







Weekly Briefing

Slovakia External Relations briefing:
Slovak politician expressed interest in leading the European
Commission
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Introduction

Traditionally, Slovakia's emphasis has been on regional and international organisations, such as the EU and the NATO. In June, certain international events caught the attention of Slovakia. For instance, the US decision to impose tariffs on steel and aluminium from the EU. The Slovak Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini stated that this would not affect the country considerably, since the Slovak producers did not trade with the US in any broad extent.¹ Furthermore, Slovakia decided to react to the decision of the US to leave the UN Human Rights Council. Slovak officials expressed their regret at the US decision and added that the role of the institution was very important.²

Then, one should take into account Slovakia's active and direct foreign involvement in the last weeks. Several events and activities can thus be highlighted. For instance, the Slovak President Kiska's trip to the B9 presidential summit in Warsaw or Prime Minister Pellegrini's performance in the Council of Europe in Strasbourg show an active foreign approach of the Slovak top officials. One of the most important events in June was the upcoming presidency of Slovakia over the Visegrad Group. Then, it is important to mention Maroš Šefčovič's expressed interest in becoming the head of the European Commission.

The President in Warsaw, the Prime Minister in Strasbourg

President Andrej Kiska attended a meeting of the Bucharest Nine platform, also known as the B9. The platform, which is a Polish-Romanian initiative,

¹ --, "Pellegrini sa stretol s veľvyslancom USA, hovorili aj o clách", *SME*, 5 June 2018, <<https://domov.sme.sk/c/20843114/pellegrini-sa-stretol-s-velvyslancom-usa-hovorili-aj-o-clach.html>>.

² --, "Vyhlásenie MZVaEZ SR k vystúpeniu USA z Rady OSN pre ľudské práva", *MZVaEZ SR*, 20 June 2018, <<https://bit.ly/2tB4frA>>.

serves as a coordination of positions and exchange of views regarding security by Poland, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Slovakia. The goal of this summit was to coordinate the positions of the above-mentioned states in the upcoming NATO summit in Brussels in July. President Kiska stated that the NATO must have a clearly demonstrated readiness and the will to implement “the Article 5”, if necessary. One of the main themes of the meeting covered the positions on Russia. Kiska declared that the situation in Ukraine or Syria clearly showed that Russia was conducting a hybrid warfare and the involved countries of the summit needed to seriously think of such threats and act accordingly. He added that the citizens of Eastern European countries feared a scenario similar to Crimea, and thus again emphasised NATO’s needed will to act. The presidents discussed other security issues as well. Apart from the situation in Ukraine, the meeting focused on how to build a joint defence within Europe as an integral part of NATO.³ This shows the active role of the Slovak President in the state’s foreign engagement. The meeting also shows the country’s clear emphasis on regional affairs and its will to increase the coordination within the region and NATO in general.

The Slovak Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini paid a visit to Strasbourg in order to give a speech at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The words of the Prime Minister appeared to be rather vague and abstract. He stated that terrorism, the current migration crisis, and the distrust of the population in the institutions were undermining the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Pellegrini added that multilateralism lacked dialogue and tolerance, and was threatened by excessive adherence to traditional interests.⁴ Furthermore, the Prime Minister found himself confronted with several questions. The members of the Assembly were interested in the recent

³ --, “Kiska with the B9 Presidents: The relationship with Russia has not improved”, *President of the Slovak Republic*, 8 June 2018, <<https://www.prezident.sk/en/article/kiska-s-prezidentmi-v9-vo-varsave-vztah-k-rusku-sa-nezlepsil/>>.

⁴ --, “Pellegrini v Štrasburgu: Súčasný výzvy možno riešiť spoločnými salami”, *Teraz*, 27 June 2018, <<http://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/pellegrini-v-strasburgu-sucasne-vy/333683-clanok.html>>.

assassination of the Slovak investigative journalist and his fiancée, and the freedom of the press in the state in general. Pellegrini answered that one of biggest investigative teams in Slovakia's history was working on the case, while also cooperation with foreign institutions.

Towards the presidency of the Visegrad Group

Slovakia starts its one-year presidency of the Visegrad Group on 1 July. However, the needed preparations and declaration of its priorities are addressed before. The motto of the Slovak leadership in the group of the four countries is described as “dynamic Visegrad for Europe”.⁵ The presidency is expected to heed the three priorities – a strong Europe, a safe environment and intelligent solutions. The authorities stated that Slovakia would do its best to maintain the internal coherence within the EU in terms of the EU-UK negotiations. Additionally, the presidency will continue the needed political discussions with the Western Balkans and the countries of the Eastern Partnership. Considerable emphasis will be laid on innovations and technological development, which are considered important and essential parts of the economy. The Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs then explained some of the priorities of the presidency. Firstly, it is unity that is needed for a successful and effective cooperation and the following mutual involvement in the EU. Then, emphasis is on the citizens who should feel the positive and practical impacts of the Visegrad policy. And finally, a compromise, respect for the differences and national interests must be taken into account should the Visegrad platform fulfil its purpose.⁶

Preparations for the presidency also appeared to be more direct and practical. The leaders of the Visegrad Group and the Austrian chancellor Kurz met in Budapest and discussed the transmission of the Hungarian leadership to Slovakia. The involved countries discussed a possible cooperation, as Austria is

⁵ --, “Slovak V4 motto to be ‘Dynamic Visegrad for Europe’”, *RTVS*, 20 June 2018, <<http://enr.si.rtv.s.sk/articles/news/167595/slovak-v4-motto-to-be-dynamic-visegrad-for-europe>>.

⁶ --, “Slovenské predsedníctvo vo V4 sa začne 1. júla, má tri hlavné priority”, *Teraz*, 20 June 2018, <<http://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/slovenske-predsednictvo-vo-v4-sa-zacn/332291-clanok.html>>.

about to preside over the Council of the European Union. The same countries met also in a different platform; the leaders of the parliaments of the Visegrad Group and Austria had an informal meeting in Balatonfüred in Hungary and the topics discussed in this meeting are expected to be of similar nature.

The future leader of the European Commission may be from Slovakia

Slovakia's European Commissioner and Vice President Maroš Šefčovič expressed his interest in becoming the next President of the European Commission, which is the EU's top executive body. A more concrete proposal came after the meeting of the social democrats of the Visegrad Group and Bulgaria in Bratislava.⁷ Šefčovič said he had received a direct offer from the Czech social democrats, which was also supported by the Slovaks. He expressed his ambition to gain support of all social democratic parties in the EU. However, a process of the nomination takes a long time and is very complex. According to Šefčovič, the nomination is currently being discussed. The member of the Slovak social democratic party SMER-SD Richard Raši addressed his support for Šefčovič's potential candidature. He said Šefčovič was definitely one of the politicians who could lead the European Commission to prosperity and was able to come to a consensus between the traditional and the new countries of the EU. He added that Šefčovič was both an excellent diplomat and an expert.⁸

If Šefčovič succeeds, he will become the first Slovak politician to hold the position of the head of the European Commission. It is undeniable that the success would raise the reputation and influence of Slovakia both in Europe and in the world. For Slovakia, it can also create certain opportunities of how to influence the European and international affairs more successfully. Speaking of the involvement of the Slovaks in such prestigious positions, the country's

⁷ Kalina Oroschakoff, "Maroš Šefčovič enters race to become European Commission president", *Politico*, 4 June 2018, <<https://www.politico.eu/article/maros-sefcovic-enters-race-to-become-european-commission-president/>>.

⁸ --, "Raši: Šefčovič má všetky predpoklady, aby dokázal EK viesť k prosperite", *Teraz*, 5 June 2018, <<http://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/r-rasi-m-sefcovic-ma-vsetky-predpoklady/329200-clanok.html>>.

Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák currently holds the position of the President of the United Nations General Assembly.

Conclusion

In June, the foreign engagement of Slovakia was most concerned with the upcoming Slovak presidency of the the Visegrad Group. Several opportunities and challenges thus emerge for Slovakia - the country can influence the regional institution and shape “the Visegrad influence” in the EU. However, there are many challenges - the contemporary international and regional environment causes much polarization among the European countries. For Slovakia, one of the most serious challenges will be dealing with this trend and creating a unified platform capable of shaping the European policy.

Speaking of June, one needs to acknowledge the visible foreign engagement of all key Slovak officials. As their involvement focused on the multilateral sphere, we can conclude that Slovakia puts great emphasis on regional and international institutions and mechanisms. Finally, the expressed interest of Maroš Šefčovič of becoming the leader of the European Commission poses a positive potential for the country. Slovakia could raise its regional and international reputation, while also gain more opportunities to influence the regional and international affairs.