



# Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia external relations briefing:  
Slovakia's foreign engagement in 2018  
Institute of Asian Studies, Bratislava**

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## Slovakia's foreign engagement in 2018

*In the year 2018, Slovakia's foreign engagement was most considerably shaped by the actions of the President, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister. Significant events occurred in the first months of the year. Amid the intensive and turbulent protests in the country following the assassination of the Slovak investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kusnirova, then-Prime Minister Robert Fico decided to step down, paving a way for Peter Pellegrini to become his successor.<sup>1</sup>*

*In 2018, Slovakia faced several challenges, both positive and negative. Perhaps most importantly, Slovakia started its presidency in the Visegrad Group. Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák successfully completed his presidency of the General Assembly of the UN. Moreover, Slovakia's representative in the European Commission Maroš Šefčovič declared his ambition of becoming the head of the EU's executive body. Among the negative issues related to the Slovak external engagement surely was the scandal around the abduction of the Vietnamese businessman.*

### **Presidency in the Visegrad Group**

Along with efforts towards the EU and NATO, the Slovak authorities have placed significant attention to matters concerning the regional platform. In July, Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini paid a visit to Budapest to officially take over the reins of the Visegrad Group. The Prime Minister stated that the main purpose of the Slovak engagement would be concrete results and actions towards the prosperity of the people. He stressed that the group needed to emphasize its “pro-European” orientation and engage in a united fashion in every EU key policy.<sup>2</sup>

The Slovak presidency, which is going to last for one year from July 2018, and is defined by the motto “Dynamic Visegrad for Europe”, was described in detail by the Slovak Ministry

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<sup>1</sup> Matúš Burčík and Lucia Krbatová, “Peter Pellegrini to become new prime minister. Who is he?”, *The Slovak Spectator*, 15 March 2018, <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20781853/pellegrini-new-prime-minister-slovakia.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> --, “Slovensko sa ujalo ročného rotujúceho predsedníctva vo V4”, *Pravda*, 1 July 2018, <<https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/475351-slovensko-sa-ujalo-rocneho-rotujuceho-predsednictva-vo-v4/>>.

of Foreign Affairs - it identified three main principles. Firstly, it has been aimed at promoting the unity in the possible spheres of cooperation among the member states. Secondly, active results and concrete actions have been emphasized. Finally, the presidency was tailored to heed the differences among the members and come up with adequate solutions.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, there are three focal pillars. First of them – a strong Europe – has emphasized the Visegrad Group's ambition to participate in the EU politics more actively and effectively, while issuing clear and coherent positions towards it. Another pillar – a safe environment – has reflected the state's desire for contributing to the region's security through the group's influence. The last pillar – intelligent solutions – concerns the issues of digital agenda, technological trends, etc.<sup>4</sup>

Thus far, during the (current) Slovak presidency there have been several events, summits and discussions related to the group. The main issues that Slovakia has hoped to address were migration and security of the external borders of the EU.<sup>5</sup> The states of the Visegrad Group have always disagreed with the EU quota system (distributing incoming refugees and migrants among the EU countries) and the group is seeking new solutions.

### **Influential individuals**

Slovak Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák was the first representative of Slovakia that held the office of the President of the General Assembly of the United Nations. His one-year tenure ended in September 2018. The appointment of Lajčák brought Slovakia considerable recognition in the international sphere. One of the most significant outcomes of his tenure included the agreement on the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. It is the first intergovernmental agreement to cover wide-ranging dimensions of international migration.<sup>6</sup> However, the Slovak government refused to agree with the compact and decided

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<sup>3</sup> --, "O predsedníctve.", *MZVaEZ SR*, 26 June 2018, <<https://www.mzv.sk/zahranicna-politika/slovensko-a-v4/slovenske-predsednictvo-v4/o-predsednictve>>.

<sup>4</sup> --, "Program a priority predsedníctva.", *MZVaEZ SR*, 1 July 2018, <<https://www.mzv.sk/zahranicna-politika/slovensko-a-v4/slovenske-predsednictvo-v4/program-a-priority>>.

<sup>5</sup> --, "Premiér Pellegrini v Budapešti prevezme od Orbána predsedníctvo V4, témou bude aj migrácia.", *Web Noviny*, 21 June 2018, <<https://www.webnoviny.sk/premier-pellegrini-v-budapesti-prevezme-od-orbana-predsednictvo-v4-temou-bude-aj-migracia/>>.

<sup>6</sup> --, "President of the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly Miroslav Lajčák handed over the gavel to his successor.", *MZVaEZ SR*, 17 September 2018, <[https://www.mzv.sk/web/en/news/detail/-/asset\\_publisher/oLViwP07vPxv/content/ukoncenie-predsednictva-miroslava-lajcaka-vo-valnom-zhromazdeni-organizacie-spojonych-narodov/10182?p\\_p\\_auth=AO6wlpAb](https://www.mzv.sk/web/en/news/detail/-/asset_publisher/oLViwP07vPxv/content/ukoncenie-predsednictva-miroslava-lajcaka-vo-valnom-zhromazdeni-organizacie-spojonych-narodov/10182?p_p_auth=AO6wlpAb)>.

that the state would not participate in it. In reaction to this, Foreign Minister Lajčák resigned, as he has not only supported the document but he was one of its creators. In the end, Lajčák changed his mind and withdrew his resignation.<sup>7</sup>

Slovakia's European Commissioner and Vice President Maroš Šefčovič is another influential individual that shaped Slovakia's image abroad. He expressed his interest in becoming the next President of the European Commission.<sup>8</sup> To do so he would have needed to first get appointed by the Party of the European Socialists. In November 2018, it looked like Frans Timmermans would be the party's candidate instead of Šefčovič, and Šefčovič supported him.<sup>9</sup> Even though Maroš Šefčovič did not succeed, his visible ambition and the support of the European Socialists brought positive image to him and his country.

### **Slovakia's involvement in the abduction of the Vietnamese businessman**

In 2017, the Vietnamese intelligence conducted an operation, in which the Vietnamese ex-oil executive Trinh Xuan Thanh was kidnapped in Germany. In 2018, the German authorities declared that Slovakia took part in the operation by allowing the Vietnamese officials to borrow a governmental plane, which flew from Bratislava to Moscow with the kidnapped businessman on board. The situation resulted in a significant political, diplomatic and media scandal. Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini along with the authorities from the Ministry of Interior denied any role in the abduction. Slovak Minister of Interior Denisa Saková added that she was sure all the passengers in the plane had passed the security check and had had diplomatic passports. Vietnam declared that no abduction took place and Trinh Xuan Thanh returned to Vietnam willingly without any use of force.<sup>10</sup> In October, it was said that the two Slovak policemen had

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<sup>7</sup> --, "Lajčák resigns as foreign affairs minister.", *The Slovak Spectator*, 29 November 2018, <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20973638/lajcak-resigns-as-foreign-affairs-minister.html>>.

<sup>8</sup> Oroschakoff, Kalina, "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/>>.

<sup>9</sup> --, „Šefčovič Junckera nenahradí, lídrom európskych socialistov vo voľbách bude Timmermans.“, *HN Online*, 5 November 2018, <<https://hnonline.sk/svet/1836979-sefcovic-junckera-nenahradi-lidrom-europskych-socialistov-vo-volbach-bude-timmermans>>.

<sup>10</sup> --, "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung: Saková is lying about the abduction of a Vietnamese citizen", *The Slovak Spectator*, 14 May 2018, <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20825255/frankfurter-allgemeine-zeitung-sakova-is-lying-about-the-abduction-of-a-vietnamese-citizen.html>>.

seen the scene and had spoken up. The policemen declared they had seen how the Vietnamese businessman had been dragged into the Slovak governmental plane.<sup>11</sup>

The scandal mobilized the Slovak parliamentary opposition and several MPs called for the government's demise. Also, the scandal influenced the German-Slovak relations, as the German authorities declared that Slovakia's role in the abduction had been real and clear. Simultaneously, the Slovak-Vietnamese relations have been affected by the issue. Slovakia has found itself in a difficult position.

## **Conclusion**

In 2018, Slovakia had several opportunities, as well as challenges. Apart from the annual meetings, summits and discussions, many extraordinary events took place. In July, Slovakia took over the presidency of the Visegrad Group. For now, the results of the state's initiatives have not brought any significant breakthroughs in the region's (and the EU's) policies. Several Slovak individuals gained in 2018 international attention. Firstly, it was Foreign Minister Lajčák, who completed his one-year tenure in the UN. One of his main accomplishments is the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration – the reason for his disagreement with the Slovak government. Then, it was European Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič who gained much attention and popularity, as he declared his ambition of becoming the next head of the EU's executive body, which did not happen in the end. And finally, one needs to mention the negative side of the Slovak foreign engagement during the year 2018 - the scandal around the abduction of the Vietnamese businessman and the Slovak role in it - which has been the issue that most undermined the Slovak reputation and relations abroad.

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<sup>11</sup> --, "Zlom vo vyšetrovaní únosu Vietnamca: Dvaja policajti tvrdia, že videli ako Thanha vlečú do lietadla.", *TV Noviny*, 1 October 2018, <[http://www.tvnoviny.sk/domace/1937148\\_zlom-vo-vysetrovani-unosu-vietnamca-dvaja-policajti-tvrdia-ze-videli-ako-thanha-vlecu-do-lietadla](http://www.tvnoviny.sk/domace/1937148_zlom-vo-vysetrovani-unosu-vietnamca-dvaja-policajti-tvrdia-ze-videli-ako-thanha-vlecu-do-lietadla)>.