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NATIONAL REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY SLOVAKIA

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Executive summary

Life in Slovakia

Slovakia's citizens perceive their own life situation as well as the overall economic situation of the country rather pessimistic. From all EU member countries is the share of "pessimists" the highest right in Slovakia.

Similar as in other countries, also in Slovakia - people are more satisfied with their personal situation compared to the economic situation in the country. A worsening of the own personal situation declared 41% of the respondents as to the economic situation of the country 52%, a worsening of the employment situation in Slovakia expect 37%, a worsening of the household's financial situation 48% and of the own job situation 18%.

If comparing the perception of Slovakia's citizens with the NMC 10 average, we can see a higher degree of pessimism. On the other hand, when comparing those results with the results of autumn 2003 and spring 2004, we see a clear trend of rising confidence in the country's economy. Concretely, the share of pessimistic expectations dropped from 65 % to 52%, as to the financial situation of the household it dropped from 59 % to 48%. This drop in pessimistic expectations was the strongest from among all New Member Countries (NMC).

We can see a drop of pessimistic expectations related to the financial situation of the household. In spite of this positive trend, the share of pessimistic expectations remains substantially higher than the share of optimistic or realistic ones. The further development will be definitely conditioned by how the currently ongoing reforms reflect the standard of living of the citizens and to what a degree the increased direct foreign investments will have an impact on the job market.

From among the five monitored fields, the relatively most optimistic expectations are associated with job opportunities in Slovakia (25%) and with life in general (22%) and there are least associations with the financial situation of the households (12%).

Expectations of the future development closely related with how the respondents perceive the recent 5 years – those having experienced an improvement of their situation, are more often optimistic also for the future.

In general, for all fields – we can say that it is the age and generation related differences, affecting most often the life-attitude of the people. It is logical and closely related not just with the better preparedness of the young people for the ongoing economic changes, resulting from the changeover from the plan-based "socialistic" economy to market-economy, but also with the European integration. For the older generation, the new conditions and circumstances of increased competition are harder to accept and cope with. This relates to the fact that people are better "equipped with skills" necessary for individual success in the environment of international competition. Many people already managed to get some international education, international experience, language skills - providing them generally with more natural self-confidence. In the group of those above the age of 60, just 15% expect a growth, what unambiguously related not just to the economic prospects but also with the prospects of life in general. Currently, the "feelings/experience of life" of the elderly people is affected by the uncertainty associated with the reform of the healthcare system and the pension reform. The youngest age-group is exactly in the opposite situation – it is just entering the job market, in most cases better prepared for competition and (moreover) with the accession to the European Union their job-opportunities improved in general.

Expectations of Slovakia's citizens deviate also in dependence from the region they live in. The most optimistic are the citizens of the Bratislava region (48% expects some improvement of their prime situation in the upcoming five years). This is absolutely clear to understand, since this region is the strongest in economic terms, the biggest of the international investments is located here as well and this region has also a very low unemployment rate. The citizens of the other three regions in Slovakia differ significantly in their expectations.

Slovakia's urgent problems

In the hierarchy of the most urgent problems Slovakia faces, dominate for a long time already "unemployment" and the "standard of living". It is the "social issues" perceived most sensitively by the majority of the population.

Generally we may state that the seven most severe problems of Slovakia are identical with those of the 10 new Member Countries. If comparing this group of states with the EU 25, we notice two striking differences – in those countries, the most sensitively perceived problems are immigration and terrorism. The Slovak citizens classified them to lower positions within this urgency charts – both problems were declared just by 1% of the respondents, i.e. on rank 10.

Confidence in institutions

The confidence in constitutional institutions (mainly the government and the Parliament) fluctuates and changes depending of the stage of the election cycle. The most trustworthy institutions in Slovakia are the electronic media (radio and television, trusted by 71% or (respectively) 68% of the respondents), followed by the Army, which is trusted by 63%, the press (57%) and charity and volunteer organisations (52%).

The European Union enjoys in Slovakia a higher confidence than in new member countries (+7 points), also than in the EU 25 (+6 points). On the other hand, the average of EU 25 trusts slightly more the UN. A large difference in the confidence level among the NMC and the EU 25 is evident also in the case of Governments or Parliaments. In the NMC, those institutions are rather unstable and the distrust towards them reflects also the general dissatisfaction with the policy and economic situation. In spring of 2004, just 19% of the citizens trusted the Parliament in Slovakia and the Government just 17%.

There is tremendous gap in the confidence in justice and the justice system in Slovakia – trusted just by 16% (in the EU 25 it is 45%). In the case of this institution, Slovakia also significantly deviates from the other NMC (by -11 points). Those low values reflect the problem of low law-enforcability, the long proceedings and corruption

From among the four monitored parameters, Slovakia achieved the lowest confidence level towards political parties (8%), with the average for the NMC 10 being by one per-cent point lower.

Information on the European Union

The majority of Slovakia's population perceives its knowledge of the European Union as slightly below the average (the average mark is 4,36 on a 10 point scale). But also this average mark rates Slovakia's citizens to the better informed.

Slovakia's knowledge quality in some basic facts related to the European Union is in some aspects higher than in the NMC in general, in some aspects lower – and in some it is exactly at the level of the NMC and EU 25 average. The Slovaks are also better informed on the major EU symbol – i.e. its flag. Up to 93% correctly declared that the European flag is blue with yellow stars. Exactly half of the respondents also correctly declared that the deputies of the European Parliament get elected directly by the citizens. On the other hand, just about one third of the respondents correctly declared that the EU has its own anthem and each year, the European Day is held. The level of knowledge was in Slovakia in both cases below the average.

On the other hand, the knowledge of the Slovaks is generally lower in issues related to the functioning of the European Union.

The majority of Slovakia's citizens feel not sufficiently informed on the country's EU accession. This result probably reflects the fact that the public discussion dealt not sufficiently with the issues, the people were really interested in. Information deficits on the EU extension in general declared almost two thirds of the citizens (65 %), in the case of Slovakia's accession it was slightly less – 61 %.

The majority of Slovakia's citizens are interested in EU related information. Just 13% declared to be uninterested in this kind of information. It is mainly elderly people of lower education.

The most frequent source of political information is definitely TV. This applies also to information related to the European Union – TV as preferred information source was declared by 81% of the respondents, what is more than the EU 25 average (+7 per cent point). The Slovaks prefer also radio (56%, what is + 19 points). Approximately half of the respondents preferred dailies, what is exactly the average in the NMC as well as the EU 25. In Slovakia, dailies are the third most preferred source of information, while in the EU 15 dailies rank the second most frequent.

Most of the Slovak citizens think that the coverage of the European Union related topics in the Slovak media is adequate. This was declared by 58% of the respondents, 11% think that this topic is "over covered" and 23 % think that this topic is not sufficiently covered by the Slovak media. A comparison of Slovakia with the NMC 10 average shows rather significant differences – the Slovak respondents make more frequent statements in the meaning that this topic is represented adequately, i.e. 58 % as opposed to 43 % of the NMC and EU 25 average. This means that the citizens of Slovakia are more satisfied with the media coverage of this topic in quantity terms.

As to the objectivity of this information, the attitude of the citizens of Slovakia is approximately the same as the NMC 10 average. Up to 44 % think that the publicised information is too positive – being rather propaganda, 38 % consider this information to be objective. In the assessment of the "balancedness" of EU related information, the accession countries significantly deviate from the EU 25 average. The EU 25 average differs in the higher occurrence of the too negative information and lower occurrence of too positive information. This assessment reflects the fact that in the new member countries, there was publicised mainly positive EU-related information in the pre-accession. This information was also superficial to some extent. In the Member Countries - on the other hand – it often happens that the EU, or Brussels, the „Brussels bureaucracy“ are depicted as the main causes of failures or unpopular steps necessary to be taken in domestic politics.

From among the European institutions, the Slovaks know best the European Parliament – up to 92% of the respondents have already heard of this institution. The second best known institution is the European Commission – known by 83%. This is followed by the European Court of Justice (78%), the European Central Bank (68%), the Council of EU's Ministers (64 %) and the European Ombudsman (59%). Less than half of the respondents have already heard of the EU Committee for the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee and the European Court of Auditors.

The citizens of Slovakia take the European Parliament to be the most important institution (83%), followed by the European Commission (73%) and the European Court of Justice (70%). In general we can say that the better known, better visible EU institutions are generally considered to be also more important, significant. Nevertheless, this does not always apply absolutely linearly.

At the same time, the European Parliament is also the most trustworthy European institution, trusted by 60% of the respondents, followed by the European Court of Justice (56%) and the trio of the most trustworthy institutions gets completed by the European Commission (54%).

Support for EU membership

Slovakia ranks third with its 46% membership support, i.e. above the NMC 10 average (43%).

The relatively lowest membership support was right before the actual accession in spring of 2004 (46 %). In the period 2001 – 2003, the support was very stable and also relatively very high – i.e. ranging

58% - 60%. In the period 1999 – 2002, Slovakia's support was higher than in the other accessing countries, in the period 2001-2002 even significantly higher.

From the viewpoint of expected membership impacts, Slovakia belongs to the more optimistic countries. 57% of the citizens expect advantages and the opposite view is advocated by ¼ of the Slovaks. To the group of more optimistically minded countries belongs Slovakia along with Slovenia (where 64% expect advantages), Latvia (58%) and Hungary (58%). On the opposite, sceptical pole we can see Poland (50%), Latvia (49%), the Czech Republic (46% and Estonia (41%). The average for the NMC 10 makes 52%.

Similarly to the issue of membership support – the development in the issue of expected advantages has been also very stable in Slovakia over the recent 5 years. In the period 1999 – 2003, advantages expected 62 – 66 % of Slovakia's citizens, what was above the average of the NMC 10. The deviation occurring in the other new member countries in the time the accession referendums were held – did not occur in Slovakia. On the other hand (similar to the accessing countries), Slovakia also experienced shortly before the actual accession a drop in the share of those expecting advantages. But Slovakia maintained an above-average share of optimists.

Support for EU's key policies

In spite of the slight decrease of the overall EU membership support of Slovakia, the citizens of Slovakia support significantly high and stable the EU's key policies.

The European Monetary Union (EMU) is supported by 68% of the respondents, what is by 8 per cent point above the NMC 10 average. A high support enjoys also the common foreign policy (74%), even higher is the support for the common defence and security policy, reaching 82%. The topical extension by 10 new countries is supported by 80% of Slovakia's citizens. Generally we may state that in Slovakia, the EU's policies enjoy a high support compared to the NMC 10 average.

Image of the European Union

For most of the respondents (72%), EU means mainly freedom of movement, travelling, studying and work. Another significant association is the common currency Euro (53%), followed by economic prosperity, peace and cultural diversity. The Slovaks declare less often some negative features – e.g. bureaucracy, but compared to the NMC 10 average, they declared more often the loss of cultural identity.

The comparison of European Union's image in the Slovak public and the public of the EU 25 indicates a higher level of idealisation in Slovakia. The citizens of the „old“ member countries declare significantly more often items like „wasting money“, or „insufficient control (guarding) of the outer borders“. We can expect that based on concrete and particular EU experience, this will become more realistic.

The majority of Slovakia's citizens declared not to understand, how the EU works. This was declared by 45% of the respondents, a positive answer was provided by 33% of the respondents and the rest was not able to answer that question.

Slovakia is broadly sceptical about the chance to influence the functioning of the EU. With the statement „My word will mean something in the EU“ disagreed as much as 70% of the respondents. On the other hand, most of them see a positive (contribution) for Slovakia in terms of economic stability and security. Positive expectations are about the political stability. Polarised are the views on the future relevance of Slovakia within the EU.

Role of the European Union

The role of the European Union is most positively associated with foreign policy in general, concretely also with terrorism fighting and defence. Those three fields were positively stated by more than 50% of the respondents. Another significantly positively perceived field is environmental protection, the economic situation, crime fighting and education.

The highest share of ambivalent answers relates practical issues of everyday life – like public transport and housing, with which the citizens of the assessing Slovakia had no practical experience so far.

A negative role to the European Union is ascribed in relation to inflation and price-rises (53%). We can expect that in this respect, Slovakia's public perceives the EU accession to be the cause for the price-rises in Slovakia.

Fears of the EU membership

Similar to the positive expectations related to Slovakia's integration in the EU, also the fears related to this step relate mainly to its social and economic impacts. A high percentage of the respondents (67%) declared fears from the transfer of jobs to countries with lower production costs. Though the accessing countries now profit from the fact that in comparison with the "old" membership countries they represent a cheaper labour force, they fear the prospective job migration further to the East. Another serious fear relating to the EU membership relates to crime – i.e. an increase in smuggling and organised crime. Other fears are associated rather with cultural problems (problems of the agriculture, loss of social benefits/services etc.). Fears of losing our cultural identity and culture or the less frequent use of the national language expressed just a minority of the respondents.

Budget of the European Union

In the perception of Slovakia's citizens, the major part of EU's budget is spent on staff, administration and EU buildings (declared by 22%). The Slovaks think that another significant part of the EU's budget is employment and social issues, followed by foreign policy and assistance to non-EU countries. The notions of Slovakia's citizens deviate from the NMC 10 average mainly in terms of the budget spent on agriculture. This item was declared just by 9% of the Slovak respondents, but by as much as 19% of the NMC-10 average and 15% of the EU 25 average. The above figures indicate that most citizens have unclear notions about the EU's budget structure so far.

European identity

The national and the European identity are by the political and cultural elites understood as complementary – i.e. mutually not exclusive. The Slovaks perceive the EU membership positively and support it. The issue of their cultural identity is perceived in sensitive way but not as endangered by the EU membership. The most frequent answer on the national and European identity question is the answer "the national + European identity" which was declared almost by the half of the respondents.

The institutional reform of the European Union

Two thirds of Slovakia's citizens think that the European Union should have its own constitution. Most of the political parties agreed on Slovakia's priorities – of which the most discussed one was the principle "one country – one commissioner". The inclusion of the Christian heritage – or mentioning God in the constitution's preamble – was demanded mainly by the Christian-Democratic Party. The question bringing most of the disagreements and blocking the adoption of the constitution at the December 2003 summit – the way of voting in the Council – had not such a resonance in Slovakia.

In spite of the fact that the support for the EU constitution has slipped a bit, the constitution support high in the public. The opposite of "consent", instead of a strong and clear „no“ (against voted just 10% of the respondents), is rather the ambivalent „I don't know“, an answer provided by 1/4 of the respondents.

The Slovak public inclines to keep the veto right – 51% declares this right should stay preserved because it protects the basic national interests. The views of the Slovak public incline more in favour of this right than the EU 25 average does, but less than the NMC 10 average does. One fifth of the

respondents think that the veto right should be limited just to several basic areas. The research was not focused on a detailed specification of these areas.

The majority of the Slovak public tends to the possibility of equality of votes, regardless of the size of the particular state. This alternative was declared by 59% of the respondents – being above the NMC 10 as well as EU 25 average. Less than one fourth agreed with the alternative “the bigger the country the more voices it should have”. Just a small percentage of the respondents answered “I don't know”. However, we can predict that the answers of the respondents are based on not such an exact knowledge of the decision-making mechanisms in the EU.

The views on the length of the rotating chairmanship period in the Council of the European Union are divided precisely almost equally in Slovakia - 40% of people think today's 6 months' period should be prolonged, 40% think it should remain as it is. One fifth of the respondents were not able to make a statement about this issue. The public views have moved more in favour of a prolonged chairmanship since last autumn. The rotating chairmanship could be prolonged. Even a permanent chairmanship in the Council of the European Union is considered.