

Slovenian members of the european parliament: between the national and the european political space

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Abstract

In his article, the author analyses the profile of Slovenian members of the European parliament (MEP), i.e. their political position, cultural character, and mode of behaviour. He perceives MEPs as element that links national and European political space. They are both representatives of national interests at the EU level and creators of common European policies. To perform their role successfully, integration in both political realms is necessary. The author claims that regarding their cultural profile, they are more similar to the representatives in the EP from other EU countries than their colleagues in the national parliament.

Key words: representatives, cultural profile, European Parliament, Slovenia

Povzetek

Avtor se v svojem članku ukvarja z analizo profila slovenskih predstavnikov v Evropskem parlamentu (EP), tj. njihovega političnega

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položaja, kulturnih značilnosti in načina obnašanja. Pri tem smatra slovenske poslance v EP kot element povezovanja nacionalnega in evropskega političnega prostora. Le-ti so na eni strani zastopniki nacionalnih interesov na nivoju Evropske unije, na drugi strani pa oblikovalci skupnih evropskih politik. Za to, da bi lahko uspešno opravljali svojo vlogo, morajo biti integrirani v dogajanje na obeh političnih ravneh. Avtor trdi, da so glede na kulturni profil slovenski 'evroposlanci' bolj podobni svojim kolegom v EP kot pa zastopnikom v nacionalnem parlamentu.

Ključne besede: poslanci, kulturni profil, Evropski parlament, Slovenija

Parliamentarism in the European Union

Parliament is without any doubts the institution that lies in the core of the system of modern democracy. It is perceived by democratic theory as key locus of democratic political life where most important political interests are represented by the elected people who through their mutual dialog articulate political course of society. However, in the last decades there has been certain shift of governance from classical political institutions like parliament to specialised expert and administrative bodies (van Kersbergen and van Waarden, 2004) that brought to certain decrease of importance of its political role. As stated by Tom Burns: "Today in western Europe, parliaments and elective assemblies on all levels have substantial difficulties in dealing with the growing complexity, highly technical character and the rapidity of many developments in modern society. There is a structural deficit between societal conditions and forces, on the one hand, and government institutions and capabilities, on the other" (Burns, 1999:167). Despite that, there hasn't been yet invented an institution that would better

perform the role of national political representation and legislation-maker.

Since the European Union has been developing into a direction of a more integrated form of political entity, the issue of democracy at the Union's level is becoming increasingly relevant. In recent years has gain on importance the notion of a need for establishment of mechanisms and institutions of efficient and democratic governance on supra-national level that would be able to handle with problems brought by the processes of globalisation, especially in a sense of provision of global public goods (see, for example, Griffin, 2003). In the case of the European Union, this is of special importance, since it stopped function as an inter-state association but became as political formation with institutions, activities and authorities on its own. What is often stressed is so called 'democratic deficit' (see Norton, 1996), meaning the lack of many features we associate with democratic governance (Horeth, 1999:249) like involvement of citizens in the political processes at the Union's level and their influence on European affairs. One of the main targets of criticism of process of European integration was its centralistic or top-down nature (see, for, example, Siedentop, 2001) what lead to the perception of it as a elite project or enterprise (see, for example, Bretherton and Vogler, 1999; Wood, 2002). The same elite-centeredness is argued to be characteristic also for the process of accession of former communist countries from East-Central Europe (see Raik, 2002).

European Parliament is the only political body on the EU level whose members are democratically elected by direct universal suffrage. The elections for the EP have being held since 1979. The Parliament is elected every five years. After the last round of the EU enlargement, the number of the members of the EP raised to 732.

Given the unique nature of the EP in terms of its democratic legitimacy, debates on democracy at the EU level and its alleged 'democratic deficit' are often related to the status of this institution. Usually it is argued that the EP 'weight' in European political setting is inferior in relation to the Commission and the Council of Ministers. It is true that it does not perform tasks analogous to the functions typical for national legislative bodies. For instance, the very role of legislature as traditional domain of parliaments is at the EU level shared between the Parliament and the Commission. However, importance of its role in relation to other EU institutions has been increasing, meaning that they have to take into account position of the Parliament (or its majority) on increasing number of issues (see, for example, Anderson, 2003; Schusterschitz and Kotz, 2007). Its voice is starting to matter also on the selection of members of the Commission. For example, during the selection of the Commission in Jose Manuel Barosso's first mandate, its president had to remove certain candidates who were found by the parliamentary majority as unacceptable due to its problematic statements on certain issues. Some commentators perceived these developments as the becoming of 'real' political dynamics at the EU level.

The countries of East-Central Europe joined the EU at the moment of comprehensive (re)construction of European political and institutional setting. It is becoming obvious that integration is not something self-evident and even less inevitable, thus it is necessary to rethink many issues related to political and cultural situation in Europe. This would probably mean also the new role of the EP in terms of its position in Union's institutional constellation as well as in conducting debates on the future of European polity. The same holds for the role of national parliaments. It is interesting to see how relations between actors form

‘old’ and ‘new’ EU members would affect these developments in European parliamentary life.

The main aim of this article is to analyse the profile of Slovenian members of the European parliament, i.e. their political position, cultural character, and mode of behaviour. MEPs can be seen as element that links national and European political space. They are both representatives of national interests at EU level and creators of common European policies. To perform their role in a successful way, integration in both political realms is necessary. The presupposition is that their cultural profile differs from the profile of representatives at the national level.

Slovenian road to the European Union

After the collapse of the communist regime, Slovenia started to build its parliamentary life as a key element of pluralisation which was part of a wider process of political modernisation of society. Slovenians had to address several dilemmas regarding their institutional setting. Slovenia decided on the parliamentary system (Zajc 2004), which is often perceived as more suitable for new democracies, i.e. countries without strong civic and democratic traditions, due to its consensual nature where political power is more dispersed and shared between different actors (Lijphart 1984, 1999).

EU membership became an ultimate strategic goal even before Slovenia achieved formal independence. It was declared as ‘an important step forward in the creation of a democratic, stable, strong, economically successful and well-organised country’ (Fink-Hafner and Lajh 2005: 53).

The decision for Slovenia to join the European Union was reached with a wide political consensus which meant that 'all major EU-related topics in Slovenia were defined as national projects' (Krašovec and Lajh 2009: 501).

Like other candidate countries, Slovenia had to accept the conditions set by the European Union. It had to adjust its legislation to the *acquis communautaire*: the Union's legislative setting. Its implementation was continuously monitored by the European Commission via its specialised bodies (Tomšič and Prijon, 2012: 98). Slovenia began its accession negotiations in 1998 and they came to a close in 2002.³ The most difficult were the chapters on finances and agriculture. However, it was one of the candidate countries where the negotiation process involved the least delays. In addition, Slovenia had to meet certain demands in order to overcome the objections of some EU member countries, particularly Italy. The most controversial was the so-called 'Spanish compromise' (reached during the Spanish presidency of the EU) that allowed citizens of EU member countries to own Slovenian real estate. The Slovenian government of Prime Minister Janez Drnovšek accepted this deal, despite strong resistance from the political opposition and general public. Finally, in order to formally join the European Union, Slovenia had to amend its Constitution in order renounce part of its own sovereignty. With these constitutional amendments made in March 2004, the National Assembly facilitated the transfer of certain sovereign rights concerning the adoption of legal acts and decisions to the

³ This took place at the European Council meeting in Copenhagen where it was officially announced that Slovenia, together with Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and Cyprus, were ready to join the EU in 2004.

European Union.

Due to this wide consensus on the EU as a main political goal, Slovenian political elites are thus, at least on the declarative level, strongly devoted to a pro-European orientation (Tomšič 2006, Krašovec and Lajh 2008, 2009). In 1997 all parliamentary parties accept one, despite their other differences and conflicts, decided to sign an *Agreement on Co-operation in the Accession Process with the EU*. The only parliamentary party that is sceptical of Slovenian membership in the European Union is the Slovenian National Party, whereas all other parties from both right and left political camps unambiguously support this. In this regard, there is strong concordance between the political elite and the vast majority of citizens. Regarding publicly declared support for the Union, Slovenia is thus one the most euro-enthusiastic new EU members.⁴ Unlike the national elite, local-level political elites have, as stated by Hughes et al. (2002),⁵ a more pragmatic and less normative attitude toward the EU and are relatively disinterested in issues related to the integration process as well as poorly informed about it. This could be a potential source of Euroscepticism, based on the benefits of integration being less than expected. However, the result of this concordance between elites and the wider public was the 2003 referendum which showed almost 90% support for Slovenia's integration into the European Union. The referendum was won on the basis of a well-organised and synchronised

⁴ In other EU members, there are some important political parties that nurture relatively strong Eurosceptic sentiments like the Citizens Democratic Party in the Czech Republic or Law and Order in Poland.

⁵ In their study, they analysed the attitudes of local-level elites in three Central and Eastern European countries (Slovenia, Hungary and Estonia) to European integration.

campaign of EU accession proponents that was in stark contrast to the opponents' campaign which was poorly organised and came across as representing a narrow set of interests (Lajh and Krašovec 2007).

Pro-EU attitudes are on declarative level still maintained by all relevant political parties, although the crisis brought some increase of Euro-scepticism, particularly in the circles related to political left. This is manifested especially in rejection of European policies and strategies for resolving of financial crisis, blaming the austerity measures backed by the EU for worsening of the social situation.

During the accession process, most major political parties in candidate countries responded to EU leverage by adopting agendas consistent with the conditions for membership (Vachudova 2005, 2008). They became integrated in political associations with different ideological profiles at the European level. The SDP, SPP and NSi became members of the European People's Party (EPP), the LDS and Zares became members of the European Liberals and Democrats (ELDR/ALDE), while the SD joined the Party of European Socialists (PES).⁶ Integration into the European institutional framework caused only a slight modification to the Slovenian party system. There were only minor changes to the programmes of political parties which have primarily seen Europe as something positive, although usually in a general fashion (the

⁶ The LDS became a full member of the ELDR/ALDE in 1998; the SD of the PES in 2003; the SDP, SPP and NSi of the EPP in 2004, and Zares of the ELDR/ALDE in 2008. Besides these, there is another party that is not formally represented in the national parliament, namely, the Youth Party of Slovenia that is still integrated into the European political space as a full member of the European Green Party since 2006.

importance of the EU *per se*) or using the EU in an instrumental manner (stressing EU norms and standards). Some party programmes include a chapter devoted to EU issues which does not, however, hold a prominent position in the programme's structure, while others mention the EU only occasionally. After the first few years, it is still quite difficult to detect a particular party's standpoint on the European issue (Krašovec and Lajh 2009: 503). As for organisational changes and their impacts on party programmes, there have hardly been any since only a minor change took place, usually by strengthening the role of the Secretary for International Co-operation. Yet in all the parties that have managed to win a seat in the European Parliament and incorporated MEPs *ex officio* into party governing bodies, this has so far not led to any redistribution of power since most Slovenian MEPs were already members of the relevant party bodies (ibid. 499).

Similar observations can be made regarding the form of the national party system as a whole, where there were only some insignificant impacts (Tomšič and Prijon, 2012: 99). Only one Eurosceptic political party has been formed, and has not been very exposed, while among parliamentary parties, as mentioned, only one minor populist parliamentary party has deplored the deficit of the 'Euro-realistic' rhetoric in pro-EU feelings (Fink-Hafner and Krašovec in Deželan 2007: 14-15). With regard to patterns of party competition, issues associated with the European Union were marginalised, especially in the period before the country's full membership in the EU, due to a specific agreement of the European Parliament's political parties stating they would not politicise European affairs at home. However, integration in the European party structure has resulted in some change in the ideological profile of political parties. This particularly applies to the Slovenian Democratic Party that was originally (when founded) a party

with a social democratic orientation (its original name was the Social Democratic Party of Slovenia), although with strong anti-communist sentiments. The incongruence between the 'leftist' name of the party and its 'rightist' perception in public opinion was resolved by a shift in ideological orientation towards the centre-right (also concerning economic issues) as well a change of its international political alliance resulting in the party's inclusion in the European People's Party as the association of European conservative and Christian democratic parties.

Slovenia joined the European Union on 1 May 2004⁷ and thus acquired the right to participate in elections to the European Parliament. The first time Slovenian citizens could exercise their right to vote at a European level was in June 2004. For the seven seats of the EP reserved for Slovenia thirteen political parties and lists contested. There were 1.628.918 citizens with this right to vote; although the total number of votes received was 461.879 (28.35%)⁸ (see Table 1). The second European elections in Slovenia took place on 7 June 2009, with a total of 1.699.755 citizens having voting rights. For the eight seats of the EP⁹ reserved for Slovenia 12 political parties and lists contested. The total number of votes received was 482,136 (28.33%).¹⁰

⁷ Negotiations to join the EU started in March 1998 and ended in December 2002 in Denmark. On 16 April 2003 the Treaty of Accession to the European Union was signed.

⁸ Republika Slovenija: Volitve v Evropski parlament 2004. Link: <http://volitve.gov.si/ep2004/>

⁹ At the time of the elections, Slovenia had seven seats in the EP but this number was increased to eight after ratification of the Lisbon Treaty.

¹⁰ Republika Slovenija: Volitve v Evropski parlament 2009. Accessed at: <http://volitve.gov.si/ep2009/>

TABLE 1: Official results for Slovenia at the European elections in 2004 and 2009.

(Source: Republic of Slovenia: Elections to the European Parliament)

	PARTY	VOTES IN 2004	%	VOTES IN 2009	%
1.	Nova Slovenija - Krščansko ljudska stranka (New Slovenia - Christian People's Party, Nsi)	102.753	23.57	76.866	16.58
2.	Liberalna demokracija Slovenije in Demokratična stranka upokojencev Slovenije (Liberal Democracy of Slovenia, LDS and Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia, DPPS)	95.489	21.9	53.212	11.48
3.	Slovenska demokratska stranka (Slovenian Democratic Party, SDP)	76.945	17.65	123.563	26.66
4.	Združena lista socialnih demokratov/Socialni demokrati (United List of Social Democrats (after 2009 Social Democrats), (UL after SD)	61.672	14.15	85.407	18.43
5.	Slovenska ljudska stranka (Slovenian People's Party, SPP)	36.662	8.41	16.601	3.58
6.	Slovenska nacionalna stranka (Slovenian National Party, SNP)	21.883	5.02	13.227	2.85
7.	ZARES – nova politika (ZARES – New Politics)			45.238	9.76
8.	Demokratična stranka upokojencev Slovenije (Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia, DPPS**			33.292	7.18

* The party was established after the 2004 elections

** The party ran at the 2004 elections in coalition with the LDS

The two European elections so far have brought victory to centre-right parties. In 2004, they won four out of seven Slovenian seats in the European Parliament¹¹ and in 2009 four out of eight seats.¹² The results of the 2004 European elections somewhat heralded subsequent political developments, i.e. the victory of the 'right' in national parliamentary elections a couple of months later. The campaign before the European election became highly 'nationalised', meaning the strong prevalence of national issues over those related to the EU. This victory led to a major change in the constellation of political forces since, after 12 years of rule of centre-left governments (with a short half-year break in 2000), parties of the centre-right (with the assistance of the Democratic Party of Pensioners – DeSUS) assumed positions of power. However, the left returned to power positions after the victory of the so-called 'leftist trio' at the 2008 elections (again with the assistance of DeSUS).

In following chapter, a case study of Slovenian members of the European parliament is presented, with its main finding on Slovenian and European parliamentary culture, interactions between representatives in the EP and cultural characteristics of Slovenian MEPs, particularly in terms of their compatibility with colleagues from 'old' democracies.

¹¹ Two seats were won by NSi (the actual winner of the elections since it received the largest share of votes), the LDS and the SDS and one by the ZLSD (now the SD).

¹² Three seats were won by the SDS (the winner of the elections), two by the SD and one by the NSi, LDS and Zares. Both political camps thus won the same number of parliamentary seats but the sum of votes for the parties of the centre-right camp of the SDS, NSi and SLS was more than for the three parties of the centre-left camp of the SD, Zares and LDS (43% vs. 39%).

Characteritics of Slovenian members of the European Parliament

Topics and indicators

The study of Slovenian members of the European parliament was conducted in a framework of the project *Eastern Enlargement – Western Enlargement: Cultural Encounters in the European Economy and Society after the Accession* that took place in years 2004-7.¹³ In this study which deals with analysis of the characteristics of Slovenian representatives in the EP, we carried out seven interviews, four with Slovenian members of the EP, one with a former member of parliamentary delegation in the European Parliament (all of them are from different political parties),

¹³ The project *Eastern Enlargement – Western Enlargement: Cultural Encounters in the European Economy and Society after the Accession* (its acronym is DioscURI), coordinated by Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (Wien) and Central European University (Budapest), was a part of the EU Commision's 6th Framework Programme.

The primary objective of the DIOSCURI project was to explore the dynamics of cultural exchange between “East” and “West” in the European economy, including identifying the main types of cultural encounters between the two halves of Europe during and after the Enlargement, mapping the major cultural gaps and strategies to bridge them, and describing the fields in which the new entrants can contribute to the rejuvenation of economic cultures in the Union.

The main focus of the analysis was on four countries of East-Central Europe: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia, and on four South-East European countries: Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Serbia. DIOSCURI focused on three research fields: entrepreneurship, governance and economic knowledge.

and two with assistants of MEPs.¹⁴

The content of the interview consists of three (sub)topics relevant for the study on Slovenian representatives in the EP: parliamentary culture (comparison of Slovenian and European parliamentary culture regarding issues like the prevailing values and modes of conduct, level of hierarchy, trust, and preparedness for cooperation), contacts and communication (possible intercultural problems in communication between parliamentarians from different countries and the possibility of mutual learning), and cultural profile of MEPs (competence of Slovenian MEP, their identity and political loyalty, and their integration into political networks – both national and international).

¹⁴ We had considerable difficulties getting the interviews done. We contacted all Slovenian MEPs in the March 2005. Couple of them rejected the participation at the start and couple of them have been delaying with the answers. As we have been told the main reason is their very tight schedule. Our problem is very small number of Slovenian members of the European Parliament (only seven). Till now, only four of them sent us filled questionnaires by e-mail. Considering this, we decided to extend the target group for the interviews, contacting people who are not themselves parliamentary representatives but who are, nevertheless, familiar with the work of Slovenian and European Parliament, like assistants of the parliamentarians and party officials, responsible for international cooperation.

The contents of the interviews

In this section, we present the insights of the interviews, i.e. the key information on the three sub-topics (parliamentary culture, contacts and communication, and cultural profile of MEPs) provided by the interviewees.

The first sub-topic deals with different aspects of 'general' *parliamentary culture*. The interviewed were asked to compare Slovenian and European parliamentary culture, i.e. values, attitudes and way of conduct from Slovenian Parliament on one hand and European Parliament and national parliaments of other EU countries on the other. They compared items like the relation between executive and legislative branch of government, level of hierarchy, prevailing type of communication (formal or informal), willingness for cooperation (especially between representatives from different political camps), and level of trust between MPs. They stated some practices that are common in Slovenian parliament but wouldn't be appropriate in the EP (and vice versa). They informed us also about their perception of changes in Slovenian parliamentary life in the last period and possible influence of EU integration process in this matter.

The interviewed find the Slovenian Parliament, regarding its prevailing cultural climate and way on conduct, more close to the parliaments of other post-socialist EU member-states than to the parliaments of established Western democracies with long parliamentary traditions as well as the European Parliament.¹⁵

¹⁵ As stated by one of the interviewees: "We are closer to the younger

In structural terms, EP is becoming rather similar to national parliaments. Executive branch is dominant in relation to the parliament both in Slovenia and in the EU. EP is perceived as more tolerant place with less pronounced political differences than SP. Hierarchy between MPs is about the same everywhere. MPs practice both formal and informal communication. There is more communication (especially informal one) in the EP. In the EP, there is more cooperation, especially between people from different political camps.¹⁶

Trust between representatives is also higher in the EP than in the SP. Autonomy of the MEPs in their initiatives is perceived as rather high (for some higher than is the case in the SP). Our interviewees don't notice any huge change in Slovenian parliamentary practice after the accession (one them says that there is more contacts with other parliamentarians). They think that Slovenian MEPs could have some impact on Slovenian parliamentary life (due to their international experience), especially on the long run, but is a question if they are considered enough by domestic political actors.

The second sub-topic deals with *interactions between Slovenian*

democracies that were formed after the year 1990. Otherwise, as I see things, in Slovenian Parliament, at least in the last period, debates are often on a very low level. This does not happen in the European Parliament which is really a kind of 'temple' of democracy." (Interviewee no. 3)

¹⁶ As stated by one of the interviewees: "Communication between parliamentarians seems to me more intensive and relaxed in the EP as well as in other parliaments as it is the case in our parliament – with exception of communication within parliamentary groups." (Interviewee no. 4)

representatives and their colleagues from other EU countries. The interviewees told us about the language they use in everyday communication on EU level; about possible problems in their encounters with their colleagues (deriving from intercultural differences like different values, attitudes, communication codes); about their possible surprises from these encounters; and about the possibility of mutual learning by parliamentarians (and which country should Slovenia take as example regarding its parliamentary life).

Slovenian MEPs speak several languages. In the official events, they use Slovenian. With their colleagues with other MEPs, they communicate mostly in English, French and German. They do perceive some differences of cultural origin between people from different EU members (one mentions national stereotypes) but do not recall problems on that matter.¹⁷

Generally, they find exchange of experience between MPs from different countries as useful. In terms of parliamentary practice, Slovenia could, according to them, learn about mutual tolerance toward people from different political and ideological camps.¹⁸ Some claim that Slovenia should take useful examples from different countries and create its own parliamentary tradition.

¹⁷ One of them said: "Yes, I see differences but they do not grow into problems because in this case representatives simply don't hang together. In the public speech, politeness prevails." (Interviewee no. 2)

¹⁸ As stated by one of the interviewees: "Slovenian parliamentarians could learn from Europeans the mutual cooperation regardless political 'color'. What matters is quality of proposal and not who is its author." (Interviewee no. 7)

The last subtopic deals with *cultural profile* of Slovenian representatives in the EP. The interviewed were asked to give their perception on competence of Slovenian MEPs (professional profile, political experience), their identity (national vs. European identity, differences between different political group in this regard), loyalty (are they representatives of national interests of their country or political interests of their group) and integration in domestic and international policy networks. They informed us also on their opinions on future political development of the EU, especially with respect to the role of the EP (and also national parliaments).

Our interviewees find competence of Slovenian MEPs as comparable to their colleagues from other European countries (but they have, as stated by one, less political experience because it is their first mandate as MEP). Primary identity of the MEPs is still national one which is, however, not inconsistent with European identity and general pro-European orientation. There are differences between political groups in this regard. While extreme-rightist parties are strongly nationalistic, the main political groups (conservatives, liberals, social democrats) are generally pro-European. It depends also on the country.¹⁹

Political loyalty of the MEPs is share, i.e. it belongs both to their country and their political association. Our interviewees don't state some significant conflict of loyalty in this respect. But some of them prefer

¹⁹ "According to my observations, Slovenian MEPs feel Slovenian and Europeans in rather equal way. Identity of the MEPs depends on party affiliation in their home country. For example, British conservatives feel much more British than Europeans what does not hold for other parties and for conservatives from other countries." (Interviewee no. 5)

national interests at least in some situations.²⁰ In case of collision of interests, they try to reach an acceptable compromise that would respect both political platform of parliamentary group as well as the interests of the MEPs' home countries. Some of the interviewed state that it is sometimes hard for Slovenian MEPs to establish what in fact the national interest of Slovenia on particular matter is, due to a lack of consensus at the national level.²¹

It is said that the MEPs are, beside their active engagement in their European political groups, involved also in Slovenian national politics. Some of them hold rather strong positions in their political parties. However, for some their influence in this regard is rather questionable. Generally, the interviewed support further integration of the EU which however shouldn't bring some strong centralisation. They think that the role of the EP will increase while the role of the national parliaments will not lose importance.

²⁰ "As concerns legislative proposals which have direct consequences for Slovenia and its interests, Slovenian MEPs are united. In this case Slovenian interests prevail over interests of political group. We try to resolve the problem of compatibility of interests by persuading of colleagues from other countries in correctness of Slovenian arguments and trying to get support for them within political group." (Interviewee no. 1)

²¹ "In one year, we probably voted on couple of hundreds of different acts, directives, declarations; in very few occasions we knew in advance what is the prevailing position of Slovenia on particular matter. " (Interviewee no. 2)

Main characteristics and patterns

We can find out that the parliamentary culture in Slovenia still differs from the one in established democracies with long tradition of parliamentarism, and also from the EU which is based on norms and principles of these democracies. There is a lack of tolerance for political and ideological differences what is related to insufficient willingness for listening opposing views and cooperation across party lines, i.e. with people with different political orientation. This is what Slovenia could learn from its European partners. In this respect, situation is more similar to other new EU countries from East-Central Europe what is understandable considering cultural closeness and similar political traditions. Comparing the EU with the SP and also other national parliaments, there is more relaxed climate in the first, with more trust and communication between them. This could be explained by the fact that the EP still does not have the political role comparable to those of national parliaments, thus tensions deriving from the decision-making process (where the key issues are discussed and voted) are not so strong. There is also much less 'historical burden', i.e. conflicts and animosities typical for certain political traditions that characterise political (and also parliamentary) life in some countries. The last holds for Slovenia who has tradition of strong ideological polarisation (so called *Kulturkampf*) between political camps that had in some periods very poisonous effects of political and social climate (Dolenc, 1996). Some elements of this polarisation that still in place in present time have been manifesting also in relations and practice of Slovenian parliamentarianism.

However, Slovenian MEPs are, in general, quite comparable with their colleagues, also those from established Western democracies. They have no problems in communication and establishing contacts. They notice

only minor differences of cultural nature between MEPs from different EU countries. However, there were no significant problems on this basis, meaning there is enough cultural compatibility in the EU legislature. *Obviously there is a cultural similarity between MEPs from Slovenia and the EU countries.* Majority of them share both national and European identity, which are, as it seems, mostly compatible. The same holds for the relationship between representation of national interests and interests of political groups. These interests are compatible in most cases, when not they are usually being resolved through dialog.

It seems that cultural differences between parliaments of the EU member countries and between them and the EP are more pronounced than differences within EP, i.e. between MEPs from different EU countries. Reason for this could be the selection of people who run for office in the EP that is made by political parties. At least bigger and more 'serious' parties put on their candidate lists for European elections people who are internationally comparable and sympathetic for European idea what is not always the case for national elections. These are in most cases people with international experience, if not international prestige. Another reason is exposure of MEPs from different countries to common institutional framework with its rules, norms and principles. As claimed by neoinstitutionalist approach (see March and Olsen, 1995), normative structure of particular institutional environment strongly affect mental and behavioural patterns of individuals. People who are engaged in the same institution thus tend to evolve similar (or at least compatible) habits and modes of conduct.

The role in domestic political life differs considerably between Slovenian MEPs. Two of them from the period 2004-2009 were leaders of (main oppositional) political parties and two vice-presidents (of main parties of

government coalition), and while others did not occupy any high positions in their parties. However, even their positions differed. One of them, a former primer minister is still very influential in his party, another one, also a former high ranking functionary, ceased being involved in party politics, while the third one, a former journalist, has never before been active in politics. Five out of eight current MEPs are former ministers (one even former prime minister). In general, we can thus say that Slovenian MEPs rank rather high (at least in formal terms) in domestic politics. But this is a result of specific internal relations in some political parties.

The respondents were rather supportive to further integration of the EU. However, we have to mention that most of the interviews were conducted before some events (especially rejection of European constitution on referenda in France and Netherlands) occurred that put under question the course of the integration. It would be interested to hear their opinion on these matters – have they perhaps changed their assessment on development of the EU?

We can see that Slovenian MEPs, regarding their experience, competence, character and prestige, stand out from general political structure in the country. Before they become elected in the EP, they had successful carrier in politics or in some other field (business, journalism). In this regard, they more resemble representatives in the EP from other EU countries (including the ones from 'old' democracies) than their colleagues in national parliament. Another is In this way, they could represent a link between national and European level of policy-making and well as agents of 'Europeisation' of Slovenian political space.

Discussion

Political and parliamentary life in post-communist Slovenia was often characterised by strong ideological polarisation and animosities between political camps. So called Kulturkampf that appeared already in the mid-nineteenth century, referring to the conflict between religious and secular forces for ideological hegemony was in some way in place also in recent period, importantly determining dynamics of political life. Ideological confrontation was focusing on topic like the role of Catholic Church and the especially the attitude towards the past, meaning both the period of the Second World War and the communist period. This period is, due to numerous tragic events (occupation, civil war, post-war killings and court show-trials, dispossessions and persecution of political opponents), the source of numerous trauma and resentments among Slovenians. Ideologically based struggles have been often conditioned by the interests of their protagonists and can thus serve as the means to (de)legitimise existing relations of powers and organise material resources (Tomšič, 2000). Such circumstances represent considerable problem for a successful social transformation because, on one hand, the energy needed to solve the burning economic and social issues is being wasted, and on the other hand, the split between the holders of the opposing ideological options is on the increase the possibilities to reach compromises.

After the 2004 parliamentary elections it appeared that political polarisation would ease, with the issue of a socio-economic regulation gaining in importance (Adam and Tomšič, 2012: 61). The campaign before these elections campaign was evidently less burdened 'old' ideological issues. In front are coming issues related to socio-economic regulation of society like liberalisation of economy, reform of taxation, reform of welfare

state etc. This turn toward 'issues of the future' has to be welcomed since it leads politics in more productive and development-oriented direction. It can be argued that this trend is at least partly conditioned by Slovenia's accession to European Union.²² The most of the issues that are at the top of Slovenian political agenda are not unique but the ones all European societies are dealing with. In this sense, integration into European political space brought more awareness for key problems of social and economic development facing European societies.

We can expect that participation of Slovenian representatives in the European Parliament would have positive contribution for this matter, since it is becoming not only a forum for discussions of European policies but an increasingly important player in the process of creation and implementation of these policies. The problem is that problems facing the Union (slow economic growth, lagging behind USA and some other countries in terms of competitiveness and technological development) coincide with uncertain future of European integration. This means that decision-makers have dual role: not only creation of specific policies but also determination of the very nature of Europe as political entity. The later has to be carried out in inclusive way, with equal participation of all member-countries and thoroughly discussed in bodies like the European Parliament where people from the Eastern part of the Union should contribute their share.

²² However, in the last years, animosities and conflicts between the political camps soon regained considerable strength. The most evident example of such ideological activities was the decision of municipal authorities in the Slovenian capital Ljubljana to name a future street after the former Yugoslav communist leader Josip Broz Tito that met with strong resistance from the centre-right opposition and a considerable section of the public, accusing the mayor and his followers of trying to rehabilitate the communist regime.

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