



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia external relations briefing:
Review of the External Relations of Slovakia in 2019
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Review of the External Relations of Slovakia in 2019

The foreign policy of the Slovak Republic in 2019 was conducted under the shadow of increasing polarization of the domestic political scene. While the main political cleavages are domestic, this division also influences specific foreign policy issues. As a consequence of the increased polarization in Slovak politics, two broad political camps seem to have formed with specific views on foreign policy. On one side is the staunchly pro-Western camp, formed by centrist and center-right parties, and comprising progressives, liberals, Christian democrats and moderate conservatives. This camp is more ideological than the second in its largely favorable attitude toward the EU and NATO, and is hostile to other global centers of power such as Russia and China, or to opinions suggesting alternative forms of European security architecture. The other camp is composed of conservatives, populists and nationalists, and is generally right wing. The stance of the members of this camp is more pragmatic (as they would put it) or populist (as their rivals would call them). While their formal attitudes towards the EU and NATO range from lukewarm to hostile, their commonality which brings them together is seen in practical politics. Parties of this camp present themselves as the defenders of Slovak sovereignty and traditional values, against what they see as interference by the liberal Western elites trying to change the continent under a progressive and homogenizing agenda, thus erasing national specificities and values. They are also more open to developing good relations to the alternate global centers of power, due to a pragmatic desire to develop economic cooperation. This camp is somewhat surprisingly even supported by elements of the radical left, as they see a shared enemy in Western liberalism. Yet while the right wing is focused more on the perceived threat of liberalism on traditional social values, the radical left is more critical of economic liberalism – although elements of the radical left are adopting conservative views on social issues as a negative reaction to what they see as Western influence. It is also the expression of a trend whereby the radical right is adopting pro-welfare left-wing economic position, thus bringing both ends of the political spectrum closer together.

This is of course a simplified analysis of the situation; it would be more accurately seen as a continuum – even the pro-Western parties criticize the EU on certain issues such as mandatory migrant quotas or suggestions for a larger role of the EU in European Security to the detriment of NATO. However, such a development is in line with the growing theory among political scientists that the main political cleavage in the future developed world be not be the traditional one between left and right, but rather one between internationalists and nationalists,

based on issues such as globalization, migration and regional integration. Whether or not such an evolution will actually take place, the Slovak experience seems to be trending in that direction. In the Slovak case, such a division actually goes back to the 1990s, the first decade of democratic politics in Slovakia after the end of the Cold War. This was the era of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, who headed a coalition government of nationalists and populists of the right and left. Opposed to him was a coalition of pro-Western and liberal parties of the center-right and center-left. This political divide thus transcended the traditional left vs. right divide seen in the Western world, and it had a great impact on the political consciousness of Slovaks. It does however to a certain extent copy the cleavage between the winners (the internationalists) and losers (the nationalists) of the economic transformation from a socialist command economy to a capitalist market economy. Anyway, the polarization along this nationalist vs. internationalist cleavage has gotten worse in recent years, which was also true of 2019. This polarization, as well as politicizing of foreign policy, was exacerbated by the fact that 2019 was a pre-election year, with parliamentary elections set for February 29th, 2020. It was also the year of presidential elections in March and elections to the European Parliament in May, as developed below.

Poised between these two camps is the country's largest party, the center-left Smer-SD (Smer – sociálna demokracia / Direction-social democracy), which is the dominant party in Slovakia, having been in government (always as the leading party) for 12 of the last 14 years, excluding a two-year stint in opposition in 2010-2012. Although identifying itself as a standard social democratic party in the European mold, it is rather conservative on many social issues, and could be better described as a party of left-wing nationalism. Smer-SD does declare itself to be squarely in the pro-Western camp, but in practice it also relies on the populist rhetoric of the protection of national sovereignty and traditional values, as well as pragmatically developing relations with non-Western powers. Such an attitude by a center-left ostensibly “social democratic” party can seem odd, since elsewhere in Europe such parties tend to be progressive and among the most pro-EU parties. The difference in Slovakia can be explained by the fact that Western-style progressivism or left-wing liberalism has never been a strong political current in Slovakia, which has led Smer-SD to adopt more socially conservative or populist positions in the area of cultural policy to gain the support of the rural working class, which tends to be more socially conservative. Yet the pragmatism of Smer-SD is shown in the fact that when it comes to practical decisions as opposed the rhetoric, it tends to act in line with the EU and NATO consensus. Therefore, while Smer-SD is often more in line with the nationalist camp when it comes to domestic political issues, in the execution of foreign policy it is more aligned with the pro-Western camp. Therein lies its image of a moderate and

pragmatic (its rivals would say populist) party, which enabled it to build a broad coalition of voter support. Significantly, Smer-SD has also been in charge of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs during its entire time in government. In general, the foreign policy establishment is unequivocally pro-Western, and the grip of Smer-SD on this portfolio shows that it is comfortable working with this establishment.

This polarization and politization of foreign policy was shown to an extent in the run-up to the presidential elections, which took place in March of this year. Out of several early candidates, the pro-Western camp coalesced around the progressive politician Zuzana Čaputová from the PS/SPOLU (Progresívne Slovensko & SPOLU / Progressive Slovakia & Together) coalition. Meanwhile, Smer-SD chose the Slovak European Commissioner, Maroš Šefčovič. These two became the main contenders who eventually faced each other in the second round of the election. Šefčovič is a professional diplomat and a firm supporter of Slovakia's pro-Western orientation, showing the similarity between Smer-SD and the liberal internationalist camp when it comes to foreign policy. This meant that the election was fought almost exclusively on domestic issues. However, while Čaputová followed the pro-Western ideological line faithfully, Šefčovič and his parent Smer-SD party tried to gain the votes of the nationalist and traditionalist camp by criticizing the EU over the migrant quotas, and its liberal LGBT and gender policies, as well as criticizing Čaputová over her adherence to these policies. This demonstrates the populist strategy of Smer-SD of trying to win votes from both camps. Yet it was a controversial attempt on the part of Šefčovič and Smer-SD, not least because as European Commissioner Šefčovič had advocated the liberal EU consensus (which he had to, as the Commission must present a united front). It led to accusations of opportunist flip-flopping and was not very successful at gaining the right-wing vote. The fact that both frontrunners were more-or-less in the pro-Western camp left the field open for a candidate from the opposite camp, and this space was taken up by the eventual third and fourth -place finishers, the populist conservative Štefan Harabin of the Vlasť (Homeland) party and the extreme nationalist Marián Kotleba of ĽSNS (Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko / People's Party Our Slovakia). If the results of these two were taken together, the resulting total would have been enough to push the right-wing candidate of this camp into the second round against Čaputová, displacing Šefčovič. This is another example of the growing divide between nationalists and internationalists in the approach toward foreign policy.

Once in office, President Čaputová fulfilled expectations by conducting presidential foreign policy in a manner consistent with her pro-Western beliefs. For example, her first relevant foreign visit, following a courtesy visit to the Czech Republic, was to Brussels, to meet with the secretary general of NATO Jens Stoltenberg and European Commission President

Jean-Claude Juncker. She affirmed Slovakia's commitments to the goals of these two organizations and criticized Russia's actions in Ukraine and with regard to hybrid threats or the proliferation of fake news. She followed up this visit with trips to Hungary and Poland, thus showing her commitment to the Visegrád Four (V4) platform. However, she obliquely criticized the Hungarian and Polish governments for using the V4 as a rival platform to the dominant EU consensus on issues such as human rights, migration and the rule of law. On the contrary, she envisages the V4 as a platform united in the protection of democracy, human right and the rule of law, as a part of the EU consensus. She has thus placed herself firmly against the current of "illiberal democracy" which is entrenching itself in the two neighboring countries and gaining popularity elsewhere in Europe. She is expected to continue in a similar fashion going forward; of course, since the position of president is a purely ceremonial one what with Slovakia being a parliamentary republic, her real influence on the country's foreign policy activities is limited.

When it comes to the specific issues that dominated foreign policy, 2019 was an eventful one for Slovak diplomacy. On January 1st, Slovakia took over the chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) for the duration of the year, with the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, Miroslav Lajčák, serving as the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office. This function was added to Slovakia's presidency of the Visegrád Four (V4) group of states, which it had held from July of the previous year, and which it continued to hold in until the end of June 2019, also for one year. The chairmanship of OSCE in particular was a challenge for Slovak diplomacy, as it was unaccustomed to taking on such an important role on the international stage, and had to grapple with organizational issues such as a lack of staffing. The three formal priorities of the Slovak chairmanship were conflict prevention, ensuring a secure future, and effective multilateralism, with a focus on the plight of ordinary people. In practice, Slovakia's priority was mitigating the effects of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and managing the peace process between the two sides of the conflict. While no major breakthrough was achieved in Ukraine, or other frozen conflicts, no one really had such high expectations of the Slovak chairmanship. The most important achievements of the chairmanship as presented by the Foreign Ministry were administrative ones, namely a proposal for the future model of financing of the organization and personal appointments to top OSCE positions, such as appointing Heidi Grau as Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office in Ukraine and in the Trilateral Contact Group. In any case, the chairmanship of the OSCE did not gain much attention in Slovakia, due to its smaller powers and consequently its lower profile than other, more influential organization like the EU or NATO.

In comparison to its OSCE chairmanship, Slovakia's presidency of the V4 was more routine, having been the 5th time Slovakia took up this role since the V4 was created in 1991. The three priorities of the Slovak V4 presidency were "a strong Europe, a secure environment and smart solutions". The third priority was mainly focused on domestic issues, but the other two were mostly related to foreign policy. As concerns the first priority, the Slovak V4 presidency had to contend with the decrease in the reputation that the V4 is going through in recent years in the EU. This decline is because of the V4 being perceived by Western European countries and EU elites as drifting away from the Western liberal consensus on high standards for democracy and the rule of law (mainly in the case of Hungary and Poland). It is also due to acting in an uncooperative way and with a lack of solidarity during the EU migrant crisis (where V4 members refused to take in refugees based on EU-allocated quotas) and on other issues where the EU wanted to act supranationally. Indeed, one of the goals of the V4 during the Slovak presidency was to advocate for the primacy of intergovernmental integration – meaning the preference for a stronger role of the European Council, where heads of state and government make decisions by consensus – as opposed to supranational integration whereby the European Commission would play the stronger role. The V4 did manage to achieve some of its goals, such as the emphasis on stronger EU border controls on land and sea or on tackling the migrant problem in the countries of origin, in the place of mandatory migrant quotas. It is however questionable to what extent this change in the EU policy was due to the V4 specifically, or merely a broader EU decision that the V4 profited from. The poor reputation of the V4 has been suggested as one reason why Slovakia was not able to achieve more of its presidency priorities, such as push through a common candidate for a top EU position after the elections to the European Parliament (EP), as expounded upon below. In any case, while the V4 is still seen as a useful tool by its members, including Slovakia, not only to coordinate themselves on regional issues of importance to them, but also to maximize their influence and achieve some synergy at the EU decision-making level, the platform is now in disfavor among the EU elites and certain influential Western European leaders.

The Slovak V4 presidency had slightly more success in its second priority, "a secure environment", which focused on regional security. The most tangible result of the presidency in this area was the the acceptance of Croatian forces into the Visegrád battlegroup as part of the EU rapid reaction forces, which was finalized at a summit of V4 and Croatian defense ministers in November. V4 policy was easy to coordinate within this priority area, as it was less of a priority and more of an affirmation of a mutually shared consensus on regional foreign and security policy within the EU, such as support for the Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy, for speedy accession of the countries of the Western Balkans, for the

Permanent Structured Cooperation in defense, but also against decreasing the role of NATO in favor of proposals for common EU security. The Slovak elites still see NATO as the most important and most reliable guarantor of Slovakia's security (implicitly aimed at Russia? With the European powers seem much weaker and too close to Russia. On the other hand, the V4 suffered a setback when French President Emmanuel Macron vetoed the start of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia,

Apart from chairing these two organizations, the most important challenge for Slovak diplomacy was presented by the results of the election to the European parliament (EP) in May (May 25th in Slovakia), which led to several months of intensive negotiations on the division of major and minor positions in the EU institutions. The elections themselves, shook up the political scene, with Smer-SD, the favorite to win, finishing a close second (with three MEPs) to the PS/SPOLU coalition (with four MEPs), which got an electoral boost thanks to the election of Zuzana Čaputová as president. But more significant than that was the election of ĽSNS in third place, with two MEPs. The ĽSNS profited from discontent with current elites as well as from general indignation connected to migrant quotas for Slovakia. Three more parties representing the pro-European camp gained MEPs. The fact that one of these parties will not be given one of its seats until Brexit (when MEPs from the UK will vacate a number of EP seats to be filled by other members, such as Slovakia), caused a mini scandal in the country. At the same time, the two parties representing the Hungarian minority lost their EP seats. Apart from the fact that the extreme right gained EP representation from Slovakia, another source of embarrassment for the government was that Slovakia continues to be the country with the lowest voter turnout among EU members. Electoral turnout in Slovakia stood at 22.74% of all eligible voters, compared to 50.62% for the entire EU. This is actually a better percentage than the previous EP elections in 2014, but still not enough to escape last place, even though there was a massive media campaign to boost turnout. The reason for this is that Slovak voters do not see the EP elections, nor the EP itself, as important or relevant to their lives and their problems. The EU is often perceived as a distant bureaucratic colossus, not really democratic and usually irrelevant for their daily lives – unless there is a EU-wide controversy that impacts domestic politics, such as the migrant crisis or the eurozone debt crisis, which, however, have died down to a significant extent compared to previous years. When such EU issues are not significant, the election contest tends to become an extension of domestic politics and internal issues. This was the case this year as well. In any case, Slovakia's influence in the EP was expected to diminish, since all but two MEPs were new, with the most influential and long-serving MEPs failing to be reelected.

The EP elections influenced the allocation of top positions in the EU, namely the President of the European 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 also sometimes included. Already at the summit in Sibiu in Romania on May 28th, just after the elections, the V4 countries had negotiated about not fielding candidates against each other, or even backing a common candidate to increase the chances of gaining a top position. All four countries agreed that their interests had not been taken into account or represented adequately by the previous office holders. Slovakia originally hoped to obtain one of these positions, especially that of EC President, for its Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič. Slovak diplomacy tried to enlist the support of its three partners as part of its V4 presidency, but was met with a cool response by the other three states, which did not want to commit themselves. Slovakia next tried to get the position of High Representative for Šefčovič, but failed to garner enough support for that move as well. In the event, no V4 candidate obtained a top job. Even if a common V4 candidate had materialized, it is unlikely that he or she would have had a chance to gain enough support to obtain a top EU position, because of the poor reputation of the V4 in the EU as was described above. This was a something of a failure on the part of Slovak diplomacy, though it was seen as an overly ambitious plan from the start. Conversely, it may be counted as a victory for Slovakia that in the end, Šefčovič kept his position as Vice-President of the EC, as well as getting the potentially influential portfolio of Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight, because of the need to focus on the future of the EU after Brexit. He was easily confirmed in these two positions by the EP in his “grilling” hearing before the EP on September 30th, but this triumph of sorts did not resonate in Slovakia, confirming the detached attitude of Slovaks toward the EU.

Possibly the main issue that Slovakia was focused on with respect to the EU and the looming Brexit was the future of the EU’s cohesion policy. The British withdrawal meant that the EU was losing a wealthy member which contributed more to the common EU budget than it received, and these funds would be missed in future budgets. Some leaders among the wealthier EU member states have called for a corresponding reduction in funding for cohesion policy, i.e. the funds meant for poorer countries and regions or disadvantaged groups in the EU to catch up to the wealthier states and regions of the EU. Slovakia, as a member state which relies a great deal on these European funds for investment in infrastructure and other projects, was and remains strongly against such suggestions. It especially rejects connecting EU funds to other policies such as accepting prescribed quotas of migrants. This stance was seen in Slovakia’s activities as part of its V4 presidency as well as part of its membership in the Friends of Cohesion grouping. This platform is composed of the relatively poorer EU member states which

have an interest in preserving a strong and well-funded European Cohesion Policy. Slovakia hosted the summit of this grouping on November 29th, which resulted in the adoption of a declaration on the Multiannual Financial Framework of the EU, as a step towards assuring this goal.

Since Slovakia is a small country whose foreign policy interests and capabilities are generally limited to the regional and European level, relations with countries further afield only occasionally come to the fore. The start of the year presented one such occasion, when a political crisis erupted about the negotiations for the signing of a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the USA. The conclusion of a DCA was a precondition to a specific project of military cooperation which the USA is interested in, namely the reconstruction of the military airbases at Kuchyňa in Western Slovakia and Sliach in Central Slovakia. The DCA was to be a building block in the development of the European Deterrence Initiative within the framework of NATO, specifically strengthening its Eastern flank against a perceived threat from Russia.

The crisis over the DCA clearly demonstrated the cleavage between the pro-Western and nationalist camps. It was initiated by the SNS (Slovenská národná strana / Slovak National Party), a junior party in the governing coalition. The SNS is perceived as the most important or relevant, though also the most moderate, party of the nationalist camp. Much like Smer-SD, it officially supports Slovak membership in both the EU and NATO, though it builds much of its political support on criticizing these organizations. Furthermore, the SNS has adopted the most positive attitude toward Russia of all the relevant parties in Slovakia. Its chairman Andrej Danko, who is also the speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic (the parliament of Slovakia), has gone on several visits to the Russian Duma (parliament) and met with high-ranking Russian politicians. As these visits and meetings were not undertaken with the support of the entire Slovak government, the Ministry of Slovak and European Affairs has criticized Danko and has had to repeatedly distance itself from them as not representing the official foreign policy line of the country. However, the support of SNS has declined to the point that polls predict that it will not be able to keep its status as a parliamentary party. While part of its voter support has gone over to more radical parties, a good deal of its decline can be attributed to the political and personal scandals of its members. Concurrently with the decline of SNS, the extreme right-wing ĽSNS, which is strongly against the pro-Western alignment of Slovakia, has grown. This trend has led SNS to try even harder to capture the right-wing vote, which along with the rise of ĽSNS, has contributed to the polarization of politics in Slovakia.

As for relations with China, these did not resonate very deeply in Slovak media and society, since China is considered to be too far away to be a political issue, and mutual trade

and investment is not at the level where closely following the developments in and relationship with China is seen as necessary. For example the 70th anniversary of mutual relations between Slovakia and the PRC in October went without notice in the Slovak media, with only a brief statement on the website of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the only acknowledgement of this fact. Even Slovakia's presence at the second China International Import Expo in Shanghai in November was limited to just two companies. Slovakia did achieve one success in one area of its economic relations with China – on April 12th during the summit of the 17+1 platform in Croatia's Dubrovnik, Slovakia and China signed a certification deal that enabled the export of Slovak dairy products to China. This accomplishment was relatively well publicized in the media. But it is dubious whether the practical results will live up to the hype, considering that Slovak producers do not have the necessary economies of scale that the Chinese market demands. Slovakia was also present at the second Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, although only represented by Foreign Minister Lajčák rather than the president or prime minister. Lajčák lobbied for Slovakia to become a railway hub for China in Europe through various projects. These projects have also been suggested in past years, however, and not acted upon. This is leading towards a cooling of enthusiasm towards the Belt and Road Initiative and 17+1 platform in Slovakia. Apart from this, Slovak media also focused on negative issues such as Chinese unfair trade practices or the debt trap that some countries which had done business with Chinese companies within the BRI framework had fallen into. President Zuzana Čaputová shares this skeptical view of China – when she met with Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China Wang Yi, she opened the topic of human rights in China. For this she was immediately criticized by Slovak Minister of Agriculture Gabriela Matečná from SNS, who worried that such comments would endanger the dairy certification deal.

To sum up, the main issues for the foreign policy of Slovakia in 2019 had to do with regional or European issues, due to Slovakia's size and consequent limited interests. Of these issues, gaining more influence in the EU and preserving the current volume of cohesion policy funds were the priorities. Slovak diplomacy also had its hands full with chairing the OSCE and presiding over the V4, each for a year. These events made it an important year for Slovak foreign policy. It was also an important year for multilateralism in the foreign policy of Slovakia, as seen by the roles played by the OSCE, V4 and EU. Slovakia's foreign policy is also influenced by growing political polarization in the country. These dynamics are expected to continue the following year as well.