

## **Post-EU Referendum Slovakia Roundtable**

**Sponsored by *Friends of Slovakia (FOS)* and the *Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA)***

### **Meeting Report**

**May 22, 2003**

#### **Summary**

On May 22, 2003, Slovakia's Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Jan Figel, and Vladimir Bilcik, Analyst of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA), addressed a roundtable sponsored by Friends of Slovakia (FOS) and the SFPA. The focus of the meeting was the outcome of Slovakia's May 16-17 European Union (EU) referendum. The discussion emphasized Slovakia's role both in EU policymaking towards its new eastern neighbors and in strengthening the transatlantic partnership. The speakers stressed the importance of capitalizing on the current positive momentum in Slovakia to complete necessary reforms domestically and with respect to foreign policy. The meeting was co-chaired by CSIS Eastern Europe Project Director Janusz Bugajski and Former U.S. Ambassador to Slovakia Theodore Russell.

#### **Discussion**

**Slovakia's Role in Bridging the Transatlantic Rift.** Slovakia is one of several Central European states facing complex challenges in the post-Iraq, mid-referenda Europe. Now that Slovakia has secured public support for its 2004 EU accession bid, the country has an opportunity to take a lead role in bridging the gap that has opened between the United States and Europe since the Iraq crisis. While some have argued that the Central European countries are in an uncomfortable position, it is more accurate that all of Europe is in an uncomfortable transition, experiencing uncertainty due to cool transatlantic relations and growing pains associated with the enlargement process. In developing a new framework for the dialogue between Europe and the United States, it must be understood that the majority of EU accession states seek ways to improve relations with both sides of the Atlantic rather than choosing to favor one side over the other. While the enlargement process *does* demand that Slovakia and its accession neighbors focus more on Europe, it *does not* inherently signify the weakening of bilateral ties with the United States. Additionally, U.S. policymakers, with a vested interest in Slovakia, must push their cause in order to successfully reinforce the U.S.-Slovak bilateral relationship, especially in relation to trade.

**Assessing the Post-Referendum Environment.** The first five months of 2003 were spent securing the political support necessary for achieving positive referendum results in Slovakia, and now the accession campaign must shift its focus toward more practical issues. Slovakia must take advantage of the bipartisan majority created by the referendum and the momentum that consensus produces. The referendum vote symbolizes Slovakia's commitment to democracy, and many more symbolic transitions will soon take place including the EU Integration Committee's transition into the EU Affairs Committee. Slovakia will only achieve a smooth path into the European Union if the momentum is carried past the symbolic transitions and through the completion of necessary reforms. These include the tax system, pension and education reforms, along with the decentralization of government institutions coupled with matching fiscal decentralization. Additionally, efforts to fight corruption will be intensified to promote transparency. Slovakia's ability to achieve EU integration will also depend upon the government's ability to successfully translate what was once foreign policy into its domestic policy.

**Formulating the “Eastern Dimension”.** Starting in 2004 the EU will gain several new neighbors to the east including Belarus and Ukraine. This presents Slovakia and other EU accession states with dynamic economic, political and social challenges. With the Schengen border due to shift east, a new European border will threaten the livelihood of countries such as Ukraine, which is already far behind Slovakia in terms of economic and infrastructure development. Slovakia has historic and economic ties to Ukraine, and should therefore play a key role in planning how the EU can successfully engage with its new neighbors. A new EU Eastern Policy must accept each neighbor as equal while leaving room for tailor-made, individualized implementation strategies. Possible policies include an adaptation assistance program, offering economic and other support in exchange for targeted reforms in the neighbor state; internal security measures including visa regulations, such as for the Russian oblast Kaliningrad; transport and infrastructure projects aimed at linking the EU and neighbor states with dependable roads and rail lines; and a so-called social dialogue creating civil society links between the EU and its neighbors.

**Addressing Social Concerns: The Roma Issue.** The issue of the Roma people has been much more prominent in the EU accession states of Central Europe than in current EU member states, thus presenting EU policymakers with a new challenge. In most cases Roma have lived outside of the societal structures generally accepted in Slovakia and other countries, making them a minority group that is both conspicuous and often difficult to engage with according to traditional social norms and regulations. Roma have been the target of discrimination and Slovakia will need to work hard to improve relations with the Roma and other minority groups in order to meet EU requirements for equality and fair treatment.

**Educating “Jozef Novak”.** Governments within all of the EU candidate countries have experienced difficulty in explaining both the benefits and risks of enlargement to the average citizen. Leaders of Slovakia point out that the EU is the only course for the future, and that the biggest risk is the lack of knowledge among the public. Only with an aggressive plan to disseminate information, will the government ensure that the country’s infrastructure will be ready to accept the funds that will come after the accession process is complete.

### **Conclusion**

Remarkable progress has been achieved in Slovakia, culminating in the country’s successful political bid to join the EU in 2004. While Brussels and the majority of Slovaks have approved this path, there is a disconnect between political maneuvering and the pragmatic transitions that are necessary for Slovakia’s successful integration with the greater European community. The nation has one year to overcome the difficult economic and social hurdles that lie on the path to accession, and policymakers must not only continue to harness the current political momentum, but also ensure that new policies are both implemented and understood by the citizens. Finally, Slovakia’s foreign policy must incorporate the new realities of EU membership while leaving room for the enhancement of Slovakia’s relationship with the United States, as the coupling of these agendas will bring Slovakia security and successful economic and social development in the future.