



# Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia external relations briefing:  
Foreign Policy of the New Government  
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## Foreign Policy of the New Government

Following parliamentary elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic (the unicameral 150-member legislative body of Slovakia) on February 29<sup>th</sup> of this year, a new government was sworn in on March 21<sup>st</sup>. The transfer of power would have been the dominant event of the past several months if not for the COVID-19 crisis. This crisis took up the bulk of the new government's attention in the first month or so of its existence in both domestic and foreign policy, as detailed in the previous two briefings.

The electoral campaign was focused mainly on domestic issues. On issues of foreign policy, all the relevant parties which were elected to parliament, or which at least had a chance to be elected, more or less explicitly subscribe to a common consensus. The consensus states that Slovakia is, and needs to remain, a member of the West in the narrowest sense. This means adherence to Western political, social and also economic values, which is exemplified in a strong pro-EU and pro-NATO stance. For that reason, a drastic shift in foreign policy was not expected whatever the outcome of the election, nor does it seem likely now that the composition of the new government is known. The only explicit exception from this consensus, which is currently electorally relevant, is the extreme right-wing Peoples Party Our Slovakia (Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko, LSNS), currently with 17 members of parliament (MPs). The other parties, on both in the right and on the left, may criticize certain aspects of this consensus or certain specific policies (migration, sanctions on Russia, unilateralism) of the EU, NATO or other institutions, but none of these parties advocate a realignment of Slovakia's foreign policy away from this consensus. In fact, adherence to this consensus is strongest in center-right political current, where the parties making up the newly formed government belong.

The new governing coalition is composed of four center-right electoral groupings, which together have 95 seats out of 150 seats in parliament. These numbers mean that the government has a passed the three-fifths (90 seats) threshold needed for a constitutional majority. The dominant party of the coalition is the generally conservative Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti, OĽANO). This party contested the election in an electoral alliance with 3 other Christian conservative parties, and the entire grouping obtained 53 MPs. The chairman of OĽANO, Igor Matovič, became Prime Minister. Matovič presented OĽANO as a non-traditional party without the usual broad membership base and party structures – instead, it was presented as a party of experts and personalities whose

expertise should transcend politics. Therefore, the MPs for OĽANO comprise both liberals as well as strong conservatives.

The second strongest party, with 17 MPs, is the conservative and populist We Are Family (Sme Rodina), which is seen as a “one-man party” of its founder and chairman, the controversial entrepreneur Boris Kollár. This party is frequently identified as being the furthest from the pro-Western consensus. Yet this is not seen as a principled policy position, but rather as a populist appeal to the more conservative and lower class voters in Slovakia who are the losers of the political transformation in the country and are therefore skeptical towards Western liberal policies. In areas of practical policy, it is not expected that the party would go against the consensus at the risk of destabilizing the coalition.

Third, with 13 MPs, is Freedom and Solidarity (Sloboda a Solidarita, SaS) a liberal (or even libertarian) party. This identity puts it close to the pro-Western consensus, but with a significant nuance – despite being a liberal party, which tend to be among the most pro-EU parties in the member states, SaS is critical of the increasing regulatory power of the EU institutions. For this reason it sits with the liberal-conservative and soft-euroskeptic Europe of Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group in the European parliament, rather than the liberal Renew Europe (RE) group. The new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivan Korčok, is the nominee of this party. Korčok is a professional diplomat and strong advocate of the pro-Western consensus who served under multiple previous governments of diverse political orientation. Before his nomination, he was the ambassador of Slovakia to the USA.

The smallest coalition partner, with 12 MPs, is the center-right party For the People (Za ľudí, ZĽ), formed and chaired by former president Andrej Kiska. This party, presenting itself as open to both liberals and conservatives, is seen as most in line with Western liberal values, compared to its partners.

As for the substance of foreign policy, from the declaration on the political program of the new government, presented on April 19<sup>th</sup>, it seems that relations with the USA will be given a higher priority. One specific issue on which Slovakia would like to cooperate more closely is the religious freedom initiative unveiled by US President Donald Trump in February of this year. The new government itself would like to make the protection of religious freedom a basic priority of Slovak foreign policy. We can surmise that behind this focus are the Christian-conservative elements in OĽANO. A larger focus on NATO is also to be expected, possibly due to the influence SaS, which looks to the USA more than to the EU.

Because of the strong identification of these center-right parties with the above mentioned foreign policy consensus and their enthusiasm for closer cooperation with the USA, a tougher stance on Russia and China is also expected. According to a poll by the portal Euractiv, in the

case of Russia, both OĽANO and ZĽ explicitly see Russia as a security threat, with SaS also leaning towards this position, and only Sme Rodina disagreeing. For example, both OĽANO and ZĽ are squarely in support of continuing EU sanctions placed on Russia after its annexation of Crimea. SaS expressed a pragmatic approach in that Slovakia should adhere to the dominant EU consensus on continuing these sanctions. Only Sme Rodina is against sanctions, due to its courting of nationalist conservative voters, who tend to be favorable to Russia. All the parties are however open to dialogue with Russia. An interesting question is whether these differing attitudes toward Russia will be a source of conflict within the coalition, although foreign policy issues are rarely important enough to cause significant rifts between coalition partners. Related to this is the issue of Ukraine itself. All four coalition groupings support EU membership of Ukraine. Since Ukraine borders the relatively poor Eastern part of Slovakia, there are hopes that bringing Ukraine into the EU could help the development of these poorer regions. In the case of China, which gets substantially less attention than Russia, the parties do not have a strong opinion on relations, much less a common policy. OĽANO puts emphasis on human rights, while ZĽ focuses on what it sees as discriminatory practices of China towards enterprises from the EU seeking to enter the Chinese market. Again, only Sme Rodina emphasizes the opportunities of the Chinese market.

While the declaration states that Slovakia will continue to support the ambitions of the Western Balkan countries, as well as Ukraine, to become members of the EU. It also affirms closer cooperation with the other countries of the Eastern Partnership of the EU apart from Ukraine. However, the coalition parties have varying degrees of commitment to EU enlargement, based on the Euractiv poll. SaS is the most skeptical towards enlargement of the EU, advocating for a moratorium on enlargement while the EU undergoes consolidation after Brexit. The other three governing groupings are generally in favor of further enlargement, though this seems to be a matter they intend to delegate to the foreign policy establishment, while they focus on internal issues. An exception is the accession of Turkey to the EU, which is universally unpopular. On this, OĽANO and Sme Rodina are most staunchly against it, mirroring the attitude of their christian-conservative voters, who oppose the accession of such a populous Muslim country, due to cultural reasons, fear of immigration, and because of the above mentioned fears of a diversion of EU funding to Turkey.

On other EU issues, the priorities of Slovak foreign policy will be cohesion policy (especially as it relates to providing aid to combat the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis), the common agricultural policy, digitalization and the environment. Slovak diplomacy will present these priorities in discussions over the multiannual financial framework of the EU budget, to be negotiated later this year. The parties are somewhat divided by the suggestion to

broaden the qualified majority vote (based on a weighted vote system) in the Council of the EU to the detriment of unanimous voting, so as to streamline EU decision making. While ZĽ is cautiously in favor and OĽANO is undecided, both SaS and Sme Rodina are against such a move, citing the protection of national sovereignty and a risk that larger member states will use their higher share of votes to outvote smaller ones.

Another issue that the new government wants to push is support of multilateralism and a stronger focus on human rights. The first principle seems at odds with the previously stated emphasis on better relations with the USA, which are known for their willingness to use unilateral means to accomplish their foreign policy goals. Indeed multilateralism is actually rather a stated priority of the current European Commission. This can be interpreted as Slovakia internalizing an EU priority, as part of its ambition of being part of a potential future EU core. As for the focus on human rights, this has been a declared priority of previous governments as well, but has not been emphasized very strongly in the face of pragmatic benefits of economic cooperation. It remains to be seen whether the current government will break the mold on this issue.