

**Slovakia's
foreign policy
after the elections
as envisaged
by the SFPA:**

Three scenarios

The parliamentary elections of 30 September 2023 will determine the make-up of Slovakia's new government. Clearly, as shown by the opinion polls, none of the political parties competing for voters will be able to form a government on their own. Parties that win enough votes to pass the five per cent threshold (seven per cent for coalitions) will seek to form a coalition government and get the majority of their election priorities into the government manifesto. These parliamentary elections will have a direct impact on domestic policy and individual sectors. They will also shape Slovakia's foreign, European and security policy, for the next few years at least. Experts at the SFPA have created three postelection scenarios for these policy areas, drawing on the available sources and their own expertise. They do not expect any of these scenarios to play out in full but see them as indicating the main post-election trends and implications for foreign, European and security policy.

The SFPA, as the oldest foreign policy think-tank in Slovakia and a non-partisan NGO, has provided analyses and perspectives that helped shape Slovakia's foreign policy in two critical periods: in 1998, a major milestone in domestic and foreign policy, and in 2004, a turning point in terms of Slovakia's accession to the EU and NATO. Before the last parliamentary elections of February 2020, the think-tank issued its SFPA on Slovakia's foreign policy after the elections, which focused on five thematic areas (1. the European Union, 2. security, 3. regional cooperation and relations with neighbors, 4. eastern policy, and 5. the Western Balkans) and the institutional issues underpinning developments in Slovakia's foreign policy. The Three Scenarios builds on previous analyses to outline three model scenarios of the postelection landscape.



Scenario 1

Reliable team member

The first scenario assumes continuity in the foreign policy and security spheres, as well as in European politics. In terms of domestic politics, this scenario will depend on the government's approach and agreement among the coalition parties on the direction of the country and its status within the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance. It will also depend on the current foreign and European policy institutional set-up being maintained and, potentially, expansion of the role played by the Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic in European policy coordination.

This scenario also assumes continued support at EU level for the sanctions against Russia and general rejection of its aggressive policy, along with full support for Ukraine in her struggle against Russia's unjustified aggression after February 2022. Slovakia would become more involved in creating European policies in several areas, support further deepening of European integration, and be more active in advocating for qualified majority voting in common foreign and security policy. It would back the expansion of EU defense projects and the strengthening of NATO's European pillar (along with EU strategic autonomy). It would be one of the leaders of the EU's enlargement policy emphasizing all candidate and potential candidate countries, including Ukraine. The EU would be the main communication platform for developing relations with China or Russia (once the invasion of Ukraine ended). Slovakia would fully exploit all opportunities to become involved in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction, which would be key to stimulating the country's economic growth, including in the eastern Slovak border area. With tens of thousands of unfilled job vacancies, the government would make it easier for immigrants to obtain temporary or permanent residence.

The pragmatic approach to the use of regional cooperation formats would continue, especially regarding the B9 (security), S3 (selected European themes), not to mention the V4 and 3SI (selected aspects of sectoral cooperation concentrating on activities in soft areas). It is in Slovakia's interest



to maintain friendly relations and constructive cooperation with all its neighbors, including exceptionally close relations with the Czech Republic, and expecting Poland to enhance its position as a strategic partner to Slovakia (partly dependent on the outcome of the Polish parliamentary elections in October this year).

In security policy, Slovakia would firmly support the transatlantic partnership and strongly back the continued enlargement of NATO to include other interested countries of benefit to the Alliance. It would uphold its commitment to defense spending of at least 2 per cent of GDP. Improvements to NATO (particularly the modernization of weapon systems) would also be in Slovakia's interest. It would back developments in the defense industry as part of cooperation with EU and NATO partners and support its domestic arms industry. In cooperation with partner countries, it would improve cyber protection, which would mean keeping the existing cyber-units in the ministries. It would also strengthen existing ministerial units combating disinformation and set up additional ones in other ministries or public administration offices. In energy security, Slovakia would continue to diversify energy sources and supply routes, including those relating to nuclear fuel, as nuclear power will remain a core element in the energy mix. It will also continue implementing the "Fit for 55" agenda, which is directly linked to the expansion of alternative and renewable energy sources and reducing energy consumption in energy intensive industries.

This scenario assumes that inclusion, diversity, and gender equality are not a mere formality but are integral to the organizational culture of the foreign ministry. Quantifiable targets would be set to achieve gender parity in the diplomatic service, both in the recruitment of male and female staff and especially when filling ambassadorial posts, which would be systematically monitored and evaluated.




Scenario 2

Solitary isolation

The second scenario is the opposite of the first. If it were to occur, there is a risk Slovakia's foreign policy and security direction would change. In domestic politics, polarization would be likely along with attempts to install a new foreign policy consensus, based on the beliefs of governing parties with extremist views. That would involve the negation of the established pillars of foreign, European, and defense policy. Government members would directly undermine efforts to deepen European integration and veto the CFSP and other things. It would disrupt ties with transatlantic partners, particularly relations with the US. The new government would not support the sanctions against Russia and nor would it provide aid to Ukraine. Moreover it would actively seek to strengthen bilateral relations with Russia and China. It would openly sympathize with the government in Budapest, and Slovakia would be Hungary's closest ally on international issues and in European politics. The shift toward Hungary would underline the move away from Slovakia's strategic partners in the region – the Czech Republic and Poland. In other words, the Czech Republic would no longer be its closest neighbor, and Hungary would become an ally. At EU and NATO level, Slovakia (along with Hungary) would increasingly be isolated. The injection of authoritarian aspects into governance would undermine the rule of law, especially the independence of the judiciary, which would lead to a dispute with the European Commission. In the medium term, Article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty could be used against Slovakia with consequences such as the suspension of EU funding (80 per cent of public investment in Slovakia is EU funded). At the same time, Slovakia would be unable to obtain substantial economic benefits from Ukraine's post-war reconstruction.

In security, one can assume greater vulnerability to hybrid threats, especially if disinformation campaigns and pro-Russian narratives were to spread, directly enhanced and echoed by government officials. These would be disseminated by the alternative media, with direct state or public support from the government. Backing from alternative media would lead to a bigger



and more extensive disinformation ecosystem and, in time, to a clear shift away from democratic values, which would have both social and economic consequences. Equally there would be a lack of emphasis on effective education. Slovakia would indirectly block any potential NATO expansion and erect barriers to Ukraine's rapprochement with NATO. The government would question the commitment to spend 2 per cent of GDP on defense, dampening growth in the defense industry. Slovakia would not seek to enter into partnerships with NATO member countries to obtain funds and would put a halt to science and research grants, not just in defense but foreign policy as well. Migrants would be depicted as a major threat to the security of Slovakia and its citizens, and Slovakia would tighten its asylum policy even further.

In energy, this scenario would lead to a shift away from the diversification of energy sources and conversely the government would look for opportunities to strengthen bilateral cooperation with its "traditional supplier", Russia. At the same time, the government would attempt to intervene substantially in energy company price-setting and seek a greater role for the state's influence in their affairs, which could ultimately lead to the nationalization of the energy sector. The implementation of the European Green Deal would also be under threat, as the government would strongly oppose the plan. Its interventionist policy would be met with a downgrading by credit rating agencies, which would affect economic investment and Slovakia's ability to borrow favorably from international financial institutions.

The foreign ministry would make no progress on its organizational culture under this scenario, as references to inclusion and diversity, as well as achieving parity in diplomatic posts, would remain rhetorical at best, with no real commitments capable of contributing to real change.



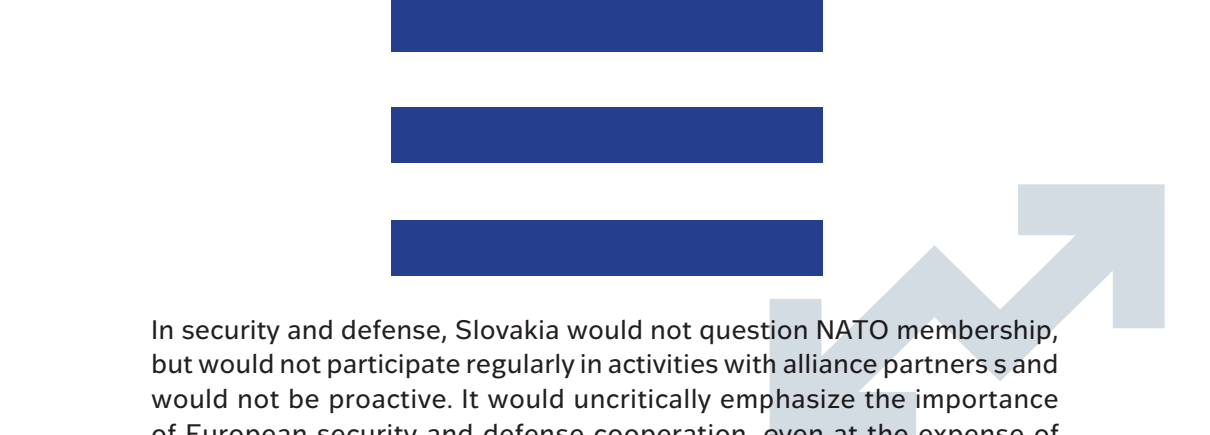
Scenario 3

An unpredictable player



Besides these two scenarios, there is a third scenario featuring elements of the first two, that cannot be ruled out. There is a real possibility of this scenario playing out.

Under this scenario, Slovakia's foreign policy direction would be reiterated formally, but in practice government actions would cast doubt on Slovakia's long-established EU and NATO priorities. Regarding the current conflict in Ukraine, for example, Slovakia would vote to continue the sanctions against Russia, but back home government officials would paint the EU position as harmful. Slovakia could suspend military aid to Ukraine and concentrate only on supplying humanitarian aid, despite the negative impact on the domestic arms/defense industry. Such an approach would in effect substantially limit opportunities for Slovak companies to get involved in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction. At the EU level, structural factors (notably eurozone membership) would prevent Slovakia from developing an independent fiscal policy and questioning the existence of the EU, but it could join those skeptical of deepening European integration and give strong support to an intergovernmental approach. Sovereignty would become a frequent topic of political discourse, and how it is applied within the European policy framework would be seen as an essential issue by at least some of the coalition parties in the government. Exercising sovereignty would be viewed through the veto mechanism, which Slovakia would increasingly wield in EU votes. There would be no escalation in tension with the EU institutions, and Brussels would not turn to repressive measures on any European policy areas; instead, Slovakia's often unconstructive stance would result in its marginalization within the EU. Bilateral relations with neighbors would not change significantly. Although the government could seek to de-escalate its relationship with Hungary, by moving closer to Budapest's positions in certain areas. Within regional cooperation, the government would push to keep all the existing formats and might occasionally be critical of Polish and Czech reluctance to participate in V4 activities.



In security and defense, Slovakia would not question NATO membership, but would not participate regularly in activities with alliance partners and would not be proactive. It would uncritically emphasize the importance of European security and defense cooperation, even at the expense of developing transatlantic relations. Some government officials would express agreement with the content shared by alternative media and ensuring an “objective” assessment of the conflict in Ukraine and those involved would become central. Thanks to government support, the disinformation ecosystem would be stronger, more resilient, and more popular in Slovak society, but it would also be socially and economically harmful. Strategic communication and the fight against disinformation would cease to be a priority. Instead the focus would be on the need for a balanced foreign and security policy and being open to negotiating with all interested countries, including Russia. The government would consider it unrealistic for Ukraine to become a NATO member, while EU enlargement would be presented as an equal opportunity for all candidate countries and any privileging of Ukraine would be rejected.

In the energy sector, one can predict greater state intervention and a closer relationship with selected energy companies. The government would seek to benefit as much as possible from Russian supplies of oil, gas, and nuclear fuel, and take advantage of the exemptions granted by the EU for as long as possible. Although Slovakia would continue to present itself as a constructive partner, questioning some European solutions and blocking the implementation of selected European policies it would no longer prove a constructive partner but become a player whose moves are sometimes difficult to predict.

In this scenario, the foreign ministry would make slow progress on organizational culture. Measures would be taken to improve inclusion and diversity and achieve gender parity in ambassadorial positions, but only minimally.