

*Center for European Studies Central and Eastern Europe  
Working Paper Series 68 (February 2010)*

**Vulnerabilities, Accession Hangovers and the  
Presidency Role: Explaining New EU Member States’  
Choices for Europe**

by

**Tim Haughton**

Centre for Russian and East European Studies

University of Birmingham

Birmingham, B15 2TT

United Kingdom

Tel: +44 121 414 6360

Fax: +44 121 414 3423

[t.j.haughton@bham.ac.uk](mailto:t.j.haughton@bham.ac.uk)

**Abstract**

What shapes a European Union member state’s preferences and why do some states seem much more enthusiastic about further integration in some policy areas than others? This paper examines the factors which shape the preferences of three of the 2004 entrants: Slovakia, Slovenia and the Czech Republic. Based on a detailed study of government and party documents complemented by a series of 40 semi-structured interviews, I argue that whilst there is merit in many of the explanations used to explain national preference formation in the longer-established member states, the key to preference formation lies in vulnerabilities and perceived weakness.

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

What shapes an EU member state's choices for Europe and why do some states seem much more enthusiastic about further integration in some policy areas than others? Moreover, to what extent is the process of national preference formation of the new member states which entered the European Union in 2004/7 different from longer-standing members? This paper seeks to address these questions by focusing on three new member states, Slovakia, Slovenia and the Czech Republic during their first five years of EU membership.

Examining the shaping of European preferences of new member states merits scholarly attention for five reasons. Firstly, the new member states have brought with them their own sets of preferences, but much of the existing scholarly literature dealing with the shaping of preferences, however, focuses almost exclusively on Western Europe (e.g. Archer and Nugent 2006; Aspinwall 2002, 2007; Dimitrakopoulos and Kassim 2004; Stone Sweet and Sandholtz 1997). What accounts have been published so far have tended to sketch out research agendas rather than provide detailed empirically-based studies of the new member states (e.g. Copsy and Haughton 2009). By examining and seeking to elucidate preference formation in three new EU Member States this working paper, therefore, seeks to help fill a gap in the literature, and contributes to making comparative European politics truly pan-European.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-000-22-2786) for funding my research and to all those officials and politicians who agreed to be interviewed on or off the record. In addition, I would like to thank Laurence Cooley, Nathaniel Copsy, Grzegorz Ekiert, Seán Hanley, Sabina Kajně, Tereza Novotná and audiences at Brown University's Watson Institute, the Central European University, Comenius University, Harvard University's Center for European Studies, the Institute for International Relations in Prague, the University of Osnabrück, UCL's School of Slavonic and East European Studies and the UACES, CREES, BASEES and APSA annual conferences for their comments on various iterations of this paper.

Secondly, most scholarly discussion of the 2004/7 entrants has been focused on accession, conditionality and post-accession conditionality (e.g. Epstein and Sedelmeier 2009; Falkner et al. 2008; Jacoby 2006; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Vachudova 2005, 2009), but the reality of membership also merits a shift in focus towards the type of member states they have become and why they behave in the way in which they do. Thirdly, examining the process of national preference formation illuminates the dynamics of domestic politics, highlighting the power and influence of societal groupings, state capacity, and the legacies of communism, the post-communist transition and the accession process. Fourthly, given the fact that member states are involved in all levels of decision-making in the EU, explaining how they reach their preferences provides pointers for the future dynamics of the EU. Fifthly, exploring national preference formation feeds into larger debates about the nature of the European Union and the relative merits of different explanatory frameworks (e.g. Moravcsik 1999; Pollack 2006; Stone Sweet and Sandholtz 1997). But also undertaking such an exercise can also contribute to wider and deeper scholarly enquiries into the nature of preference formation (e.g. Checkel 2005; Druckman 2004) and why states choose to pool sovereignty and integrate (or not) into international organizations such as the EU (e.g. Milward 1992; Moravcsik 1999).

This paper proceeds as follows. After a brief overview of the merits of existing frameworks to explain national preference formation I focus on preference formation in the three new member states in a number of different policy areas associated with issues related to liberalization, harmonization, distribution of funds, external relations and the completion of integration. Although I find evidence indicating some of the existing explanatory frameworks such as size, ideology, institutional frameworks, the power of big business and dependency play a role in the process of national preference formation, I also argue that the processes of accession

and transition as well as the holding of the EU presidency matter. Nevertheless, in the final part of the paper I argue the key to understanding national preference formation lies in vulnerabilities and perceived weakness.

### **Existing Scholarly Frameworks**

The literature seeking to explain national preferences i.e. the ‘fundamental motivations underlying support or opposition’ to further integration both in general and in specific policy areas (Moravcsik 1999:5) highlights a number of potential explanations of why states make the choices they do including unique historical experiences (Bulmer and Paterson 1987; George 1998); size (Archer and Nugent 2006); public opinion (Nguyen 2008); ideology (Aspinwall 2002); societal interests (Moravcsik 1999) and dependency, both trade and EU-funds dependency (Stone Sweet and Sandholtz 1997; Aspinwall 2007).

Neither history, size nor public opinion are especially fruitful frameworks to explain national preference formation. History clearly matters, for example, in the British and German cases, but it is more of a *master/meta* explanation or backdrop than the basis for a testable hypothesis. Indeed, what matters about a country’s history in terms of its European choices lies more in the resultant sense of vulnerability (or lack of) than in history *per se*. Moreover, although we might assume the smaller a state the more enthusiastic they are to have powerful common institutions and cede sovereignty while struggling to retain the principle of equality (Antola 2002), an alternative logic suggests that large states might actually prefer stronger institutions as it allows them to implement their visions and control smaller states. In addition, although public opinion is often seen to shape the broad parameters of policy, restricting politicians’ room for

manoeuvre and has been increasing in significance in European politics in recent times (Hooghe and Marks 2009:5), European themes remain marginal both in older member states and indeed in the three case studies under consideration in this paper (Haughton and Rybář 2009; Krašovec and Lajh 2009; Hloušek and Pšeja 2009). Nonetheless, all three of these frameworks should not be completely discarded. The history of accession and transition, the lack of clout at the European level and the largely permissive consensus of public opinion play a supporting role in the European choices of Slovakia, Slovenia and the Czech Republic.

Other explanatory frameworks are more fruitful furrows to plough. Aspinwall (2002:105) argued that much of the scholarly literature ‘presumes that governments represent some conception of the national interest in an environment free of ideological competition’, but he maintained that parties see European integration through an ideological prism, and respond to it on that basis. Aspinwall’s research (2002, 2007) provides extensive empirical evidence to suggest that ideology matters for preference formation in the EU. Nonetheless, the examination of older member states highlights not the change but the continuity of policy despite governments of different ideological colors holding power (Paterson 2006; Wall 2008).

A potential explanation for the continuity of policy can be found in Moravcsik’s (1999) liberal intergovernmentalism framework in which domestic economic lobbying organizations, especially big business, are central to the process of national preference formation and help explain member state positions during the deliberations leading to major treaties such as the Single European Act. The power of big business is the subject of much discussion and speculation across post-communist Europe thanks to the sometimes murky interactions between parties, money and patronage (e.g. Grzymała-Busse 2006; O’Dwyer 2006). Three qualifiers, however, need to be made. Firstly, business in Central and Eastern Europe tends to focus less on

the macro level European issues such as the Lisbon Treaty, euro entry and enlargement and much more on the more prosaic, but highly significant issue of EU funds. Secondly, the companies which do focus on more macro level issues are often larger companies, frequently foreign direct investors who are keen to remove barriers to cross-border trade, but are simultaneously keen to see the government of the countries where their factories are located maintain their comparative advantage in fields such as fiscal policy. Thirdly, although critics of big business claim the corporate lobby's power is clear for all to see in Brussels<sup>2</sup>, the power of business, of both FDI and domestic origination, is intimately linked to deeper dependencies tied to their country's underlying economic structure and trade patterns (Stone Sweet and Sandholtz 1997). Small, trade dependent countries need to carve out niches to remain appealing which tend to involve integration and involvement in supranational bodies whilst maintaining some distinctive sources of appeal such as lower rates of tax.

Moreover, liberal intergovernmentalists tend to overlook domestic institutional arrangements (Dimitrakopoulos and Kassim 2004; Closa 2004), sometimes seeing institutions as little more than neutral transmission belts. Although institutional structures are generally more important in helping shape transient bargaining positions than in determining underlying preferences, institutional frameworks do play some role in the aggregation, coordination and translation of preferences especially during the preparations for an EU Presidency and in policy areas where politicians do not express strong preferences.

### **Choice of Countries, Policy Areas and Methodological Tools**

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<sup>2</sup> EUobserver.com, February 13, 2009

The countries of study have been chosen for three reasons. Firstly, the cases provide an excellent basis for examining the contending explanatory frameworks. Given that governments of very different ideological hues have held the reins of power in all three states under consideration, for example, Aspinwall's work would predict some significant changes in European choices. In terms of the power of societal interests Slovenia's history of deliberative democracy, very high rates of union membership, comprehensive collective bargaining arrangements and well-developed institutionalized coordination have all ensured organized labor is much more powerful at the domestic level. But does this feed through to Slovenia's European choices? Secondly, both Slovenia and the Czech Republic have held the presidency of the European Council (the first half of 2008 and 2009 respectively). Although I acknowledge that holding the presidency is in many respects rather unrepresentative, it is also the case that an impending presidency throws a lot of issues into sharper relief than normal. Thirdly, whilst the passing of the Lisbon Treaty (and discussions surrounding the Constitutional Treaty) was rather uneventful in Slovenia, it was more problematic in Slovakia and the ratification of Lisbon proved to be a long-drawn out affair in the Czech Republic.

The analysis focuses on three economic policy areas (tax harmonization, liberalization associated with the Services Directive and the Laval/Viking rulings, and the allocation of EU funds), external policy (further enlargement), institutional reform (Lisbon/Constitutional Treaties) and the completion of integration (euro and Schengen entry). The choice of policy areas was shaped by a number of considerations. Firstly, although recognizing these are not a complete list of all potential policy areas they have been amongst the most prominent in the 2004-9 period not just for the three countries but also for the EU as a whole. Secondly, both Moravcsik and Aspinwall acknowledged that ideology and the power of big business is likely to

be more significant in some policy areas than others, hence we might expect in all three cases that whilst a new government's ideological preferences might change a state's position on socio-economic policy areas it might not impact on other policy areas. Thirdly, the Lisbon Treaty and its forerunners merit attention as numerous scholars have distinguished between two types of process: intergovernmental conferences which tend to be more closed and the more routine bargaining where interest groups are more active participants (Forster 1998; Menon and Kassim 1997). Moreover, the Lisbon Treaty and its forerunners provoked responses not just to the provisions, but also stimulated wider discussion and debate across the EU about the degree, extent and purpose of further integration. Fourthly, although May 2004 marked Slovenia's, Slovakia's and the Czech Republic's entry into the EU, all three states were still treaty-bound to complete their integration into Schengen and the eurozone. Whilst Slovenia joined the euro in 2007 and Slovakia two years later the Czech Republic remained outside.

Drawing on declarations and position papers produced by the respective governments, ministries and major political parties since May 2004, in addition to a number of macroeconomic indicators and a close reading of leading newspapers and the websites of key business and union groupings complemented by an extensive series of semi-structured interviews with current and former government ministers, civil servants and representatives of interest groups conducted in Prague, Ljubljana, Bratislava and London this paper seeks to provide an overview of the preferences of the three states and provides explanation of what shaped the choices and the changes.

## **Explaining the Choices for Europe**



Table 1 provides an overview of the stances of the three states during the first five years of membership. Although admittedly clarity has been achieved at the expense in some places of nuanced differentiation, two things are immediately obvious. Firstly, the stances of the three countries are similar in most areas with the exception of the Lisbon/Constitutional Treaties and euro entry where the Czech position is very different to the other two cases. Secondly, the stances of the member states are remarkably stable. The remainder of this section will examine these policy areas in more detail and highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the existing frameworks.

Insert table 1 about here

### *Economic preferences*

If ideology holds the key to national preference formation then we would expect to see changes in the stances of all three countries during the 2004-9 period, especially in socio-economic policy given the salience of those areas in each of the countries' domestic politics in the 2004-9 period (Haughton and Rybář 2009; Krašovec and Lajh 2009; Hloušek and Pšeja 2009). All of them have witnessed the swing of the ideological pendulum at elections time (2004 and 2008 in Slovenia; 2006 in Slovakia and the Czech Republic), but yet what is striking is not the change, but the stability of preferences. Despite governments of different ideological hues all have taken a broadly pro-liberalization line on internal market matters, have opposed tax harmonization and have been supportive of distributive politics encapsulated in the discussion surrounding the budget. That is not to suggest that ideological concerns have been absent in

shaping European stances. The Prague Declaration signed in May 2008 with the UK, Sweden, Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands and Germany calling for the reduction of administrative burdens on business by 2012 and the 2009 presidency motto, 'Europe without Barriers', for instance, were both rooted in the ideological view of the then centre-right government in the Czech Republic. Moreover, for ideological reasons the then Slovak Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda was keen to stress he was on the side of the liberalizers when the Bolkenstein directive was raised at the European Council in March 2005.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, on issues such as the Working Times Directive Slovene centre-right politicians have even seen the EU as a corrective against the domestic left.<sup>4</sup> When the Laval and Viking cases came before the European Court of Justice in early 2007 although the Czechs placed themselves on the free movement of services side of the debate, it was striking that neither Slovakia nor Slovenia expressed strong views (Lindstrom 2008). This was linked to impact to which we will return to below.

Insert table 2 about here

Some of the stances are relatively easy to explain. As net recipients (see table 2) and relatively poor states distributive politics are central to the shaping of policy. Although different statistical measures can greatly alter the contributor/recipient ranking of states, all three are net recipients

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<sup>3</sup> Le Monde, March 11, 2005

<sup>4</sup> Author's interview with Anton Kokalj, Chairman of the Slovene Parliament's Committee on European Affairs 2004-8, Ljubljana, April 6, 2009

on a number of measures.<sup>5</sup> Striking a deal and ensuring the continued flow of funds to Slovakia, for example, was the prime motivation of premier Dzurinda in the run-up to the December 2005 European Council. Moreover, even the xenophobic Slovak National Party has shown its enthusiasm for the flow of EU money to Slovakia (Haughton and Rybář 2009); a sentiment not absent amongst other parties and political actors in the three cases for whom money can trump ideological reservations and indeed a finding not that uncommon in some of the older member states.

A closer examination, however, suggests the importance of powerful societal interests. Two examples are illustrative. Firstly, although even under the self-declared centre-right pro-market government of Mirek Topolánek during the debates surrounding energy liberalization the Czech Republic expressed some strong opposition to complete unbundling. The stance of the Czech government was clearly influenced by the power of the Czech energy giant ČEZ (the second largest company in the country) which has been active in pushing its European agenda both publicly and behind closed doors<sup>6</sup>, although this was disputed by civil servants in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs and the Foreign Ministry<sup>7</sup>. Secondly, the Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico's decision to continue his predecessor's opposition to tax

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<sup>5</sup> For alternative measures see, for example, <http://www.openeurope.org.uk/research/budget07.pdf> , <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/8036097.stm#start> and [http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/european\\_community\\_finances\\_2009.pdf](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/european_community_finances_2009.pdf) . [Both accessed December 8, 2009].

<sup>6</sup> See the dedicated *Evropská agenda* section of the company's website: <http://www.cez.cz/cs/o-spolecnosti/evropska-agenda.html> [accessed on October 10, 2008]. The close links between Topolánek and ČEZ chairman Martin Roman were also clear during the so-called Tuscany affair in the summer of 2009 when it was discovered the two men (along with other businessmen and politicians) were on vacation together in Tuscany. See *Lidové noviny*, August 4, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Interviews conducted by the author in Prague June 9-30, 2008

harmonization - after some initial signals to the contrary - was largely a response to pressure from powerful business interests (Gould 2009). Crucially here, however, the pressure was largely exercised by the foreign business lobby in Slovakia. The country had benefitted from significant FDI, especially in the automotive industry, which pushed hard for euro entry, but simultaneously sought to put a brake on any moves towards tax harmonization. Indeed, opposition to tax harmonization in all three cases is not rooted in ideology. It has been a constant refrain thanks to the power of the business lobby tied to a deeper sense of vulnerabilities. The key here is the conditional importance of business: its power lies in the fact that it can play on and articulate the underlying economic vulnerabilities.

In contrast to the business lobby, the other side of industry, however, appeared weak. Most union activity focused attention on issues of domestic politics, illustrated by the demonstrations versus the fiscal reforms in Slovenia in 2005; the change to the Labor Code in Slovakia in 2007; and the widespread strikes in the Czech Republic in June 2008. By their own admission leading union officials in the Czech Republic and Slovakia acknowledged their influence on European policy was very limited even under governments of the centre-left traditionally more sympathetic to the position of organized labor.<sup>8</sup> Even in Slovenia where there is general widespread belief that unions are much stronger and which witnessed large scale demonstrations in 2005 over proposed neoliberal reforms and two years later over a rise in inflation following euro accession in 2007, civil servants, politicians and union officials were

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<sup>8</sup> Author's interviews with Zdeněk Málek, Deputy Chairman, ČMKOS and Hana Málková, Head of the European Integration Team, ČMKOS both in Prague June 27, 2008, and Evgen Škultety, Vice President KOZ, Bratislava, February 16, 2009.

unable to provide evidence of clear linkages between union pressure and stances taken at the European level when pressed during interviews in Ljubljana.

### *Enlargement*

All three states have been consistently supportive of enlargement although some qualifiers need to be made. Contrary to expectations that ideology does not have much role in shaping stances on external policy, it does explain the position of the Christian Democrats in all three countries. They have consistently expressed strong doubts or reservations about Turkish accession seeing the EU as a ‘Christian club’, but crucially whilst these parties have been in government and Cyril Svoboda was even Czech Foreign Minister for the first two years of Czech membership, the countries’ line remained positive about the possibility of Turkish entry (providing the accession criteria are met) albeit recognizing this will take years, if not decades. Ideology also partially explains the position of the Czech centre right government under Topolánek. In line with the position of British Conservatives, President Klaus and likeminded politicians in the Civic Democratic Party (ODS)<sup>9</sup> have advocated enlargement to include Turkey, Ukraine and even Morocco and Kazakhstan (Hanley 2008) in part because they believe that expanding complicates and thereby hinders deepening.

More broadly, all three countries have supported enlargement to the Western Balkans, albeit now keener to stress the importance of meeting the criteria in part due to the experience of post-accession Romania and Bulgaria. Whilst geographical proximity and historical ties may

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<sup>9</sup> Klaus left ODS in December 2008

have some explanatory power the extensive trading links, especially in the case of Slovenia, are central to enlargement policy.<sup>10</sup> It explains why Slovenia put the Western Balkans top of its list of priorities for its presidency of the Council and invested in this theme much time and effort during its six months at the EU helm (Kajnc 2009). Nonetheless, the decision to block Croatia's accession negotiations in December 2008 highlighted a deeper set of motivations linked to vulnerability (discussed below).

### *Institutional Preferences*

In terms of the debates surrounding the Constitutional/Lisbon treaties ideology played some role in the shaping of preferences, although the impact was largely restricted to the right of the spectrum where there was discernible catholic conservative resistance to 'liberal' Europe's attitude to moral questions. In the case of the Christian Democratic Movement in Slovakia, for instance, the party called in its 2004 European Parliament election manifesto for a national veto in a whole range of issues, including asylum, immigration, and on cultural and ethical issues (KDH 2004) and opposed the Lisbon Treaty's Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The debates surrounding the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty highlight the importance of different factors in the three cases. In Slovakia, for instance, three findings merit mention. Firstly, following the 2003-4 Intergovernmental Conference when Slovak politicians invested great effort in drawing up a detailed position on a range of policy areas only to discover that thanks to a distinct lack of clout at the EU level, hardly any of them made their way into the final

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<sup>10</sup> Croatia is the third most important destination for Slovene exports.

text. Rather than staying on the field expending energy in a series of fruitless runs Slovak politicians chose to retreat to the bench and conserve energy for other EU games (Haughton and Bilčík 2010). Indeed, politicians left the major role of preparing Slovakia's priorities for EU institutional reform from the Convention to the Lisbon Treaty in the hands of civil servants at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the country's mission and the Permanent Representation to the EU.

Secondly, the long-drawn out battles surrounding the ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty demonstrate not the salience of European themes to Slovak politicians or strongly held convictions as to the provisions of the treaty, but rather the instrumentalization of European themes for domestic political benefit (Haughton and Rybář 2009). Indeed, politicians from across the political spectrum saw Lisbon as a compromise.<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, although Fico expressed some views on the future of Europe at the Berlin summit in March 2007 and welcomed the European Council's decision in June 2007 to launch a new intergovernmental conference, Fico's main concern was not the future institutional architecture of Europe, but Slovakia's goal of entry into the eurozone in 2009.

In the Czech Republic there were stark differences across the political spectrum. Support for the treaty amongst the Social Democrats such as party leader Jiří Paroubek was rooted in a social democratic belief in cooperation.<sup>12</sup> In addition to strong criticisms from the communists, a hard core of ODS politicians expressed strong ideologically-rooted criticisms of the Lisbon

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<sup>11</sup> For example the author's interviews with Zdenka Kramplová, Minister for Agriculture 2007-8, Bratislava, February 18, 2009; Pál Csáky, Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs 2002-2006 and Chairman Party of the Hungarian Coalition 2007- , Bratislava, February 16, 2009; and Miroslav Lajčák, Slovak Foreign Minister, 2009-, London, June 6, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Paroubek (2008b).

Treaty, most notably the party's Senators who referred the document twice to the Czech Constitutional Court. Moreover, President Klaus could not contain his glee when the Irish voted 'no' in June 2008 and took great pleasure in being a thorn in the EU's side even after the Irish voted yes when asked for the second time in October 2009. Nonetheless, the government remained committed to passing the treaty. Apart from personal tensions between Klaus and Prime Minister Topolánek, this commitment was linked to two factors. Firstly, the vast majority of politicians in ODS are much more pragmatic than ideological and secondly, there was a clear presidency effect (discussed below). The presidency effect also helps explain Slovenia's position as the country was in the EU chair in the first half of 2008.

### **Completion of integration**

As the discussion on Slovakia above illustrates, central to the thrust of policy in the first five years of membership was the completion of integration (i.e. Schengen and euro entry) and the flow of EU funds. Three factors drove this policy. Firstly, it was important for valence issues in domestic Slovak politics. Schengen and euro entry were sold to the electorate as evidence of the government's competence and ability to achieve European goals.<sup>13</sup> Secondly, it indicates the power of business interests. Fico publicly raised some questions over the date of entry when he took office that led to a predictable rush out of Slovak crowns and considerable pressure was exerted on the Prime Minister from the large multinational investors in Slovakia to stick to the goal of 2009 entry. Fico stuck with the decision to aim for 2009 entry despite rumblings of

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Robert Fico (2007a , 2007b); KDH (2006); ES-HZDS (2006); SDKÚ-DS (2006); Smer-SD (2006); SMK (2006) SNS (2006);



discontent within his own party. Thirdly, this pressure of business, however, is better understood within the framework of vulnerability. Slovakia under Fico joined the euro in part because of the ‘threat of capital flight and devaluation’ (Gould 2009:3).

The completion of integration agenda was perhaps most significant in the Slovak case. The explanation for this may lie with Slovakia’s accession trajectory. Having not been invited to begin accession negotiations at the Luxembourg European Council in 1997 due to a failure to meet the Copenhagen political criterion much of the subsequent decade was spent catching up with its neighbours and demonstrating the country was a *good* European. To some extent this can be seen as a sort of entrapment - a twist on Schimmelfennig’s (2001) rhetorical entrapment during accession - whereby states claimed they were good Europeans, so they went along with some integration in some areas even if not that keen. Indeed, accession can be seen as a period of preference sublimation. With membership achieved those states with the more problematic accessions gradually begin to feel more comfortable being awkward and sticking out their necks declaring preferences which they know will not appeal to all.

Although completion of integration was also important to Slovenes the main priority for Slovenia in the first few years of membership was preparations for the forthcoming EU presidency (see below). In the Czech case, in contrast, whilst Schengen entry was also important there was a much more equivocal position on euro entry. Ideology can feed into the explanation of why there is difference between the stance of the centre-right Topolánek government and the position of the Social Democrats, but much of this is linked to vulnerabilities. Indeed, the salience of the euro to Czech exporters was not lost on Social Democrat leader and former Prime Minister Jiří Paroubek who feared the impact of staying outside the eurozone. He advocated euro entry as soon as possible, ‘in the name of keeping the stability and prosperity of Czech industry

and therefore for the entire country'.<sup>14</sup> Paroubek's sentiments echoed concerns expressed by large firms in the Czech Republic which had been expressing worries about the impact of exchange rate fluctuations for some time.<sup>15</sup> Witnessing economic slumps in Latvia and Hungary, this desire for the safe harbor of eurozone membership was only strengthened as the global credit crunch began to bite in 2009. Nonetheless, others - most notably Klaus - looked to countries like Ireland, observing that eurozone membership was no panacea, claiming that remaining outside the single currency had helped the Czech Republic weather the economic storm.

### **The Presidency Effect<sup>16</sup>**

In both the cases of the Czech Republic and Slovenia we can clearly see a 'presidency effect' impacting on national preference formation in four ways. Firstly, it raised the profile of EU issues, provoking both states to consider positions on a wide variety of issues. Prior to the EU presidency three successive Czech Prime Ministers, Stanislav Gross, Jiří Paroubek and Mirek Topolánek showed very little interest in European policy. Both Social Democrat Prime Ministers (Gross and Paroubek) were happy to leave European policy to the Foreign Minister Cyril Svoboda and his ministry<sup>17</sup>, only invoking European themes when it appeared politically expedient as a means of attacking their political opponents.

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<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Paroubek (2008a).

<sup>15</sup> For example, Unipetrol (2008).

<sup>16</sup> I am grateful to Jan Karlas for first making me consider the presidency effect.

<sup>17</sup> Author's interview with Cyril Svoboda, Foreign Minister 2002-6 and 2007-9 Minister without Portfolio, Prague, June 30, 2008.

Secondly, it contributed to changes in the institutional structure, involving the creation of new bodies (e.g. the Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs in the Czech Republic) and/or the strengthening of others (e.g. the Government Office for European Affairs in Slovenia). Although both the Czechs and Slovenes undertook consultation processes in the run-up to taking the EU helm the preferences of the governments were shaped largely by the central organs coordinating the presidency and inherited priorities (e.g. Kajnč 2009). Indeed, the latter point reminds us we should be cautious about seeing the headline priorities of the presidency as merely expressions of underlying preferences.

Thirdly, the stances of some of these key politicians were affected, most notably the Czech Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs Alexander Vondra who had opposed the Constitutional Treaty. Thanks in no small part to his central position in the Czech EU presidency he supported the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty stressing the benefits for Europe and the Czech Republic. This presidency effect, however, had far less impact on the more euroskeptic politicians such as Klaus and the Slovene National Party's Zmago Jelenčič Plemeniti.

Fourthly, in the Slovene case the presidency cast a long shadow over the articulation of Slovene preferences for much of the period under study. The preparations for the presidency began soon after accession. As Slovenes were generally keen on ensuring the presidency was seen to be a gaffe-free success there was a greater focus on managing the task rather than the formation and articulation of preferences. Indeed, we can see the entire period up until July 2008 as a period of sublimation.<sup>18</sup> The majority of Slovenia's parliamentary parties even agreed in

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<sup>18</sup> Author's interviews with leading Slovene officials at the Government Office for European Affairs, Ljubljana, April 15, 2009.

2007 a non-aggression pact for the duration of the EU Presidency (Krašovec and Lajh 2009). Slovenia's strong preference on Croatian accession (intimately linked to deeper questions of insecurity and vulnerability) was only expressed publicly with significant force and acted upon with the blocking of Croatia's accession once Slovenia's EU presidency had passed into history, although thanks to a publicity stunt carried out by the Slovene People's Party (which became a member of the government) in the 2004 election campaign, the issue of the disputed border had not been completely swept under the carpet.

The presidency effect feeds into the large debates about preference formation and theories of European integration mentioned above. Clearly the EU preferences of both Slovenia and the Czech Republic were not formed solely exogenously during the presidency period (and the preparations). Many were inherited or shaped by the position in the chair. Slovenia, for instance, was keen to be a good manager, hence it pushed for a compromise position on energy liberalization and sought to avoid conflict on the issue of the recognition of Kosovo by recognizing the sensitivity of such recognition to states which feared the precedent such a declaration might have for their own internal political stability (Kajnič 2009). The key lesson however, is that preferences are largely domestically formed, but refined, refracted and amended by the interaction at the EU level. So preferences are not *formed* at the European level, but how preferences are manifested is the product of interaction. This is the exact opposite to Pollack's (2006) suggestion of how we might marry constructivist and rationalist approaches of preference formation.<sup>19</sup> Preferences are rooted in domestic concerns, but these may be tweaked at the European level.

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<sup>19</sup> Pollack argues that we can use constructivist accounts to look at how preferences are formed and rationalist accounts for modeling interactions among actors with exogenously given preferences.

## **Towards a More Holistic Explanation: Vulnerability and Weakness**

The preceding discussion has highlighted the existing frameworks have some explanatory power, but they seem inadequate to provide an overarching explanation. In this section I propose an argument which integrates the insights derived from other frameworks, drawing in particular on dependency, and suggest the key to explaining a member state's choices for Europe lies in vulnerability and perceived weakness. Recognizing the limitations of what can be achieved domestically, integration is therefore advocated as a means of compensating for domestic weakness. The theme of vulnerability - which has been employed in international relations, especially in work on small states (e.g. Keohane and Nye 1977; Cooper and Shaw 2009) - appears in the work of Milward (1992) and Moravcsik (1999). The latter, who viewed national preferences as a product of power struggles at the domestic political level, largely saw vulnerability within the domestic arena. I would suggest, however, that especially for the new member states from Central and Eastern Europe, external and geopolitical vulnerabilities are also significant in preference formation. Vulnerability can be distinguished from dependency in two important respects. Firstly, dependency is a narrower concept which focuses mostly on economics. In this sense dependency can be seen as a sub-set of vulnerability. Secondly, the word *perceived* is central to the concept of vulnerability i.e. it cannot be understood merely by looking at tables of economic statistics (Haughton 2009).

All of the key preferences of the three new states (such as liberal internal markets, energy security, opposition to tax harmonization, further enlargement and the flow of EU funds) can be explained by reference to vulnerabilities and perceived weaknesses. There are two elements to this vulnerability. The first lies in economics and is intimately linked to a state's dependency on

foreign capital, trade patterns and whether the state is a net contributor or beneficiary. Building on Connolly's (2009) work on financial vulnerabilities, four measures are helpful for identifying vulnerabilities. In addition to (the extent of) net recipient status shown above, illustrative measures include an openness of the economy indicator (sum of imports and exports of goods and services divided by GDP), a trade dependency indicator (proportion of exports to EU-27 countries of total exports), and a debt to GDP ratio. All of these highlight the extent to which an economy is dependent on external factors. Whilst on these measures the three cases show signs of relative vulnerability although more in terms of trade rather than financial dependency (see tables 3a, b and c), which following the arguments of the dependency scholars could be used to explain why these states have generally been enthusiastic about liberalization and redistribution in the European Union, they are not convincing when seeking to explain stances in other areas such as the Lisbon/Constitutional Treaties. Hence, this economically rooted argument needs to be complemented with something with a more constructivist flavour.

Insert tables 3a, 3b and 3c

The second component of the concept of vulnerability is linked to a country's perceived place in the world and questions of security. This element is harder to quantify, but it is clearly significant. Central to this idea is the vulnerability of labels. In the case of Slovenia, for example, as a liminal state frequently labelled as 'former Yugoslav' or 'Western Balkan' it sought shelter in the safe harbor of labels and has been keen to project itself as 'Central Europe', 'Alpine' or 'Mediterranean', but also as a 'good European' (Lindstrom 2003; Bojinović 2005). This desire to

be seen as a good reliable European state was central to explaining internal consensus on European issues and the desire not to rock the boat by taking positions out of kilter with the European mainstream. But Slovenia's sense of insecurity also explains its willingness to rock the boat in December 2008 when it blocked Croatia's accession negotiations. Fishing rights, access to the sea and the 'fear' of a large neighbor all contribute to Slovenes' sense of vulnerability.

There was a similar 'insecurity discourse' in the Slovak case.<sup>20</sup> Thanks to the snub at the Luxembourg European Council in 1997 when Slovakia was not invited to begin accession negotiations, Slovaks were keen to demonstrate they were good Europeans. Indeed, once negotiations began Slovakia resembled an 'obedient dog faithfully following its master's instructions' (Malová and Haughton 2006: 327). There are fainter echoes of these sentiments in the Czech case where in the early post-communist years there was initial concern about Czechs' place in the world and a rhetoric of 'catching up' with the West where the Czech Republic felt it belonged (Braun 2008: 51). Although as the 1990s wore on this was replaced with a more critical view of the EU as the Czech Republic was firmly established in the minds of the Western Europeans as part of its orbit.

All three states share three interlinked vulnerabilities. Firstly, in the sphere of security where the twentieth century has taught all three nations of the benefit of European co-operation and the need to be perceived as part of the Western European club of established democracies. Secondly, size. As small states in the centre of the continent they are dependent on their neighbours not just for security, but for economics. Even euroskeptics such as Czech President Klaus has reiterated his belief that there was, and remains, no alternative for the Czech Republic

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<sup>20</sup> The term is Barbullishi's (2009).

to membership of the club (Klaus 2009). For such politicians membership is a ‘marriage of convenience’ rather than a ‘marriage of love’ (Braun 2008: 58). The third component is linked to globalization. The EU provides an umbrella of protection against the harsh rains of the global market. The first two of these vulnerabilities were in evidence in early 2009 when the Czech EU Presidency under premier Topolánek and his successor Jan Fischer fought hard to prevent the EU veering towards protectionism as the global financial crisis was beginning to bite.

The salience of vulnerability shaping European preferences is clear in two other policy areas: energy and Justice and Home Affairs. All three countries are heavily dependent on external sources for their energy supply and have led the calls for nuclear power. Indeed, both Slovakia and the Czech Republic have been at the forefront of the European Nuclear Energy Forum hosting two meetings each between November 2007 and May 2009. The insecurities linked to trade and openness, but rooted in geography and geology, shape these countries’ stances on energy issues. Moreover, in JHA issues the three member states have generally been supportive of future integration in a range of areas including protection of external borders and the fight against organized and cross-border crime. In Slovenia, for instance, real concerns about its vulnerabilities have shaped a JHA stance which aims for a stronger Europol, a strong interest in FRONTEX and a Southeast Europe Organized Crime Threat Assessment; all intimately linked in to Slovenia’s deep seated fear of infiltration and exposure to organized crime stemming from the Western Balkans.

Vulnerability can also explain when public opinion can matter. The thorny issue of the Beneš decrees and the linked concerns about Germans expelled from the Czech lands after the Second World War was invoked by Klaus in 2009 when he was mulling over whether to sign the Lisbon Treaty. His stated concern that the Charter of Fundamental Rights might open the door



for Sudeten Germans to claim the return of property not only helped bolster Klaus's popularity, but also swung public opinion away from supporting the Lisbon Treaty. Moreover, conscious that the Beneš decrees also applied to ethnic Hungarians who had lived on the territory of Slovakia, Prime Minister Fico was quick to appear on television to state he would also ask for a similar opt-out if the treaty opened the doors for Hungarian claimants. For historical reasons Czechs and Slovaks see their bigger neighbor, Germany and Hungary respectively, as potential threats to the integrity of their states.

## **Conclusions**

Five years of membership is too short a period upon which to draw definitive conclusions, nonetheless studying and seeking to explain the preferences of Slovenia, Slovakia and the Czech Republic in a number of policy areas highlights several salient factors in the process of national preference formation and some avenues for future research.

Firstly, and linked to the relative novelty of their membership we can observe an 'accession hangover'. Much time and effort was placed on meeting criteria, transposing the *acquis* and seeking to project a good image of the country during the accession period of 'asymmetric interdependence' (Vachudova 2005) that it has taken time to adjust to the new realities of being a subject and not just an objective of EU decision making and developing the necessary capacity. Indeed, in many respects the new member states still think like accession states and not member states. This is changing, but the pace of change is slow. With the passage of much more time we may look back on the early membership period - when the demands of accession cast a long shadow - as being distinctly unusual.

Secondly, the cases of Slovenia and the Czech Republic demonstrate a clear presidency effect. Preferences are formed domestically and usually tweaked at the European level as part of a country's integration strategy, but this tweaking may be quite substantial during the holding of the presidency, especially when there is a desire as in the case of Slovenia to project itself as a 'good and reliable European state'; a finding which has implications for broader debates amongst constructivists and intergovernmentalists and indeed for the debates surrounding the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty and the changes to the nature of the EU presidency.

Thirdly, this paper has argued that the key to a member state's choices for Europe lies in vulnerabilities, maintaining that this vulnerability is best understood as a combination of economic and financial vulnerability with a more existential vulnerability linked to questions of security and categorization. The bases of the vulnerabilities are not fixed in stone. Indeed, it is quite possible, for example, that one of the 2004 entrants will be a net contributor in the next decade. If the net contributor/net beneficiary status is important for shaping national preference formation, especially in the socio-economic sphere, and given that tapping into EU funds is the current priority of states like Slovakia, some significant changes may be observable in the future.

This paper indicates a number of potentially fertile furrows for future research to plough. Firstly, the research was limited to three cases and certain policy areas, but clearly there would be merit in examining national preference formation in a larger sample of policy areas and across EU-27, especially those other new member states which have been largely ignored in the literature most notably the Baltic States. This could be used to test and develop further the 'vulnerability' based explanation. Secondly, holding the rotating presidency of the EU appears to play a not insignificant role in national preference formation suggesting the merits of a large-scale comparative study on a number of member states holding the presidency, but also the

impact of the presidency on Czech and Slovene positions poses the question as to whether the impact of holding the presidency will have a lasting legacy or will fade. Thirdly, the bulk of the empirical period covered was one of healthy economic growth for the three states, but the global credit crunch and resultant recession had begun to bite by early 2009. Although one Slovene interviewee put it clearly that ‘the EU is part of the solution not the problem’<sup>21</sup>, the impact of the crisis may bring more radical ideologies centre-stage and affect public opinion and underlying economic vulnerabilities.

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<sup>21</sup> Author’s interview with Janez Podobnik, President Slovene People’s Party 2003-8 and Environment Minister 2004-8, Ljubljana, April 16, 2009.

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**Table 1 Overview of Slovenia's, Slovakia's and the Czech Republic's Preferences 2004-9**

	Slovenia		Slovakia		Czech Republic	
	Stance	Change?	Stance	Change?	Stance	Change?
Liberalization	Supportive of liberalization	Minor	Supportive of liberalization	Minor	Supportive of liberalization	Minor
Tax Harmonization	Opposition	No change	Opposition	No, but new govt. wobbled in 2006	Opposition	No change
Budget/EU funds	Supportive of distribution	Some cooling	Supportive of distribution	No change	Supportive of distribution	No change
Enlargement	Enthusiastic support for Western Balkans	Dec 2008 blocked Croatia's negotiations	Enthusiastic support for Western Balkans	Support Increased stressed on fulfilling criteria	Enthusiastic support for Western Balkans	No change
Lisbon/Constitutional Treaty	Support	No change	Support, although Christian Democrat reservations	No change	Conflictual views	Yes, amongst key ODS politicians
Euro entry	Support	No change	Support	No change	Conflictual views	Wide variety of opinion

Sources: 40 semi-structured interviews conducted by the author with politicians, civil servants and civil society representatives in Slovakia, Slovenia and the Czech Republic plus numerous documents including ČSSD (2005); Government of the Republic of Slovenia (2006); KDH (2002); KDU-ČSL (2006); Liberalna demokracija Slovenije (2008); ĽS-HZDS (2006); National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia (2007); National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia (2008); ODS (2006); SDKÚ (2002); SDS (2005); Smer-sociálna demokracia (2006); SMK (2002); SNS (2006); Socilani Demokrati (2008); Útvar místopředsedy vlády pro evropské záležitosti (2007); and Vláda Slovenskej republiky (2006) and *Zares* (2009).

**Table 2 EU Dependency: Net Recipients and Net Contributors: Operating budgetary balances\***

	2004		2005		2006		2007		
	Million EUR	%GNI	Million EUR	%GNI	Million EUR	%GNI	Million EUR	%GNI	EUR per capita 2007**
Greece	+4163.3	+2.27%	+3900.5	+2.00%	+5102.3	+2.43%	+5436.4	+2.43%	+485
Lithuania	+369.3	+2.08%	+476.4	+2.34%	+585.3	+2.52%	+793.1	+2.95%	+236
Portugal	+3124.0	+2.20%	+2378.0	+1.63%	+2291.7	+1.52%	+2474.1	+1.58%	+233
Latvia	+197.7	+1.81%	+263.9	+2.05%	+255.5	+1.64%	+488.7	+2.55%	+215
Estonia	+145.0	+1.59%	+154.3	+1.43%	+176.4	+1.40%	+226.2	+1.54%	+169
Hungary	+193.4	+0.25%	+590.1	+0.71%	+1150.0	+1.34%	+1605.7	+1.72%	+160
Ireland	+1593.8	+1.26%	+1136.6	+0.83%	+1080.5	+0.72%	+671.8	+0.42%	+153
Poland	+1438.3	+0.73%	+1853.2	+0.78%	+2997.6	+1.15%	+5135.7	+1.75%	+135
Slovakia	+169.2	+0.52	+270.9	+0.72%	+323.2	+0.74%	+617.7	+1.17%	+114
Spain	+8502.3	+1.02%	+6017.8	+0.67%	+3811.7	+0.40%	+3649.5	+0.36%	+81
Malta	+45.0	+1.01%	+90.0	+1.98%	+101.0	+2.09%	+28.1	+0.54%	+68
Czech Rep	+272.2	+0.33%	+178.0	+0.19%	+386.2	+0.36%	+656.4	+0.55%	+64
Bulgaria	-	-	-	-	-	-	+335	+1.17%	+44
Slovenia	+109.7	+0.42	+101.5	+0.36%	+142.8	+0.47%	+88.5	+0.27%	+44
Romania	-	-	-	-	-	-	+595.6	+0.51%	+28
Cyprus	+63.5	+0.52%	+90.3	+0.69%	+102.4	+0.72%	-10.5	-0.07%	-13
Finland	-69.6	-0.05%	-84.8	-0.05%	-241.0	-0.14%	-172	-0.10%	-32
Italy	-2946.9	-0.21%	-2199.0	-0.15%	-1731.8	-0.12%	-2016.8	-0.13%	-34
France	-3050.7	-0.18%	-2883.5	-0.17%	-3012.5	-0.17%	-3001.5	-0.16%	-47
Austria	-365.1	-0.16%	-277.9	-0.11%	-301.5	-0.12%	-563.7	-0.21%	-68
UK	-2864.9	-0.16%	-1529.0	-0.08%	-2140.2	-0.11%	-4168.2	-0.21%	-68
Belgium	-536.1	-0.18%	-607.5	-0.20%	-709.9	0.22%	-868.9	-0.26%	-82
Germany	-7140.4	-0.32%	-6064.3	-0.27%	-6325.2	-0.27%	-7420.2	-0.30%	-90
Sweden	-1059.8	-0.37%	-866.9	-0.29%	-856.6	-0.27%	-995.5	-0.29%	-108
Denmark	-224.6	-0.11%	-265.3	-0.13%	-505.2	-0.23%	-604.9	-0.26%	-111
Netherlands	-2034.9	-0.40%	-2636.6	-0.51%	-2587.6	-0.48%	-2865.5	-0.50%	-175
Luxembourg	-93.6	-0.39%	-86.8	-0.35%	-60.2	-0.22%	-114.9	-0.40%	-237

Source: [http://ec.europa.eu/budget/library/publications/fin\\_reports/fin\\_report\\_07\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/budget/library/publications/fin_reports/fin_report_07_en.pdf) (page 80) [accessed on 28 December 2009]. \*Operating budgetary balanced calculated as the difference between allocated operating expenditure and own resources payment. \*\*calculated using population statistics for 2007 published by Eurostat. See [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/data/main\\_tables](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/data/main_tables)

**Table 3a**  
**Openness of the**  
**Economy**

Country	2004	2005	2006	2007
Czech Republic	140.23	141.25	149.67	155.31
Slovakia	151.62	157.09	172.69	173.97
Slovenia	117.30	124.85	133.77	141.63
EU-27average	108.24	112.49	119.28	120.15

Source: World Bank Development Indicators, Washington: D.C:

<http://ddp-ext.worldbank.org/ext/DDPQQ/member.do?method=getMembers&userid=1&queryId=135>

Accessed 30

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**Table 3b**  
**Exports to EU-27 (% of**  
**total)**

Country	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Slovakia	87	87	87	87	90
Slovenia	68	67	67	67	65
Czech Republic	86	84	84	83	83
EU-27 average	70	68	68	68	66

Source: IMF Direction of Trade Statistics: <http://www.imfstatistics.org/DOT/>

Accessed 30 October 2009

**Table 3c**  
**External Debt to GDP**

Country	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Czech Republic	0.41	0.37	0.40	0.44	0.37
Slovak Republic	0.70	0.76	0.83	0.94	0.96
Slovenia	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.04	0.03
EU-27 Average	1.81	1.71	2.05	2.26	1.93

Source: GDP data from World Bank Development Indicators

<http://ddp-ext.worldbank.org/ext/DDPQQ/member.do?method=getMembers&userid=1&queryId=135>

Gross External Debt from International Monetary Fund International Financial Statistics, New York:

<http://www.imfstatistics.org/imf/>

Accessed 30 October 2009



