



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia external relations briefing:
Distribution of Top EU Positions after the EP Elections
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Distribution of Top EU Positions after the EP Elections

The main issue of foreign affairs in Slovakia over the past month or two was the final allocation of positions and offices in the EU institutions, according to the results of the elections to the European Parliament (EP) in May of this year. As discussed in the Slovak internal political briefing for October, the most high-profile position to be filled was that of European Commissioner. However, that was not the only position that Slovak diplomacy was thinking about. At an informal European Council summit in Sibiu in Romania on May 28, there was an agreement between the Visegrád Four (V4) countries that they would try to gain more influence in the EU by trying to obtain one of the top EU jobs that would have to be filled after the EP elections – i.e. President of the EU Council, European Commission (EC) President, President of the EP, and High Representative (HR) of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, with the President of the European Central Bank sometimes included. This “pact” consisted of an agreement that an eventual front runner from any of the V4 countries would have the support of all the other three remaining members, which would not nominate their own candidate to oppose this front runner. The reason for this agreement was a perception that the interests of the V4 countries in particular, but also the Central and Eastern European member states in general were not adequately represented according to the current distribution of power in the institutions. This distribution of power ostensibly favors the “older” Western European member states, i.e. those that acceded before 2004. This was seen most explicitly with the issue of migrant quotas following the EU migrant crisis which started in 2015. The problem of migration in general, and refugee allocation in particular, has become the most divisive issue between the “older” and “newer” member states. But this is not the only grievance of the central European political elites towards the EU. The looming Brexit led to forecasts that in the next EU budgetary framework, EU structural and cohesion funds would have to be cut to make up for the loss of contributions from the UK. The V4 countries, as well as the other “newer”, or post-2004 EU members, were worried that the Central and Eastern European region was in an unfavorable position to defend its interests in the EU, due to not being adequately represented in the top EU positions. This was the opinion among the V4 country governing elites even in spite of the fact that the president of the European Council is Donald Tusk from Poland. He is however seen as too much of a pro-EU politician not only among his political opponents in his native Poland, who currently hold the reins of government in that country, but among euroskeptics in the entire region.

Among the V4 countries, Slovakia is generally seen as the most pro-EU member. Unlike its other three partners, it is a member of the Eurozone, and it had contributed to the Greek debt relief and other assistance during the EU debt crisis via the European Financial Stability Facility and the later European Stability Mechanism. Slovakia also accepted a number of Assyrian Christian refugees from Iraq, albeit not as part of the EU migrant allocation scheme, and despite its lawsuit against Decision 2015/1601 of the Council of the EU on the allocation of migrants. However, even though Slovakia was not seen as so skeptical of the current direction of European integration as its other V4 partners, it agreed to a common V4 platform because it was banking on gaining support for its EU commissioner and vice-president of the EC Maroš Šefčovič. According to the Slovak government, Šefčovič had the best chances of success in the ambitions of the V4 to gain an important position. His strengths were his high position and long tenure in the EC as well as acceptability by the EU political mainstream. Another reason for Šefčovič as a V4 candidate was that each of the four governments of the V4 countries was represented by a different political grouping in the European Council and the EP – the *Party of European Socialists* (PES) for Slovakia, the centrist liberal *Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party* for the Czech republic, the pro-EU Christian-democratic *European People's Party* for Hungary and the conservative euroskeptical *European Conservatives and Reformists Party* for Poland. This was supposed to form a basis for broad support for Šefčovič across all the mentioned political groupings in the EP, as well as present him as a consensus nominee whose candidacy is based upon professionalism and experience rather than a narrow political affiliation, and whose appeal can cross party lines. That was seen as especially important after the most recent EP elections, in which the informal ruling coalition of the EPP and the PES (represented by the Socialists and Democrats grouping in the EP) lost its majority, meaning that more groupings had to be taken on board to confirm the nominees for the top positions.

At first, just after the EP elections, Šefčovič was touted by the Slovak government as a possible V4 candidate for the Presidency of the EC, though his candidacy was not formalized among the V4 partners. In the event that Šefčovič would not get the necessary support for his candidacy, another option would have been for him to be put forward as the V4 platform nominee for the High Representative, in exchange for V4 support for a different and more broadly acceptable candidate for EC President. While the Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák claimed that Šefčovič was the official candidate of the V4, his boss Prime Minister Peter Pellegríni said that this was only an unofficial decision, and that Šefčovič was merely one of several possible candidates for the V4 platform. Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš was even cooler towards this development, claiming that the agreement of Šefčovič as a common V4 candidate was mere speculation. The opinion of the other EU member states

presented an even larger hurdle for Šefčovič's – and therefore Slovakia's – EC ambitions. Due to the above mentioned conflict between the V4 governments and the Western European member and EU elites over refuge and migrant allocation and quotas, the V4 platform was seen by them as a troublemaker in the EU. This meant that these elites were not well disposed to accommodate the V4 by granting it concessions concerning the top EU positions. What's more, since Šefčovič was nominated by the social-democratic Smer-SD party, the dominant governing party in Slovakia, this led to some trouble with the leadership of the PES, of which Smer-SD is a member, and which had already nominated the Dutch European Commissioner Frans Timmermans for the post of EC President. Timmermans had been the "spitzenkandidat", or lead candidate of the PES for the EC Presidency already before the May EP elections. This was originally one of the selling points for Šefčovič – his candidacy was partly defined as a refusal of the Spitzenkandidat system, to which many national elites were opposed to because of a perception that it takes too much power away from member states – especially the V4 member states but also president Macron of France. Yet while the Spitzenkandidat system was severely weakened if not discredited in the negotiations following the EP elections, Timmermans retained the the PES nomination for EC, though he later lost to the German Minister of Defense Ursula von der Leyen.

It was also speculated that Šefčovič could try for the post of High Representative. However, that also did not bear fruit, and he once again failed to get a clear mandate from all V4 countries, with Babiš again denying that Šefčovič was the official candidate of the V4 platform. It therefore became clear that the V4 had failed to obtain a top post for its representative. It could be conceded that Slovak diplomacy had failed, but from the start it was obvious that Slovakia bit off more than it could chew and its chances were always rather poor, not only because of Slovakia's low influence in the EU as a "newer" and less populous member state, but also due to the circumstances mentioned above, notably the poor reputation of the V4 because of the migrant crisis, as well as the adherence to the Spitzenkandidat system by the PES. Slovakia had to then focus on obtaining a good EC portfolio for Šefčovič, who remained the Slovak nominee for European Commissioner. His reception of the portfolio of Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight did not cause celebration or disappointment in Slovakia, being the successor portfolio of the one he had held between 2010 and 2014. However, due to Brexit and the debate on the future development of the EU as outlined in EC President Jean-Claude Juncker's white paper on the five scenarios on the future of Europe, this portfolio may become much more important in the years to come. More important was the fact that Šefčovič will remain the Vice-President of the EC in the new Commission. He was unanimously confirmed in his portfolio and the vice-presidency in his "grilling" hearing before

the EP on September 30, 2019. He has thus cleared the last hurdle, unless another reshuffle takes place due to the need to nominate and accept a new EC candidate from Romania – a similar situation in 2014 led to a re-allocation of portfolios for Šefčovič due to the need to find a new EC candidate from Slovenia. All in all, the retention of the vice-presidency of the EC as well as receiving such a potentially important portfolio points to a victory for Slovak Diplomacy. The conclusion is not as good for the policy of the V4 platform, however. The V4 countries had failed in their collective attempt to obtain one of the top positions in the EU and thus achieve the “regional balance” that it so desired. It could be said that it will be worse off than it was until now, since for the past five years there was Donald Tusk of Poland at the helm of the European Council. It would seem that the V4 has been weakened, or at least has shown a weakness that was there all along, since it failed to parlay its relatively strong internal cohesion into actual influence and gain the necessary allies from outside the group. But this only sets the stage for more confrontation in the future, such as over the volume and allocation of Structural and Cohesion Funds in the new budgetary framework. The existing East-West divisions in the EU may therefore get stronger in the following years.