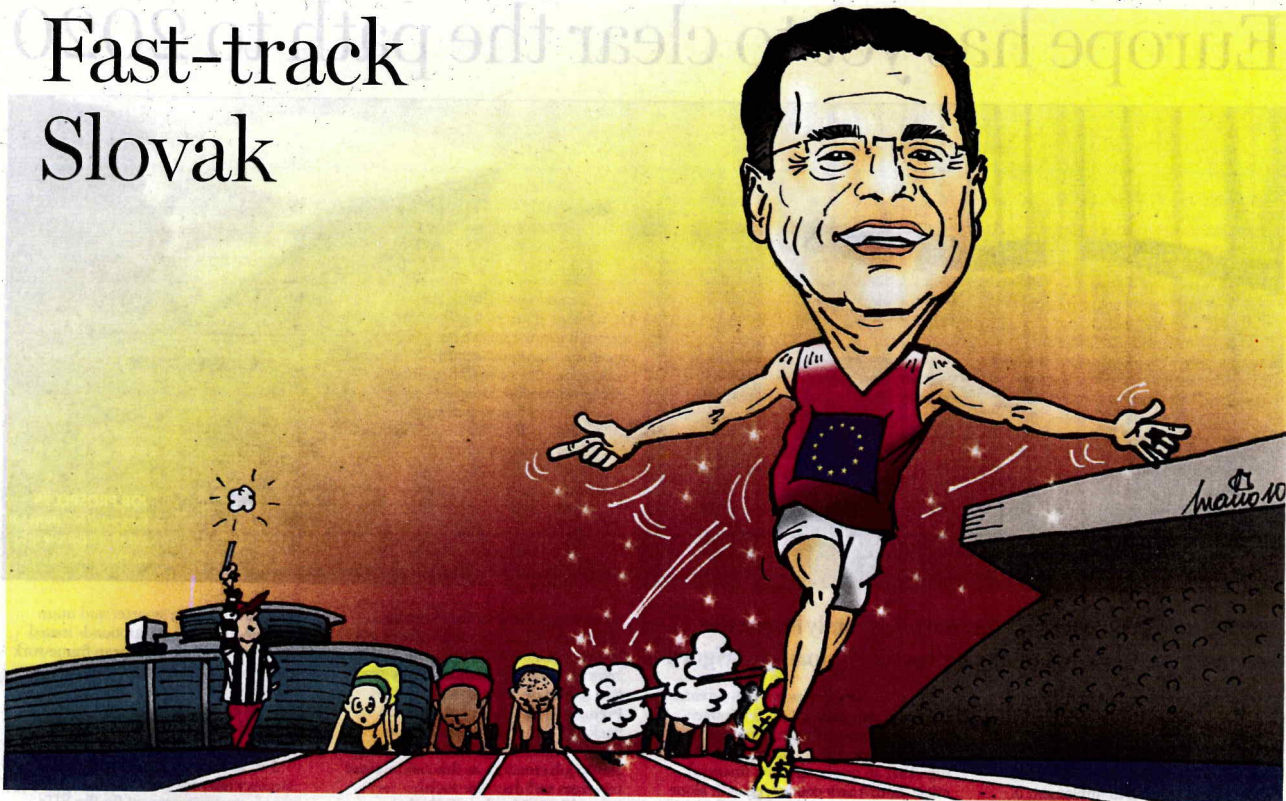


Fast-track Slovak



Maroš Šeďčovič has packed a lot into a short life, becoming a vice-president of the European Commission at the age of 43, after helping to establish his country as a credible member of the EU.

His widely acknowledged talents and renowned cheerfulness will be tested as never before in the next five years, as he takes on his role as commissioner for administration and inter-institutional affairs. An accident of history has put the Slovak diplomat into what might have been a rather dull job just as it becomes a hot seat.

The changes brought about by the Lisbon treaty are subjecting the EU to new strains, and Šeďčovič has admitted the need to strengthen "trust and co-operation between the EU institutions" as they adapt to new ways of working. His start in office has been difficult, with profound disagreements over the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and with the EU's institutions jostling as they struggle to find an effective strategy for a Europe still in crisis.

Šeďčovič's tasks range from supporting the new foreign policy chief, Catherine Ashton, to staff the EEAS, to representing the Commission in the General Affairs Council and in much of the organisation of EU summits. He is likely to face more frequent conciliation procedures on legislation, and will have to persuade the Council to accept closer collaboration with the Commission and the European Parliament, and to involve national parliaments more. He has to set up the citizens' initiative, and bring new credibility to transparency and better regulation. At the same time, he has to ensure that the Commission operates smoothly at a time when its 30,000 or so staff face heavier workloads and are becoming increasingly restive.

Fate has repeatedly placed Šeďčovič in dramatic situations. He studied in Moscow as the Soviet Union was falling apart. He entered the Czechoslovak foreign ministry as his own country was going through its break-up. His first foreign posting was to Zimbabwe, where Robert Mugabe was tightening his grip on the population. Early in his career he had to choose a new country. And his

attempts to bring Slovakia closer to Europe were repeatedly frustrated by a prime minister – Vladimír Mečiar – whose pariah status relegated the country to the slow track of EU and NATO membership. Even Šeďčovič's hearing at the Parliament in January was turned into a political circus, with allegations of anti-Roma and pro-communist sentiments – allegations he rapidly defused.

His rise is all the more remarkable because he comes from the wrong side of the tracks. His mother worked in the post office and his father was, he says, a tough and self-made man from a background devoid of any privilege. But his parents had high expectations of their son, and he responded. He overcame his childhood shyness as his sporting talents emerged: he used to run the 100 metres in less than 11 seconds, and still enjoys tennis, jogging and skiing.

He won such high grades in economics and journalism in his first undergraduate year in Bratislava that he was selected for fast-track training as a diplomat. Sent to Prague and then to Moscow, a whole new world opened up to him. At the prestigious State Institute of International Relations (where he briefly overlapped with Štefan Füle, the Czech Republic's European commissioner), he studied the works of British and American politicians, learnt English and French, attended lectures from visiting Western professors and diplomats, and had access to material about the events of 1968 that he was still unable to see when he returned to Czechoslovakia.

With a doctorate in law to his credit, he entered the ministry of foreign affairs as an adviser, and was quickly selected for a scholarship at Stanford, where his teachers included Milton Friedman, Condoleezza Rice and George Schultz. His first foreign posting was to Zimbabwe, followed by a promotion to Ottawa – at which point, as Czechoslovakia split, in 1993, he had to decide which foreign service he wanted to stay with.

He chose Slovakia ("the more adventurous option", he remarks), and within five years had risen – still barely 30 years-old – to the position of director of the foreign minister's office. In 1998,

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he came to Brussels for a year as deputy head of his country's mission. After a brief spell as ambassador to Israel and another swift promotion in the foreign ministry, he returned to Brussels to head Slovakia's mission, and – when Slovakia at last joined the EU – as his country's permanent representative. In September last year, he was appointed to the Commission as a stop-gap replacement for his departing compatriot Ján Figel, and spent three months in charge of education and culture.

He will not have much free time for leisurely reading of biographies, one of his favourite relaxations, but he will certainly find time to spend with his family. He is a proud father of three – and is happy to let them choose their own course in life.

Speaking of his new role, he says: "I'm very much for rules-based systems", perhaps reflecting a desire for order after a lifetime touched by ambiguities. Educated among the elite in the dying years of the Soviet regime, he was a *stagiaire* in the foreign ministry in Prague during the Velvet Revolution. He was supposed, as a diplomat of a Soviet satellite, to be a member of the Communist Party, but the system collapsed before he received his membership card. During Mečiar's reign, Šeďčovič often had to maintain a difficult balance as his country's spokesman in Brussels. "We in the foreign service were branded," he says, "but we played an honest role."

His experience has left him cautious about the damage that individuals can inflict when checks and balances in political systems are inadequate. It has also made him conciliatory. "I want to leave a negotiation room knowing I can talk to partners again the next morning," he says.

After more than a decade of direct involvement with the EU and five years as a member of the select club that is the EU's committee of permanent representatives, he has intimate knowledge of how the EU works, and has a strong network of contacts. So he approaches his complex tasks with optimism: "Administrative and inter-institutional questions can be blockages, but they can – and should be – bonds," he says.

Peter O'Donnell

CURRICULUM VITAE

1966:	Born, Bratislava
1984-85:	University of Economics, Bratislava
1985-90:	State Institute of International Relations, Moscow
1990:	Doctorate in law, Comenius University, Bratislava
1990-91:	Adviser to Czechoslovak deputy foreign minister
1991:	Stanford University
1991-92:	Official, Czechoslovak embassy, Zimbabwe
1992-95:	Official, Czechoslovak and Slovak mission, Canada
1995-97:	EU and NATO department, Slovak ministry of foreign affairs
1997-98:	Deputy director, foreign minister's office
1998:	Director, foreign minister's office
1998-99:	Deputy head, Slovak mission to the EU
1999-2002:	Slovak ambassador to Israel
2002-03:	Director-general, bilateral co-operation section, ministry of foreign affairs
2003-04:	Director-general, European affairs section, ministry of foreign affairs
2004-09:	Slovak permanent representative to the EU
2009:	European commissioner for education, training and culture
2010-:	European commissioner for inter-institutional relations and administration