



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Slovakia external relations briefing:**  
**External Relations of Slovakia: Chairmanship of the OSCE**  
**Institute of Asian Studies, Bratislava**

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## **External Relations of Slovakia: Chairmanship of the OSCE**

The dominant event in the realm of the foreign policy of Slovakia for the year 2019 is the Slovak chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), under the direction of the Chairperson-in-Office, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, Miroslav Lajčák, which started on January 1<sup>st</sup> and will continue for the duration of the year.

The annual chairmanship of the OSCE is seen as a prime opportunity for Slovakia to make a name for itself on the world (or at least regional) stage and direct attention to issues which are of prime importance to Slovakia. The chairmanship poses a great organizational challenge to Slovakia, which is not used to assuming such an important role on the international stage, and behind the scenes there are questions as to its preparedness to assume the position. This is especially the case in the area of staffing, with there being difficulties in finding appropriate policy experts for the needed positions. Related to this is criticism that the agencies responsible were too late and too slow in addressing these issues. Another related controversy was part of the government crisis in late 2018, which came to a head in November of that year, just before the start of the Slovak chairmanship of the OSCE in January. This crisis was about the Slovak accession to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regulated Migration. Foreign Minister Lajčák who had been at the forefront of negotiations on the compact in his office as President of the United Nations General Assembly for the 72<sup>nd</sup> session on 2017-2018, found unexpected opposition to the initiative within the ruling coalition of Slovakia's government (namely the Slovak National Party and parts of his own Smer party), and threatened to resign if Slovakia did not accede to the compact. He handed in his resignation when accession to the compact was voted down, and for a while it looked like former Prime Minister Robert Fico, chairman of the Smer party, would take his position. In the end, Lajčák was persuaded to stay on as Foreign Minister precisely because of his indispensability in the impending chairmanship of the OSCE. There was general agreement among politicians and pundits that his expertise and strong credentials, as well as his perceived political neutrality and relative lack of scandal, were needed to ensure a successful chairmanship. This in itself suggests a lack confidence on the part of the Slovak political and diplomatic establishment, as well as a perceived lack of elites capable of managing the chairmanship. It also exposed a rift among the parties of the governing coalition, which may affect the stability of Slovakia during its time at the head of the OSCE.

The three formal priorities of the Slovak chairmanship are conflict prevention, ensuring a secure future, and effective multilateralism, with a focus on the plight of ordinary people. In practice, Slovakia's tenure at the helm of the OSCE will focus on the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. This is a natural priority for Slovakia as a neighbor of Ukraine, which is at risk of being at the forefront of any negative consequences of a potential flaring up of hostilities between the Ukrainian forces and the separatists backed by Russia. Among the consequences that Slovakia fears are an influx of refugees, or at least of economic migrants if the economic situation in Ukraine worsens dramatically, or a disruption in the flow of oil and natural gas through the pipelines going from Russia through Ukraine into Slovakia and the EU countries beyond. Slovakia is still dependent on oil and natural gas through these pipelines, even though this dependence has been lessened somewhat in the past few years by building connections with the network of pipelines throughout the EU which transport oil and natural gas by other routes from Russia, or from other sources entirely. This enables Slovakia to bypass the Ukrainian transit route in obtaining its oil and natural gas in the case of an emergency. Even so, such a scenario would be disruptive for the Slovak economy, not least because of the loss of transit fees for the transport of oil and natural gas by these pipelines through the territory of Slovakia. Slovakia's main efforts within the OSCE will be directed at helping to ensure the stability of Ukraine after the parliamentary and presidential election in that country this year, as well as attempting to de-escalate tensions along the front line, ensuring the adherence of all parties to their commitments in preventing escalation and finding a lasting solution to the conflict. Importantly, as part of the emphasis on ordinary people, Slovakia and the OSCE will focus on humanitarian projects and aid in the affected areas.

The OSCE does not have much name recognition among the average population of Slovakia, compared to the other regional organizations the country is a part of, namely the EU and NATO, or even the Visegrád 4 platform. This may seem strange at first glance, due to the Slovakia's membership in it having the longest duration of all these other organizations, due to its former prominence in the security establishment of the region (as championed by the Slovak National Party mentioned below), but also due to the Slovak diplomat and later Minister of Foreign Affairs Ján Kubiš serving as the secretary general of the organization in the years 1999-2005. Nevertheless, or maybe because of this low profile, the OSCE has a unique position in the Slovak political discourse. The reason for this is the relative level of acceptance it has across party lines in the political arena. While the members of the political and administrative establishment is generally pro-Western and Atlanticist, with formal policymaking firmly in their hands, there are segments of society that are skeptical of such an orientation, mainly those that identify with the radical right or left, but also people without a strong political identity,

which are liable to vote for populist political parties, or those from more rural areas of the country. This is seen in the composition of the ruling governmental coalition in Slovakia, which was formed after the parliamentary elections of 2016 as a least favorite or least popular choice for all involved parties to stave off political paralysis or early elections. This rather unnatural coalition is composed of three long-standing and mainstream parties from opposite poles of the various political cleavages in Slovakia, but only one of them – the center-right and ethnically mixed Slovak-Hungarian party Most (Bridge), the smallest party, is staunchly Atlanticist. The other two, Smer-SD (*Smer – sociálna demokracia* / Direction – Social Democracy) and the conservative-nationalist party SNS (*Slovenská národná strana* / Slovak National Party), while declaring themselves to be pro-Western, are much more lukewarm or even ambivalent, and also emphasize the necessity of strong ties with Russia. Especially SNS is seen as edging closer to a pro-Russia stance, as seen in the activities of party chairman and Speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic (the Slovak parliament) Anton Danko, who twice travelled to Moscow to address the Russian Duma in contravention of official Slovak policy, or other leading SNS politicians visiting Crimea, in spite of its annexation by Russia not being recognized by Slovakia, which adopted EU sanctions on Russia as a response to the annexation. In the past SNS advocated a neutral foreign policy for Slovakia, with the OSCE as a guarantor of peace and security in Europe, instead of committing to membership in NATO. Meanwhile, the position of Smer, ostensibly a social democratic party but fitting rather the profile of a left-wing nationalist party, is seen as being more pragmatic and business oriented, with its lukewarm rhetoric toward the rest of the West being seen as more of a ploy to tap into the sentiments of the electorate rather than a position based on a commitment to an ideological doctrine. In any case, OSCE ties into the debate in Slovakia about the political and strategic orientation of the country, which may seem clearly pro-Western on the surface but is always simmering below the lid. The third mentioned priority of Slovakia's leadership in the OSCE, effective multilateralism, can be seen through the prism of this internal foreign policy debate.

One of the reasons for this perception of OSCE in the political discourse is due to the broad membership of the OSCE, which includes Russia as well as the USA and the major Western European powers. This satisfies those segments of the population and political leaders that are critical of the declared unequivocal Atlanticist orientation of Slovakia and see Slovak membership in NATO especially, but also the EU due to its aforementioned sanctions on Russia, as excessively and unnecessarily jeopardizing Slovakia's relationship with Russia. This makes the OSCE a unique organization in that all major parties can come together and agree on its constructive role in ensuring peace, security and the protection of human rights on the Eurasian continent. More probably, though, it is due to the relatively weaker powers and

mandate of the organization, especially compared to those with a higher profile, such as the EU or NATO. This is primarily because of the decision-making process in the OSCE. Decisions in the organization are reached by consensus of all member states; with the current membership of 57 states, it is rare for all of them to agree on a course of effective action. This means that often the decisions reached are weak or vague, or a decision is not reached at all, which has the silver lining of the OSCE not being criticized as often by various segments of the population for taking action which goes against the opinions or interests of these critics. Another aspect is that OSCE does not have any means of compelling countries to abide by its decisions, which are therefore often ignored by the targeted countries. Both of these aspects of OSCE decision making are a source of criticism in their own right, to the effect that OSCE is a powerless organization unable to change anything and serves only as a forum for discussion. It would also account for the low level of recognition of the organization and its activity among the Slovak population.

Apart from the challenges of organization mentioned above, chairing the OSCE also poses a challenge for Slovakia in the areas of prestige and substantive policymaking, especially as the chairmanship of the OSCE is not granted automatically on the basis of rotation as in the case of the presidency of the Council of the EU, but it has to be applied for. By doing so, Slovakia made a commitment that it can take on the responsibilities that go along with the position, not only in the area of organization and logistics, but also in the realm of leadership and ability to formulate and negotiate progressive solutions to difficult problems. In this aspect, it is up to the presiding country in question to formulate its own priorities and program for the year, even though it can rely on coordination with the other two members of the “troika”, or trio of successive presiding countries, which in the case of the current Slovak chairmanship, are Austria and Italy, which preceded Slovakia in chairing the organization. Slovakia as a presiding country must therefore take care to formulate policies and solutions commensurate with its capabilities and experience, and not have overly ambitious goals which it risks not being able to fulfill, nor adopt goals which are too vague or do not go far enough in furthering the agenda of the OSCE.