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Slovakia and the turnout conundrum: Why don't Slovaks vote in European Parliament elections?

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Slovakia and the turnout conundrum: Why don't Slovaks vote in European Parliament elections?

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Low turnout at European Parliament (EP) elections is common in new member states, but the exceptionally low turnouts in Slovakia suggest that the reasons for this may be complex. The EP elections there do not have all the classic characteristics of 'second order' elections, and there is little evidence to support domestic explanations highlighting the need for more publicity for European Union (EU) affairs. Based on survey data, PADEMIA members Ol'ga Gyárfášová and Karen Henderson argue that the fuzziness of party and voter attitudes on EU issues, together with an inward-looking agenda focusing on economic advantages, help depress turnout and do not bode well for the future.

The Slovak Republic has produced the lowest turnout in every European Parliament election since it joined the European Union. With 13% turnout in the 2014 EP elections the country beat its own record for the lowest national turnout ever in an EP election, the 17% it achieved shortly after joining the EU in 2004. Understanding the reason for this could have major implications for understanding public engagement with EU affairs as a whole. It has been variously suggested that turnout is reduced by hostility to the EU, satisfaction with the EU, low levels of party loyalty or lack of information. EP election turnout in post-communist countries is low as a whole (see Figure 1), and although low levels of political trust in general seem to lower turnout, in newer democracies EU institutions are frequently regarded as more trustworthy than domestic ones. In short, simplistic solutions will not suffice when trying to explain the Slovak turnout conundrum.



Neither 'second order election' theory nor reasons commonly discussed in Slovakia explain low turnout satisfactorily



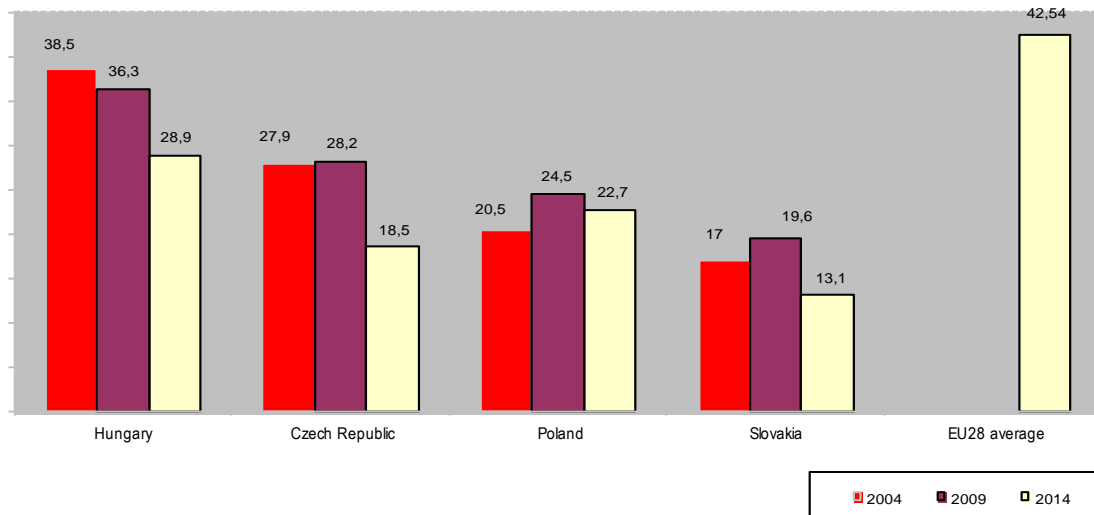
Low turnout is a typical feature of 'second order elections' – those that the public considers less important than national parliamentary or presidential elections. However, EP elections in Slovakia do not show two other common features of second order elections. Ruling parties do not do worse than the opposition, and smaller, more radical parties do not perform particularly well.

Slovak explanations for their low turnout are also not entirely convincing. It is pointed out that the EP elections always take place a couple of months after the two-round presidential elections, but voter fatigue did not affect the regional elections held in November 2014. It is also argued that the EP elections are inadequately publicised: members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are criticised for failing to publicise their work, and political parties are accused of investing too little effort in the campaign because, unlike in domestic elections, the percentage vote they gain does not translate into revenue via state funding. This is a popular argument with Slovaks involved in EU affairs since it suggests that more resources need to be devoted to informing citizens about the work of the European Union. The

difficulty with this explanation, however, is that there is no hard evidence that the EP election campaign in Slovakia is less prominent than in many countries with higher turnout, and party programmes increasingly focus on

EU-centred rather than domestic policy discussions. *Eurobarometer* surveys also suggest that Slovaks are quite well-informed about the EU.

Figure 1. EP elections - turnout in the Visegrad Four countries (2004, 2009, and 2014)



Source: www.elections2009-results.eu; www.result-election2014.eu

Another explanation offered is that 13 seats in a 751-member parliament give Slovakia such a small voice that the elections are unimportant. This argument is unconvincing since nine member states have fewer seats, yet always manage higher election turnouts than Slovakia, and 17 states have more voters per MEP than Slovakia does, so that their citizens' voices have less weight than that of Slovaks. In addition, when *Eurobarometer* surveys ask Slovaks if they feel their voice counts in the EU, their replies are similar to the EU average.

A final explanation is that failure to vote may be linked to satisfaction with the EU. The idea that Slovaks are pleased to be EU citizens is plausible. The country had a particularly difficult political trajectory preparing for entry and all parties supported membership in the accession referendum. Slovakia has since received massive funding from the EU, receiving approximately three times more

than they contribute to the EU budget, with over three-quarters of public investment dependent on EU funds. Politicians have frequently cited 'EU funds' or 'structural funds' as the source of finance for any increased public expenditure they propose, particularly in election manifestos.



Voters are unclear about the differences in party stances on EU issues



Based on the EES data we have explored other explanatory factors for low turnout. When we look at public awareness about parties' position on the EU, in Slovakia this has increased significantly, but parties' stances are perceived as weakly differentiated. European Parliament elections appear to have EU content, but not to be an EU contest. The

positions of parties on many issues are *fuzzy both in reality and in the perception of voters*. We argue that this contributes to the Slovak failure to engage with EU issues and elections. This may be attributable to unrealistic expectations of the benefits that can be expected from membership.



Emphasis on the economic advantages of EU membership is more effective than eurosceptic messages, but how long will this last?



A closer look at the European Election Studies (EES) data also shows other problematic features of Slovak attitudes to the EU. Voters and parties' perceived attitudes to the EU do not seem to match, and the same 'fuzziness' exists when we look at parties' and voters' views on some key EU issues and find that that they often hold completely contradictory and incompatible views. Parties who dislike economic redistribution and state intervention in the economy support the EU's cohesion funds, and voters who are very strongly in favour of the right of EU citizens to live and work in any member state feel

very negative about immigrants from other member states coming to Slovakia.

Where the EU agenda was more successfully used as a tool for voter mobilization, it was by those parties which managed to instrumentalize the EU as a guarantee of improved economic conditions in Slovakia; eurosceptic messages were less effective. The utilitarian model of how the EU is perceived – 'it's the economy, stupid!' – seems to have the greatest explanatory power. The EU is regarded primarily as providing solutions for domestic economic problems while other aspects of European integration appear less salient. What is arguable, however, is whether the instrumental and inward-looking attitude of Slovakia and other new member states towards membership actually endangers the EU's functioning long-term. Such an instrumental attitude to EU membership may ultimately prove more problematic than low electoral participation.

The inappropriate Central and Eastern Europe attitudes towards the refugee crisis should not, perhaps, have come as such a surprise. The detachment of many member states from the solidaristic principles on which the EU functions may be linked to the disinterest in participating in elections.

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