



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Slovakia external relations briefing:**  
**External Relations of Slovakia: The COVID-19 Pandemic**  
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## **External Relations of Slovakia: The COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic continued to be the dominant issue for Slovak diplomacy in April – whether through monitoring the situation abroad, repatriating Slovak citizens, acquiring medical material, sending medical aid abroad, or negotiation crisis responses within the EU. Although the first case of the disease in Slovakia was confirmed on March 6<sup>th</sup>, the main growth of the infection curve came in early and mid-April. Slovakia entered April with 400 cases, which increased to 1 403 by April 30<sup>th</sup>. The first two deaths were reported on April 6<sup>th</sup>, while at the end of the month the death toll was 23 people. The new government, which took power on March 21<sup>st</sup> following parliamentary elections on February 29<sup>th</sup>, generally continued the policies of the previous government to contain the virus. For example, on April 8<sup>th</sup>, the government renewed controls at the borders with its EU neighbors. These controls will continue till at least May 7<sup>th</sup>.

One of the initiatives reconsidered by the new government was repatriation of Slovaks stranded abroad due to travel restrictions and lockdowns. From April 2<sup>nd</sup>, registration of Slovaks abroad for repatriation was halted, due to concerns that many were abusing the system by returning to the country from which they arrived, expecting they would be repatriated again. However, previously registered repatriations continued – on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, these numbered 6 190 from over 100 countries, of which 70% were from Europe. By then, around 3 500 Slovaks had been repatriated, which increased to 3 723 by April 20<sup>th</sup>. But if the number of registered Slovaks was too low, as was the case in Mexico, the repatriation was cancelled due to limited capacity of the Slovak plane fleet. For the same reason, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) urged candidates for repatriation to travel as close as possible to Slovakia on their own. Repatriation took place either by bus, which was free (i.e. financed by Slovakia) or by plane, which was paid for by the repatriated citizens. On the other hand, Slovakia entered into agreements with other EU members, both to repatriate their citizens, or to have Slovak citizens repatriated by their efforts. Over 550 Slovaks were repatriated by other EU states by April 20<sup>th</sup>. It is clear, however, that the MoFA was not prepared to handle the transportation of the required number of people on short notice. Another limitation was the insufficient capacity of quarantine sites for repatriated citizens. This unpreparedness is a problem to be addressed by the current and subsequent governments to avoid it in case of future crises.

Slovak diplomacy was also involved in the EU response to the pandemic. For instance, the EU helped coordinate and finance repatriation. Slovakia also benefitted greatly from the EU

decision that previously unused European funds (which would originally have had to be returned) would be made available for combating the virus. On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, after an informal videoconference of the Council of the EU, Slovakia was promised an additional 5 billion Euros to aid in the fight against the coronavirus. Countries had more latitude on how they could use the money compared to previous funds, provided that the relevant ministries draw up plans on where the funds are most needed. Slovakia was represented by State Secretary of the MoFA (i.e. deputy minister) Martin Klus. This was because the actual minister, Ivan Korčok, was in mandatory two-week quarantine. As he had previously been Slovakia's ambassador to the USA, he had arrived from there to take up his new position after the elections. During his quarantine, he was represented by Martin Klus in professional matters. In representative matters Korčok's duties were taken on by Vice-Premier Richard Sulík, chairman of the classical-liberal SaS (Sloboda a solidarita, Freedom and Solidarity) party, which nominated Korčok and Klus to their new positions after the election. Korčok finally took up his position on April 8<sup>th</sup>.

Apart from focusing on the EU itself, Slovak diplomacy did not neglect regional matters relating to the pandemic. Also on April 8<sup>th</sup>, the Foreign Ministers of the Visegrád Four countries held a videoconference on which they agreed on the creation of a V4 fund for the six countries in the Eastern Partnership of the EU (i.e. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) to help mitigate the effects of the coronavirus pandemic in these countries, under the name of V4EastSolidarity. This was added to the aid allocated to the region by the European Commission, which was supported by Slovakia and the other EU members at another Council of the EU videoconference on April 22<sup>nd</sup>.

One controversial topic of the EU response to the coronavirus is aiding the EU-wide economy by issuing common Eurobonds. This would mean the transfer of wealth from EU members countries weathering the economic aspects of the coronavirus crisis relatively better, to those members which have larger economic problems. Slovakia was and remains skeptical towards the Eurobonds, since it was not hit as hard as the countries supporting the Eurobonds. This stance is made all the more relevant because one of the parties of the new governing coalition is SaS, which is possibly the most hostile of the relevant parties towards subsidizing member states seen as irresponsible and generally wealthier than Slovakia. SaS, with its emphasis on fiscal responsibility, has quite a reputation in this respect, as the last time it was in government in 2012 it refused to back a vote of confidence in that government over the Slovak contribution to a bailout to Greece during the Greek debt crisis, which led to the fall of that government. Many Slovaks would also probably be skeptical of the need for aid toward the wealthier EU countries such as Italy, Spain or Belgium, even though the government emphasizes that they are not responsible for the COVID-19 outbreak and are as much victims

as Slovakia, and therefore deserve to be helped. The counter-argument of their opponents is that the severely hit countries have a major responsibility for their situation, due to their delayed and ineffective reactions to the threat.

However, Slovakia does not deny the need for solidarity within the EU, if only to prove that it is a constructive EU member. Being one of the EU members least hit by the virus, Slovakia also offered to aid the more severely affected countries. For example, on April 20<sup>th</sup>, Slovakia sent 316 000 &Euros worth of aid to Italy in the form of 300 000 face masks and 500 liters of concentrated disinfectant. Slovakia also offered to send medical personnel, lend medical equipment, or accept patients from Italy into Slovak hospitals. Slovakia also gave aid to three hospitals in Moldova.

After the EU summit on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, discussion turned from Eurobonds to a reconstruction fund, which Slovakia supported. In the debate whether the fund should consist of loans (advocated by the wealthier contributor Northern members of the EU) or grants (supported by poorer Southern members hit hard by the virus) Slovakia preferred loans, due to its emphasis on fiscal responsibility and better results in the pandemic, meaning it would not need the fund as much. New Slovak Prime Minister Igor Matovič claimed it would help Slovakia twice as much as EU funds, but insisted on more flexibility for the specific needs of the EU members. He also called for a greater role for the Commission in public procurement of medical supplies.

In late April, travel restrictions began to be gradually lifted. Notably, the government scrapped a planned directive obliging citizens crossing borders daily to work in the Czech Republic or Austria and then returning home from proving that they did not have the virus by showing a negative test not older than 30 days from May 1<sup>st</sup>. The plan had been unpopular, since the required type of test, the PCR test, was rather expensive to be taken regularly, and results took too long to be practical. This relaxed measure applied to those people living up to 30 km away from the border. However, in cooperation with neighboring countries and starting from April 23<sup>rd</sup>, Slovak authorities mandated that these workers were obliged to present a form in three languages (Slovak, German and Hungarian), affirming they were employed abroad. Any minors accompanying these workers were also exempt from entering into quarantine, or if they were under three years old, from having to provide tests, due to a scandal when a minor was not allowed to cross the border by Slovak border police. Furthermore, Slovaks working in health and social services in regions of Austria and the Czech Republic directly bordering Slovakia were exempted from quarantine. They however still needed to present an employment certificate and a negative COVID-19 test not older than 96 hours. The same measures were valid for students travelling abroad for exams.

These measures demonstrate that combating the pandemic was an issue of regional cooperation, rather than unilateral or EU-wide responses. This was mainly due to the interconnectedness of the economies in the border regions of the Central European countries. This would suggest that while multilateral cooperation within the EU will be strengthened, it will mostly be intergovernmental rather than supranational cooperation. This is also seen in the way EU members closed their border without regard for the Schengen system. However, the potential success of the Eurobond advocates could signify a stronger supranational approach. The same goes for the reconstruction fund, whose working the member states delegated to the Commission. In that case, Slovakia, whose priority is to be part of any future EU core, would go along with the majority of EU states.