties. In this case, the Union was favoured mainly by seniors living in the country or rural areas. The main pro-European power was women whose attitudes stemmed from anti-Communism and deep religious background.

In the years 1998 – 2000 as much as 62 per cent of Slovaks declared their support for Slovakia's joining the Union in the prospective referendum voting. It is amazing that Slovakia was rejected from the negotiating table in 1997. However, this did not change the attitude after a renewed invitation to negotiations in the year 2000. The percentage of those who favoured the accession was exactly the same as that in 1998. Absence of the European debate blurred the vision on the shape and functioning of the EU. A majority of the population regarded it as an economic project.

A very interesting public opinion research was conducted by Taylor Nelson Sofres (in Slovakia realised by TNS FACTUM – SLOVAKIA s.r.o). In the year 2000, one fourth of the society was genuinely interested in Slovakia's entering the EU; and, around 56 percent of the respondents were interested in the subject-matter. However, 21 per cent of the respondents remained indifferent to Slovakia's integration with the EU (Sroka, Zamorska, 2004).

A sustaining high level index of support for integration led to self-complacency of the ruling bloc and an absence of dissemination of information on the complexity of the process of integration with the EU. Also, the media failed to present the problem in a right way. The campaign assumed a propaganda style rather than a decent informative one. Such an approach to information policy caused problems with attendance in the year 2003 during the referendum voting.

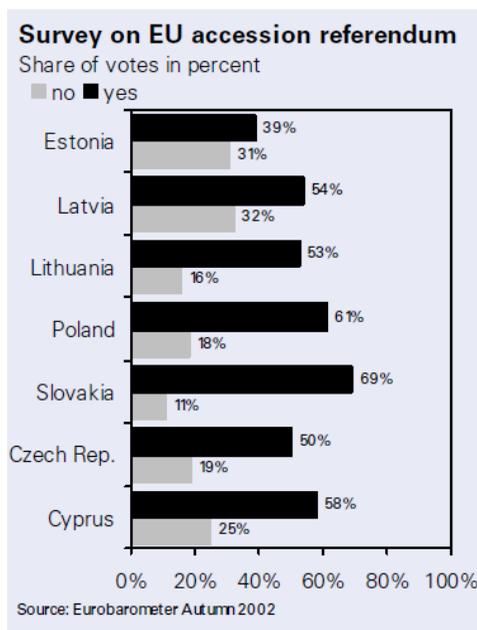
In the year 2001, the TNS group conducted a renewed survey on the support of the EU in the aspiring countries – that were under scrutiny a year before. Again, the results caused optimism and deepened the idleness of the authorities in Bratislava. The year 2001 was a period of strenuous work for the Slovakian negotiators. It should be remembered that our neighbours had to compensate for the backwardness after their exclusion from the first group of countries entering the accession negotiations.

An excellent esteem of the Slovakian negotiators was transposed to the support of the accession by the citizens of our southern neighbours. In

comparison with the year 2000, as much as 4 per cent more would support the integration. In comparison with the previous research, the number of opponents grew almost by 1 percent. It seems that this resulted from the influence of the mass media on the public opinion and a greater social consciousness of the problems connected with the EU.

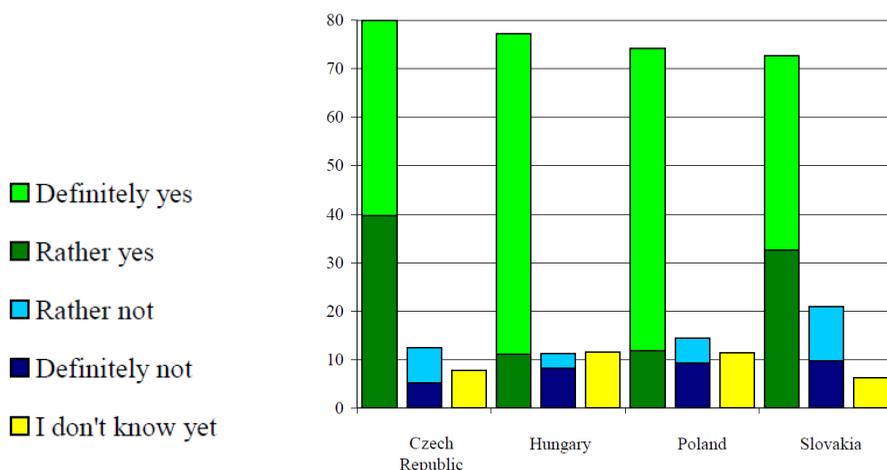
In the autumn of the year 2002, *Eurobarometer* conducted research connected with the EU. This time it was a questionnaire on the accession referendum. Towards the end of 2002, almost 70 per cent of the respondents supported entering the EU. The index of the opponents to the integration dropped to the level of 11 per cent (Eurobarometer, 2003).

The public opinion surveys gave the contemporary ruling bloc a tremendous support for their integration activities and were an excellent prognostic before the forthcoming referendum. Therefore, the Slovakian Government concentrated on the negotiation process and dismissed the information aspect of the complex process of accession.



To accomplish the presentation of the attitudes of the Slovakian society towards the accession, the results of the research conducted by the Central European Opinion Research Group Foundation (CEORG) in March 2003 should

be demonstrated.



Among a number of questions pertaining to the referendum, there was one on the participation in voting – for the citizens of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. Its form was: *“If the referendum on the accession into the European Union took place next Saturday, would you take part in it?”*³

The results did not confirm the behaviour in the real-life voting which was held in Slovakia on the May 16 – 17, 2003. The threshold of above 50 per cent was reached owing to a consolidation of the major political powers of the opposition and **Dzurinda’s** ruling coalition. After a successful period of negotiations, the voters did not want to take part in a plebiscite. A majority of the Slovaks eligible for voting simply remained at home.

Conclusions on the Information Campaign on the Slovak Republic’s joining the European Union

In Slovakia, there was no real debate on the accession into the European Union. Contrary to the neighbouring Czech Republic, nobody openly opposed to the accession. The citizens’ knowledge on the Union was debatable. 58 per

³ Attitudes towards EU membership in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia: Sufficient support; questionable participation, 2003, Central European Opinion Research Group Foundation (CEORG), Brussels, 07.04.2003, pp. 2.

cent of adult inhabitants claimed that they had not been sufficiently informed on the integration and problems related with the Union. Only 38 per cent of the Slovaks confirmed sufficient information on the EU. Specialists and observers stress that the Slovakian campaign was boring, that it started too late, and that it lacked competence. (Petrilák, 2003) It failed to provide the receivers with the fundamental knowledge that would help them express their opinions during the voting. This kind of the government's strategy was criticised by the **Robert Fico's** populist party of SMER ("Direction"). Absence of discussions, a limited number of topics on the EU in mass media in the period preceding the referendum influenced the emergence of populist groups which wanted to take advantage of the dissatisfaction of those frustrated ones in the period of real-life membership of Slovakia in the European Union.

The most important problem of the information campaign in Slovakia was reaching the threshold of 50 per cent of attendance. Then-Prime Minister **Mikuláš Dzurinda** discovered that the information campaign had not brought the desired results. Therefore, he decided to perform action which would be impossible in the other countries aspiring for EU membership. For Slovakia's *raison d'état*, he managed to unify and consolidate all political powers on the issue of the integration with the Union (Wojnicki, 2005).

Soon, joining the European Union was advocated by the Hungarian minority politicians, nationalists, Christian-Democrats and populists.

It should be noted that the former Prime Minister **Vladimir Mečiar** and head of the then-ruling government **Mikuláš Dzurinda** also appealed for the accession. Bearing in mind national interest, the gesture of reconciliation was also demonstrated by bitter enemies: the former President **Michal Kovač** and the former Prime Minister **Vladimir Mečiar**, who shook hands in public as a sign of a concord - for the first time after the period of eight years. Such an agreement seems impossible to envisage in any European country and the whole world.

The politicians feared that their attitude could not have been sufficient to reach the constitutionally required threshold of attendance. Therefore, during the meeting with the President **Rudolf Schuster** they agreed that if a low level of attendance occurred on the first day of voting, they would appeal for participation even during the election silence. The politicians recognised unequivocally that calling for the participation in voting without indicating the behaviour at polling stations would not mean a breach of the law.

According to the information broadcast by the "Markiza" Television, on the

first day of the referendum only 25 – 27 per cent of those eligible for voting took part. Then, three country's major politicians appealed through the media to go to the polling stations. Two hours before the end of the ballot, it turned out that the required level of attendance was not reached. Therefore, Prime Minister **Mikuláš Dzurinda**, President **Rudolf Schuster**, and the Chairman of the Parliament **Pavol Hrušovský** appeared on television with a dramatic appeal to their citizens/compatriots to take part in the voting. (Grabiński, 2003a)

This was effective; and soon, the Prime Minister could announce a victory. The desired level of 50 per cent was surpassed.

The Slovak Communists attributed a low level of attendance to a poor information campaign. However, they also supported the Slovaks' aspiration to the accession. In their opinion, the campaign informed the public opinion on the advantages of the EU dismissing the fact that in the initial years - after entering the EU – the living standards would be lowered in Slovakia. In their efforts to sustain themselves in the political mainstream of the country, the Communists could not afford to object to the accession. Unlike their counterparts in the Czech Republic, in the Parliamentary election they managed to win only half of the number of the votes of their Czech colleagues.

Similarly to the other countries aspiring to join the Union, the European Commission allocated funds for the information campaign in Slovakia. Considering the amount of financial resources transferred to Bratislava, it should be noted it was not too high in comparison with other countries. The cost of the information campaign in Slovakia was one of the lowest among the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. The referendum in Slovakia ended a particular stage beginning with the social transformations in the year 1989. After having entered the European Union, the Slovaks will be able to influence the future and the shape of the EU, and, consequently, their own future.

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