



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia External Relations briefing:
External Relations in 2018
Kristina Kironska

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Outlook for 2018: Slovak External Relations

Since the EU and NATO accession, the nature of the Slovak foreign policy and external relations can be viewed as rather unchanging and continuous in the long run. Adapting to the new challenges and interests that transcend those of Slovakia alone, the country's foreign involvement has reflected the promotion of both its own national interests and the regional and strategic needs of the EU and NATO. In accordance with that, external relations of Slovakia in 2018 are likely to follow the trends of the recent years.

Firstly, the European policy shall represent one of the key priorities of Slovakia. There, given the situation after Brexit and the rising skeptical attitude towards the EU among the European population, the country faces several challenges and possesses certain opportunities to shape the environment within the EU. Secondly, Slovakia's external relations will aim at the focal security and political issues that the current world is facing. Thus, it is likely that also in 2018, Slovak authorities will formulate their positions on specific global problems and try to actively contribute to certain solutions, logically, through Slovak international and regional partners and allies. Finally, a significant emphasis regarding the outlook of 2018 in Slovakia and its external relations should be placed upon Slovakia's economic interests and its economic diplomacy. Taking into account the country's national economic interests, the year 2018 will focus on promoting attractive foreign investments and Slovakia's trade options in the international markets, as well as active involvement in international economic platforms. Considering Slovak external economic relations, we mustn't forget the crucial role of the energy policy – one of the most important parts of Slovakia's foreign engagement.

Will Slovakia belong to the core of the EU or become the black sheep?

The Slovak foreign policy towards the European Union has to be understood in two major ways. On one hand, Slovakia's great concern lies in maintaining productive and active relations with key actors in the EU, mostly Germany and France, as well as the European Union as a whole. On the other hand, the Slovak involvement in the EU is considerably influenced by its membership and politics in the Central European regional organization – the Visegrad group.

Regarding the most expected development in 2018, Slovakia will continue facing two focal issues – the fragile European environment in the context of the “withdrawal talks” between the EU and Britain, and the unstable and strained situation influenced by the current migrant crisis. Despite the fact that the country does not and will not play any significant role in the Brexit talks, there is a significant amount of Slovaks living in Britain, which influences Slovakia's attitude towards the future EU-Britain relations. In the second half of 2017, Prime Minister Fico stated that Britain should not have benefitted from the negotiations, but instead, Britain needed to offer adequate guarantees to the citizens of EU living in the UK.¹ In accordance with this and the fact there has not been any change, one can conclude the Slovak attitude towards Britain and Brexit in 2018 will remain the same, and the Government will go on with its policy pushing for future benefits for the Slovak and other EU citizens living in Britain.

Another significant issue in Slovakia's relations with the EU is related to the current migrant crisis and Slovakia's opposition to the EU migrant policy. From 2016 until now, the Government's position has remained the same - rejecting the policy to distribute asylum seekers and requiring the EU to formulate an alternative plan. Since the Slovak attitude has been criticized by other EU members this refusal has become one of the most visible obstacles in

¹ Liam Doyle, “Brexit should NOT be a UK victory! Slovakia PM says leaving CANNOT be tilted for Britain”, *Express*, 24 October 2017, <<https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/870518/Slovak-PM-Robert-Fico-Brexit-can-t-be-a-victory-for-the-UK-brussels-summit>>.

the partnership between Slovakia and EU. Even though it is likely this issue will not dominate the Slovak-EU relations in 2018, we mustn't forget that the developing and hardly predictable dynamics of the migrant crisis still influences this Slovak-EU relationship.

Last year, Germany and France agreed to create a “sub-platform” for EU countries interested in a deeper European integration. Subsequently, the Government declared Slovakia was highly interested in the idea and wished to belong to the EU core and not to the “bloc of Eastern European euro-skeptical countries”.² Slovakia without any doubt hopes for better and stronger relations with the EU. Taking into account Slovakia’s position on the migrant crisis, the move is a pragmatic one - the better the relations between the country and EU, the better the advantages and options for Slovakia. However, moving closer to the EU core, it seems that Slovakia will find it more difficult to cooperate with the Visegrad group, as the members’ cooperation in the context of EU has been partially based on “mutual criticism” of certain EU policies.

Slovakia amid the unstable international arena

Despite the fact that Slovakia lacks any significant global and regional influence, the country puts an emphasis on certain issues relevant to Slovak national interests. In this context and also concerning the nature of today’s international situation, Slovakia will follow in 2018 the trends of the previous years. The situation in Ukraine, on the Korean Peninsula, and in Syria shall represent the issues catching the Slovak attention.

There are several explanations for Slovakia's interest in Ukraine - firstly, Slovakia’s geographical proximity; furthermore, the large amount of security

² Tatiana Jancarikova, “Slovakia's future is with core EU, not eurosceptic eastern nations: PM”, *Reuters*, 15 August 2017, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-slovakia-politics-eu/slovakias-future-is-with-core-eu-not-eurosceptic-eastern-nations-pm-idUSKCN1AV1YY>>.

and political threats emerging from the current Ukrainian crisis.³ As the situation in Ukraine still lacks any peace status, we can agree that this regional interest will remain in place. However, we cannot forget the significant role of NATO, which the country is a member of. The organization offers Slovakia various opportunities to follow its national security interests through NATO's most influential members, mainly the US. Regarding the current crisis in Syria and on the Korean Peninsula, the country has been already expressing its positions previously. Thus, a similar approach can be expected in 2018. Moreover, the Syrian crisis has a lot of significance for Slovakia, taking into account the number of asylum seekers from this region.

Slovak economic diplomacy

Slovakia's economic interests and its economic diplomacy are key priorities in Slovakia's foreign efforts. There are two major interests – attracting valuable foreign investments and securing the needs of the Slovak energy policy. This trend shall remain the same in 2018.

The Slovak economy is mainly focused on machinery and automotive production. Its growing industry, however, faces serious needs for a satisfactory energy policy.⁴ Since the energy sector plays an important role, Slovakia's great interest lies in maintaining good relations with the key foreign energy actors. Equally important is finding more alternatives how to keep the growing energy consumption at bay. Therefore, it is obvious the energy policy will continue to play a significant role in the Slovak EU engagement.

Should Slovakia attract more foreign investments in 2018, it has to be more attractive for potential investors and will need to maintain productive relationships with the key foreign actors in this regard. China is one example.

³ See Balázs Jarábik, "Slovakia: A Small Neighbor With a Big Concern", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 1, 2016, <<http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/04/01/slovakia-small-neighbor-with-big-concern-pub-63210>>.

⁴ Tomáš Madleňák, "Innovation of Energy Sector in Slovakia: high hopes without strategy?", *Central European Day of Energy*, 11 December 2017, <https://www.ceep.be/www/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Innovation-of-Energy-Sector-in-Slovakia_CEDE2017.pdf>.

The Slovak authorities have already expressed their interest in the Chinese OBOR initiative.⁵ Even though many experts and economists have been skeptical about the possible Slovak involvement in the project, the officials see various diplomatic opportunities to get more or less involved.⁶

Conclusion

To sum up, there will not be any dramatic changes in Slovakia's external relations in 2018. The current government's mandate started already in 2016, and thus any significant political changes influencing Slovakia's foreign policy is rather unlikely.

Concerning the country's European policy, the Government recently declared that Slovakia was definitely part of the EU core and does not want to be considered a euro-skeptical country. Therefore, it is obvious Slovakia will strengthen its European engagement. However, several obstacles still continue to collide with such Slovak EU ambitions.

Speaking of Slovakia's engagement in some more serious international affairs, any relevant actions cannot be expected, as Slovakia lacks adequate political, economic or military capabilities. On the other hand, Slovakia has never hesitated to express its position on specific global issues.

Finally, regarding the economy, Slovakia will continue to attract valuable foreign investments and secure its energy sector's needs. Should Slovakia succeed, it has to keep good relations and find productive partners among key economic actors in the region.

⁵ Zheping Huang, "Your guide to understanding OBOR, China's new Silk Road plan", *Quartz*, 15 May 2017, <<https://qz.com/983460/obor-an-extremely-simple-guide-to-understanding-chinas-one-belt-one-road-forum-for-its-new-silk-road/>>.

⁶ Martin Šebeňa, "16+1: Failed Dreams or Failed Economics?", *Institute of Asian Studies*, 9 February, 2018, <<http://www.asian.sk/161-failed-dreams-or-failed-economics/>>.