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The Republic of Austria and the Slovak Republic's Membership in the European Union (1998–2002)

Polityka i Społeczeństwo nr 9, 345-353

2012

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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AND THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC’S MEMBERSHIP
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The aim of the paper is to present Slovak-Austrian relations in the context of the Slovak Republic’s membership in the European Union. The time-frames include the period from 1998 to 2002 and they coincide with the government formed by Mikuláš Dzurinda’s¹ „broad coalition” in Slovakia.

In the analyzed period Austria had two cabinets: one headed by Viktor Klima and the other formed by Wolfgang Schüssel. That was a breakthrough period since Slovakia managed to overcome its isolation in an international arena which it had experienced when governed earlier by the cabinet of the Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar. Tense relations with its neighbors, which resulted in relinquishment of the Visegrad states’ cooperation, and the lack of respect for human rights had their consequences in the international arena. Slovakia had not been included in the so called Luxembourg group, meaning those states that were invited to open negotiations with the EU during the Luxembourg summit (*Presidency Conclusions Luxembourg...*). The same happened during the NATO summit in Madrid: Slovakia had been excluded and had not been invited to apply for membership.

As far as its relations with Austria, they were not as strained as those with for instance Hungary. Nevertheless, there were a few factors that in the analyzed period determined their bilateral relations, such as the issue of the Slovak nuclear plants, bilateral trade, the Beneš decrees, the case of Jörg Haider, and, most of all, Austria’s attitude towards Slovakia’s membership in the EU.

¹ This coalition was composed of the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK), the Party of Democratic Left (SDL), the Party of Civic Alliance (SOP) and the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK).

After NATO's enlargement by the Czech Republic and Hungary and expecting that Slovakia and Slovenia would join the North Atlantic Alliance, Austria was surrounded by states which constituted a unified defense system (Hinteregger 1998: 8). In 1998, the leadership of the Austrian Social-Democratic Party (SPÖ) rejected a compromise drafted by its rightist coalition partner, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) which proposed that Austria should consider all options in the European security architecture, including a prospect of its own accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Luif 1998: 49–50). The Austrians' attitude towards NATO could not fundamentally affect Slovakia's chances to join the Alliance – unlike its accession to the EU. In 1998 a clear clash of interests existed between the ruling parties (SPÖ, ÖVP) and the public opinion who rejected the EU enlargement to include the states of the former Eastern Bloc. According to the Eurobarometer, in 1998 67% of the Austrians declared that they did not approve of the EU enlargement (Gyárfášová 1999: 8).

As of 1 July 1998, Austria took over the EU presidency. During the Austrian presidency around 50 meetings at the level of the Council of Ministers and 1500 meetings at lower levels were organized. While presenting the objectives that Austria wanted to achieve during its presidency, five basic points were listed that referred to Slovakia: combating organized crime, developing the rule of law, European solidarity with refugees, extension of the Schengen system and the EU enlargement (*Vorsitzprogramm* 1998: 1). Following the Luxembourg summit (12–13 December 1997), where six countries had been invited to open negotiations, the Austrian Foreign Affairs Ministry took a hard line. Minister Wolfgang Schüssel openly spoke in favor of a strategy to keep the options open for those countries that had not been granted a permission to start negotiations. Nevertheless, he also stated that the level of unemployment in the EU Member States was 10% (in the candidate countries it was much bigger) and therefore that the European Union must first of all resolve the problem of its internal reforms (Schüssel 1998: 4–5).

On 19 April 1999 a meeting between Dzurinda and the Austrian president Thomas Klestil was organized in Vienna. The subject of the talks was related to Vienna's doubts concerning the robustness of the Slovak democracy and threats to the Austrian labour market that were associated with Slovakia's accession to the EU. Also, the international situation was discussed, primarily the war in Kosovo (Łoś 2007: 116). The Roma constituted another of the controversial problems, in-

cluding their migration to the West as well as their applications for asylum there. For this reason some of the EU Member States introduced visa requirements for Slovak citizens (Žarna 2009: 480–491).

The new Slovak government launched an intense campaign addressed at its only neighbor that belonged to the EU. It concentrated on the following agreements: an agreement concerning crossborder transportation, airborne transportation, mutual assistance in case of natural disasters. Slovakia wanted to have agreements covering international cooperation along the frontier rivers and on the state borders completed the soonest possible. Its inclusion in the Schengen system was also important. A special partnership was established whose aim was to stabilize the relations between Slovakia and Austria. Even though it could not entail Slovakia's inclusion in the Schengen Information System, it was presumed that Slovakia (and other Visegrad Countries) would be able to participate in the common policy against illegal immigration, money-laundering, drug trafficking, prostitution and other issues that loomed over the relations between the Schengen states and the CEEC transition states (Lukáč, Chmel, Samson, Duleba 1999: 350–352).

An academic seminar entitled „Opportunities and chances of bilateral cooperation in Europe – the case of Austria and Slovakia”, organized 24–25 November 1998 owing to the initiative of the Institute of the Danube Region and Central Europe in Vienna, Economic University in Bratislava and the European House in Bratislava, symbolized warmer mutual relations. The Slovak and Austrian authorities took part in the seminar together with representatives of the Churches, universities, parliaments, banking sector, media and non-governmental organizations. The seminar was to result in concrete projects of cooperation. The key topics discussed during that event included: economy, finance and banking, European integration, regional cooperation, transportation, science, culture, youth, media, the Church, and non-governmental organizations. Those areas were emphasized in which collaboration could take place: political parties, institutes for social development, non-governmental organizations. Other important issues included cooperation between the Austrian ORF television and the Slovak STV and possibly TV Markiza; a project to open a canal linking the Danube with the Oder and the Elbe. Support was envisaged for an agency to inform the Slovak society about the EU and its Member States (Lukáč, Chmel, Samson, Duleba 1999: 352).

Much confusion was caused when Schüssel formed a new cabinet in Austria composed of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the

People's Party, whose policies made other EU Member States take an unprecedented step. Statements made by the FPÖ chairman Jörg Haider (including rehabilitation of nazism, racism and xenophobic hatred) forced the EU to impose sanctions on Austria as of January 2000 – 14 Member States suspended their contacts with the Austrian government. Out of the remaining states, the Czech Republic froze its dialogue with Austria on all levels. By contrast, Hungary and Slovakia did not change their positions (Łoś 2007: 116). This delivered an additional message: the Czech Republic overtook Slovakia in the accession process by becoming a member of the Luxembourg group. On the other hand Austria was the only Slovakia's neighbor to belong to the EU, which is why its support was seen as vital. This was one of the reasons why the Slovaks did not criticize the Austrians openly. Another reason had to do with the structure of the Slovak governing coalition, in which the position of the Christian Democrats was strong who – in ideological terms – were related to the Austrian People's Party.

With the nearing of the date of the EU enlargement, ever more voices were heard that emphasized all kinds of problems. Ten years after the process of transformation had been triggered in the CEE states, the Austrians started to suspect that the economic reforms were not implemented in those countries fast enough. According to Günther Tichy, in comparison with the preceding decade, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia had growth indicators twice as big as the EU average (4% as compared to 2%). However, still 40 years more were needed before the CEEC could reach the level of the EU Member States (Tichy 1999: 28–29). Some politicians emphasized the significance of including Austria's neighbors in an enlarged European Union. Political and academic circles, when referring to the past, underlined Austria's role in integrating Central Europe. The socialists (in opposition since 2000) favored enlarging the EU as soon as possible. Their chairman Alfred Gusenbauer claimed that Slovakia was a country closely related to Austria, which was why it had to become an EU Member State. The same stance was taken by the head of the Austrian parliament Heinz Fischer. Nevertheless, in 2000 the governing coalition composed of ÖVP-FPÖ did not demonstrate an unequivocal support for Slovakia's accession to the EU. Having stepped down from the party chairman's position, Haider continued to be FPÖ's actual leader. He demanded that the EU enlargement process be delayed by another 20 years. The new Freedom Party's chairwoman, Suzanne Riess-Passer, believed that the enlargement had to be prepared very

well. Such ambivalence was also characteristic of the Austrian Trade Unions (ÖGB). The unionists claimed that the candidate countries could access the EU only when their average wages had reached 80% of the Austrian average (Lukáč, Samson, Duleba 2000: 384).

On 10 October 2000 chancellor Schüssel paid a visit to Slovakia, stressing the necessity to establish a partnership of small and medium sized countries in the future EU. An official visit by President Klestil in Slovakia on 21 November in 2000 was important for facilitating further contacts. He was met by President Rudolf Schuster, Prime Minister Dzurinda and the Slovak Parliament's Speaker Josef Migaš. Klestil and Schuster emphasized correct bilateral relations. Schuster called on Austrian entrepreneurs not to invest exclusively in Bratislava and its immediate neighborhood but also in eastern Slovakia.

Regional cooperation developed through meetings of the heads of governments – Austrian, Hungarian and Slovak. On 10 November 2000 the fifth meeting of the politicians took place. Schüssel, Viktor Orban and Dzurinda arrived at the Slovak castle in Bojnice. The issues discussed included projects aiming at creating a euroregion Vienna – Bratislava – Győr (*Europa Środkowa...* 2001: 276). The Chancellor thanked both countries for not suspending their diplomatic relations with Austria during the period of the EU sanctions. The Austrian diplomatic circles authored an idea of the strategic partnership in Central Europe. The Austrians offered the neighbouring states of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia a helping hand in the process of their accession to the EU. Later, this project was enlarged to include Poland. It was motivated by earlier experiences with the established EU Member States which criticized FPÖ's participation in the governing coalition following the recent elections in Austria. In the circumstances, the Austrians wanted to identify loyal partners. They opted for their closest neighbors in Central Europe. A more detailed outline of the planned partnership was presented by Minister Benita Ferrero-Waldner in a speech entitled „Strategic partnership and political challenges in Europe” that was delivered on 12 February 2001 in Vienna. However, the plan to establish the partnership was met with little enthusiasm. Objections were raised against its name (following the Vienna summit of June 2001, a decision was taken to rename it as „Regional partnership in Central Europe”). The Czech, Slovak and Hungarian intellectual circles feared that Austria would want to dominate Central Europe (parallels were sought with the Hapsburg monarchy). Opponents to the idea wondered why it was voiced so late. Comments were heard that

just when the declarations about cooperation and partnership were issued, some tensions in the Czech-Austrian and Slovak-Austrian relations appeared. They were caused by the issue of nuclear power plants and the Beneš decrees (Marušiak, Duleba, Melišova-Bates, Lukáč 2001: 324–325).

At the same time Austria firmly maintained that a seven-year transition period was to be introduced before its labor market was opened for the new EU Member States. This position was presented by Ferrero-Waldner early in March 2001 during her lecture at the London Royal Institute of International Affairs. She stated that the average income in Vienna was much bigger than that in Bratislava, and that this difference could induce many citizens of the new Member States to move to the Austrian labor market. Consultations concerning the issues of labour market, nuclear energy, strategic partnership were held during the talks in the first half of 2001. On 15 May 2001, the head of the Slovak diplomacy, Kukan, talked about these issues with Ferrero-Waldner, deputy Prime Minister Susanne Riess-Passer (FPÖ) and Chancellor Schüssel. He wanted to reduce the Austrians' fears which were fed by the expected influx of the immigrant labor force and to persuade the Austrian partners to shorten the seven-year transition period. As evidenced by the public opinion surveys, the Austrians claimed that the support of the Austrian society for the EU enlargement oscillated around 70% in case the seven-year transition period was planned. Otherwise, the Austrian society's support was down to barely 32%, while 43% of the Austrians were against the enlargement (Marušiak, Duleba, Melišova-Bates, Lukáč 2001: 326).

As already mentioned, the nuclear power plant at Mochovce (JEMO) still constituted a major problem in the bilateral relations of Austria and Slovakia. In 1998 this issue was still trapped in a deadlock. Until October 1998 there were no meetings of the top politicians. Following the change of cabinet in Bratislava, the Slovak side recognized the fact that the JEMO issue had to be resolved. Nuclear energy was an issue that went far beyond the bilateral relations. In addition, their compliance with international security norms was in the interest of the Slovak Republic's citizens too. A threat re-emerged that the Austrians would veto Slovakia's accession to the EU (in the period of 1999–2000 Austria had similar problems related to the Czech nuclear power plant at Temelin). Even though Austria had started to develop its own nuclear energy production, the Austrian citizens stopped it in a referendum. The whole situation changed in 2001. The Austrians positively evaluated

the open attitude of the Slovak partners and their willingness to carry on a dialogue concerning the issue of closing down their nuclear power plants. Subsequently, Austria welcomed the Slovak government's decision to phase out blocks V1 and V2 in their nuclear energy plant at Jaslovské Bohumice over 2006–2008 and its refusal to undersign a loan earmarked for the expansion of the Mochovce nuclear power plant (Figeľ, Adamiš 2004: 124–127).

The second regional conference of the foreign ministers of Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia took place in Bratislava on 29 November 2001. The negotiations involved issues related to combating terrorism, regional cooperation and the EU enlargement in view of the European Council's summit at Laeken. Ferrero-Waldner declared that she attached importance to the completion of the accession negotiations with the candidate states by the end of 2002. During the Bratislava summit its participants focused on security issues, implementation of the Schengen agreement, combating terrorism, natural environment and culture (Marušiak, Duleba, Melišová-Bates 2002: 407).

The Slovak-Austrian cooperation at lower levels was constructive. In the context of Slovakia-EU negotiations concerning free movement of people, in December 2001 a bilateral agreement was signed that focused on social security (Z.z. 154/2003). Subsequently, on 25 April 2002 in Vienna the respective undersecretaries of education signed an agreement concerning mutual recognition of maturity exams and diplomas (Z.z. 255/2002). On 22 November 2001, Martin Fronc (Secretary in the Slovak Ministry of Education) and the Austrian ambassador Gabriele Matzner-Holzer signed a protocol in which they envisaged further Austrian – Slovak cooperation in the period 2002–2007. The protocol concerned student exchange in the framework of scientific projects. At the end of 2001, 714 Slovak students studied free of charge at Austrian tertiary education establishments despite the fact that the Austrians introduced full tuition costs in their university studies. The Austrian side ensured that it would cover two thirds of the costs involved, while the Slovak side would cover one third. The program was to start operating from 2007 onwards.

Austria was thought to be one of the most important investors in the Slovak market and a serious trading partner. Of particular significance was the buy-out of 87% of the Slovenska sporiteľne's stocks in 2001, for which the Austrian Erste Bank paid 412 mln euro. The Austrian trade representative in Slovakia, Josef Altenburger, main-

tained that owing to harmonization of the Slovak legal system with EU regulations, the investment activity of the Austrian companies was bound to increase.

FPÖ politicians, largely for populist reasons, kept criticizing the EU enlargement. Part of the ÖVP politicians took a similar stance because of the Beneš decrees. Meanwhile representatives of the Central and Eastern European states drew attention to the fact that Austria, similarly to the German Federal Republic, persisted in its negative attitude regarding the free movement of employees from the new Member States.

Summing up, Austria played an important role in the Slovak process to become an EU Member State. In the second half of 1998, during their presidency, the Austrians pressed for Slovakia's inclusion in the group of countries invited to start their accession negotiations in Luxembourg, which ultimately happened in December 1999 at the Helsinki summit (*Presidency Conclusions Helsinki...*). It is worth bearing in mind that bilateral relations with Slovakia were not as much important for the Austrians as they were for the Slovaks.

Their relations with Austria were good. The only doubtful matters included the issue of the Slovak nuclear power plants, the Beneš decrees and the Austrian labor market. The good interstate relations were confirmed by economic relations as Austria was and still is an important investor from the Slovak point of view. The bilateral relations visibly improved when the EU Members States boycotted Austria, which was related to Haider's public declarations. Slovakia did not join in the boycotting, which was appreciated in a speech by the Austrian foreign minister Ferrero-Waldner in Bratislava. It was in Austria's interest to change its critical attitude to the issue of the Eastern Enlargement because – as a result of the imposed sanctions – it faced marginalization within the EU. Austria was the driving force behind the Danube countries cooperation – its development depended upon Austria's stance

as a country which was economically the strongest in the region. The same was true of the initiative to launch the regional partnership project.

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