




Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia external relations briefing:
Digital technologies as one of the key diplomatic topics
Kristína Baculáková**

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.
Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin
Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.
 +36 1 5858 690
 office@china-cee.eu
 china-cee.eu

Digital technologies as one of the key diplomatic topics

Summary

The digital agenda and the green revolution have become more important in recent times. It is not just about economic solutions, the topics are also gaining ground in the diplomatic negotiations. In the presented briefing, we focus on Slovak priorities and attitudes in the issue of digital technologies, which were also recently presented by the Slovak Minister of Foreign and European Affairs at the conference in the Slavkov format as well as at the negotiations with the new Secretary General of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and at the meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels.

Introduction

On the last day of June, the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs took part at the negotiations in the Slavkov format. The conference was called: A Compass for Citizens During the Digital Transformation. The Minister held talks with his partners from Austria and the Czech Republic. The ministers met on the occasion of the symbolic handover of the annual leadership of regional cooperation within the Slavkov format, which connects these three countries. The meeting was held in a strong spirit of belonging.¹ The reason was a natural disaster - a tornado - which hit the territory of the Czech Republic, not very far from the Slovak border (South Moravia). Such a natural phenomenon is unusual in the given geographical conditions and the damage it caused was unprecedented. Therefore, Slovakia also helped eliminate the consequences and provide assistance to the affected areas. This incident pointed to the importance of regional cooperation, which must be constantly strengthened and improved. One of the new challenges of the joint cooperation of the Slavkov format is also digitalization as a new challenge from the point of view of economy, human rights or international politics with regard to security risks.

¹ Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí Slovenskej republiky. 2021. *Minister I. Korčok na konferencii v Slavkovskom formáte venovanej digitálnemu humanizmu: Rozvoj digitálnych technológií je globálnou realitou, ktorú však treba modelovať v prospech človeka a spoločnosti.*

The need of standards in the digital world

At a meeting of partners in the so-called Slavkov format, the Slovak side emphasized in particular the need to create certain standards of digital development. According to the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, Ivan Korčok, these standards should take into account, in particular, ethical principles, so that new technologies can really serve the people.² The topic of digitization also resonated at the meeting of the Slovak Minister with the new Secretary General of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development as well as at the meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels on the 12th July.^{3,4} There is no doubt that digital technologies have become part of our daily lives. However, in the post-pandemic era, their use will be even more intense. It was with the advent of the global pandemic that some professions were forced to move to a whole new format of functioning, and not everyone was ready for this immediate change. We are talking not only about the material and technical equipment, but also about the knowledge or standards of security.

In the last two decades, online platforms have developed significantly. This term includes online marketplaces, social media, application stores, price comparison websites, as well as search engines. All bring benefits to both traders and consumers. However, with their expansion come new threats, which so far even Slovakia has not sufficiently reflected. Consumers are exposed to a whole range of new illegal goods, activities and content. Start-ups can often have difficulty entering a market dominated by large platforms. It is those platforms that connect many companies with many consumers that have access to large amounts of data. They gain influence over the control and setting of standards for important areas of the digital economy. The EU wants to regain opportunities to shape this area at Union level and set standards worldwide. Slovakia appreciates the legislative efforts of the European Union to create digital standards, which would represent a set of rules for a coordinated approach to the area. However, it also approaches the digital agenda as part of the Recovery Plan in the “Digital Slovakia” section.

² Ibid.

³ Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí Slovenskej republiky. 2021. *Minister Ivan Korčok: Digitálna a zelená transformácia a jej vplyv na postpandemickú obnovu patria medzi naše priority v OECD.*

⁴ Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí Slovenskej republiky. 2021. *Minister zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí SR Ivan Korčok na zasadnutí Rady EÚ pre zahraničné veci v Bruseli: Globálne digitálne pravidlá musia rešpektovať ľudské práva, demokratické princípy a zásady právneho štátu.*

Digital Slovakia

The global coronavirus pandemic has only accelerated the changes that digitalisation and new technologies have brought to everyday life. The nature of services, industrial production but also teaching in schools has changed. For Slovakia, this change brings an opportunity to restart and implement the functional reforms it has long needed. In April 2021, the European Parliament approved the Digital Europe program. It is the Union's first-ever financial instrument to bring technology closer to citizens and businesses. The program should fund digital infrastructure and strategic technologies that should improve Europe's competitiveness, help the transition to a greener economy and ensure technological sovereignty. Together, it should invest almost € 7.6 billion in five areas: supercomputers (€ 2.2 billion), artificial intelligence (€ 2.1 billion), cyber security (€ 1.6 billion), advanced digital skills (€ 577 million) and the introduction of digital technologies in all areas (€1.1 billion).⁵ Within the framework of the European Recovery and Resilience Facility, Slovakia counts on about 20% for digitization within the allocated grant funds.⁶ Slovakia has already submitted a plan to the Commission, focusing on three main priorities. They relate to the profound reforms that will need to be launched after the pandemic and which are the result of long-term inaction on digitalization.

To date, Slovakia does not have functionally digitized public services, despite the fact that considerable resources have been spent on digitalization. Despite billions of investments, today the electronic services of the state are used by a minimum of citizens - only 280,000 users make at least one login to the central public administration portal slovensko.sk a year.⁷ A critical example of the bureaucracy of electronic service failure is, for example, the processing of documents before and at the birth of a child, when parents have to visit the registry office, health insurance company, social insurance company for the necessary confirmations. The paradox is that some forms can be submitted online (social insurance), but they must be brought in person or delivered in paper form by post, which is completely at odds with the goal of digitization and cutting red tape.

The first pillar of Digital Slovakia is therefore services for citizens. Access to basic electronic services for citizens will be the first step that the ministry plans to introduce. The second pillar is then the provision of fast and high-quality Internet access for all households in places where it has not been advantageous for operators so far. The third and key part of the

⁵ Európsky parlament. Spravodajstvo. 2021. *Digitalizácia: dôležitosť, benefity a legislatíva EÚ*.

⁶ Ministerstvo investícií, regionálneho rozvoja a informatizácie Slovenskej republiky. 2020. *Vicepremiérka Remišová predstavila reformný plán pre digitálne Slovensko v rámci Plánu obnovy EÚ*.

⁷ Novotná, E. 2021. *Priority digitalizácie v Pláne obnovy a odolnosti na Slovensku*.

package is tackling cybersecurity.⁸ It is mainly a transition to the digital economy, where human labor is being replaced by machines. However, it should be noted that within the Industry 5.0 concept, the work of companies and people must be in symbiosis, with new IT and smart solutions to help. So the use of artificial intelligence must clearly go hand in hand with human capabilities. Another area where Slovakia is unfortunately lagging behind is digital skills. Not only employees, but also pupils and students whose education is part of the future labor market. Unfortunately, we have to say that, despite the fact that pupils are surrounded by modern technologies, their digital skills are still not sufficient enough, lagging behind other EU countries. Also, very few students are still interested in studying IT, so there is a lack of experts in these areas. This is also reflected in the demands of employers, which are constantly decreasing.⁹ Nevertheless, the fact that the corona crisis has improved students' digital skills can be assessed positively. However, it is up to the controversy at what cost.

In comparison with other EU member states, Slovakia lags far behind in digitalization. According to Digital Economy and Society Index – DESI, Slovakia ranked on the 22nd place out of all member states.¹⁰ However, what is even more alarming is that Slovakia is below the EU average in all aspects that the index takes into account. These include analysis of broadband, digital skills, internet use, digitalisation of businesses, digital public services, new technologies, cyber security, the information and communication technology (ICT) sector and its R&D expenditure, as well as the use of funds from the program Horizon 2020. The aim of the implementation of Digital Slovakia is therefore to improve the status of the indicator and to approach the European standard of digitalization. Given the financial demands of this rebirth, the key will be how effective (compared to the past) Slovakia will be able to take advantage of grant opportunities.

Conclusion

The pandemic, with which the whole world has been struggling for more than a year, has accelerated changes in the economy and society. In connection with new technologies, there is a sudden need to speed up the process of digitizing the economy. The more intensive use of

⁸ Ministerstvo investícií, regionálneho rozvoja a informatizácie Slovenskej republiky. 2020. *Vicepremiérka Remišová predstavila reformný plán pre digitálne Slovensko v rámci Plánu obnovy EÚ.*

⁹ Baumann, M. *Sú slovenskí žiaci digitálne zruční?*

¹⁰ European commission. 2020. *Slovakia in the Digital Economy and Society Index.*

digital technologies in everyday life has also drawn attention to cyber security. It is in the online space that many threats lurk for entrepreneurs, consumers, but also students and ordinary users. Slovak diplomacy also perceives this change in the economic paradigm, so the topic of accelerated digitization has become a priority of foreign negotiations not only in the Slavkov format, but also at the EU or OECD level, which create and set world standards. As Minister Korčok said: Modern technologies will benefit Europeans not only through expanding functionalities, but also when they are developed in accordance with the fundamental rights, values and democratic principles on which the Union is founded.

Sources:

Baumann, M. 2021. *Sú slovenskí žiaci digitálne zruční?* [online]. Available at: <https://eduworld.sk/cd/martina-baumann/3075/su-slovenski-ziaci-digitalne-zrucni>

Európsky parlament. Spravodajstvo. 2021. *Digitalizácia: dôležitosť, benefity a legislatíva EÚ.* [online]. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/sk/headlines/society/20210414STO02010/digitalizacia-dolezitost-benefity-a-legislativa-eu>

Ministerstvo investícií, regionálneho rozvoja a informatizácie Slovenskej republiky. 2020. *Vicepremiérka Remišová predstavila reformný plán pre digitálne Slovensko v rámci Plánu obnovy EÚ.* [online]. Available at: <https://www.mirri.gov.sk/aktuality/digitalna-agenda/vicepremierka-remisova-predstavila-reformny-plan-pre-digitalne-slovensko-v-ramci-planu-obnovy-eu/>

Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí Slovenskej republiky. 2021. Minister Ivan Korčok: Digitálna a zelená transformácia a jej vplyv na postpandemickú obnovu patria medzi naše priority v OECD. [online]. Available at: https://www.mzv.sk/ministerstvo/detail/-/asset_publisher/Iw1ppvnScIPx/content/minister-ivan-korcok-digitalna-a-zelena-transformacia-a-jej-vplyv-na-postpandemicku-obnovu-patria-medzi-nase-priority-v-oecd?p_p_auth=P8PU3DIw&_101_INSTANCE_Iw1ppvnScIPx_redirect=%2Fministerstvo%2Fminister-aktivity_ministra

Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí Slovenskej republiky. 2021. *Minister I. Korčok na konferencii v Slavkovskom formáte venovanej digitálnemu humanizmu: Rozvoj digitálnych technológií je globálnou realitou, ktorú však treba modelovať v prospech človeka a spoločnosti.* [online]. Available at: https://www.mzv.sk/ministerstvo/detail/-/asset_publisher/Iw1ppvnScIPx/content/minister-i-korcok-na-konferencii-v-slavkovskom-formate-venovanej-digitalnemu-umanizmu

[content/minister-i-korcok-na-konferencii-v-slavkovskom-formate-venovanej-digitalnemu-umanizmu](https://www.mzv.sk/ministerstvo/detail/-/asset_publisher/Iw1ppvnScIPx/content/minister-i-korcok-na-konferencii-v-slavkovskom-formate-venovanej-digitalnemu-umanizmu)
[-rozvoj-digitalnych-technologii-je-globalnou-realitou-ktoru-vsak?p_p_auth=P8PU3DIw&_101_INSTANCE_Iw1ppvnScIPx_redirect=%2Fministerstvo%2Fminister-aktivity_ministra](https://www.mzv.sk/ministerstvo/detail/-/asset_publisher/Iw1ppvnScIPx/content/minister-i-korcok-na-konferencii-v-slavkovskom-formate-venovanej-digitalnemu-umanizmu)

Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí Slovenskej republiky. 2021. Minister zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí SR Ivan Korčok na zasadnutí Rady EÚ pre zahraničné veci v Bruseli: Globálne digitálne pravidlá musia rešpektovať ľudské práva, demokratické princípy a zásady právneho štátu. [online]. Available at: https://www.mzv.sk/ministerstvo/detail/-/asset_publisher/Iw1ppvnScIPx/content/minister-zahranicnych-veci-a-europskych-zalezitosti-sr-ivan-korcok-na-zasadnuti-rady-eu-pre-zahranicne-veci-v-bruseli-globalne-digitalne-pravidla-musi?p_p_auth=P8PU3DIw&_101_INSTANCE_Iw1ppvnScIPx_redirect=%2Fministerstvo%2Fminister-aktivity_ministra

Novotná, E. 2021. *Priority digitalizácie v Pláne obnovy a odolnosti na Slovensku.* [online]. Available at: <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/sk/blog/priority-digitalizacie-v-plane-obnovy-odolnosti-na-slovensku>