

The State of the Union a Year Before the Slovak Presidency

The Slovak Presidency of the Council of the European Union, scheduled for the second half of 2016, presents a unique opportunity to raise Slovakia's credit abroad as well as to initiate a deeper public debate in Slovakia. We approached an expert on the EU, Jozef Bátora, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Comenius University in Bratislava, who agreed to share his views on the topics which currently resonate in the European public, on the future of the European project, as well as the opportunity presented by Slovakia's upcoming Presidency.

The last couple of years were exceptionally dynamic for the EU. What in your opinion were the biggest milestones and how did they change the EU?

I would mention two developments. First, the 2009 adoption of the Lisbon Treaty was an important milestone. Compromises are usually not perfect but they provide a way forward. The Lisbon Treaty set up a new organizational basis for the EU's foreign policy actorness. Its new diplomatic service – the European External Action Service – is an important innovation in the institutional architecture of the Union. What is pretty new here is that the EU is not a state and yet it is in the process of developing structures and practices of diplomatic actorness on a par with states. This is both an opportunity and a challenge for the diplomatic actorness of the member states. For smaller member states like Slovakia, the EEAS provides diplomatic information and access in countries and areas where they have no embassies of their own. Such infrastructure is useful for businesses seeking investment opportunities etc. The challenge is that diplomatic representation has been a core prerogative and a marker of state sovereignty over the last centuries. And some of the member states – most notably the UK – perceive the establishment of the EEAS as an encroachment upon their sovereignty in foreign policy.

The second development worth paying attention to

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is the proliferation of new institutional structures aimed at dealing with the Eurozone crisis since 2009. This includes, for instance, the European Stability Mechanism set up in 2011. This is an international organization set up outside the EU's treaty framework and with a seat in Luxemburg. Its steering board consists of the finance ministers of the Eurozone countries.

Non-Eurozone countries can participate in meetings as observers. The ESM has proven an important instrument in stabilizing the effects of the financial crisis in countries like Portugal or Ireland. But decisions on stabilization packages and conditions attached to them are taken in the closed circle of the Eurozone members and under profound influence of France and Germany who contributed 20% and 27% of the financial assets in the ESM and thereby also have 47% of votes. The profoundness of influence of these two governments on the negotiations with Greece in June and July 2015 is an issue that other member states' governments as well as the EU institutions seek to come to terms with.

Given such tensions, the Union today is a differentiated political order where states choose various degrees and modi of cooperation. Some are members of the Eurozone, others are members of the Schengen zone, still others have various kinds of "opt-outs" (e.g. Denmark on defense cooperation) or "opt-ins" (e.g. Norway on defense and security policy cooperation) and still others choose to participate in parts of the EU's governance while not being members of the Union – with Norway as a prime example. This flexibility is the recipe for the Union's success but it is a challenge to maintain it in place.



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BIOGRAPHY

Jozef Bátora is Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia. Previously he was Associate Professor at the Institute of European Studies and International Relations at Comenius University, a Fulbright visiting professor at the FSI, Stanford University, senior researcher at the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna and at ARENA - Centre for European Studies, University of Oslo. He holds a PhD in political science from the University of Oslo and is the author of numerous scholarly articles on EU diplomacy, governance and institutional change published in academic peer reviewed journals. He is also a lecturer in the professional training program of the European External Action Service and coordinating editor of Journal of International Relations and Development.

EDUCATION

- PhD in Political Science University of Oslo (2006)
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- BSc. in Political Science Comenius University, Bratislava (1997)



How do you see the EU evolving in the next decade? Are there several possible scenarios?

Two points here. First, following the events related to the Greek crisis in recent months, it seems inevitable that the Union will need to find a new set of arrangements for governing the Eurozone. There are signals that some member states' governments – most notably France and Germany – might push for deeper integration in the Eurozone creating a quasi-federal structure of economic governance. Arrangements will need to be found how to involve non-Eurozone countries and EU institutions more closely in decision-making on the fiscal policies of the Eurozone.

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Second, I do not see the UK leaving the EU. I think the British public is pragmatic and sees the benefits of British participation in the Union as a member. In fact, the whole debate on UK "leaving" the EU is a flawed one. The Union is not a federation which you could leave. It is rather a political and economic order where countries choose the degree of their integration and participation. Norway is an example of a non-member fully integrated into the Union's single market, labor market as well as the Schengen zone of no border controls. In the latter aspect, the UK is already less integrated than the non-member state Norway.

The next decade will see the Union in a familiar situation: seeking to come to terms with finding the best institutional

arrangements for maintaining Europe at peace. Is this ambiguity annoying? Surely. But it is worth paying this price if one realizes how enormously effective the Union has been in generating a peaceful and prosperous environment in Europe.

With the Slovak Presidency scheduled for the second half of 2016, which topics will most likely shape the EU agenda during this period?

We will likely see efforts to set up new institutional arrangements for Eurozone governance. That will include debates on democratic governance in the EU – not least in light of the upcoming UK referendum. Also, the situation in the EU's eastern and southern neighborhoods will continue to be volatile. Finally, the theme of Transatlantic trade and making the EU economies more competitive and more secure will resonate in the debate.

What should Slovakia's priorities be during the upcoming Presidency?

The debate on the Slovak priorities is only just starting. I believe they could include four elements related to the developments in the EU. First, Eurozone governance – we should find a balanced and inclusive model of how the Eurozone is governed so that important non-Eurozone economies such as the UK, Sweden, Poland or Hungary are not excluded from decisions and responsibility. Second, we need to keep the momentum in the EU's enlargement processes. Slovakia has traditionally been a supporter of active engagement with Ukraine and the Western Balkans. We should work towards offering Ukraine a membership perspective – this may not happen during the Slovak presidency but we should continue putting this question on the table. Third, it is important to boost competitiveness in the EU's economies. Slovakia

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with its active IT start-up scene should work in support of the EU's Digital Single market, Energy Union and not least the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership. Slovak IT companies already have a foot in the door in Silicon Valley and in other IT clusters in the US and we should continue supporting this trend. Finally, democratic governance in the EU should be addressed. In recent years it has become clear that many decisions in EU governance are taken without proper scrutiny by democratically elected assemblies. Slovakia as a newly formed democracy should be interested in not having the quality of democratic decision-making watered down by growing technocracy.

Do you also perceive this as an opportunity to increase interest and awareness about the European agenda in the Slovak society?

Absolutely. Slovakia has been one of the most Europhile societies but, at the same time, one of the most ignorant

societies when it comes to the EU. As you know, in the last three European Parliament elections, Slovak voter turnout was the lowest in the Union. Getting responsibility to steer the Union in six months could help the Slovak society in taking a more active interest in our European home.

MEMBERS STATES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

FOUNDERS
Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxemburg

1951

Denmark, Ireland, United Kingdom

1973

Greece

1981

Portugal, Spain

1986

Austria, Finland, Sweden

1995

Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia

2004

Bulgaria, Romania

2007

Croatia

2013