



Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia external relations briefing:
Attitude towards the situation in Belarus**
Juraj Ondriaš

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

Attitude towards the situation in Belarus

The right-wing government that was formed in the Slovak Republic after the parliamentary elections in February indicated a new approach in Slovak foreign policy. This new approach was to be founded on a closer relationship with the country's Euro-Atlantic allies and a stronger emphasis on Western values and principles rather than pragmatism based on economic interests, which was the hallmark of the foreign policy of the previous government. One of the ways that this new approach could be detected was in Slovakia's attitude towards the presidential election in the Republic of Belarus as well as the post-election aftermath. This election, which took place on August 9th, was officially won by incumbent president Alexander Lukashenko with 80.1% of the vote, over his rival, the candidate of the united opposition Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, wife of the opposition leader and former presidential candidate Siarhei Tsikhanouski, who was jailed by the Belarusian authorities. Tsikhanouskaya officially received 10.1% of the vote [6]. Most of the Western world refused to accept these results or Lukashenko's continuation in the presidency, citing numerous irregularities or outright voter fraud on the part of the Lukashenko administration. In an exacerbation of the already tense situation, the refusal of the Belarusian opposition leaders and voters to accept these results led to mass protests, which were met with a heavy-handed crackdown by the security forces of Belarus on the protesters. This led to even stronger condemnation of the Lukashenko administration by the EU, USA and much of the Western world.

Slovak diplomacy, led by Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivan Korčok (a career diplomat and a non-partisan nominee of the right-wing or classical liberal party Freedom and Solidarity / Sloboda a solidarita), presented an uncharacteristically strong stance in opposing the Lukashenko administration and supporting the Belarusian opposition. This is in line with the government's declarations of a closer commitment to diplomacy based on Western values of democracy, human rights (especially negative or first generation human rights and freedoms), rule of law, free markets, a limited role of government in the economy, etc., as espoused by the EU, the major Western European powers, and the USA. Such an orientation naturally leads to a critical stance toward countries that do not adhere to these values. Among these are especially alternative centers of power and sources of values, such as Russia or China, but also countries seen as being under the influence of these alternative powers, notably (for the purpose of this article) Belarus.

In this context, the attitude of the Slovak government toward Belarus can be seen as a proxy for its attitude toward Russia. Slovak diplomacy is far more critical toward Russia than it was under the previous government, as can be seen from its reactions to the poisoning affair of Russian opposition leader Alexei A. Navalny, or its criticism of alleged Russian interference in the political process of Western countries. This also applies to China, as can be seen in the agreement between Slovakia and the USA on the security of future 5G internet infrastructure, signed on October 22nd by Korčok and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, during the former's visit to Washington D.C. [1]. Such a foreign policy fits a government composed of four center-right political parties, ranging from libertarianism to conservative populism. The electorate of these parties is mostly made up of wealthier, urban and better educated voters, i.e. the winners of the economic transformation from socialism to capitalism that took place in the country after the fall of the socialist regime in 1989.

Slovakia was initially thrust into the center of the Belarusian election dispute in an unexpected way – a week after the Belarusian election, the ambassador of Belarus to Slovakia, Igor A. Leshchczenya, was the first head of a Belarussian diplomatic mission to publicly side with the protestors against his government, which he did in a video posted to social media. Minister Korčok was quick to use this incident in support of a hard-line approach to the Lukashenko administration, stating that the declaration of the ambassador affirms the Slovak evaluation of the situation in Belarus [7]. The Slovak Prime Minister, Igor Matovič, offered the ambassador asylum if he would be at risk of persecution by the government of Belarus because of his action [8]. It is unknown whether the Belarusian ambassador was motivated by the anti-Lukashenko attitude of the Slovak government, or whether his words actually had an impact on Slovak policy toward the country, rather than merely affirming what the governing elites already believed.

In any case, on August 19th the government of Slovakia unanimously adopted a common opinion on the situation in Belarus calling on the government of Belarus to respect human rights, stop the violent crackdown, release political prisoners and start a dialogue with the opposition that would lead to a new presidential election as soon as possible. The Slovak government also declared its intention of supporting an EU-wide collective response to the situation in Belarus, which would include support for the sector of civil society in the country, measures to prevent the further escalation of tension, as well as sanctions and other restrictive measures on certain relevant functionaries of the Belarusian government [2]. At the same time, however, the government stressed that the situation in Belarus should be resolved without any outside interference from other countries. Korčok even compared the situation in Belarus to the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the armies of the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact during the crushing

of the Prague Spring in 1968 – the parallel was ostensibly seen in the mass pro-democracy protests by the populace against a tyrannical regime both in the former Czechoslovakia as in Belarus [9].

The approach of Slovakia bore fruit in October. On October 2nd, a summit of the European Council adopted a decision to place sanctions on over forty members of the government of Belarus, believed to be behind the alleged vote-rigging and the violence in the aftermath of the election. Notably, president Lukashenko himself was not on the list of sanctioned individuals. The reason for this was to keep open the possibility of a dialogue between Lukashenko and the EU [10]. While Slovak diplomacy welcomed the decision, both Prime Minister Matovič and Minister Korčok stated that they believed Lukashenko should have been on the sanctions list as well. With that, they demonstrated the relatively hard-line attitude of Slovakia, as promised by the center-right government upon its formation. Korčok also stressed the targeted nature of the sanctions, in contrast with an alternative approach of broad economic sanctions that would hurt the people of Belarus. He also repeated the EU opinion that as Lukashenko won the presidency based on fraudulent elections, the EU does not recognize him as the legitimate president of Belarus. Furthermore, Korčok warned that if Lukashenko will not heed EU calls to stop the violence, it would only be a matter of time until he would be included on the sanctions list during a future European Council summit [3].

A major reason for the visibility and relevance of the issue of Belarus in Slovakia was the prominence given to the country at the annual GLOBSEC conference on security issues, which is co-sponsored by the Slovak foreign affairs ministry. October 8th, Slovakia hosted the Belarusian presidential candidate for the opposition, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who came to the country to take part in the Minister Korčok called her a brave woman, and her story (as well as that of her husband) as symbolic of the Belarusian struggle to freely choose their own leaders. He then once again compared the situation in Belarus to the Slovak experience, this time to the demonstrations that led to the fall of the socialist regime in the former Czechoslovakia in 1989 [4]. In spite of that, Slovakia did not take the extra step of recognizing Tsikhanouskaya as the legitimate president of Belarus, as did Lithuania, another EU member with a hard-line stance against the Lukashenko government. Slovakia did, however, recall its head of mission in Belarus (Slovakia did not have a full-fledged ambassador in the country since May) for consultations, also on October 8th. This step was explained as an act of solidarity with Lithuania and Poland, who withdrew their ambassadors from Belarus after Lukashenko did the same with the Belarusian ambassadors to these two countries as a reaction to the sanctions. Furthermore, the other two Baltic states, Latvia and Estonia, also withdrew their ambassadors [11], while Germany, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic took the same step as Slovakia in recalling its own

ambassador [12]. On the following day, at a meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs of the V4 countries and France on the sidelines of the GLOBSEC conference, Korčok reiterated their common stance that the Belarusian elections were undemocratic, as well as opposition to further violence and support for targeted sanctions against certain representatives of the Lukashenko administration [5].

The attitude of the current government and diplomacy of Slovakia toward the crisis in Belarus is thus a good example of how the foreign policy of Slovakia has changed after its parliamentary election and the accession of the center-right to power. The question is whether such a foreign policy will be beneficial to the country. Briefly put, Slovakia may likely benefit from being seen as a more reliable partner by its allies in the EU and NATO, which it can translate to a stronger negotiating position within the EU decision-making process on questions it considers relevant, such as allocation of EU structural and cohesion funding or a resolution of the migration allocation issue. It is clear that the Slovak government sees the issue of Belarus through an ideological lens, as a struggle between different values systems, as seen in its comparisons of the situation in Belarus to the seminal years 1968 and 1989 in (Czecho-)Slovak history. However, such a one-sided and confrontational foreign policy may also contribute to a sharper drawing of lines between the West and the alternative centers of power, which may hinder global cooperation on topics of mutual interest.

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