




Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia external relations briefing:
Outlook for the year 2019
Institute of Asian Studies, Bratislava**

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Outlook for the year 2019

Introduction

The year 2019 is and will be an important year for Slovakia's external relations as many strategic events and anniversaries will be taking place.

In the beginning of the year, Slovakia's Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Miroslav Lajčák officially took over presidency of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which is one of the two presidency seats held by Slovakia this year. The other one is the continuation of the one-year long presidency in the V4, which started in June 2018.

After a five-year tenure of President Andrej Kiska, Slovakia will choose a new head of state in the presidential elections in March. Along with the presidential elections, Slovakia will nominate new representatives of the European Parliament two months later, in May.

The year 2019 brings a huge question mark about the future of the European Union, since the withdrawal of the United Kingdom is closer than ever before. The situation got even more complicated after the rejection of Teresa May's Brexit deal on 15 January. There are many Slovak citizens that live in the UK and their future is uncertain.

Slovakia's external engagement will also be necessary in the Ukraine conflict, especially crucial from a security and natural resource perspective. This brings us to the last memento of the year 2019, which is 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, which brought the communist era to an end and gave birth to a free and democratic state.

Presidency of OSCE

On 1 January 2019, Slovakia took over historically for the first time the presidency of OSCE. The office will be under the leadership of Slovakia's Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Miroslav Lajčák, who is one of the key figures of the Slovak external engagement.

He was lately repeatedly discussed in the Slovak public space in the context of the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration* – a resolution issued by the UN created during Lajčák's tenure as President of the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA). Despite the non-committal character of the document, it wasn't received well in Slovakia and was considered controversial as it was touching upon a highly sensitive topic, migration (there

are increasing radical national sentiments). This document is being misused as a weapon for an inner political fight among the Slovak parties.¹ The government refused to agree with the compact and decided that it would not participate in it, upon which Lajčák decided to resign, but consequently withdrew his resignation because of upcoming duties in OSCE.²

The presidency in the OSCE is a big challenge, but undoubtedly also a great opportunity for Slovakia. The presidency in the UNGA in 2018 and the presidency in the V4 gives Slovakia international recognition and helps build a positive image outside the borders. Slovakia has the power to set the agenda for security negotiations in OSCE and the opportunity to influence activities according to its own foreign policy needs. Three priorities were set out in the beginning of the tenure:

1. Prevention and mitigation of the consequences of conflicts;
2. A secure future; and
3. Effective multilateralism.

They are united in the leitmotiv of the Slovak presidency: *“Responsible future: inclusive dialogue for protecting people.”* Particular attention will be paid to the situation in Ukraine. The first visit of Miroslav Lajčák as acting President of the OSCE led right to the conflict zone, where he said: *“If there is any way how to mitigate the situation of people in the area, we have to use it.”*³

Ukraine

After the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation a new wave of tensions between the two countries arose in November 2018 when three Ukrainian ships with men on board were captured by a Russian ship. Both countries accuse each other from initiating the *Kerch incident*, stating that their counterparts were trying to create tensions outside the borders to stabilize their own inner-political situation – Ukrainian President Petro Porošenko to raise

¹ Braňo Závodský, “M. Lajčák: We have to Deal with Questions and Problems related to UN Compact from behind of negotiation desk”, *Rádio Expres*, 23 November 2018, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oE59XKFAgi8>>.

² Katarína Filová and Michal Horský, “Lajčák will stay. Kiska and Pellegrini look for a way, how to do it”, *Pravda*, 5 December 2018, <<https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/494091-rokovaniu-vlady-bude-dominovat-lajcakova-demisia/>>.

³ --, “Slovak presidency in OSCE: Program and priorities”, *MZVaEZ SR*, 8 January 2019, <<https://www.mzv.sk/zahranicna-politika/predsednictvo-slovenska-v-obse/program-a-priority>>.

his popularity before the presidential elections in March; and Vladimir Putin to stabilize his position within the deteriorating economic situation in Russia.⁴

Slovakia as member of the EU and Ukraine's neighbor expressed full support for Ukraine and appreciated Ukrainian reform efforts to lead the country into the Euro-Atlantic structures.⁵ In case of an open conflict there would be two concerns for the Slovak Republic. The first one is security. The Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defense of Slovakia prepared an action plan for protecting the borders and possible migratory waves of Ukrainian citizens towards the West. In case of an energy threat (Russia would stop supplying Ukraine and therefore also Slovakia), Slovakia has some reserves but it wouldn't be able to supply Ukraine through a reverse flow during the winter season. Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini argued, that sanctions on Russia do not the desired impact but he would respect the EU deal.⁶ All preventing measures, such as the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) and the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) of OSCE are all active and Slovakia will closely follow the situation in Ukraine.⁷

BREXIT and the future of the EU

According to results of the referendum from 23 June 2018, the UK decided to leave the EU. From the article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty every state, which decides to withdrawal from the EU, has two years to agree on terms of the withdrawal and for the UK the date was set to 29 March. Prime Minister Theresa May worked hard to negotiate a deal between the UK and the EU, however, the British MPs refused this document in the January voting and didn't support their Prime Minister. The UK might leave the EU without a deal. Both pro and against Brexit

⁴ Carl Bildt, „2019 Presidential Election in Ukraine: What to Expect Before and After“, *Hromadske International*, 18 September 2018, <<https://en.hromadske.ua/posts/2019-presidential-election-in-ukraine-what-to-expect-before-and-after>>.

⁵ Branislav Wáclav, “Pellegrini: Ukraine can count on Slovakia’s support“, *Aktuality.sk*, 4 December 2018, <<https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/647486/pellegrini-ukrajina-moze-ratat-s-podporou-slovenska/>>.

⁶ --, “We have to be ready for crisis scenario, said Pellegrini in the context of Ukraine“, *Pravda*, 28 November 2018, <<https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/493278-pellegrini-slovensko-musi-pocitat-s-krizovymi-scenarmi-pre-konflikt-ukrajina-rusko/>>.

⁷ ---, “Slovak presidency in OSCE: Program and priorities“, *MZVaEZ SR*, 8 January 2019, <<https://www.mzv.sk/zahranicna-politika/predsednictvo-slovenska-v-obse/program-a-priority>>.

MPs agree that the consequences of a no-deal exit would be even worse than staying in the EU.⁸ The future of the UK is still not clear.

Slovakia agrees with the EU position on this issue – the Slovak officials see the Brexit deal as fair and balanced and think there shouldn't be any further discussions on the Michel Barnier wording. The main interest for Slovakia is the position of Slovak citizens in the UK and the financial settlement after the Brexit. Among the priorities are legal relations, social and health care of the Slovak expat community.⁹

Slovak presidential elections

On 16 March, Slovakia will choose the new president of the country. Acting President Andrej Kiska decided not to run for election for a second tenure. In the last five years, Andrej Kiska presented a balance to the political power of the government and received a huge support from the general public. He presented the country as a progressive and pro-European country, which recognizes freedom, justice and democracy as its core values.

Presidential elections are important for the future development of Slovakia. It's not just about who will be the head of state, but also about the governmental elections in 2020 and the unquestionable changes on the political scene after tragic events from the beginning of 2018, and also about the direction which will Slovakia take in next few years.¹⁰

The list of candidates is still not complete. There are some **controversial names**, such as the representative of the extreme right, Marián Kotleba, or the Supreme Court judge Štefan Harabin, who is associated with former Prime Minister Róbert Fico in discreditable ways. On the other hand, there are figures, who might represent progressive Slovakia and could bring in

⁸Alex Hunt and Brian Wheeler, "Brexit: All you need to know about the UK leaving the EU", *BBC*, 21 January 2019, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-32810887>>.

⁹--, "Miroslav Lajčák: From perspective of Slovakia, Brexit deal is good, there is no necessity to change it.", Youtube, 19 November 2018, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hTSzk3o4LD8>>.

¹⁰Štefan Hrib, "Will decent Slovakia win in 2019?", *.týždeň*, 5 January 2019, <<https://www.tyzden.sk/podlampou/52617/pod-lampou-vyhra-v-roku-2019-slusne-slovensko/>>.

a new wave of political leaders – scientist Robert Mistrík, lawyer Zuzana Čaputová and one of the key figures of the Velvet revolution František Mikloško.¹¹

30th anniversary of the Velvet revolution

The Slovak Republic will commemorate revolutionary events from November 1989 – the Velvet revolution. Peaceful protests turned into a history-changing milestone; Czechoslovakia expressed its wish to be part of the democratic West.

The anniversary will be relevant also for the current political situation in Slovakia, as it's already likened to “*Protests for decent Slovakia*”, which started out as a reaction to the murder of investigative reporter Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in March 2018 and received huge public support.

Conclusion

A crucial role in the Slovak external engagement in the year 2019 is played by the Slovak Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, Miroslav Lajčák, and his presidency in OSCE. This is particularly important as tensions between Ukraine and Russia increased after *Kerch incident* in November 2018. Also, the far reaching impact of Brexit will be a hot topic throughout the year 2019 - Slovakia agrees with the EU statement that the Brexit deal is fair and balanced and there should be no further discussion about the wording. Priorities for Slovakia in the UK withdrawal from the EU are the position of Slovak citizens in the UK (social and health care and legal relations) and the financial settlement after the Brexit. In March, Slovakia will elect the new head of the state, who will substitute Andrej Kiska, and set the future directions of the country.

¹¹ Miro Mezei, “Who has already announced the candidacy for the 2019 presidential election?”, *Sme.sk*, 18 January 2019, <<https://domov.sme.sk/c/20838913/prezidentske-volby-2019-pozrite-si-zoznam-kandidatov.html>>.