Slovakia external relations briefing:
Relations between Slovakia and Major Powers
Kristína Baculáková
Relations between Slovakia and Major Powers

Summary

This briefing captures the trend of development of diplomatic and economic relations between Slovakia and the major powers. Because Slovakia is part of the European Union, we focus primarily on relations with the United States, Russia and China.

Introduction

In 2004, Slovakia became a member of two important groupings. Slovakia joined NATO as well as the European Union. This slowly and gradually began to shape a completely new foreign policy, but also the country's security strategy. Within the Union, Slovakia has become a member of the European Single Market, thus accepting a common EU Trade policy towards third countries. The Union has also begun to provide a platform for shaping common positions in foreign policy. The situation was similar in terms of security - NATO offered Slovakia clear security and defense guarantees, but as a full member of the Alliance it also has responsibilities such as active international involvement but also to build armed forces, fully compatible with NATO. Nevertheless, Slovakia continues to build its relations with the major powers on its own. Russia, as a traditional partner and not only in the field of energy supply, remains a strategic point of interest in Slovak foreign policy, although Slovakia is increasingly declaring its pro-Western orientation. Relations with the United States are developing in a positive direction. However, the vision of cooperation with China is a bit more rigid and unconceptual.

Slovakia and China – economic friendship?

Cooperation between Slovakia and China is still a rather unbalanced one. It can be stated unequivocally that economic cooperation prevails, but in the form of a significant trade deficit in Slovakia. Imports from China in 2019 represented 5.04 billions euro while Slovakia's exports to China reached only 1.69 billion euro. It should be noted that Slovakia is not, and never has been, a strategic partner for China. Experts who deal with Slovak-Chinese relations even point

1 DATAcube.sk 2021. Zahraničný obchod podľa krajín. [online]. Available at: <http://datacube.Statistics.sk#!/view/sk/VBD_SLOVSTAT/zo2006rs/v_zo2006rs_00_00_00_sk>
out that Slovakia is the least important country out of the V4 countries. Slovakia lacks a deeper vision of the development of diplomatic relations and better enforcement of Slovak exporters in the Chinese market. Nevertheless, Slovakia's policy towards China has moved a little forward thanks to the adoption of the Concept of Development of Economic Relations between the Slovak Republic and China. The aim of the concept was to identify opportunities for the Slovak Republic in relations with the PRC and to present intentions in areas of cooperation, such as investment, business and trade, transport, tourism, as well as research and innovation.

However, Slovakia is not yet very effective in translating its ambitions (especially business) into practice. Although we have become part of the 16 + 1 initiative, the EU + China concept is more for political dialogue. And as far as political dialogue is concerned, Slovakia is slightly restrained. And there is no domestic political agreement either. On the other hand, relations with China will not be as friction on the domestic political scene as, for example, in the neighboring V4 countries. Uncertain and not entirely substantiated concerns about the relation with China will not be as friction on the domestic political scene as, for example, in the neighboring V4 countries. Uncertain and not entirely substantiated concerns about the political motivation of Chinese investment are also a hindrance to the more effective development of Slovak-Chinese relations. If the perception of these fears turns into opportunities, the door will open to more pragmatic expectations of cooperation. Although the Chinese market offers exceptional opportunities, it cannot be perceived as a salvation for Slovak exports.

Russian standard

Relations between Russia and Slovakia are, at least on the Slovak political scene, much more turbulent than with China. Pew Research Center surveyed 33 countries about their opinion on Russia in 2019. Of all the countries surveyed, Slovakia was among the countries with the most positively attitude towards Russia. A more positive public perception of Russia can only be found in Bulgaria. Up to 60% of people in Slovakia perceive Russia positively. Despite the positive attitude towards Russia, the government's rhetoric is changing slightly. Relations are currently viewed through the prism of EU membership and especially NATO. Emphasis is placed on the pro-Western orientation of Slovakia. The positive perception of Russia stems

---

2 Šimalčík, M., Turcsanyi, R. 2017. Čína na Slovensku: Sme pripravení na budúcnosť? Policy paper
from a certain historical proximity, but many experts rather point out that the Slovak view of Russia is idealistic and does not correspond to reality.

Since the establishment of the independent state, Slovakia's policy towards Russia has also been significantly influenced by the attitudes of individual, whether governmental or opposition political parties. Of the latter, it was mainly the Slovak National Party that has an explicitly pro-Russian agenda. In the last parliamentary elections, not only did it join the governing coalition, but the party's chairman also served as Speaker of the Parliament. Russia considers Slovakia a key partner because, as an EU member, Slovakia, for example, has taken a soft stance on sanctions imposed by the EU. Although Slovakia agreed with the sanctions, it repeatedly expressed a negative opinion on the margin of their effectiveness or their repeated extension.

The last remnant of tense domestic political views on Russia was the case with the purchase of Sputnik V vaccines. The not very successful trip of the Minister of Finance to Moscow and the negotiations on the vaccine, which was supposed to be in the competence of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, de facto led to the government crisis. Although it was blessed, Sputnik had problems with registration, which resulted in a situation where Russia requested the return of the supplied vaccines. The last straw was also the fact that there was nothing out of the announced great interest of citizens in this vaccine - Slovakia moved the vaccines to the Balkans or South America.

Apart from differing views on Russia on the domestic political scene, we must not neglect economic cooperation. Although long-term foreign trade ties between Slovakia and Russia have been crucially changed at the turn of the 1990s, Russia dominates Slovakia's foreign trade outside the EU. The development of foreign trade between Slovakia and Russia can be characterized by a long-term passive trade balance by Slovakia. The structure of Slovak exports and imports with Russia was influenced mainly by the high dependence of our country on imports of Russian energy raw materials. Cooperation in the field of energy and fuel complex is the basis of Slovak-Russian economic relations. Supplies of Russian oil, natural gas and nuclear fuels satisfy up to 90% of Slovakia's needs. The question of the geopolitical game remains to what extent Slovakia will be influenced by the operation of NS2 gas pipeline as a transit country through which gas flows from Ukraine to the west.

---

Last but not least...

The United States of America, a world power, is one of the key partners for Slovakia. The formation of Slovak-American relations dates back several generations. Slovaks, together with Czech emigrants, laid the foundations of a common state of Czechs and Slovaks in the USA through the Cleveland and Pittsburgh agreements. According to Slovak diplomacy, Slovakia must realize that among the allies guaranteeing Slovak defense, it is the United States that plays a key role. During Mike Pompeo's visit as Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2019, it was emphasized that Slovakia had always been a good partner for the United States in multilateral organizations. During the visit, the strengthening of cooperation in the field of defense and thus the reduction of dependence on Soviet technology was also mentioned.  

The election of President Joe Biden also predicts the strengthening of bilateral relations. As part of the NATO summit, which took place in June this year, the Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová also met and discussed with the American President. President Biden praised the progress that Slovakia has made. The two state officials talked together about the importance of the values that unite Slovakia and the USA. These are the values of democracy and the rule of law. At the same time, Joe Biden returns to America the position of a guarantor of liberal democracy in the world, from which Slovakia can only benefit.

Slovakia shares some common priorities with the USA, such as the need for critical infrastructure security, including 5G networks, while the two countries signed a Joint Declaration, where Slovakia confirmed its commitment to the secure construction of communication networks. Of course, there are also areas where the two countries differ to a greater or lesser extent - for example, the attitude to the construction of the Nord Stream 2 oil pipeline was problematic. However, the USA and Germany have currently signed an opinion in support of Ukraine and the energy security of Central and Eastern Europe, which Slovak diplomacy has appreciated. Slovakia also played an integral role in the mission in Afghanistan, and even in the current difficult situation, it provided its assistance in evacuating from this area.

---


8 Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí Slovenskej republiky. 2021. "Minister zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí SR I. Korčok podpísal vo Washingtone spoločné vyhlásenie SR a USA k bezpečnosti sietí 5G." [online]. Available at: <https://www.mzv.sk/aktuality/detail/-/asset_publisher/lw1ppvn5clpx/content/minister-zahraničnych-veci-a-európskych-zalezitosti-sr-i-korcok-podpisal-vo-washingtone-spolocne-vyhlasenie-sr-a-usa-k-bezpecnosti-sieti-5g/10182>
Apart from politics, the United States is a key trading partner of Slovakia. Exports from Slovakia to the USA are dominated by Volkswagen and Audi vehicles manufactured in Slovakia. Unlike China, Slovakia has a trade surplus with the USA. Exports in 2019 represented 2.52 billions euro, while imports only 0.9 billions euro. US share in Slovakia’s total export is 2.65%.

Conclusion

Slovakia is a small open economy. For its successful existence, integration is necessary not only in the EU and NATO, but also the creation and maintenance of quality relations with key players in the world economy and politics. Our relations are built on historical foundations, a common past, a future, but today especially on democratic and liberal principles. As part of the EU, Slovakia is also part of the political decisions of the Union and its internal market. It is therefore not surprising that from a trade point of view, the EU countries are Slovakia's largest partner. However, relations with China are developing positively. On the other hand, there is a slight change in rhetoric towards Russia, with an emphasis on the country's pro-Western orientation. From a geopolitical point of view, Slovakia does not become neutral, it is an active and full member of NATO.

---

9 DATAcube.sk 2021. Zahraničný obchod podľa krajín. [online]. Available at: <http://datacube.statistics.sk/#/view/sk/VBD_SLOVSTAT/zo2006rs/v_zo2006rs_00_00_00_sk>
Sources

DATAcube.sk 2021. Zahraničný obchod podľa krajín. [online]. Available at: <http://datacube.statistics.sk/#/view/sk/VBD_SLOVSTAT/zo2006rs/v_zo2006rs_00_00_00_sk>


Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí Slovenskej republiky. 2021. Minister zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí SR I. Korčok podpísal vo Washingtone spoločné vyhlášenie SR a USA k bezpečnosti sietí 5G. [online]. Available at: <https://www.mzv.sk/aktuality/detail/-/asset_publisher/Iw1ppvnScIPx/content/minister-zahraničnych-vecí-a-európskych-zalezitosti-sr-i-korcok-podpisal-vo-washingtone-spolocne-vyhlasenie-sr-a-usa-k-bezpecnosti-sieti-5g/10182>


The Slovak Spectator. 2021 President Čaputová met with Biden, he appreciated Slovakia's progress. [online]. Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22682059/president-caputova-met-with-biden-he-appreciated-slovakias-progress.html>