



# Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia External Relations briefing:**  
**Latest External Relations Development in Slovakia**  
**Institute of Asian Studies, Bratislava**


## China-CEE Institute

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## **Introduction**

In August and September, Slovakia witnessed several cases, which caught the attention of both the Slovak and the foreign community. Most visibly, Slovakia commemorated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the invasion to the former Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact in 1968. While certain Slovak authorities gave symbolic speeches and statements regarding the anniversary various foreign representatives also attended the events. The theme of the 1968 invasion was included in the statements of many foreign politicians, diplomats, even artists.<sup>1</sup> For both Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the annual commemoration of the 1968 events serves several purposes. Firstly, the states are able to demonstrate their unique historical experience and suffering, and thus maintain their regional and international uniqueness. And secondly, they can show their clear Western democratic orientation to the world, especially to the countries of the EU and the NATO.

But also another recent affair needs to be highlighted. In September, Slovak Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini paid a visit to the informal summit of the heads of the states and governments of the EU. The meeting in Salzburg in Austria was aimed at the current themes of migration, internal security of the EU and Brexit. Speaking of the EU, Slovakia's Maroš Šefčovič officially announced his interest in becoming the next head of the European Commission. Simultaneously, he revealed the key priorities of his prospective engagement.

## **The EU met in Salzburg**

Slovakia was at the summit in Salzburg in Austria represented by Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini. Austria organized the event since it currently presides

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<sup>1</sup> --, "Na 50. výročie invázie do ČSSR reagovali aj svetové media", *T43*, 21 August 2018, <<https://www.ta3.com/clanok/1134224/na-50-vyrocie-invazie-do-cssr-reagovali-aj-svetove-media.html>>.

over the Council of the European Union. Firstly, the leaders discussed the issues of illegal immigration, which has been one of the most sensitive debates within the EU.<sup>2</sup> The Slovak government has always disagreed with the quota system based on the organized distribution of migrants. Pellegrini stated the position of Slovakia was still the same and very similar to that of Austria. The Prime Minister appeared to be pleased and added that the discussions about the distribution of migrants were getting less important, as the EU states had started to emphasize security along the EU's external borders.<sup>3</sup> Slovakia simultaneously addressed its opinion on the future of the Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Both Pellegrini and Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš showed sensible skepticism over the agency and its options concerning the migrations and security of the external borders. According to them, the EU should provide more funds to individual member states in order to help them guard their own borders against illegal migration. It was added that states such as Malta, Spain, Italy and Greece needed to be assured that more funds would be provided to them.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, Slovakia along with the Czech Republic and Austria share a similar attitude towards the issues of illegal immigration. Pellegrini voiced certain concerns at the question of sovereignty regarding the Frontex agency. He added that it should have been the President, Prime Minister, Interior Minister or Defense Minister, who possessed the right to defend the state's borders. He recommended that the agency could be much more active in third countries, for instance in Northern Africa.

President of the European Council Donald Tusk and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz additionally informed of their mutual dialogue with Egyptian President as-Sisi as part of a broader initiative aimed at the cooperation with

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<sup>2</sup> --, "Pellegrini na summite EÚ: Téma posilňovania vonkajších hraníc vystriedala spory okolo kvót", *HnOnline*, 20 September 2018, <<https://hnonline.sk/svet/1811928-pellegrini-na-summite-eu-tema-posilnovania-vonkajsich-hranic-vystriedala-spory-okolo-kvot>>.

<sup>3</sup> --, "Premiér odcestoval na summit EÚ o migrácii, bezpečnosti a brexite", *Teraz*, 19 September 2018, <<http://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/premier-odcestoval-do-salzburgu-na-summ/349672-clanok.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> --, "EU Should Focus on Member State Border Forces, Not Frontex, Say Czech, Slovak PMs", *The New York Times*, 17 September 2018, <<https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2018/09/17/world/europe/17reuters-europe-migrants-czech-slovakia.html>>.

third countries, especially those influential in the Middle East.<sup>5</sup> Such an initiative is welcome by the leaders from the Visegrad group. Pellegrini along with Hungary's Viktor Orbán, the Czech Republic's Andrej Babiš and Poland's Mateusz Morawiecki agreed that the EU needed to be more financially active in Northern Africa, as it had been, according to them, an effective effort that could dim the migration flow from the region.<sup>6</sup> At this summit, Slovakia had a considerable opportunity to address its regional and international concerns and propose its own solutions. Better than be alone, once again, the Slovak authorities found allies in the Visegrad group. There, the member states practically share all the opinions talking about the current migration.

Migration and external borders' security were not the only themes at the summit. The participants also discussed the Brexit and the relations with the United Kingdom after leaving the EU. The new State Secretary of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs František Ružička declared that Slovakia's position on Brexit remained the same and the state supported the concept of a so-called soft Brexit. It means that Slovakia prefers a situation in which an organized withdrawal is implemented and a reasonable political agreement between London and Brussels is achieved. Ružička then warned that any "hard Brexit" might have a negative impact on Slovakia, its economy and the Slovak people living in Britain.<sup>7</sup> After the EU summit in Salzburg, Slovakia's Peter Pellegrini said the situation concerning the Brexit was very complicated and it appeared that both Brussels and London considered certain issues as non-negotiable. According to the Slovak Prime Minister, the United Kingdom only wanted to maintain the free movement of goods, which was unacceptable for Slovakia and the EU.

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<sup>5</sup> --, "Informal meeting of heads of state or government, 19-20/09/2018", *European Council - Council of the European Union*, September 2018, <<http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2018/09/19-20/>>.

<sup>6</sup> --, "Na V4 nezaznelo nie posilneniu Frontexu, povedal Pellegrini pred summitom v Salzburgu", *Pravda*, 19 September 2018, <<https://europa.pravda.sk/aktuality/clanok/484728-v-salzburgu-cakaju-pellegriniho-narodne-debaty-o-brexite-aj-migracii/>>.

<sup>7</sup> --, "Ružička: Tvrďý brexit by mal priame dôsledky na ekonomiku Slovenska", *Teraz*, 18 September, 2018, <<http://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/ruzicka-tvrdy-brexit-by-mal-priame-d/349453-clanok.html>>.

## **The next head of the European Commission from Slovakia?**

In September, Maroš Šefčovič, the European Commissioner from Slovakia, finally announced his candidacy for the President of the European Commission. Šefčovič gained support of nine social democratic parties from the Party of the European Socialists - Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Romania and Slovakia supported his candidacy. At the summit of the Party of the European Socialists in Latvia in October, other candidates from the party are to announce their candidacies.<sup>8</sup> It appears that Šefčovič's main challenger may be the leader of the European People's Party in the European Parliament, Manfred Weber. Both politicians know each other well and frequently cooperate. Šefčovič simultaneously stressed that he believed in a fair, transparent and responsible political competition between them.

The Slovak Commissioner described his priorities - for him, one of the most important things to do is to seize the differences and barriers between the Western and Eastern countries, start listening to each other better so that the cooperation among the states can be improved. He added that the EU must remain the most powerful defender of democratic values, freedom, justice, and fairness. He also mentioned certain economic prospects and emphasized technological development and research.<sup>9</sup> If Šefčovič finally succeeds and becomes the President of the European Commission, it will be Slovakia's first representative in this position. Such an achievement can without doubt enhance Slovakia's reputation and influence in the EU. Furthermore, the state could considerably benefit from the Šefčovič's influence in the sphere of energy policy and politics. However, both Šefčovič and Weber cannot be sure yet whether they win the battles in their own parties.

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<sup>8</sup> --, "Šefčovič chce vymeniť Junckera. Oznámil kandidatúru na šéfa eurokomisie", *etrend*, 17 September 2018, <<https://www.etrend.sk/ekonomika/sefcovic-chce-vymenit-junckera-oznamil-kandidaturu-na-sefa-eurokomisie.html>>.

<sup>9</sup> --, "Šefčovič by ako šéf EK chcel odstrániť delenie na východ a západ", *Teraz*, 17 September 2018, <<http://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/sefcovic-by-ako-sef-ek-chcel-odstranit/349113-clanok.html>>.

## **Conclusion**

In August and September, Slovakia and its foreign involvement again faced several issues and opportunities. Apart from commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1968 invasion to Czechoslovakia they were not significant. Firstly, the Slovak Prime Minister paid a visit to the EU's summit in Salzburg. Indeed, the summit discussed the most important and challenging issues that the EU has currently been facing, but the outputs of the summit were rather abstract and not significant. At the summit, Slovakia again showed its clear position on the issues of the current migration flow and external borders' security. There, we can see the traditional cooperation among the member states of the Visegrad group, especially given the discussed themes. It is worth mentioning too that Slovakia's European Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič is now closer to becoming an official candidate of the European socialists for the President of the European Commission. This could not only strengthen Slovakia's reputation in the EU but also help fulfill its regional and international interests.