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EU *ante portas* or is there a new division line in Slovak politics?¹

Keywords: European agenda, European discourse, domestic politics, euroscepticism, political parties

Many analyses have provided evidence that the European agenda is not salient for the public and the EU political arena is perceived as a sphere in which less is at stake. However, in the political mobilization we could observe a growing interactions between the national and European agenda – not only national politics is thematized for the EP election campaign but also *vice versa*: European agenda is more and more present in the political appeals and voters mobilization. The economic and fiscal crises have accelerated these processes. The study examines Slovakia – a country with a specific integration trajectory and explores how the European agenda has entered the domestic politics recently. The analysis deals also with position of the political parties towards the EU integration and the images of the EU which emerged in the latest national election.

EU *ante portas* oder gibt es eine neue Trennlinie in der slowakischen Politik?

Schlüsselwörter: europäische Agenda, europäischer Diskurs, Innenpolitik, EU-Skeptizismus, politische Parteien

Viele Studien haben gezeigt, dass das politische Handeln der EU für die Öffentlichkeit von geringer Relevanz ist. Ungeachtet dessen können wir in der politischen Mobilisierung eine wachsende Wechselwirkung zwischen nationaler und europäischer Ebene beobachten – nicht nur wird die nationale Politik im EP-Wahlkampf thematisiert, sondern auch *vice versa*: Europäische Agenda ist mehr und mehr in der politischen Kommunikation und der Wählermobilisierung präsent. Die Wirtschafts- und Finanzkrise hat diese Prozesse beschleunigt. Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht, wie die europäische Agenda die Innenpolitik der Slowakei beeinflusst. Die Untersuchung befasst sich auch mit den Positionen der politischen Parteien zur EU-Integration und den „Bildern“ der EU im jüngsten Wahlkampf.

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Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft (ÖZP), 42. Jg. (2013) H. 3, 279–293

1. Introduction

A number of analyses have provided evidence that the European integration does not constitute a relevant dividing line for the political competition at national level. The EU agenda is not salient enough for political positioning, the EU-level political arena is perceived as a sphere where “less is at stake”. Low significance is most visible in the EP election campaigns, but the role this agenda plays in national elections is, or used to be, comparatively much less relevant than domestic politics issues.

However, the turbulent economic development within the last 3–4 years is showing us that the time of permissive consensus is over and the European agenda is becoming more present in political competition, in campaign appeals and in voters mobilization. In other words, economic, fiscal and debt crises accelerated the process of “domestication” of European issues.

In this context, Slovakia represents an interesting case. The country has one of the most EU-phile public across EU-27; but at the same time it reached historically lowest turnout in both EP elections so far (2004; 2009). Country’s integration trajectory raised attention in the late 1990s when it has been labelled a “black hole” in Central Europe, but after 1998 it returned to the “right track” and was busily catching up with initially more successful neighbours. Slovakia turned, within a very short period of time, from a “troubled candidate” to a “loyal member”. However, the image of a good pupil changed dramatically in 2010 when Slovakia, like the only Eurozone member, refused to participate in the Greek bail out. Re-manoeuving from the rebellion position back to the mainstream cost Slovakia the inner political crisis and early parliamentary elections. Despite return to clearly pro-EU attitudes, the position of the EU agenda has changed; it is more present and emerges as a potential subject of dispute, along with new forms of Euroscepticism. The extent to which the EU agenda becomes a contested issue in Slovakia will be clearly visible in the 2014 EP elections.

The study identifies the factors of low politicization of European integration in general, then specifically in Slovakia. It explores how the political parties and the constituencies stand on EU integration. The analysis focuses on a changing role of the EU agenda in Slovak politics, and identifies the old and newly emerging faces of Euroscepticism. Finally, the paper inquires if there is re-structuring of dividing lines of party competition patterns in Slovakia.

By its methodology the paper represents a country case study focused on Slovakia. Since it cannot rely on one consistent research project which would cover various aspects of the analysed phenomenon it uses different approaches and utilises empirical data from several relevant surveys. It works with quantitative public opinion data as well as with the expert survey evaluating the positions of political parties. Available data is not based on the same scales and the fieldwork was not conducted simultaneously, however, having in mind some methodological imitations, their comparability and explanatory value is relevant and reliable. Furthermore, the paper analyses party manifesto for 2012 general election from the perspective of what EU images are constructed and presented by main political parties. The case study is a kind of “microscope” focused on detailed analyses of one case using different approaches and frames of reference in order to introduce the phenomenon in its integrity and complexity.

2. Low politicization of the EU agenda

European integration is from its very beginning a typical elite-driven project. EU agenda did not play an important role in public and political discourses of most EU member states. EU agenda has been often depicted as a “sleeping giant” (van Eijk/Franklin 2004; de Vries 2007) which does not interfere domestic politics rather represents a dormant potentiality. In spite of decades of the EU project’s existence the political competition was deeply embedded in dividing lines of nation states and the patterns of political competition in established member states have been almost untouched by European agenda.

The pro/anti – EU cleavage – if any existed at all – was weak. It can be subsumed neither into the existing dominant left-right ideological division, nor into the liberal vs. conservative dividing line. It might be possible to view the main EU divide as nationalism vs. pro-integration (pro-globalization), but it does not explain the competition structure either.

Hanspeter Kriesi saw it as a part of a larger conflict between integration and demarcation and argues that “[f]or the discussion of the mobilization of the political conflict potential linked to the European integration and to the integration-demarcation conflict more generally, it is important to distinguish between two sides of these phenomenon – their cultural and economic aspects” (Kriesi 2005, 4). The economic dimension divides winners and losers of globalization/denationalization/integration but at the end the “defence of national identity and the national community constitutes the smallest common denominator for the mobilisation of the losers” (Kriesi 2005, 8), means the cultural dimension is more likely to politicise the EU integration.

One explanation factor of low political relevance of EU agenda is high public support for EU integration. Mikko Mattila and Tapio Raunio analysed the variety of ideological alternatives national parties offer on the EU dimension. They argued that there is no potential for politicising the EU dimension while the general public holds such a strong pro-EU bias (Mattila/Raunio 2007).

Of course, there are variations of EU integration salience across the EU and factors of low politicization of EU and the significance of Euroscepticism for political parties are strongly depended on individual national party systems and national context. In 2008, shortly before the economic crisis, Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak identified three categories of countries based on country surveys: 1. hardly any relevance; 2. subject of open, coherent and intense political debate (for example Czech Republic was included into this category); 3. the subject of highly incoherent and changing debate (Taggart/Szczerbiak 2008). Most of the Central and Eastern European countries, including Slovakia, were classified in this category (Hartleb 2011, 24). Nevertheless, this picture may change very quickly and the economic crisis is a factor bringing the EU into domestic agenda.

3. EU agenda in Slovak politics

Weak politicization of the EU for domestic politics is a general phenomenon. For Slovakia, some country-specific conditions can be identified. Slovakia, unlike the Czech Republic – above all in person of President Václav Klaus, did not exhibit open, party-based Euro-scepticism, nor would the relevant public actors criticize the EU integration. As Karen Henderson pointed out regarding countries with a difficult accession trajectory such as Slovakia’s, “the major EU debate was not about what Slovak parties wanted from the EU in policy terms, or what sort of EU they wanted, but rather about what the EU required from Slovakia and who could deliver it” (Henderson 2009,

535). And, she continued, “EU accession is a valence issue: it is generally accepted in the political discourse as a ‘good thing’, but the ability to achieve it is the contested political issue” (Henderson 2009, 535). This exactly happened in 2002 general election campaign. The strongest opposition party, left-leaning Smer, criticized the government, which was the leading and pushing force of the country’s integration for “selling Slovakia too cheaply” or being “not assertive enough in pursuing Slovak interests” but not for integration itself.

After the country’s accession to the EU, the broad consensus on the strategic importance of EU membership turned into a comfortable but passive consensus with respect to the European agenda and to Slovakia’s performance in the EU. It corresponds with the famous “permissive consensus” which was typical also for the established EU members in the earlier decades of membership. Unsurprisingly, this situation has stimulated no political or public discussion on EU matters, which, with only minor exceptions, have not been profile issues either as part of the political parties’ agendas during these first years of EU membership, or in the public discourse.

Another consequence of the broad pre-accession consensus and of very undeveloped and unstructured debate on the “pros” and “cons” of being part of the European Union was that Slovakia’s membership was viewed mostly instrumentally. This was very much true not only for the political elite’s but also for the broader public which, *nota bene*, to a certain extent reflects the position of the elite.

This can be illustrated by a phenomenon of certain schizophrenia: Slovak society has been showing two different faces regarding EU agenda. On one hand it ranked among the most Euro-optimistic member states. Surveys have repeatedly shown that Slovak society is very satisfied with EU membership and appreciates its benefits, notably those concerning economic and social aspects. The Slovak public also have high confidence in EU institutions, in democracy at the European level (comparatively higher than that at the national level); the majority supports further enlargement and deepening of integration.²

For Slovaks, EU membership has been a means of conclusive escape from the wrong side of the “iron curtain” and of modernization and EU funding benefits, however, not so much of improving its international position or of having a say in European matters. For that benefit the Slovaks are too much inward looking.

On the other hand, weak interest in European issues was reflected at behavioural level – in a critically low turnout in EP elections: in 2004 Slovakia recorded the lowest turnout in the history of the European elections (17% of eligible voters). The second European election of 2009 brought only a slight increase in voter turnout (19.6%), but Slovakia remained the country with the highest abstention rates across the EU-27. Slovakia, similarly to other new member states from the post-communist world, proved that EP elections are somewhat odd elections. As pointed out Michael Marsh and Mark Franklin several years ago, even before the big-bang enlargement, “European elections were neither really European nor proper elections” (Marsh/Franklin 1996). This is due to the fact that the EU executive is not directly affected by the outcome of parliamentary elections in the member countries. This means that EP elections do not initiate a process of government formation as in the parliamentary democracies. The second characteristic refers to the fact that electoral competition is not driven by the European agenda. The national agenda dominates in the electoral campaigns across all member states regardless of how long they have been members.

Both dimensions are expressible in terms of the second-order election concept. European Parliament elections are second-order because they are considered to be less important by voters, political parties, and the mass-media than the “real” first-order elections, i.e. national parliamen-

tary or presidential elections. Second-order elections differ from national elections in a number of ways, however three dimensions have been laid by Reif and Schmitt already in 1980 as the main characteristics: lower voter turnout, weaker performance of the party/ies in government (above all if the EP elections are in the middle of the electoral cycle and the mid-term unpopularity peaks), and thirdly preference and better electoral performance for the protest, marginal and anti-EU political parties (Reif/Schmitt 1980).

Thus in terms of voter turnout the 2004 EP elections fully confirmed the second-order election model. It was then for the first time that voters in the new democracies were able alongside voters in the established EU member states to elect their representatives to common European institution affecting European legislation and the activities of other EU bodies. Some analysts enthusiastically labelled this event as “the founding elections of a unified Europe” (e.g. Wessels 2007). However, despite the apparent enthusiasm, the voter turnout in most new CEE member states was significantly well below the EU25 average³, and well below what used to be regarded as low turnout. The weak interest was in sharp contrast with the demanding efforts to gain EU membership, as well as the enthusiasm accompanying the accession. Aside from the low turnout, the voting mobilisation and voting decision patterns were very ambiguous, and it was almost impossible to detect any general voting behaviour patterns among the “new” Europeans.

Even if the Slovak political parties got more involved in the 2009 EP election campaign, the campaign was still not competed over European issues. Peter Gažík examined how the political parties approached the EP election. He adopted a quantitative content analysis of the party manifestos to determine the parties’ positions and the salience of the EU dimension in the EP elections. Based on this analysis he argued that there was an increase in parties’ dispersion on the pro/anti-EU continuum between the two EP elections of 2004 and 2009. The increased dispersion may have been an indicator that the parties had started to free themselves from their pro-EU bias, which was distorted by contextual factors and by the effects of conditionality. While some political parties did become more critical of the European integration process in the 2009 EP elections, the EU dimension has yet to develop into a proper pro/anti-EU cleavage. It is still lacking a credible anti-EU counterpart that would balance the predominant pro-EU position. As a result, while issues concerning Slovakia’s integration into the EU determine the parties’ position, the weak pro/anti-EU dimension has not yet created an element of conflict in the political competition for EP seats (Gažík 2009). The author concluded that the 2009 EP elections in Slovakia were characterised by *a European context, but not by a European contest*. In other words, the political parties evoked European integration issues, but did not yet consider them with a critical eye. When the parties speak to the voters they definitely prefer a domestic agenda.

4. EU and the political parties: fuzzy positions, low saliency

Weak political discourse on the EU agenda has not favoured positioning of the Slovak political parties on the EU-integration dimension. There are empirical evidences based on 2009 data on how the positions of political parties on EU integration dimension are perceived by the broad public, and how the public awareness of the EU dimension differs from that of the main axis of the political competition – socioeconomic left-right one. Using the data from the European Election Study of 2009 (EES09)⁴ we can test six parties which were at that point represented in the national parliament and were successful in getting at least one mandate in the EP. The government

coalition was composed by the left oriented Smer-Social Democracy (Smer-SD), the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (ĽS-HZDS) (headed by the former Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar). The centre-right liberal Slovak Democratic and Christian Union – Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS), conservatives – Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the party representing ethnic Hungarians – Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK) were in the opposition.

In 2009 Slovakia completed five years of the EU membership; moreover, the accession on 1.5. 2004 was preceded by the successful popular referendum and many years lasting accession process. In spite of that the portion of “don't know” (DK) responses when it comes to evaluate the position of the main political parties on the EU integration, reached up to 33%. This high level of ambiguity means that the identifiability of the political supply in terms of EU integration is relatively low. As for the left-right positioning, the respondents are more aware – DK responses reached “only” up to 16% in average with higher percentage for ethnic parties, lower for programmatic and more profiled parties. This was in spite of the fact that in Slovakia the classical left-right spectrum has been less profiled than for example in the neighbouring Czech Republic.⁵

One of the powerful theories of voting behaviour – the proximity theory – assumes that there is a certain distance between voters' position on policies and issues and the parties equivalent positions and the voters are likely to opt for a part which better represents (is closer) to her or his own position. But it would not work when the position of the party is not known or clear. Low ability to identify the positions of political parties refers to low ability to structure the political competition and to mobilize the voters.

Based on the responses of those who were able to evaluate and to place the political parties we can see that in the public perception the most pro-EU Slovak political party was the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic Party (SDKÚ-DS) – centre-right, pro-reform, liberal party, the leader of the anti-Mečiar broad coalition after 1998 and the engine of Slovakia's integration.

Table 1: Positions of political parties on the EU-dimension as perceived by the public
(means on the scale 0–10)

Party	party's position as seen by the public
SDKÚ-DS	6,13
Smer-SD	5,71
SMK	5,53
KDH	5,27
ĽS-HZDS	4,58
SNS	3,98

Source: EES-Piredeu, 2009

Ranking of the experts in 2006 Chapel Hill survey⁶ differed in some aspects – as the most pro-EU party they saw the Party of Hungarian Coalition (SMK), representing the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. The ethnic party favoured the EU integration because the EU has been seen as the reliable guarantor of ethnic minority rights. The opposite pole was taken by the Slovak National Party (SNS), a party with nationalistic agenda and subsequently Eurosceptic views.

Table 2: How would you describe the general position on EU integration that the party took over the course of 2006? (means on the scale 1 = strongly opposed; 7 = strongly in favour). Saliency of EU integration for a party (means on the scale 1 = no importance; 4 = great importance)

Party	EU-Integration	Saliency
SMK	6,36	3,21
SDKÚ-DS	6,07	3,36
ĽS-HZDS	5,23	2,79
Smer-SD	4,79	2,57
KDH	3,86	2,86
SNS	3,23	2,14

Source: The 2006 Chapel Hill expert survey

Summing up the 2009 public opinion results and earlier experts findings we see low public awareness in regard of party positions on EU integration. Weak pro/anti-EU dimension has not yet, in pre-crises period, created an element of conflict in the political competition for EP seats. For example the left-right continuum is more “readable” for the public and also more differentiating. The reason for the weak interest in the European dimension can also be seen in the fact that the EU arena is still perceived as a sphere where “less is at stake”, and therefore the main political “battlefield” and source of power is politics at the national level. The 2006 expert survey shows a relatively low range between the most pro-EU and most against-EU party⁷ and low saliency where we can observe a clear tendency – the more pro-EU the party is the higher is the saliency, what indicates that the parties which oppose the EU integration do not use Eurosceptical views and positions for mobilizing the voters, at least not explicitly, visible, taking the EU agenda as salient for political competition (Table 2).

The 2010 expert evaluation reflected already some shifts in party positions. However, they were not caused so much by continuously positioning on the EU axis over the respective period as by so-called Greek-loan – an *ad hoc* case which got huge political and public resonance because

Table 3: How would you describe the general position on EU integration that the party took over the course of 2010? (means on the scale 1 = strongly opposed; 7 = strongly in favour). Saliency of EU integration for a party? (means on the scale 1 = no importance; 4 = great importance)

Party	EU-Integration	Saliency
Smer-SD	5,87	3,00
Most-Híd	5,87	3,07
SMK	5,80	2,80
SDKÚ-DS	5,20	3,40
ĽS-HZDS	5,13	2,27
KDH	4,53	2,93
SaS	4,53	2,67
SNS	3,08	2,20

Source: The 2010 Chapel Hill expert survey

of the concurrence with election campaign for the 2010 general election. In 2010 the historical driving force of Slovakia's European integration SDKÚ-DS did not rank on the top but only after the social democratic Smer-SD which has shown unconditional loyalty to the Brussels policies, and after two "Hungarian" parties which – as we mentioned above – are strongly in favour of EU integration for specific reasons. The opposite pole was predictably occupied by the nationalists followed by a new liberal party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) which has been the main opponent of bail-out and later on the ESFS. Nevertheless, the variation among the parties stays relatively low, so the salience. It varies between 3,4 and 2,2 (Table 3).

5. EU enters domestic politics

On 1.1. 2009 Slovakia joined the Eurozone. Under the impression of a very good economic situation and constant GDP growth in 2007–2008, the membership was perceived with enthusiasm. The economic, financial and debt crises within the Eurozone, however, changed the perception, and within a very short time also the interaction between the national and European arenas. European issues became domesticated and the national parties have to address important political issues in the domestic setting even if they do not like to do so.

In spring 2010, when the Greek crises broke out, Slovakia stood before the general election. The issue was elevated to public discourse also due to the then ongoing pre-election campaign, in which each party clearly presented its attitude towards the issue. The "Greek loan" became one of the key campaign topics and "monopolized" the perception of the EU completely.⁸ The debate was heated also by the tabloid media which depicted the Greeks as lazy, cheating, and living far over what they can effort. Unsurprisingly, the loan/aid to Greece was not at all popular among Slovak citizens. The concrete numbers of the public opinion polls differed but one was for sure: those who were against the bailout prevailed.

The initial configuration of the actors in the debate was as follows: then main coalition party Smer supported the Greek loan and as an executive actor promised to "Brussels" that Slovakia will contribute. Centre-right opposition, above all SDKÚ-DS and new competitor SaS, opposed it. The dividing line between the proponents and opponents of providing Greece with aid (especially in the beginning of the discourse there was no differentiation between different forms of aid) did not, however, go along the coalition-opposition nor right-left divide, since the SNS which was at that time still a coalition junior partner opposed and the Christian democrats took lukewarm in favour position.

After the election the positions have changed – centre-right parties constituted the government. At the beginning they stick to their pre-election promises and refused Slovakia's participation in Greek bail out, later on the government expressed support for EFSF; but not the entire centre-right coalition. Slovakia voted as the last out of 17 Eurozone members and this vote broke down the government, since Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party, a junior member of the four-party ruling coalition, did not support it in spite of the fact that the EFSF vote was tied with confidence vote for the government. The Slovak "no" made the country quite visible also in the international media.⁹ Nevertheless, the EFSF expansion was approved next day by votes of the social democratic opposition, namely Smer, but the government broke down after being only 15 months in office.

In explaining what and why happened in this vote Kevin Deegan-Krause (2011), US political scientist and expert on Slovak politics, applied the modified framework of three party goals

– votes, office and policy – by Kaare Strom. For the specific situation (intervention of supranational factor) he added the fourth dimension – external pressure (EU, euro-parties, party-families). Furthermore he explains why the parliamentary parties voted as they did. Let's have a closer look only on those NO votes who voted principally against the EFSF – Slovak nationalist and liberals and not against the government, like party Smer did. Krause argues that the SNS was in this respect an easy case with a multiple pressure to vote against the EFSF because of its coherent anti-EU stances. For the liberal SaS party the incentives for NO vote, which actually meant to let the government fall, came above from internal ideological commitments but also from the electoral pressure. The party hoped that the voters would reward the principal attitude of the party by votes in the upcoming election. The liberals stood on the statement calling the ESFS “The Road to Socialism” (Sulík 2011). The party leader Richard Sulík “genuinely regarded the EFSF as both a moral wrong (taking from the disciplined and giving to the lazy) and practical mistake (since it would not work anyway).” (Krause 2011) The liberals stacked to this position also later on.

6. Three images of the EU in 2012 election campaign

In October 2011, the Slovak government lost a vote on boosting the EFSF rescue fund that was tied with a confidence vote in the government. After the fall of the government, many experts assumed that the EU agenda will become important, even the most important theme of election campaign. This seemed to be a natural consequence of the conflict between definitive “No” of SaS party and clear “Yes” of its coalition partners. Finally, under the pressure of economic crisis, social and economic issues became a central theme of the campaign and the parties profiled themselves mainly on a standard left-right axis.

In their election manifestos, established parties presented themselves in relation to the EU agenda as pro-European, however, without any ethos, enthusiasm, or creative policies. The only point at issue was the attitude towards solving the debt crisis. “In the area of EU policy, the contentious issue on Slovak political scene is the crisis in Eurozone and its possible solutions. Though basically all parties agree on the need of budgetary discipline and stricter control by fiscal cooperation, their attitudes towards the European Stability Mechanism, solving the Greek crisis, or possible deepening of integration in other areas of economic policy differ, from a total rejection, through a consent with reservations, to the support for deep integration (in particular Smer-SD)” (Geist 2012, 2). Let's have a look at three images of the EU in the 2012 election campaign: two different types of Euroscepticism, nationalistic and (neo)liberal, and the most pro-European image, represented by Smer-SD party.

6.1 *EU = image of an enemy*

Radical right-wing and nationalistic parties across the EU present the integration as a threat to national sovereignty and national cultural identity. Cas Mudde conceptualized the Eurosceptical positions which use populist appeals in terms of centre-periphery cleavage. Shortly before the big-bang enlargement in 2004 he expected that “one possible way in which EU accession could influence party competition in the new member states: in transforming the already present regional divide into a full populist, anti-EU enter-periphery cleavage” (Mudde 2004, 2). Furthermore,

he pointed at Euroscepticism which would mix populism with peripheral frustration. The centre-periphery divide in combination with national populist anti-EU position would be perfect also because it has links back to the classic populist discourse of the 1920s and 1930s in this region which posited that the key struggle was between rural and “national” people and the urban and cosmopolitan elite (Mudde 2004, 7).

However, the winner-losers of integration dividing line did not work very well, at least not in Slovakia – people in the poorer regions saw EU funds as a possibility to balance with more developed regions, not talking about balancing the capitals. In addition, the Europhoria was general, wide-spread across very different social environments; EU-sceptical feelings could be hardly mobilized before the crises.

The “text book example” of the peripheral nationalism against regional or global institutions, the West, the EU can be found in the rhetoric of the Slovak National Party (SNS) which labelled the EFSF as “a mega-betrayal on the Slovak nation”. The nationalists’ arguments go further on in losing the (national) sovereignty and avoiding being “the servants of the West”.

The Euroscepticism of the SNS has a “pattern” of radical right-wing parties, such as the True Finns or Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). In the election campaign the SNS thematised “rich Greeks or Italians living beyond their means and causing trouble to the poor maintaining the budgetary discipline” and the “ineffective principle for lazy countries to which the SNS will respond by the requirement to introduce minimal average European price of labour and increase salaries” (*Vernost’ Slovensku ...* 2012, 3). Moreover, the SNS was the first parliamentary party to cross the Rubicon when considering the alternative of leaving the EU and Eurozone: “... in case of urgent need to protect citizens’ property and values and state sovereignty, we will consider leaving the EU and Eurozone” (*Vernost’ Slovensku ...* 2012, 1).

The SNS characterised ex-post membership in the Eurozone as a big mistake (as a ruling party the SNS supported the idea between 2006 and 2010). Slota also argued that support of the EFSF is a “crime against the Slovak nation” (SITA 2011).

In a typically alarmist manner, the SNS argues in its programmatic document that: “It is bad enough that we have had governments that sold our sovereignty and the economic interests of Slovaks. Slovakia is now in positions of psychological, political and economic submission, and total dependence” (*Vernost’ Slovensku ...* 2012, 1). Or: “The first thing we need to do is to perform a comprehensible audit and inform the citizens about the actual condition of the Slovak Republic. Subsequently we will initiate changes necessary for leading country out of crisis; in case of urgent need to protect citizens’ property and values and state sovereignty, we will consider leaving the EU and Eurozone” (*Vernost’ Slovensku... 2012, 1*).

SNS fights for the rights of national states and labelling the others as “irresponsible”, not worth of our assistance: “Various EU directives reduce rights of individual countries in sovereign areas, such as competencies and rights of the parliament and Slovak government guaranteed by the Constitution of the Slovak Republic. We disapprove of a false rescue of the European Monetary Union and of its change into a debt and unprofitable union. We say no to endless public debt increase resulting from “helping” irresponsible countries” (*Vernost’ Slovensku ...* 2012, 2).

According to the typology of eurosceptical positions proposed by Peter Kopecký and Cas Mudde we could SNS categorize as “euro-rejects” (Kopecký/Mudde 2002). Their positions are negative of both dimensions of that typology – they are not supportive of the EU at the level of the diffuse support of EU integration either on the specific support which represents the practice of the EU policies.

6.2 EU = road to socialism

For the liberals, the EU with its solidarity and bailout is irrational and denies free-market economic principles. The SaS also rejects a deeper integration because it “can lead to reduction of sovereignty of Member States” (*Volebný program SaS ... 2012*, 56). “The Party supports stricter and enforceable sanctions to not only small or less important states but also the EU giants, Germany and France” (*ibid.*). The brochure explaining their stance is entitled – “EFSF – Road to Socialism”. The leader of SaS sees EFSF as the greatest threat to the euro, because it is trying to solve the debts by other debts ...” (Sulík 2011).

Neo-liberal attitude of SaS meets with a positive response from younger generation, rich in social capital; the party is not supported by those marginalised by the integration. This type of Euroscepticism is based on economic reductionism and “worshipping” of the invisible hand of the market. As we have already mentioned, SaS argued at two dimensions – moral (bailout is a moral hazard because it preferred those are no table or do want to keep with fiscal discipline and is a punishment for those who comply with the rules) and economy-pragmatically – the measures are not efficient anyway. Such positions trapped the liberals in national egoism and chauvinism. Based on that one could be quite sceptical about the liberal nature of the party because Euroscepticism doesn’t benefit the liberals.

Using again the Kopecký/Mudde typology (2002) we would see SaS as genuine EU-sceptics since they are supportive for the EU integration at the level of ideas and ideals, however, they are critical about the real the specific EU practices, namely the EFSF mechanism.

6.3 EU = image of a co-protector of national interests

The most pro-European party in the 2012 early elections was Smer-SD. The party perceives the EU as a normative/reference framework and as a protector, which fits in with the general concept of a “protecting hand”. The pro-European stance is a synergy of the role of national state, but only if “we/our party are/is the state”.

In its programmatic document, Smer even made the loyalty to the EU a reference framework of domestic policy: “Smer – Social Democracy believes that, despite current crisis, the European Union and Eurozone membership remain fundamental environment determining everyday reality of Slovakia and its citizens. For us, the EU membership means to feel secure politically, economically and socially. The anti-European attitudes threaten the very existence of the Slovak Republic” (*Programové zameranie strany ... 2012*).

The Smer party even turned the pro-European stance into a condition for cooperation among the parties on a domestic political scene; the pro-European attitude is also a guarantee of stability because “ignoring this precondition led to the fall of right-wing government and to unstable political situation, which caused great damage to the country and its people. SMER – Social Democracy warns of dangers brought about by political adventurers and adventurists who, in order to make themselves visible on a political scene, do not hesitate to adopt any decision going against the interests of Slovakia and the entire European Union” (*Programové zameranie strany ... 2012*).

From the perspective of the official documents and proclaimed attitudes of Smer-SD can be seen as the euro-enthusiasts (Kopecký/Mudde 2002) or the maximalists when we take into consideration the six point continuum along which party positions toward the EU may be situ-

ated – continuum from rejectionists to maximalists by Chris Flood (2002). However, in the everyday politics the pro-European stance of the Smer party is thus instrumentalized for several purposes: to strengthen the image of the party as a guarantee of social stability and securities as well as a guarantee of political stability, as the party defines itself in opposition to those adopting anti-European attitudes in order to pursue their own political interests.

7. Concluding discussion

The signs of rising relevance of the EU agenda and growing Euroscepticism in Slovak politics cannot be overseen. Among the obvious factors of this shift are euro and/or debt crises as well as the quest for solidarity, which is not very popular, especially when the citizens have the feeling that they should solidarize with those who are richer and better off.

Yet, despite the fact that the EU issue caused the fall of the government, it did not decide the subsequent early election and the salience of the EU issues for the domestic political competition should be seen as getting stuck on a halfway. Why?

The nationalistic, traditionally eurosceptical SNS did not manage to reach 5% threshold and after being an important political actor for almost two decades it is now out of the parliamentary politics. Many former voters of SNS changed in favor of Smer-SD which is seen as more competent in social and economic issues. SNS has been always perceived as a single-issue party, and this concrete “single-issue” (nationalism connected with anti-EU positions) became not salient enough.

SaS, which continued to campaign against the EFSF, managed to get into the parliament with a small margin (5.9%), what was a mixed result – on the positive side unlike its predecessors SaS survived the ‘second election test’.¹⁰ On the other hand, in 2010 the party gained 12% of votes, which means it lost a large portion of electoral support, most of it in favour of a newer new party Ordinary People and Independent personalities (OLaNO), which did not thematize EU agenda at all. This most recent newcomer to the Slovak parliament, fully complies with all theoretical characteristics of new alternative parties: it mobilizes frustrated protest voters, portrays itself as a new actor that comes from the outside of the established political elite and mainstream parties. Its agenda is focused mainly on the problem of corruption and party clientelism.

Among the losers of this election we could see also the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union-Democratic (SDKU-DS) party which lost about 60% of votes comparing to the 2010 election. The voters did not reward its merits in Slovakia’s integration process and the pro-EU positions, quite on contrary – it was punished for under-performance at the domestic political arena.

The unambiguous winner of the election was the EU-optimistic Smer-SD party. However, the landslide victory was not reached thanks to the pro-EU stances but thanks to offering social security and better economic conditions. The EU has been used as an additional pragmatic instrument to appeal to electorate yearning for more social and economic security.

The case of Slovakia (as those of many other EU countries) illustrates that we are entering a new phase of interactions between the national and EU political arena. We are facing new aspects of Euroscepticism, too. The crisis is a factor of this process but at the same time it brings to the light economic and social problems. The example of Slovakia shows that the EU agenda was more successfully used as a tool for mass mobilisation by those parties, which managed to instrumentalize the EU as a guarantee of improved economic conditions or as a scapegoat for

the misery. The EU agenda as such did not dominate the political competition. The politization of EU issues has seemed to be a temporary episode rather than a long-term dividing line and the factor having a significant impact on the pattern of political competition. We can summarise that the relevance of the EU factor is increasing but still not fully developed as an independent dividing line of the political competition, it is stuck between previous irrelevance and expected future salience.

NOTES

- 1 The author would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful and constructive comments that greatly contributed to improving the final version of the paper.
- 2 For example in fall 2011 the trust to the EU was expressed by 48% Slovaks whereas the EU-27 average reached just 34%. (http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb76/eb76_fact_sk_en.pdf). Another example: in spring 2010 78% of Slovaks believed that their country is benefiting from the EU membership, the EU-27 average was 53%, moreover 59% of Slovak public thought the EU membership is a good thing, the same question was answered positively only by 49% EU-27 citizens (http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb73/eb73_fact_sk_en.pdf). More empirical evidences about pro-EU bias of the Slovak public could be found in Standard Eurobarometer regular surveys at http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm.
- 3 In 2004 the average turnout for EU25 was of 45.6%, whereas in eight post-communist new members reached only 31%, with high variation – in Lithuania it was 48%, in Slovakia 17%.
- 4 The data from the European Election Study of 2009 (EES09), voters study, have been collected within the project PIREDEU (Providing an Infrastructure for Research on Electoral Democracy in the European Union, www.piredeu.eu). The fieldwork has been conducted in June 2009 in all 27 EU member states. For the European Integration the question was worded as follows: „Some say European unification should be pushed further. Other say it has already gone too far. About where would you place the following parties on this scale? Please indicate your views using a scale from 9 to 10, where 0 means unification “has already gone too far and 10 means it should be pushed further”. Similarly – for the Left-Right position the question was: “in political matters people talk of the left” and “the right”. About where would you place the following parties on this scale? Please indicate your views using any number on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means “left” and 10 means “right”.
- 5 “Comparison of the Czech and Slovak case shows what different paths the development of the party systems and cleavages in Central Europe after the break of the communist regimes can Czech conditions demonstrate a relatively smooth emergence of the socioeconomic cleavage of transformation and its dominance [...]” (Hloušek/Kopeček 2008, 545).
- 6 We are comparing means on different scale – as for the public the 11-point scale was used, in the expert survey a 7-point scale is used for EU integration and a 4-point scale is applied for saliency. Therefore the comparison is possible for rankings and internal differences within the respective scale. But as for the expert survey we could clearly observe the trends between 2006 and 2010 since the methodology and the applied scaled were identical.
- 7 As for the Czech Republic, for example, the range of means of parliamentary parties positions has been stretched from 2.50 (Communists) to 6.25 (Greens) (The 2006 Chapel Hill expert survey).
- 8 In a survey conducted in May 2010 respondents were asked an open-ended question: “Which EU-related issue has most recently caught your attention?” More than 60% responded “Greece (paying for the Greeks, clearing off the Greek debt, Greece’s bankruptcy etc.)” (Gyarfasova 2011).
- 9 „The Slovak vote Europe’s efforts to save the single currency were thrown into temporary confusion when Slovakia’s parliament, uniquely among the euro area’s 17 national legislatures, failed to approve an expansion of the European financial stability facility, the emergency fund set up to assist financially-stricken member states. [...] It looked like one more nail in the coffin of the European monetary union, hammered home by a country whose 5.5m people account for less than 2% of the eurozone’s 332m Ruritarians, revolt – small states have earned freedom.” (Financial Times, 14.10. 2011).
- 10 Newly emerged political parties in the past – for example Alliance of a New Citizen in 2002 – rose like a rocket, but failed to return to the parliament in next elections.

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