

THE VOICE OF THE SMALLER COUNTRIES IN THE EU DEPEND ON THE QUALITY AND CAPACITY OF THE PEOPLE THAT WE ARE SENDING TO THE EU INSTITUTIONS, THE SLOVENIAN AMBASSADOR TO BULGARIA SAID

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The European integration is a long process. What Slovenia has achieved? What is the next step?

When we were leaving Yugoslavia at the end of the 80-es and in the beginning of the 90-es, we had this big dream of becoming the integral part of Europe, members of the EU and NATO, area of prosperity. We did not even dare to think about having the Presidency of the EU one day. Most of those crucial goals we have achieved. The country is doing economically well, we have a stable democracy, therefore, the huge stories that have politically mobilised the Slovenians in the past are over. What is next? I believe that most Slovenians just expect that their country will offer them a good standard of living, feeling of security, fair perspective for their children. They want to feel the general economic progress in their own pockets and they want to be citizens of a state that is respected in the world and has good relations with its neighbours. Those are the goals for the future which our politicians will have to work on. We believe that not being a big country could also be a big advantage for us and we will have to use it.

The global financial crisis affected Europe. How does it influence the Slovenian economy?

Not so much as some other countries. After all, the financial crisis did not hit so much the European markets as it did to the American market. The Slovenian economy is very European and EU-oriented. Our main partners are in Western Europe - Germany, Austria and Italy. Certainly there are some consequences. We had very good economic growth in the previous years which - similar as in Bulgaria - climbed over 6 percent in the last year. In 2008 the growth will - due to the global financial crisis and signs of recession - for sure slow down, however, we still expect it will be between 4 and 5 percent. The Slovenian stock market also felt the crisis despite the fact that our stock market was always something special - even in the years when the world stocks were falling, our stocks were just going up. For many Slovenians the investments in domestic stock was almost like a game where everybody wins and most of them actually made excellent gains. However, in these first months the Slovenian stocks collapsed as well and only now they are gradually recovering. Now the people know that you can also lose money on the stock market which was a lesson that had to be learned. I am convinced that the Slovenians will be from now on more cautious with their money when it comes to speculative investments and that is good.

Slovenia is a small country like Bulgaria. How do you deal with the great European challenges for example to reach the living standard in the so called "old member-states" and economy growth? Which successful practices you would recommend to Bulgaria?

It is not appropriate for us to give any advice because the starting point of development of Slovenia and Bulgaria was very different. Although both countries were living in socialist systems the Slovenian economy even in the socialist times, in former Yugoslavia, has already to a great extent operated

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according to the market rules. The Slovenian economy was always export-oriented. It had to be: our own market was always too small for our most successful companies.

Therefore, the collapse of Yugoslavia did hurt our economy because it lost an important part of the market; however, the companies were able to adjust to the new circumstances in a very short time, turning themselves even more to the western markets. We could build our development on a quite strong basis that was already set in the previous system which was not the case of Bulgaria. The foreign capital did not enter Slovenia to such extent as it entered other post-socialist countries.

Actually, in the first years of independence Slovenia did not have much foreign investments because there was a general political view that the best Slovenian companies should remain in Slovenian ownership. We also had system of privatization where ordinary people received certain amount of shares of their companies for free and they could also buy them. Therefore, the ownership was not concentrated just in the hands of the few. We have always had a very strong welfare state, looking up to the Scandinavian model. So far, we did not allow the so called turbo-capitalism to win over the social concepts; hopefully it will remain that way. The development of Slovenia was during all the years after the independence and even in the years before that quite stable, without big oscillations, with constant growth, which was not the case in Bulgaria.

Currently our BDP per capita is close to 18.000 EUR which is 90 percent of the average BDP in the EU. Another important point: throughout the 90's which were for us the crucial years after gaining independence, Slovenia had coalition governments which contributed to the economic progress with moderate and reasonable political decisions. That is why I could not advise much what you could use from Slovenia.

I think your economy is doing well. When I talk to Western diplomats they are very optimistic as regards your future economic development. We encourage Slovenian companies to come to Bulgaria because up to now they very much focused on former Yugoslavia - Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia, lately on Romania. I think they are gradually discovering the advantages of the Bulgarian market. The trade exchange between Slovenia and Bulgaria doubled last year in comparison to 2006, the perspectives for this year are even better.

What Slovenian people and society know about Bulgaria?

Frankly speaking, I would say not much. People from my generation know Popangelov and Stoichkov, your red wines are known, the story with nurses in Libya filled our media as well, but generally the events in your country rarely attract attention of the Slovenian public. However, I don't know how much the Bulgarian people know about Slovenia. Certainly the publicity in the European press as regards corruption and crime certainly has an impact on the image of Bulgaria in my country as well.

But on the other hand, Bulgaria is gaining good reputation in Slovenia as a tourist destination. More and more Slovenians are having vacations in Bulgaria both in winter and in summer. They come because they see nice places and the prices are very attractive. More Slovenians will come to Bulgaria in this summer, there are charter flights from both our airports, Ljubljana and Maribor. As you might know, there are no direct regular flights from Slovenia to Bulgaria yet. When people come and get to know the country from its best sides this certainly helps the image of Bulgaria in Slovenia.

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Bulgarian society and politicians currently have met many obstacles in the fight with corruption, the management of the European funds. The governing coalition announced serious changes in the government. How these events affect our role in the European politics? How do you see our image as a diplomat? How Slovenian media and society comment these changes?

It's true that the European press is quite critical to Bulgaria, however, it is by far not so critical to your country as your own press. That certainly does not help your image. However, you are a journalist, I was a journalist most of my professional life, we both know that we like more the bad than the good news and that the journalists are not supposed to be the ones who have to take care of the image of their country. It's the politicians' job.

No doubt, the problems of corruption and organised crime dominate Bulgaria's negative international image. The positive side of this negative publicity is the fact that you are openly discussing these problems. By making them the top stories of your media you are on the way of starting to solve them, putting pressure on the state authorities who have to produce results in fighting crime and corruption. There is no secret that Brussels is not satisfied with those results. With some recent moves your government demonstrated the political will to improve the situation but it will take time before the results might be visible. On the other hand, Bulgaria has many positive things to show to the world. You have a very dynamic economic development. You have created an extremely favourable environment for foreign investments. The standard of living is getting better and better. You have beautiful touristic sights.

This is my second time in Bulgaria. I was here for the first time 22 years ago and it's a huge difference. My friends from Slovenia who had visited me in Sofia were positively surprised because they did not expect to come in a very pleasant, very Western city. They very much relied on this negative information. They expected that on each corner there will be a criminal who will threaten their lives. Diplomats can help you get away from this image by sending a correct and balanced information about Bulgaria to their countries, however, you have to do more for the positive promotion of your country abroad - besides solving your domestic issues.

The Lisbon Treaty changes the position of the member states in the European politics. Bulgaria and Slovenia are small countries. How the Lisbon Treaty will affect our role in the European politics and the institutional mechanism?

The Lisbon Treaty gives among other things much more power, influence and competence to the European Parliament and to the national parliaments. This is a guarantee that the EU will not become a union of countries dominated by few. We should not think so much about what a country loses or has to give away in terms of sovereignty but what is gained by being in the EU. The EU will never become the USA. I cannot imagine that this EU could survive if there would be ambitions to impose on its member countries any decisions that those member countries would consider as not being in their national interest. That would be the start of the end of the EU. Even if the EU will further strengthen its common institutions, the smaller countries like Slovenia and Bulgaria will have their voice when the decisions will be taken - after all, there are more so called smaller countries in the EU than the big ones, therefore, our

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two countries will never be alone in opposing possible attempts that the strongest countries might dominate the EU. It will also very much depend on the quality and capacity of the people that we are sending to the EU institutions. That is why it is important to have competent diplomats and politicians everywhere the EU politics are decided. It is also very important that the new EU member countries support each other's candidacies for important positions in the EU institutions.

There is an initiative "Talk to Europe" of our media and it is aimed at raising the awareness of the European institutions in Bulgaria. Would you say some words and did you have a similar initiative in Slovenia too?

Yes, we had initiatives on informing Slovenians about the EU particularly in the last two-three years before joining the EU and in the year before taking over the Presidency. The success of such actions very much depends on if you are able to attract the attention of the people. They usually think about EU institutions only when some decisions affect their everyday life. Otherwise they don't care much who is the EU commissioner or what is the Commission doing. You have somehow to raise their interest and create the need for this kind of information.

The interview was taken on April 22, 2008, under the initiative "Talk to Europe", carried out under Plan D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate of EC. You may read the [first part of the interview here](#).