Role of Slovak Political Elites in the EU integration project – a neo-Gramscian analysis

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Abstract

The study of International Relations (IR) is dominated by approaches that tend to confirm and often serve to legitimize neo-liberal economic policies around the world. In contrast to these, the neo-Gramscian approach to IR is cited within the historical materialist problematic of social transformations and questions the rationale behind the existing institutions. To do this effectively it inessential that theoretical work centered on the neo-Gramscian approach goes hand in hand with real world application of its findings. In addition to theoretical feasibility the validity of an approach is often best evaluated by its ability to provide clear explanation of real world events. This article employs the neo-Gramscian approach to present the 2004 enlargement of the European Union (EU). As such it attempts apply the neo-Gramscian approach to a real world event. It does so by presenting a case study of the Slovak Republic (SR) a Central and Eastern Europe
Country (CEEC) that joined the EU in May 2004. The intention is to decipher whether the most recent EU expansion can be characterized as hegemonic.

1. Neo-Gramscian Critique of Transition and Integration

Traditional approaches to IR along with traditional integration theories tend to suggest that EU integration is a rational or even a natural development. These approaches are based on theories that assume certain truths about the observable reality. Cox (1981) states that theories are developed and exist for someone or for some purpose. He elaborates: theories are based on perspectives that draw inputs from their position in time and space. This position is especially important when theories explain phenomena in social sciences. Social and political time and space directly impact the perspectives upon which theories are based. Therefore analyses performed under the auspices of a given theory allow for questions to be raised and explanations to be offered within the framework of the theory. Cox suggests that there are two types of theories. One type of theory provides the framework within which problems can be conceptualized, studied, understood and within which solutions can be suggested. These are the features of a “problem-solving” theory. The goal of this theory is to make the power relationships and institutions work smoothly within the world it observes – with no significant changes to these social and power relationships. In general, the institutions and relationships as such are not called into question.
The second type of theory described by Cox is the critical theory. The critical nature of this type of theory comes from the sense that it stands apart from the generally accepted order of the world and directly questions how that order came to existence. Critical theories are directed towards the assessment of the framework of action, which problem solving theory accepts as its parameters (Cox, 1981). While the nature of problem-solving theory causes fragmentation in the field, critical theory creates connected images of the observable reality, and it seeks to understand the process of change. Critical theory is also a theory of history, concerned with both the past and the process of historical change. The study of history allows for a normative choice of alternatives (which are feasible transformations of the existing world) to be considered. Cox suggests that prevailing viewpoints of different periods in history support one type of theory over the other. The end of the Cold War closed a period of uncertainty and brought about a general acceptance of capitalism, individualism and democracy as the prevailing perspectives of the current period. This elucidates the prevalence of problem solving-theories of transition and European Integration of CEEC.

Rather than employing one of the problem solving theories, this article will attempt to present a coherent picture of the extent to which the discourse on EU integration and the articulation of decisions leading to this goal fit the neo-Gramscian understanding of the current hegemony in which neo-liberal capitalism – through the deepening and widening of the EU – is actively engaged in the project of incorporating larger territories. The neo-Gramscian perspective will illustrate the experience of the SR as it changes its focus from
one international regime to another; from “actual existing socialism” to globalized neo-liberal capitalism.

1.1 Methodology and Research Outline

The neo-Gramscian perspective of IR as developed by Cox and expanded upon by Gill will be employed here. The neo-Gramscian understanding of IR is based on the work of Antonio Gramsci at the beginning of the 20th century. In his work Gramsci attributes a very important role to ideas as he focuses on the open-ended feature of social change through class struggle. In his opinion, ideas on one hand are part of the overall structure, and they are represented by intersubjective meanings – he suggests that ideas establish the wider framework of thinking. On the other hand ideas can also be used as weapons to legitimize policies (Gramsci, 1971). This is the framework within which this study will be localized.

In order to understand and explain the most recent expansion of the EU in CEEC from the neo-Gramscian perspective, the focus of this study will be the attitudes of elites in creating a pro-EU sentiment in the country. First the rationale behind the selection of the above attribute will be presented. Next, data on the attitudes and perspectives of political elites using direct personal interviews and a mail survey will be gathered and analyzed.

1.2 Hegemony and Elites
In Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony, the dominant class gains hegemonic status by a combination of both force and consent. The more complete the hegemonic rule of the dominant group, the less force is needed and used to maintain this status (Gramsci, 1971). He maintains that hegemony even in the “parliamentary regime” means the permeation of values, attitudes and beliefs of the dominant class in the society, serving as the basis for maintaining the status quo. The values, attitudes and beliefs are then accepted by the people as “common sense” so that the philosophy, culture and morality of the ruling class appear as the natural order of things (Boggs, 1976). Domination is not merely forced from above, but has to prevail through the consent of subordinated groups who believe that the “common sense” approach will serve their interests. In order for a group to gain hegemonic status it must create a “historic bloc”. Gramsci stresses the importance of organic intellectuals - elites in this struggle for a hegemony.

Gramsci used his own experiences as a journalist in Turin to analyze the bourgeoisie press of Italy at the beginning of the 20th century. Forgacs and Nowell-Smith (1991) in their introduction of Gramsci’s notes on Journalism characterize the pre-1919 Italian state – as a state that had a very narrow social base. Within this society, the media existed as the vehicle to “voice the interests” of the above groups. They explain that the connection between the media and the influential classes resulted from the newspapers’ need for financial backing. The shareholders either directly or indirectly “exerted pressure” on the papers and coerced them to follow a “specific line”. Similarly, the newspapers became tied to the political patrons and as such became the “mouthpieces” for their political ideologies. Press and - in general - media can be seen in Gramsci’s writing as
constituting both the framework of society and also as a powerful actor within it.

Gramsci recognized the importance of the press in influencing the views of the people. Analyzing the press of the bourgeoisie Italian state, he identified and described the types of periodicals, newspapers, essays, yearbooks and almanacs that would be needed to create and maintain a counter hegemonic movement that would have the potential to eventually become hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971).

1.3 Hegemony in International Relations

Gramsci’s analysis of hegemony primarily focused on Italy, but his Prison Notebooks included references to the development of hegemony around the world. Of hegemony he wrote:

[Hegemony] occurs not only within the nation, between the various forces of which the nation is composed, but in the international and world-wide fields, between complexes of international and continental civilizations. (as cited in Joll, 1977).

Cox (1981), in his article on Social Forces, States and World Orders, was concerned with the explanatory power of existing perceptions attempting to explain hegemony and dominance. He suggested that the realist and neo-realist perspectives explaining hegemonies and world orders such as pax Britannica or pax Americana are not sufficient in explaining their success or failure. He turned to Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony, proposing that the stability and the success of world hegemonies is derived
from “the coherent conjunction or fit between a configuration of material power, the collective image of world order and a set of institutions which administer the order with a certain semblance of universality”. These three elements create the basic conditions for hegemony on the international scale. Their conjuncture creates the historic circumstance for hegemony to emerge, exist and sustain its power.

In asking the questions on how hegemonies come about, Cox suggested that the current hegemonic order of the late 20th century was born from increased internationalization of the state, internationalization of production and the internationalization of class structure (Cox, 1981). Internationalization of the state is perceived as the outcome of the institutional change on the global scale after WWII when international organizations took on levels of formalization unknown in the past. Their main intention was to negotiate social pressures within devastated countries that hoped to participate in the exchange of goods and services on world markets. As examples, Cox presented the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The IMF was established to provide financial help to countries with shortages in the balance of payments. IMF funding attempted to mitigate the deflationary pressures caused by the imbalance. The World Bank was created to provide longer term financing for countries in financial trouble. In both cases, Cox stated, help in the form of financial appropriation was coupled with a rigorous monitoring process. National policy-making was thus subordinated to the needs set by the funding agencies whose help was essential in reconstructing devastated economies. In addition to domestic policies being subjugated to conditions from abroad,
internationalization of the state was further intensified by the alignment of state agencies – ministries of finance and prime ministers’ offices within individual states (Cox, 1981).

Gill (1993) expanded on the work of Cox and identified the complex incremental development of a transnational class as the dominant process behind the expansion of the current hegemonic order. However, Gill stressed the importance of capital mobility. In his view hegemony is not limited to the geographic area of the developed Western capitalist countries. Gill suggested that this hegemony seeks legitimization from beyond the boundaries of the West.

… Western triumphalism and propagandists who proclaim the ‘end of history’, developments in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have reinforced the claims to credibility, positional power and vigor of the hegemonic discourses in the West. (Gill, 1993)

Since this Gill’s was written, the development in CEEC has proven that the project supported by the local elites and Western market reformers has prevailed. Full economic liberalization is the winner. The type of neo-liberal reform introduced in many countries of the region meets the objectives of the national elites, the EU and the transnational capital who strive for the expansion of capitalist accumulation across the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Bieler, 2003).

2. Political Elites of the Slovak Republic
The European integration project became rather popular after the collapse of communist regimes. This new taste for European orientation is exemplified by the speech of Václav Havel, a former playwright and dissident of Czechoslovakia, in front of a Joint Session of the U.S. Congress in February 1990 - just 2 months after being elected president of Czechoslovakia. When referring to the historic changes in Central and Eastern Europe he said:

What does all this mean for the world in the long run? Obviously a number of things. This is, I am firmly convinced, a historically irreversible process, and as a result Europe will begin again to seek its own identity without being compelled to be a divided armoury any longer. (Havel, 1990)

Havel in his speech expressed the sentiment of both the political elites and the general population who had recently overthrown the communist regime in the region. He summarized the strong desire and aspiration to be considered European again. As a result the agreement between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic and the European Communities on December 16th, 1991 formally validated the new directions of political and economic interests of Czechoslovakia. Even though the signatories never formally ratified this agreement, it provided the basis for new association agreements signed after the Czech Republic and Slovakia became independent states in 1993. In June 1995, Slovakia officially applied for EU membership. However, by the end of October 1995, the government of the Slovak Republic received a reprimand from the European Union,
pointing to unacceptable political development in Slovakia. Later that month, at its meeting in Strasbourg, the European Parliament passed a resolution demanding that human rights and democratic rules be fully observed in the Slovak Republic. A similar message was communicated to Slovakia by the US government (“Slovakia Slips Backwards”, 1995; “Slovak Democracy ‘Suspect’”, 1995; “Slovak leader warned”, 1995).

Significant change in Slovakia’s European integration occurred after the 1998 elections. Mikulas Dzurinda became the Prime Minister. The uniting theme for the parties (both from the right and the left) involved in his government was their general opposition to Meciar (former prime minister) and their shared pro-Western and pro-European course. This new course was reflected in the decision making of the executive. The second meeting of the new cabinet held on November 3rd, 1998 included 10 points of business. The most prominent of these was the decision to approve the immediate visit of Mikulas Dzurinda in Brussels and Vienna with high-ranking representatives of EU and NATO to be held on November 5th and 6th, 1998 (Slovak Government, 1998a). EU and NATO membership became a clear priority for the government. On December 2nd, 1998, the National Council of the Slovak Republic approved the proposed Program Statement of Dzurinda’s government. This approval by the parliament showed the wide-spread support of political elites/legislators for a change in Slovakia’s foreign affairs. The Program Statement in the section on Foreign Affairs indicated:

The Government will pay special attention to the process of Euro-Atlantic integration where Slovakia has recently been situated in a position not appropriate to its potential.
Slovak Foreign and Security policy will be based on a belief that the protection of own identity, sovereignty, security and a creation of constructive conditions for economic development of the Slovak Republic is only possible within the framework of European and trans-Atlantic associations. (Slovak Government, 1998b, translation by author)

In the same document, the government outlined a strategic plan to join the NATO, the EU, and to further the cooperation with the Council of Europe and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). A continuation of the same strategy was also outlined in the Program Statement of Dzurinda’s second government (in office since October 2002). In this document, the government set the strategic goal of finishing the negotiation process with the EU and achieving full membership in 2004 (Slovak Government, 2004). On May 1st, 2004, the plan proposed by Dzurinda’s first government became reality. Slovakia became a member of NATO and joined the European Union - also gaining membership in OECD and working very closely with the Council of Europe. The project was complete.

Gramsci’s hegemony suggests a permeation of specific values among intellectuals/political elites and legislators related to a hegemonic project. In the following section the values motivating the support for EU membership among legislators will be identified and utilized to support the claim about the hegemonic nature of Slovakia’s EU integration.
2.1 Support of EU Integration by Slovak Political Elites/Legislators – Survey and Personal Interviews

A survey of legislators was carried out between April 15th and July 15th, 2004 by a mail questionnaire. All 150 members of the parliament were contacted for a response. The questionnaire was sent in three separate mailings with intermediary e-mail reminders. The questionnaire was designed to gather qualitative information on the opinions of legislators about Slovakia’s transition period - from 1989 to the entry to the European Union on May 1st, 2004. The questions in the survey were divided into 4 sections. The first two gathered information on the legislators’ opinions on EU membership. Section three gathered information on political perspectives of the transition that guided the legislators’ decision-making in determining Slovakia’s future. The last section collected data on demographic characteristics of the respondents. The response rate for the survey was 37.3 percent.

2.1.1 EU Membership

An overwhelming majority (98%) of the respondents indicated support for Slovakia’s membership in the EU. Full support of membership was indicated by 87% of the legislators. Only 2% of the respondents expressed any reservations about Slovakia joining the European Union. This result is very much in line with the political declarations of parties in the current Slovak Parliament in. Only one party in the, the Communist Party of Slovakia, did not campaign on an active policy of Slovakia’s
membership in the European Union. However, even this party acknowledges the necessity of Slovakia’s EU membership given “the political-economical situation and the geo-political location of Slovakia in Europe” (Communist Party of the Slovak Republic, 2004). This result points to a general acceptance of Slovakia’s EU membership among all parties in the parliament.

But what do the legislators believe that Slovakia will gain from EU membership? First, they were asked a general question to identify if EU membership will be an advantage or disadvantage in furthering Slovakia’s interests in Europe. Roughly 90% agreed that Slovakia’s EU membership will be advantageous, but only 10% indicated EU membership would result in a major or slight disadvantage in furthering Slovakia’s interests. When legislators were asked to express their beliefs concerning the loss of sovereignty, almost 70% of them stated that they do not perceive the loss of sovereignty due to EU membership as a problem.

To assess views on actual effects of EU integration among Slovak legislators, the survey asked them to evaluate the immediate short term (12 month) impact of Slovakia’s EU membership on the economy and the day-to-day life of Slovaks. Interestingly, only 34% of legislators believe that Slovaks’ day-to-day life will improve in the 12 months following the date when Slovakia joined the club, with 52% believing that there will be no significant change. On the other hand, 53% of legislators believe that the economy will be better off, while 38% expect no change to the economy. There are at least two possible explanations. One, the legislators’ decisions to support EU membership are not
guided by the interests of the individual population but rather by the performance of the
economy as a whole (and here it is assumed that these are in contradiction). Two, the
legislators are more aware of Slovakia’s place in a global market and concentrate on
long-run positive effects of EU membership (believing in a trickle-down economic
time) and the policies (marketization, liberalization, deregulation, privatization and
increased competition) required by the project.

The second conclusion appears more in line with the legislators’ response to a question
on the longer term effects of EU membership. The legislators’ top four long term
expectations are economic growth, job creation (connoting benefits to the public but also
increased business activity), benefit to businesses, and an overall belief that the benefits
of membership will outweighing the disadvantages. Economy and economic
performance expectations appear at the center of the integration project in Slovakia.

2.1.2 Political Perspectives

Political perspectives on the success of democratization and transformation from a
planned economy to a market economy were gathered next. The legislators were asked
to state their satisfaction with the democracy in Slovakia. As a result only 7% indicated
that they were very satisfied with democracy, but more than 20% of the respondents
expressed dissatisfaction with democracy in Slovakia. In view of the ongoing economic
transformation the legislators were asked to indicate which model of capitalist economy
Slovakia should build. Social-democratic capitalism as known from Austria, Germany
and Scandinavia seems to be the most desirable system with 55% of the legislators. Highly competitive corporate capitalism of Japan and Korea, were preferred by no legislators. In line with political ideologies of parties represented in the Slovak Parliament, 5% of the respondents indicated that Slovakia should not build capitalism. Market-led capitalism known from the USA and the UK is preferred by 38% of the legislators. Slovak legislators were then asked to choose between two extreme cases describing the relationship between capital and labor.

Over 50% of legislators indicated a clear preference for a highly competitive business environment - even at a price of lower labor protection. This is much more in line with the Japanese and Korean model. Clearly, any mention of decreased competitiveness/increased protection of labor remind the respondents of the past economic system.

The self-identified political affiliation of legislators confirms their disagreement with the economic system of the foregone era - of “really existing socialism”. Legislators were asked to identify their own political perspectives. Over 50% of the legislators identify their political perspectives to be located on the right of the political spectrum. Usually, in developed democracies, the identification of political perspectives on the left-to-right continuum is related to their opinions on the functioning of the economy and on various social issues (the environment, abortion, the death penalty and on the role of religion). However, in Slovakia’s new political party system, legislators’ identification on the political spectrum is most related to opinions on the economy. The identification of 52%
of legislators with “the right” points to a commonly shared, specific economic perspective among political elites in Slovakia. High levels of competitiveness, even at the price of low protection of labor, are central to the perspective of the legislators surveyed.

This survey of political elites revealed a high level of support among legislators for Slovakia’s EU integration. Although the basic factors such as peace and cooperation among European nations resonate with the legislators, their preference for an economic result drives their support for the project. In the short term, legislators expect businesses - rather than the general public - to receive greater benefit from integration. In the long run, an overwhelming majority of legislators believe that businesses will benefit from EU membership, while barely half of them expect the worker’s rights/protection to improve. Legislators also clearly indicated their preference for a highly competitive business environment - even at the price of less liberal labor laws.

In addition to the mail questionnaire, personal interviews served as another attempt to understand the position of political elites on the issue of Slovakia’s EU integration. A group of 15 members of the Slovak Parliament was asked to participate in a personal interview. The legislators in the group were selected based on their active participation in Slovakia’s EU negotiations – with the sample including all political parties represented in the legislature. Eight of the legislators responded to the request, and four (each from a different party) agreed to an interview - all held between March 22nd and March 26th, 2004 in Bratislava in the Slovak Republic. The location of the interviews was selected
based on mutual agreement (three held at party offices, and one conducted at the Slovak Parliament). The topics of the conversations centered on EU integration and the economic transformation that accompanied the process since 2002. All four indicated a strong support for EU membership. There was no question in their mind that Slovakia would be better off. They have all participated in national politics for at least 10 years, giving them the background to reflect on Slovakia’s path to EU membership.

Most important results of the personal interviews are the opinions of Slovak legislators about the role of international organizations (IMF, World Bank, WTO and NATO) in Slovakia’s transition and quest for EU membership. They expressed their view that these organizations have significantly contributed to the success of Slovakia’s transition from a planned to a market economy. They argued that these organizations are “essential to Slovakia in building a market economy”, allowing Slovakia “to finance budget deficits” during transition, and serving as “a natural part of the globalized world economy”.

The deputies expressed their conviction that EU membership is inevitable, either because the country is geographically in Europe or because only through integration do economic opportunities arise - and only through these economic opportunities can Slovakia progress. They reiterated their opinion that Slovakia at this time does not have another choice. A highly competitive market - and also a more socially conscious market economy - are desired, with externalities of capitalism mitigated by democracy and the government, and international organizations enabling Slovakia’s transition.
Both the personal interviews and the survey revealed a general acceptance and support of Slovakia’s path towards EU membership – an acceptance of a predetermined path as the neo-Gramscian approach would suggest.

3. Conclusion

The article attempted to discern whether or not Slovakia’s transition from communism in 1989 to its joining of the EU in 2004 could be characterized as hegemonic in Gramscian terms. Observations on the role of intellectuals (specifically legislators and their opinions) are in line with Gramsci’s vision of the role that organic intellectuals play in the formation and perpetuation of a hegemonic order. The observations of legislators and their opinions on both the transition and EU membership point to the formal political elite’s unquestioned acceptance of the rationality and desirability of Slovakia’s path. In general, the majority of legislators accepted the inevitability of Slovakia’s EU membership.

The permeation of pro-EU ideas among legislators suggest that Slovakia’s transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy and from socialism to capitalism (culminating in Slovakia’s acceptance to the EU) was a movement to align the country with the dominant world order – thus it should be considered hegemonic.

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