

EU Enlargement Discourse in Slovakia: Supporting It, but Better Let's Not Talk About It

Policy Brief

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Introduction

The Slovak Republic joined the European Union on May 1, 2004, as a part of the “Big Bang enlargement” and has benefited greatly from its EU membership ever since. Indeed, the country’s EU accession prospects gave Slovak governments between 1998 and 2004 the necessary impetus to introduce a myriad of initially uneasy and painful reforms to adapt their economy and political system to EU standards. In accordance with this constructive experience, Slovakia’s longstanding policy has been to support the further enlargement of the EU, with an emphasis on the Western Balkan countries. This stance has been directed towards fostering a similarly positive approach to reform and democratic transition in Eastern and Southeastern Europe and ultimately towards the acceptance of these countries into the EU. Additional aims include stabilising these regions, ensuring continued stability following the violent wars of the 1990s in some of the countries, and tying the states geopolitically to the rest of Europe, where they undoubtedly belong. To this end, EU enlargement is widely seen primarily as a geopolitical tool and less as an instrument for advancing European values and rules for their own sake. EU enlargement also provides a pathway for securing a lasting peace in Europe.

Even as years passed and EU integration policy towards its immediate neighbourhood suffered from considerable delays and lost momentum, Slovak foreign policy never completely abandoned its enlargement aspirations for the Union. That said, Slovakia refrained from pursuing a targeted and strategic approach, rather

merely reiterating its desire to promote EU integration processes in the Western Balkans and the Eastern neighbourhood.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, nonetheless, has reinvigorated enlargement discussions in most member states. Governments now see enlargement policy as an instrument for effectively responding to the evolving geopolitical backdrop and strengthening the EU in its immediate neighbourhood. The impetus for EU enlargement appears to be back, with Ukraine dominating discussions – for better or worse – and also pulling other aspirants closer towards becoming EU members. While the centre of gravity for EU enlargement is clearly in “the East” at present, Western Balkan countries have participated in the accession process for a longer period of time, triggering certain frictions. Nonetheless, the current reopening of the process could serve as a new opportunity for the Western Balkan countries to redouble their efforts and leverage recent momentum to their benefit. Indeed, Bosnia and Herzegovina finally received candidacy status in late 2022 and opened negotiations in March 2024, lending credence to this argument.

Russia’s full-scale war in Ukraine has also influenced discussions about EU integration in Slovakia. Experts and officials alike have underscored the significance of Ukraine’s future EU membership, especially its potential impact on eastern regions of Slovakia. However, at the Slovak government level, structured and strategic discussions related to future enlargement (and its impact) are currently more limited, partly as the new government’s foreign policy strategy is readjusted.

Slovakia and the EU enlargement discourse—the domestic political context

Slovakia's September 30, 2023, elections led to the formation of a new government, with Prime Minister Robert Fico securing a fourth (non-consecutive) term at the helm. This time, Fico's coalition is comprised of his own political party, SMER-SSD (which styles itself as a supposedly social democratic party), the splinter party HLAS (also an ostensibly social democratic party), and a smorgasbord of far-right, nationalist, anti-EU, and anti-Western politicians. Far from the type of rhetoric one might expect from a social democratic party, the SMER election campaign promulgated populist and anti-systemic narratives, peddled various anti-Ukrainian narratives, and expressed pro-Russian sentiment. And after assuming office, the new government swiftly pursued a busy legislative agenda, enacting a raft of measures targeted towards, among other aims, controlling the free press, imposing restrictions on civil society, and introducing contentious changes to the judiciary. These policies could potentially be challenged by the EU and may jeopardise future European funds designated for Slovakia.

On foreign policy, while there has been no outright change in strategy, there has been a shift towards promoting a more “sovereign” and “multivector foreign policy to all sides of the world”, a pivot away from the country's long-standing firm pro-Western orientation.

As these shifts in domestic and foreign policy occur, the official Slovak position on enlargement stands unchanged – Bratislava still formally supports the process and the European future of aspiring countries. However, practically, Slovakia lacks strategic direction on its plans for acting on this support at home and within the EU.

An entirely contradictory message, in fact, is far more readily apparent in Slovakia, as evidenced by the growing distrust of the country's government elites towards the expert and academic communities.

While constructive dialogue previously contributed

to strategies, action plans, and policies that were inclusive and widely consulted on, these discussions now are confined to two separate echo chambers. The preparation of legislation that would label NGOs and think tanks as ‘political’ further marks a move towards delegitimising the work of civil society.

An important distinction between the two camps is necessary. On the one hand, government elites are promoting a more insular discussion influenced by populist group-think. On the other, the expert community has espoused a more enlargement-supporting and data-driven approach.

Meanwhile, a third group, the general public, presently remains detached from the enlargement discussion altogether. According to the latest opinion polls, only 47% of Slovaks support EU enlargement.¹ One explanation could be a lack of self-reflection on their own pre-accession experience 20 years ago, with the public taking for granted the subsequent improvements in living standards, economic growth, and incomes they have come to enjoy. Absent discussion, these tangible benefits have subsided from the public consciousness. Reduced support for enlargement could also be tied to disparities in accession outcomes for Slovaks. Indeed, Slovakia's enlargement spurred inflation that impacted everyone even as some societal groups were further let down by other unmet expectations of accession. In general, Slovakia has seen an increase in Euroscepticism over the past three to five years, with 48% perceiving the country's membership in the EU positively, below the EU average of 52%.² Given this trend, engaging the public more on enlargement without addressing unfounded, populist narratives could prove to be futile. Far from being evidence-informed, public discussions would likely be quickly hijacked and subsumed by emotionally driven narratives, such as fears that Slovakia will ‘lose sovereignty’ if qualified majority voting (QMV) is applied in foreign policy or accession processes or apprehension that the country will ‘lose funds’ from the vitally needed cohesion and common agricultural policy (CAP) revenue streams. Opponents could also stir up unease that Ukraine's accession will render Slovakia a net contributor to the EU budget, detrimentally impacting the country's finances.

¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/distrust-towards-the-eu-rising-among-slovaks/>

² <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23317907/eurobarometer-slovaks-see-eu-more-positively-than-czechs.html>

For example, the government has already assertively argued against extending QMV, making any movement towards compromise unlikely, including support for the recent Slovene-German non-paper on addressing some aspects of accession negotiations through QMV.³

Slovakia and the EU enlargement discourse (if a public discussion were to actually take place)

The expert community and democratic parties in opposition

While liberal and progressive opposition figures have emphasised the general benefits of enlargement to Slovakia and the EU, especially concerning pressing geopolitical challenges, they have acknowledged that economic considerations, be they positive or negative, have been neglected.

Nevertheless, experts from academia and civil society, in general, agree that enlargement will be economically beneficial, including by **enhancing the single market** and adding around 70 million new citizens to the free movement area. A larger single market would mean **more “economic power”** (more exporters) vis-à-vis third countries, but also facilitate **greater trade** between member states. It would also enable the **EU to better achieve strategic autonomy** and strengthen the EU's role as a global actor.

By accepting current (relevant) candidates, the EU would bolster its **geopolitical strength and normative power** (defined as the ability of the EU to augment its influence and the dissemination of its norms and values via third countries and international organisations).

That said, enlargement can also be expected to spur novel challenges. New neighbours will also entail changing borders and strategies (e.g. the EU's borders with Russia will be far larger than before). The **security dimension of the EU would also necessarily grow considerably**. For example, some experts have underscored that unless the EU's defence capabilities

are boosted, the EU's “reliance” on the US for security will only increase. Certain breakaway regions, such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia and Transnistria in Moldova, will further pose major challenges, not least the fact that around one-fifth of Ukraine's territory is currently occupied by Russia.

The enlargement conversation in Slovakia among the expert community and partially among the main opposition parties in parliament is premised on the notion that Slovakia is a small to medium-sized country, a net beneficiary of EU membership, and a nation deeply integrated into the EU (as part of the Eurozone, Schengen, enhanced cooperation via the European Public Prosecutor's Office, etc...). Slovakia also borders the biggest candidate country to its east, Ukraine, where war is raging (though Russia's aggression also brought new impetus to enlargement).

This echo chamber (which lacks executive power at the moment and espouses contrasting views to the current government) generally shares the following beliefs regarding **Slovakia's ideal position on EU enlargement**:

- ▶ They perceive EU enlargement as unavoidable and inevitable. Enlargement is key to ensuring EU strategic autonomy as well as stabilising the European geopolitical space. In their view, the EU should rather ask itself in this respect: What happens if EU enlargement does not happen? What will be the costs of non-enlargement?
- ▶ From their perspective, Slovakia could get on board with creating different versions of membership in the event that the differing views of member states lead to certain candidate countries being blocked. This does not mean, however, that Slovakia should resist deeper EU integration.
- ▶ The main institutional issue is the use of the veto. It is problematic that any single country can repeatedly and essentially endlessly block proposals from the European Commission and other member states. The previous Slovak government (prior to 30.9.2023) had become open to seeking creative models – such as limiting the frequency of the use of the veto (e.g. like the Belgian and German proposals).

³ Slovene-German Non-paper on a more efficient Enlargement Process – suggestions for technical amendments to the Enlargement Methodology (non-public)

- ▶ For Slovakia, an essential issue concerns how traditional policies related to the EU budget are to be reformed and whether Slovakia will continue to be able to effectively benefit from them. However, it is important to reform the implementation of EU funds with a view towards streamlining the use of centrally managed programmes and monitoring their contribution to Slovakia's productivity growth, competitiveness, and decarbonisation.
- ▶ The EU's enlargement policy needs to be prudently crafted to protect the rule of law and values (e.g. by creating new mechanisms that extend beyond existing instruments that suffer from limited effectiveness). Reforming the EU's value protection mechanism will be crucial for both acceding and existing member states.
- ▶ The extent to which Slovakia can benefit from a larger EU will be underscored by the degree to which it can engage in the reconstruction of Ukraine (in terms of investment and/or competitiveness), harness trade opportunities in the Western Balkans, and effectively leverage talent migration from new member states.
- ▶ Experts recognise that the one commissioner per member state principle is especially important for small member states, such as Slovakia, to ensure their desired representation in Brussels. However, the community is open to alternatives, such as rotating thematic portfolios every 2.5 years between countries and fairly dividing "strong" portfolios, commissioners, and deputy commissioners between big and small member states. Alternatively, they are open to a European Commission with a reduced number of commissioners on the rotating regional principle as anticipated in the Lisbon treaty.
- ▶ There is no support for reopening the treaties, but there is backing for EU internal reforms as the Union is an evolving entity that must reflect external and internal changes.
- ▶ Slovakia's national position on enlargement and EU internal reforms should be based on extensive horizontal and vertical public administration consultations with social partners and civil society.

Government elites

While there is no official document outlining the Slovak government's position on enlargement or EU internal reforms (e.g. the coalition's Program Declaration does not even once mention enlargement⁴), these views can be somewhat discerned through interviews.

- ▶ Slovakia wants to benefit from enlargement. This position is contractual towards Ukraine, where Bratislava sees an opportunity for the least developed regions of the country (i.e. Eastern Slovakia) to prosper from additional funding. A similar mutually beneficial arrangement was apparent when the less developed eastern Austrian regions (e.g. Burgenland) benefited from the Slovak, Czech, and Hungarian EU accessions in 2004. While the government has occasionally deployed anti-Ukrainian rhetoric at home, at the EU level it has been supportive and even urged the opening of negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova.⁵
- ▶ In the meantime, Slovakia is a founding member of the "Friends of the Western Balkans" initiative, launched by Austria in June 2023, stressing the need to strive towards the accession of the Western Balkan countries. Interestingly, while Slovakia has been a supporter of enlargement towards the Balkans for security and economic reasons, any benefits from the region joining the EU could prove far more elusive than from Ukrainian membership. Slovak officials, nonetheless, refer to cultural, ethnic, social, and historical ties as additional motivating factors.
- ▶ Though there is an awareness that EU internal reforms are needed, Slovak officials believe these should not be enacted through a reopening of the EU's foundational agreements and treaties, nor should they precede enlargement. A simultaneous process, however, is acceptable.
- ▶ The considerable dependence of Slovakia on EU funding for many years has contributed to palpable fears concerning the impact of Ukraine's accession on Slovakia's access to cohesion and agricultural funds. Though less pronounced, the process is also fuelling apprehension that an unprepared Slovakia could suddenly shift from being an EU budget net beneficiary to net contributor.

⁴ <https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/19777627/programove-vyhlasenie-vlady-SR.pdf/7c47ab5b-7532-4d6b-7a81-3c67a802993e>

⁵ <https://hnonline.sk/svet/96153005-jedenast-krajin-eu-ziada-otvorit-pristupove-rokovania-s-ukrajinou-a-moldavskom>

- ▶ The current Slovak government is firmly against eliminating the veto power and enhancing QMV (especially in the foreign policy domain). It equates relinquishing veto power with surrendering sovereignty, with the protection of sovereignty one of its strong campaign platitudes. This position goes hand in hand with discussions on relinquishing its commissioner position or other powers especially enjoyed by small member countries.
- ▶ Though the accession process is not ideal, it should not be further tweaked. The candidates should be evaluated based on merit, their completion of reforms, and their alignment with the *acquis communautaire*.

Recommendations

While there is no real ongoing dialogue between government elites and the expert community on enlargement, some recommendations can be advanced to ensure that Slovakia is adequately prepared for and a participant in the EU's inevitable internal reform and future enlargement processes.

- **Prepare for enlargement**

Slovakia should proceed with preparations (especially in Eastern Slovakia) for the absorption of Ukraine into the EU and related opportunities for Slovakia. For Austria, amid the accession of Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary, such preparations took place beginning with the fall of the Berlin Wall (15 years). It may take a similar timeframe for Ukraine to join the EU; it is, therefore, necessary to already start preparing today.

Note on methodology

This Policy Brief was drafted based on 12 interviews conducted between December 2023 and May 2024. The interviewees included former and current state officials, career diplomats, representatives of the public administration, civil society members, and academic experts.

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- **Support Ukraine's victory**

Any plans for connectivity, economic growth, foreign investment, or the implementation of cross-border projects will be dashed if Ukraine loses. Consequently, support for Ukraine's victory is in Slovakia's vital interests. "If Russia wins in Ukraine, it will mean the end of any EU enlargement."

- **Strengthen the economic development and enlargement nexus narrative**

It is necessary to invest in strengthening the narrative linking the reconstruction of Ukraine and its EU membership with the development of Slovakia, especially its less developed eastern regions.

- **Prioritise Ukraine's EU membership**

Ukraine should be a priority for Slovak diplomacy in advocating for EU integration - its potential economic benefits for Slovakia far exceed those that Western Balkan membership in the EU can bring (e.g. the combined GDP of all six Western Balkan countries – including much larger Serbia – equals the GDP of Slovakia).

- **Shift towards strategic funds**

Slovakia's priority in the medium term should be to gradually move from a reliance on cohesion spending to EU strategic funds. Inspiration can be drawn from the Baltic countries, which have already taken such pre-emptive measures. Some areas to focus on include the green transformation, the digital agenda, and AI.