

FOREIGN POLICY AFTER THE ELECTIONS

During the current electoral term (2016–2020), the consensus on Slovakia's foreign policy priorities has disappeared. Consequently doubt is being cast upon Slovakia's membership of the EU, and especially NATO, by several political actors (including some governing coalition MPs). The parliamentary elections in February 2020 should provide motivation to restore the consensus. The SFPA, the oldest foreign policy think tank, summarizes the various options and recommends solutions for all six areas.

1. THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU membership offers Slovakia the opportunity to shape policy and come up with its own solutions. Yet we do not sufficiently exploit this potential – efforts to shape EU policy are overshadowed by the tendency to simply implement the agenda. There is also a lack of robust internal political debate on how the EU represents the most acceptable institutional option and on the benefits it can bring Slovakia in terms of sectoral policies. The tools that were originally used in the early years of membership to enable the public to become involved in European policy-making, especially the National Convention on the EU, have since been transformed so they no longer meet the original goals and expectations. Consequently Slovaks have difficulty identifying with the EU as a “domestic” actor, and the Union, or Brussels, is predominantly seen as a distant, foreign player.

2. SECURITY

International relations and global policy have taken on a dynamism that is directed at revising the international security system, as we have seen in recent decades. The lack of trust, transparency and political will to cooperate in international relations has led to the return of decision-making along traditional security dilemma lines, an increase in armaments and a rhetoric promoting the national interest in the absence of more detailed explanations or attention to content. Slovakia faces new kinds of security threats emanating from both the external and internal environments. Nonetheless, understanding them separately would be a mistake.

3. REGIONAL COOPERATION AND NEIGHBORLY RELATIONS

The Visegrad Group remains the most important regional initiative in Central Europe, insofar as Slovakia's long-term interests are concerned. It is a coalition of countries interested in co-operating in selected areas, rather than a unified decision-making bloc with the requisite institutions. In the past, the V4 has helped eliminate tensions in bilateral relations between countries, especially Slovakia and Hungary. It can continue to fulfil this stabilizing role.

4. EASTERN EUROPE

Strengthening the security of neighboring Ukraine, restoring its territorial integrity and reforming Ukraine into a stable and prosperous European country that is integrating into the EU is in Slovakia's long-term interests. In relations with Russia, Slovakia's long-standing interest is for Russia to have a cooperative relationship with both NATO and the EU. However, that will only become possible if Russia's foreign and security policy changes. The EU's Eastern Partnership policy is a key instrument for Slovakia to promote its interests in Eastern Europe.

5. WESTERN BALKANS

The Western Balkans is a region where Slovak foreign policy could bring added value. The region's integration in the EU is another of Slovakia's key interests. Although Slovakia's population is roughly one-third of that in the Western Balkan region, its GDP is comparable to that of all the countries in the region put together. This shows the potential for economic development in the Western Balkans and the untapped opportunities for Slovakia.

6. INSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

The institutional structure of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic with its sections and departments largely corresponds to the key priority topics of Slovakia's foreign and European policy, and the diplomatic capacities that need concentrating on. Nevertheless, there is scope for further changes to the functioning of the Ministry, which would make Slovak diplomacy more effective.

RECOMMENDED SOLUTIONS

1. THE EUROPEAN UNION

- Audit our EU membership to enable us to more precisely define our interests in the EU and launch a discussion on how Slovakia can change existing EU legislation and policy,
- improve coordination of European policy, consider the possibility of transferring responsibility for coordinating the European agenda to the Government Office,
- involve the general public in developing EU legislation and policy and initiate a national debate on the EU and Slovakia's EU membership priorities,
- prevent any institutional reforms of the EU which would divide member states into two categories.

2. SECURITY

- Update and approve the new Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic and other policy documents with immediate effect,
- clearly identify hostile acts by foreign states on the territory of the Slovak Republic and within the region that are aimed at undermining confidence in state institutions and the democratic political system,
- strengthen the capacity to eliminate hybrid threats, focusing especially on enhancing Slovakia's information security,
- carry out an interdepartmental analysis of the activities of paramilitary structures operating on the fringes of the law and develop proposals for cross-cutting solutions to tackle them;
- systematically build up the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic in terms of capacity and material resources, taking into account that this should be a cross-party priority.

3. REGIONAL COOPERATION AND NEIGHBORLY RELATIONS

- Effectively balance Slovakia's priorities in the EU with its interests in the region, focusing on preventing the emergence of any dividing lines between the V4 and other EU countries,
- continue to promote the "weak institutionalization" of the V4 as guaranteeing the flexibility and viability of the group, regardless of differences of opinion between the V4 countries on certain issues,
- create conditions for developing the practical dimension of regional cooperation within the V4, reject any political efforts to exploit the V4 brand for particular objectives.

4. EASTERN EUROPE

- Strengthen strategic communication aimed at the Slovak public regarding the situation in Eastern Europe, including the challenges facing Slovakia and our interests,
- strive to ensure EU-Ukraine relations lead to the dismantling of the "dividing" function of the Slovak-Ukrainian border and facilitate economic cooperation and people-to-people contacts,
- support open and critical dialogue between NATO, the EU and Russia, including dialogue in bilateral relations, while unambiguously calling out Russian actions that are incompatible with Slovak interests.

5. WESTERN BALKANS

- Strive for greater ties between experts on the Western Balkans and enlargement policy through regular, or at least ad hoc, meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic,
- take steps to link projects for transferring Slovak know-how, especially the National Convention on the EU, with larger EU programs or instruments aimed at the Western Balkan countries,
- in the context of supporting Kosovo's integration prospects and strengthening relations with Pristina, create conditions for the informal representation of Kosovo in Slovakia (following the model implemented by Greece some time ago).

6. INSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS

- Carry out a comprehensive audit of management processes and activities and streamline Slovak foreign policy planning, including by strengthening the analytical department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,
- establishing more effective cooperation mechanisms between the Ministry and the expert public, universities and specialist non-governmental institutes focused on foreign policy analysis,
- strengthen coordination of economic diplomacy with other relevant ministries,
- continually increase the official development assistance (ODA) budget and engage in efforts to set up EU programs in this area.