

CAFÉ EUROPE

Marathon man

Mikulas Dzurinda and Slovakia's race to catch up

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Mikulas Dzurinda running the Kosice marathon in 2009. Photo: Marathon-Photos.com

Of the ten new member state leaders in attendance at the raising-of-the-flag ceremony in Dublin on 1 May 2004, only one could claim to have overseen his country's accession process from start to finish. This was Mikulas Dzurinda, prime minister of Slovakia.

“I remember all the details, especially when they raised our flag. It was the top event of the day, the change of flags, and one of them was the flag of my home [country]. It was very, very emotional. I understood. I felt that suddenly we are equal!”

Dzurinda was born in 1955 in Spissky Stvrtok, a small medieval town in Eastern Slovakia. He witnessed the difficulties of life under communism early on in life.

“My parents were teachers but they were also [Catholic] believers. On the day I was born, my father’s boss – my father was the director of a primary school – handed him an official paper excluding him from the educational system because he didn’t want to become a member of the Communist Party and refused to cooperate with the secret police. From then on my father was a worker, a simple manual worker. So, as a child, I felt that I was a second class citizen. I understood when I was about 10 years old that he was expelled not because of lacking abilities but because of his values.”

His father allowed young Mikulas to listen to Radio Free Europe and Voice of America. As Dzurinda recalls, “I had to promise five or ten times that I would not speak about this on the street or in school”.

Dzurinda graduated from the University of Transportation and Communications in Zilina, a town of 80,000 inhabitants close to the Polish (and now Czech) border. He came to Bratislava to work as an economic analyst at the Transportation Research Institute. Shortly before the collapse of communism he received his PhD and was promoted to a position in the regional directorate of the Czechoslovak Railways in Bratislava.

Following the Velvet Revolution of 1989 Dzurinda entered politics – as an expert on railways – with the newly established Christian Democratic Movement (KDH). In 1991, he became the deputy minister of transport of the Slovak government in Bratislava. The following year, he was elected to the Slovak Parliament.

The same elections sealed the end of Czechoslovakia. The year before, in spring 1991, Vladimir Meciar had split from the anti-communist “Public Against Violence” movement. After he won the 1992 elections, he agreed with Vaclav Klaus, his Czech counterpart, to bury the federal state without organizing a referendum. On 1 January 1993 both became the prime ministers of independent states.

In newly independent Slovakia, KDH became the backbone of the political opposition against the Meciar government. Dzurinda gradually rose through its ranks to the position of deputy chairman for economy. In 1994, he was appointed minister of transport in a caretaker government; he left the post seven months later when

parliamentary elections returned Meciar to power. While the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland moved towards EU membership, Slovakia fell increasingly behind. In its “opinion” in 1997 the European Commission highlighted “the instability of Slovakia’s institutions, their lack of rootedness in political life and the shortcomings in the functioning of its democracy.” It concluded that Slovakia did not fulfil the political criteria and refrained from starting accession talks.

At that time KDH and four other opposition parties formed the Slovak Democratic Coalition (SDK). Mikulas Dzurinda, a junior opposition figure and a compromise candidate, became the coalition’s chief spokesman. A few months later, having become a popular figure in the media, he was confirmed as the SDK’s leader for the crucial October 1998 elections. The outcome of the poll, in which the SDK secured 26.3 percent of the popular vote, catapulted Dzurinda to the prime ministership. The government, a grand coalition of forces united by little more than their opposition to Meciar, comprised eight political parties from all across the political spectrum.

“We had a lot of misbalances. The country was isolated, its reputation was very, very bad. So my main goal and my first priority were to change the [political] climate and the [foreign policy] orientation of the country: simply said, from East to West. I knew that my role was to coordinate the democratic political forces, because my first government was composed of very different people: former communists and former dissidents, Catholics and atheists, Slovaks and Hungarians. It was not easy to say ‘Look gentlemen, we should follow this direction.’”

With a young and inexperienced prime minister, Slovakia aspired to “return to Europe”. Despite the odds, Dzurinda managed not only to preserve the coalition but to pursue far-reaching reforms. The glue that held the unlikely coalition together was the objective of EU integration.

“It was clear that Europe would be reunified. In December 1997 the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Estonia and Slovenia were invited to start negotiations with the European Commission. So it was absolutely clear that the big train had started moving; the question was whether Slovakia would jump onto this train or not. Some people understood this challenge as a great opportunity. Others thought that it was not that interesting. But all of society was persuaded instinctively that there was only one way for Slovakia to go if we wanted to make our children happy.”

Dzurinda admits that there were moments – “before the elections in 1998 and also after the elections, I noticed that the left-wing part of my government was not so enthusiastic” – when he was afraid that Slovakia might miss the train. Getting the post-communist Party of the Democratic Left (SDL), one of the coalition partners, to support NATO accession, was a major challenge.

“I understood the process of European reunification not only as a political and economic issue, but also as a security issue ... It was not easy to persuade people from the SDL, the former communists, that our orientation on NATO was equally important ... In 1998, before Christmas, Pavol Kanis, my [SDL] minister of defence, told me that it was impossible to send an application for NATO membership. He told me: ‘This is not part of our tradition. For the SDL it is impossible.’ ... I invited the SDL boss [Jozef Migas] for a walk along the Danube for three or four hours, telling him, ‘Jozef, you should change your thinking! Should we turn to the West or should we remain a black hole in the centre of Europe?’ I spent many, many hours taking walks, playing football, speaking patiently with these people. This was substantial to clear our heads.

We were closer and closer each day. Some people made my life more complicated, but being honest I should also mention that there were some people inside the SDL, like [former party leader] Peter Weiss, who helped me a lot, strongly convinced as they were that Slovakia should turn to the West.

And before the summit in Helsinki [in 1999] I was quite happy because it was quite clear that we were united enough for both a NATO application and EU negotiations.”

At Helsinki, EU leaders decided to open accession talks with the so-called second group of candidates, which also included Slovakia.

By 2001 Slovakia had caught up with the first group of candidates in the negotiations. The October 2002 elections gave Dzurinda a mandate to continue his policies, allowing him to form a centre-right cabinet and to pursue even more ambitious structural economic reforms. *The Economist* later characterized Slovakia as the “reform star of central Europe, with a flat tax, labour deregulation and a solid pension system”. In November 2002, Slovakia was invited to join NATO. In December – after only 34 months, less than any other candidate country – it completed accession talks with the EU.

In the midst of this rapid transformation, Dzurinda and other Slovak leaders decided to put the country's accession to the EU to a national referendum. It was a risky decision. None of the previous three referenda in Slovakia's young history had produced a valid result. Voter participation had never reached the required 50 percent threshold. A similar outcome in the EU referendum would have been a huge embarrassment.

According to the Slovak Constitution, ratification of the accession treaty by the parliament would have been enough. Dzurinda, however, was certain that the referendum was a risk worth taking.

"I was convinced that such a decision should be confirmed by the people. I did not get the opportunity to vote for the independence of Slovakia because of such arguments. The division of the country and EU accession were steps that were practically irreversible. In such circumstances, leaders should be responsible and honest and ask people what they think about such a step. On the other hand, I believed that we would be able to motivate people and to organise a successful referendum. But I will remember forever how nervous I was on that day."

To secure a "yes" vote Dzurinda was willing to reach out even to the former arch-enemy, Vladimir Meciar, now in opposition.

"I invited him into my office. He was shocked. He told me that he could not believe that he was in the government premises again. I told him simply: 'Help me, help the country! You played a substantial role during the division of Czechoslovakia. You should also bear some of the responsibility. Ask your voters to participate in the referendum.' The meeting was short, but I wanted to do it. And Meciar promised to do it."

On 17 May 2003, 52.15 percent of Slovak voters turned out at the polls. The result was valid. An overwhelming 92.46 percent endorsed Slovakia's accession to the EU. Slovakia's long road to EU membership – Dzurinda having been there practically from day one – came to a close.

On 21 December 2007, Slovakia became part of the Schengen area. The border controls with Austria, among the last vestiges of the Cold War, were at last removed.

“I like jogging and running marathons. After I came to Bratislava [in the early 1980s], I did many, many runs along the Iron Curtain from Devin [a Bratislava suburb] along the river Morava [the border with Austria]. I still have before my eyes the soldiers that followed me with the barrel of their weapons as I did my favourite sport. For seven years I ran alongside this Iron Curtain, running and dreaming that one day I will run as a free man. Now those roads, which were built for soldiers, are used by people doing cycling, running and other sports.” ■