

Slovakia's Foreign Policy Priorities in 2016

Upon proposal of the East European Security Research Initiative Foundation, a selection of Slovakian experts commented on the probable changes in Slovakia's foreign policy, especially with respect to the Visegrad Group, the Eastern Partnership, the European Union, NATO, Ukraine, and Russia.

Q1: What changes in Slovakia's foreign policy are to be expected towards V4, EaP, EU and NATO?

Q2: Should we expect changes in Slovakia's politics towards Ukraine, Russia-Ukraine conflict and the issue of sanctions against Russia?

Dušan FISCHER, head of the International Security Program at the Slovak Foreign Policy Association

Q1: One month after the election it is difficult to predict any changes in the Slovak foreign policy for the upcoming period 2016-2020, mostly for two reasons. Firstly, priorities in foreign policy have been vague so far. We are yet to see a comprehensive plan addressing any challenges in foreign policy towards V4, EaP, EU or NATO. Secondly, current government consists of parties that most did not have a detailed political program focused on foreign policy beyond simple phrases prior to the elections in March. Two of the parties, Slovak National Party (SNS) and Kotleba-People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) are constantly questioning the need for EU membership. They do not have a plan for alternative, let alone a comprehensive plan for future of Slovakia's engagement within NATO which they also oppose.

There are, however, few conclusions we can draw from the debate. Although being very sketchy, the foreign and security policy did play a role during the election campaign. The airtime was mostly filled with fear mongering the issue of migration. This is expected to cease. Further, SNS appointed Minister of Defense, retired General Pe-

ter Gajdos who, in spite of his ties to Russia, expressed his views of Slovakia as a pro-European and pro-NATO country. Next, from July to December 2016, Slovak foreign policy will be pre-occupied by the Presidency of the EU. There is also certainty that the Slovak foreign policy will be managed solely by the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs. Its core staff remains the same, so we can expect continuation of foreign policy priorities and policies.

Q2: I don't think we should expect any dramatic changes. The foreign policy towards Ukraine and Russia has two dimensions – national level and European / NATO level. When it comes to the foreign policy towards Ukraine and Russia on bilateral level, the debate will be mainly consisting of assurance and reassurance measures in energy security sector and challenges posed by Russia's behavior in the region and influencing the stability of Eastern Ukraine after the withdrawal of its forces from Syria. The Russian invasion in Ukraine caused minimal shift in the Slovak foreign policy so if there is no escalation of the conflict there will be no change to the current policy.

In terms of security challenges from the east, NATO assurance measures such as strengthening its presence in the East will be addressed by Russia. In this regard, Slo-

vakia should stand firmly as a pro-Atlantic ally. Regarding sanctions, there will be some statements against the sanctions, mostly from the representatives of the Slovak National Party, but Slovakia mostly agrees and follows EU policies. So in this view, there should be no change and while the EU maintains compromise and consensus among its members, Slovakia should continue to be on board.

There should be an urge for more intense cross-border cooperation to prevent trafficking and criminal incidents at the border of the Schengen zone. It will be interesting to see what impact will have a potential cabinet position in the Ukrainian government for Slovakia's former Minister of Finances Ivan Mikloš.

Zuzana NOVAKOVA, *visiting researcher at Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and a junior researcher at International Institute of Social Studies in the Hague*

Q1: The incoming government consists of principally divergent parties, yet its coalition priorities were agreed in a surprisingly quick manner. This raises more doubts than hopes. The priorities of the new government rhetorically reaffirm continuity of pro-European and pro-Atlantic orientation of the country, reinforcing of national parliaments, plus an update of Slovakia's security and defense strategy.

In practice this comes in the atmosphere of an increasing radicalization within the V4 region; with the group diverging from other EU member states on questions of solidarity (such as migration crisis or sanctions on Russia). Simultaneously, Hungary and Poland experience strong illiberal backlash. Some voices already coin the Visegrad group a "cohesive bloc of illiberal anti-European nationalist governments". Even if such description might seem overstated, it suggests a lot about the possible future foreign policy direction of the region.

The incoming government is most likely to follow this path. Slovakia's old-new Prime Minister Fico is a social democrat, yet he finds a lot of common ground with those conservative V4 partners. The presence of Slovak National Party in the ruling coalition is likely to further reinforce such convergence. While the other two coalition parties (Most-Hid and Siet) stand for more liberal/Euro-positive outlook, their influence on the foreign policy of the country is likely to remain marginal. By co-opting them into a coalition SMER remains the hegemon setting the course of this government, hence there is little change to be expected.

Slovakia will take over the rotating Presidency of the EU Council from July 2016. While this role is foremost a symbolic one, but in the volatile times of EU facing multiple (security) crises it is likely to leave an imprint: shaping further response to the refugee crisis, directing the EU relations with Russia, potential facilitation of negotiations of Brexit. Let me remind again that despite the government's stated pro-European and pro-Atlantic vocation, vast majority of parties in Slovak parliament (incl. the two main coalition partners) remain openly critical and actively opposed to some of the measures defining contemporary European integration.

Q2: No. The ambivalent approach to Ukraine is most likely to persist. On the one hand Slovakia will maintain its role as a reliable partner in energy security: by providing the reverse stream option for gas as well as by opposing the plans to enhance the Nordstream gas pipeline to Germany (ie. one which by-passes both Ukraine and Slovakia, while increasing direct energy cooperation between Germany and Russia). On the other hand the old-new Prime Minister remains one of the fiercest opponents to the EU sanctions on Russia; joining Czech republic and Hungary in an outcry against the these and actively opposing any enhancement of the sanctions regime.

This ambivalent approach in high politics reflects the general nature of the public discussion about the crisis, where the public domain became a battleground of two mutually exclusive main narratives, a "pro-Ukrainian" and "pro-Russian" – reading the situation in a black and white fashion.

Jozef ULIAN, *PhD, former member of the Slovak Mission to NATO and high-ranking official in the Slovak MOD, active member of the UN Roster of SSR Experts*

Q1: The SR participated actively in decision-making of the EU and NATO on all major issues. However, since the beginning of election campaign, the FP has been driven by political marketing to solve internal problems followed by anti-Brussels propaganda. The Slovak diplomacy, fortunately only in that time, could be characterized as naive, passive and introvert in terms of refugee crises and fight against terrorism. However, results of parliamentary election in March 2016 finished one-party rule and brought slightly different situation, but not too much, indeed.

Nowadays coalition of the four political parties has formed the Government that replaced the previous one.

The new Government is more consistent to conservative governments in Hungary and in Poland, unlike the previous one. The coalition is in consensus on the European and transatlantic orientation, so we may not expect large changes of the Slovak FP. The main points of SK PRES will particularly have included the EU internal relations after the UK referendum, EU external relations to the Eastern Partnership Policy (EaP) and Western Balkan states.

Minister of Foreign Affairs is an experienced professional. After the long period of unqualified Ministers of Defense, we have got the one with military background. Both might have worked on a new National Security Strategy and Defense Strategy to replace the obsolete ones. It would be included in Manifesto of the Government of the SR for the period 2016 to 2020.

In that sense, I expect more active attitude of the Slovak FP towards EaP, a proactive attitude of the EU and NATO in the effort of building a better European security and counterterrorism paradigm during SK PRES. Parallel to that, the Slovak FP has got capacity and know-how for improving role of V4 countries to form the better future of the EU.

Q2: Slovakia, as a country on the eastern border of the EU, pays high attention to situation in our neighbor country. The FP through the Slovak aid assists as much as it can discuss adequate steps and economic strategies toward the developing situation in Ukraine. The Slovak FP has not changed opinion: the conflict in eastern Ukraine must be solved by diplomatic tools. Former Croatian president Ivo Josipović said: “Rather many years to negotiate than a day to fight.”

Due to lack of sources, essential changes in Slovak FP towards Ukraine, Russia-Ukraine conflict and sanctions against Russia should not be expected.

Marek LENČ, PhD, assistant lecturer at the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica

Q1: Despite the fact that former ruling party Smer-SD is now joined in a coalition by 3 other partners, their influence on foreign-political agenda of the country is going to be rather very limited and therefore the nature of the Slovak foreign policy will most likely remain unchanged when compared to the execution by the previous government (2012-16). Excellent proof for this statement might be the fact that current coalition negotiations brought no changes either on the position of the Prime Minister of

the country (R. Fico), Minister of Foreign and European Affairs (M. Lajčák), Minister of Finance (P. Kažimír) or Minister of Interior (R. Kaliňák) – all four are nominees by the party Smer-SD. In this sense, the European partners can expect certain predictability and continuity with the style of politics execution by the previous government. However, one should not forget that the 2nd Fico government was also characterized by quite a significant ambivalence between his verbal statements and more diplomatic (sometimes even contradictory) approach taken by the Ministry of Foreign of European Affairs of the Slovak republic.

Nevertheless, the decisive moment that is going to shape Slovak domestic debate on European and global issues is takeover of the Presidency in the Council of the EU in the 2nd half of this year. This fact as well as existing progress in refugee and migration crisis (issue that heated Slovak relations with European partners) will more likely soften PM Fico rhetoric's and lead to verbally less confrontational and more cooperative foreign policy conduct with EU MS in Brussels.

V4 is going to stay Slovakia's main platform for coalition building potential within the EU and the Group will concentrate besides political goals on development of already existing energy security, transport and economic projects. Fico's (he is 2nd longest serving PM among V4 after V. Orban) and Lajčák's contacts based on good personal relations with leaders in Prague, Budapest as well as in Warsaw are going to be crucial for the Slovak contribution to this Group. The fact that Slovakia will be chairing the EU will also lead to stronger emphasis of V4 (Central European) interests at the EU level - as V4 as well as Central and East European countries can more easily access the leaders in Bratislava than particular Western governments.

In regard to the EaP Slovakia is keen on accelerating “multi-speed” economic integration and further political association between the Union and partner countries (especially Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia). Nevertheless, maintenance of pragmatic relations with Russia will remain present for action of R. Fico's 3rd cabinet.

In terms of government positions towards NATO policies, the new coalition is most likely to opt for more conservative approach as we have seen during the Ukraine crisis (verbal criticism of Ukrainian, not Russian political elites by PM, reluctance to strengthen NATO's Eastern flank in Eastern Europe or refusal towards deployment of NATO military base on Slovak territory). These elements can now be enhanced by another coalition partner – Slovak National Party, which profiles itself as „republican type of party“ that carries not only national posi-

tions, Eurosceptic views towards Brussels policies, but also certain amount of sentiment towards Russia present within its electorate and party officials.

Q2: Slovakia is going to play a crucial role in the second half of the year 2016 as the country takes over the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU for the first time in its history. This unprecedented challenge means the Slovak diplomatic and political leadership will have to give up on narrowly national topics and its domestic interests and rather concentrate on leading negotiations and moderation of the broad European debate among all EU member states. From this point of view it is very unlikely that Slovakia will be among the countries that will advocate the debate for abolishment of the sanction regime against Russia, even though Bratislava is most likely to remain “friendly pragmatic” when it comes to relations with Moscow under the current government. Taking into account that prime minister Robert Fico took some narrow domestic positions confronting major European political powers (mostly Germany and France) in the past when it came to migration and refugee crises (also as a part of his domestic parliamentary campaign), we expect him not to crusade anymore as he can rather more wisely opt for improving his own image and country’s profile on European and international scene.

This, however, does not mean that Slovakia will give up on its specific national interests, especially, when it comes to energy security and energy transport issues such as Nord-Stream II. In this case Slovak political and diplomatic elites strongly advocate against the expanding of the current capacity of the Nord Stream as the project contradicts common European policy on Ukraine. Therefore relations between Kyiv and Bratislava (and many other Central European countries) will be shaped by their joint refusal towards this project.

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Q1: I do not expect the major changes in Slovak foreign policy, especially when it comes to the country’s western orientation. Although the composition of the new government is a bit surprising, Robert Fico maintained his leadership and the post of Ministry of Foreign Affairs stays unchanged as well. The country’s pro-Atlantic orientation and the smooth upcoming EU presidency are the main foreign policy priorities of the new government. Slovakia will try to show that it is a stable and relevant

partner at least at the EU policy playground. However, it will be interesting to observe whether Fico (together with V4 countries) maintains his strong anti-migrant policy or he used it only as a part of his electoral campaign and now he is able to show his better face in Brussels.

Q2: What concerns Russia, the Slovak position stays unchanged – critical dialogue, but continuing cooperation. Well, that is an official statement. In fact, Slovakia with Robert Fico as a Prime Minister will never be constructive critic towards Russia and its soft position is rather expected.

When it comes to Slovak-Ukraine relations, Bratislava upcoming EU presidency comes in a very difficult period. The Dutch referendum in April about ratifying the Association Agreements is changing the EU positions towards Ukraine from modernization and democratization rather to stabilization and security related issues. I am afraid that despite the Slovak long-term support to the Ukrainian western integration, the discussion about our eastern neighbor and its status will be pushed back and Ukraine will stay at the end of the priority list.

Samuel GODA, PhD, head of the Security and Defense Studies program at the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, Assistant Professor at the University of Economics, Bratislava

Q1: In this regard, I do not expect a considerable change in Slovak foreign policy in short term perspective. All political parties have agreed (before the elections) on consensus to support the upcoming Slovak presidency of the Council of the EU. Hence, the most important goal is to successfully accomplish this mission.

In medium term there might occur some discrepancies. There are personal changes in parliamentary committees dealing with foreign, security and defense policies in favor of “anti-EU/NATO” parties. To some extent, this applies to executive structures as well, especially to the Ministry of Defense, which is under the influence of the Slovak National Party. However, the coalition parties seem to be not so radical in that regard (even though there are some supporters within the Slovak National Party).

The topic of EaP is currently taken over by the “migration crisis” issue, which will not change in upcoming months in my opinion. The V4 level will be interesting to follow – however, in the topic of “migration crisis” V4 countries are on the same page.

Q2: Prime Minister Fico, before the elections, called for easing of sanctions. However, this call could be recognized rather as a message to internal electorate. Nonetheless, I think that he will try to pursue this position also in the foreign policy and will find support of Slovak National Party.

At the same time, it seems that he finally got the pretty well understanding about the importance of energy security issue, which is a top foreign policy priority for Slovak Republic and a crucial issue for Ukraine as well. Nevertheless, he does not hide his negative views on Ukraine's internal politics.

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