

XXIV Annual Review Conference of Slovak Foreign and European Policy (for 2025)

The XXIV Annual Review Conference of Slovak Foreign and European Policy brought together the expert community to reflect on key developments shaping Slovakia's position in an increasingly volatile international environment. Over the course of the event four moderators led 15 distinguished panelists (MEPs, policy advisors, think-tankers, academicians) over four thematic sessions. The conference featured a new element, an international panel with foreign experts, marking an important extension of the conference's format. The conference welcomed 143 attendees in total, including 44 diplomats, two representatives of the European Parliament, and around 100 representatives from state institutions, academia, civil society organizations and the international organizations. Participants used also breaks in between the panels as further opportunities for informal networking and exchange.

The conference was opened by Tomáš Strážay, Director of the Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA). In his address, he emphasized the importance of the conference for shaping Slovakia's foreign policy discourse and outlined its thematic direction. The opening remarks were also delivered by Professor Juraj Stern, Chairman of the SFPA Board of Directors. In his address, he highlighted the deepening unpredictability of the global environment, the erosion of stability in Europe's neighborhood, and the growing inconsistency of Slovakia's foreign policy signaling toward its partners in the European Union and NATO.

First Panel: Slovak Foreign and European Policy in 2025

The first panel, titled "Slovak Foreign and European Policy in 2025," was moderated by **Pavol Demeš**, SFPA Board member and featured MEPs **Miriám Lexmann**, **Lucia Yar**, and foreign policy advisor of the President of the Slovak Republic **Ján Kubiš**. MEP **Katarína Roth Neveďalová**, who had originally been scheduled to participate, apologized for her absence due to illness.

The panel focused on assessing the turbulent international environment and Slovakia's foreign policy performance over the past year. Panelists agreed that the current global context is increasingly volatile, marked by geopolitical competition, weakening predictability, and growing pressure on the rules-based international order.

Speakers highlighted several key trends shaping this environment, including the rising influence of global powers such as China, shifts in transatlantic relations, and mounting internal and external pressures on both the European Union and NATO. At the same time, it was emphasized that despite these pressures, the rules-based international order remains an essential reference framework, particularly for smaller states such as Slovakia.

A central theme of the discussion was the widening gap between the principles of international law and the growing use of power politics. While international law continues to provide an

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important foundation, panelists noted that its consistent application is increasingly challenged across regions and conflicts.

The discussion also addressed Slovakia's foreign policy trajectory. Panelists pointed to unclear and at times inconsistent communication towards partners, underlining the need for more coherent positioning within EU and NATO structures. The importance of strategic clarity, credibility, and predictability was repeatedly emphasized, particularly in a context where ambiguity may weaken Slovakia's standing among its allies.

The panel concluded that Slovakia must more firmly anchor its foreign policy within its Euro-Atlantic commitments, while at the same time adapting to a rapidly evolving and less predictable international environment.

Second Panel: A Joint Future in the EU and NATO

The second panel, titled "A Joint Future in the EU and NATO," was moderated by **Andrej Matišák**, journalist at Denník Pravda and author of the Global Agora podcast. The panel featured **Susan Stewart**, Senior Fellow at Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik in Berlin; **Martin Svarovský**, foreign policy analyst and European Fellow at Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in the Czech Republic; **Piotr Szymański**, Senior Fellow at the Security and Defense Department of the Centre for Eastern Studies in Poland; and **Richard Whitman**, Professor of International Relations at the University of Kent in the United Kingdom.

The discussion focused on the evolving role of the European Union and NATO in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment, with particular attention to transatlantic relations and Europe's capacity to respond to growing security challenges. Panelists agreed that both organizations are undergoing a period of adaptation, driven by increasing geopolitical tensions, internal divisions, and uncertainty regarding the future role of the United States.

A central theme of the debate was the changing nature of the transatlantic relationship. Several speakers pointed to a deepening structural rift between the United States and Europe, reflecting differences in strategic thinking, approaches to the use of power, and perceptions of international order. At the same time, it was emphasized that despite these divergences, both NATO and the EU remain essential frameworks for cooperation and are expected to continue playing a central role in European security.

Panelists also highlighted growing uncertainty regarding U.S. foreign policy, particularly in relation to Ukraine and broader European security. While the United States remains a key security provider, its approach is increasingly perceived as less predictable and more transactional, prompting discussions on the need for Europe to assume greater responsibility for its own defense.

In this context, the discussion pointed to the rise of more flexible forms of cooperation, such as "coalitions of the willing" and mini-lateral formats, as a response to the limitations of consensus-based decision-making within the EU and NATO. While these formats can enhance responsiveness

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and effectiveness, panelists noted that they may also lead to fragmentation and the marginalization of smaller states.

The debate also addressed the role of Ukraine in the future European security architecture. Panelists agreed that Ukraine is becoming an indispensable component of European security, while also noting the challenges related to providing credible security guarantees and sustaining long-term support.

The panel concluded that the future of European security will depend on Europe's ability to strengthen its own capabilities, maintain transatlantic ties under changing conditions, and develop more flexible and effective forms of cooperation in response to an increasingly complex and uncertain international environment.

Third Panel: Current European and Security Challenges

The third panel, titled "Current European and Security Challenges," was moderated by **Ivan Štulajter**, independent commentator, and featured **Zuzana Múčka**, analyst at the Council for Budget Responsibility; **Oľga Gyárfášová**, Institute of European Studies and International Relations, Comenius University in Bratislava; **Miroslav Wlachovský**, Distinguished Fellow at GLOBSEC; and **Matej Šimalčík**, Executive Director of the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS).

The discussion focused on the narratives shaping Slovak foreign policy, particularly the growing emphasis on sovereignty and the concept of pursuing a "foreign policy in all four directions." Panelists identified both international and domestic drivers behind this shift, including broader trends of populism and sovereigntist rhetoric, as well as internal political competition and changing electoral dynamics.

A central theme of the debate was the use of sovereignty as a political narrative. Panelists noted that this framing is often built on the perception that Slovakia's sovereignty is under threat, despite the absence of a structural limitation. This approach was described as a typical populist pattern, combining the construction of external threats with promises of protection and restoration of control, while relying on emotionally driven communication.

The discussion also highlighted the increasing emotionalization of political discourse and the persistence of a "middle-ground" positioning within parts of Slovak society, reflecting a tendency to balance between East and West. Panelists noted that such narratives are often reinforced in political communication, despite Slovakia's clear institutional anchoring in the European Union and NATO. Panelists further addressed the gap between rhetoric and economic reality. While political discourse refers to diversification and broader geopolitical balancing, Slovakia remains deeply embedded in the European economic space, with the vast majority of trade, investment, and financial stability linked to EU markets. At the same time, current rhetoric may divert attention from key structural challenges, including competitiveness, fiscal sustainability, and energy security.

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The panel also discussed foreign policy narratives related to Russia and China, warning against ambiguity in identifying the causes of the war in Ukraine and the risks of adopting narratives that relativize responsibility. Such ambiguity, panelists argued, may weaken both domestic understanding and Slovakia's credibility among its partners.

The panel concluded that while Slovakia has not fundamentally shifted its foreign policy orientation in practice, it is approaching a point where rhetoric may begin to shape strategic reality. Strengthening clarity, credibility, and a consistent Euro-Atlantic orientation remains essential for Slovakia's future positioning.

Fourth Panel: What foreign policy for Slovakia

The fourth panel, titled "What foreign policy for Slovakia", was moderated by **Magda Vášáryová**, co-founder of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, and featured **Jana Kobzová**, Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations; **Alexander Duleba**, Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association; **Imrich Marton**, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava; and **Juraj Marušiak**, Institute of Political Science, Slovak Academy of Sciences.

The discussion focused on the strategic choices facing Slovakia in an increasingly unstable and unpredictable international environment. Panelists agreed that the level of risk is significant and that Slovakia cannot rely on assumptions about the stability of existing international structures. The debate emphasized that "things will somehow work out" is no longer a viable approach in the current geopolitical context.

A central theme of the panel was the need to strengthen Slovakia's resilience, defense capacity, and partnerships. Panelists highlighted the importance of addressing long-term influence operations, particularly from actors such as Russia and China, as well as the necessity of investing in credible defense capabilities. It was stressed that a country unwilling to defend itself cannot expect others to do so on its behalf. At the same time, the discussion underlined the importance of building meaningful partnerships and defining Slovakia's added value within them.

The debate also addressed the broader transformation of the European security environment. Panelists described the current period as a fundamental turning point, bringing Europe back to questions of hard security, including nuclear deterrence, arms control, and the reconstruction of a stable security architecture. The need to rethink both security arrangements and the institutional foundations of the European order was emphasized.

At the domestic level, panelists identified a growing challenge related to Slovakia's strategic orientation and identity. It was argued that the country is facing an internal crisis of direction, which cannot be resolved externally. Instead, Slovakia must define its foreign policy priorities based on its own historical experience, democratic foundations, and societal consensus. The importance of democratic legitimacy and public debate in shaping foreign policy was repeatedly highlighted.

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A key point of the discussion was the importance of maintaining relevance, credibility, and clarity in foreign policy. Panelists warned that ambiguous positioning and the concept of a “foreign policy in all four directions” undermine Slovakia’s reliability and reduce its influence among partners. For a country of Slovakia’s size, credibility, predictability, and active engagement in European and transatlantic structures were identified as essential.

The panel also highlighted the risks of a “in between” positioning between geopolitical blocs, which may lead to a loss of relevance and strategic marginalization. At the same time, panelists stressed the importance of multilateralism, democratic values, and solidarity as key guiding principles for Slovakia’s foreign policy.

The panel concluded that Slovakia is facing a critical moment in defining its future trajectory. Ensuring long-term security and prosperity will depend on strengthening internal resilience, maintaining a clear strategic orientation, and actively contributing to European and transatlantic cooperation.

Conclusions and Key Takeaways

The XXIV Annual Review Conference confirmed that Slovakia is operating in an increasingly volatile and unpredictable international environment, marked by geopolitical competition, pressure on the rules-based order, and uncertainty in transatlantic relations. While the European Union and NATO remain indispensable frameworks for security and cooperation, they are undergoing adaptation and require stronger European engagement. Across the panels, a clear consensus emerged that Slovakia remains structurally anchored in the Euro-Atlantic space, yet inconsistencies in communication and ambiguous positioning risk weakening its credibility and influence among partners.

At the same time, the discussions highlighted that Slovakia’s key challenges are increasingly internal. The growing gap between political rhetoric and structural reality, the use of sovereignty-based narratives, and limited strategic clarity may gradually shape policy outcomes if left unaddressed. Strengthening resilience, defense capabilities, and meaningful partnerships, while reinforcing democratic legitimacy and a clear foreign policy orientation, were identified as essential priorities. Ensuring Slovakia’s long-term security and relevance will depend on its ability to act as a predictable, credible, and active contributor within the European and transatlantic community.

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