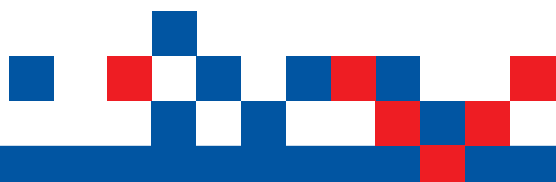


YEARBOOK OF SLOVAKIA'S FOREIGN POLICY



SFPA
Slovak Foreign Policy Association



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edited by Peter Brezáni



_Foreword // 6

Pavol Demeš

1_The Slovak Republic in the international environment

Microslava Pisklová

- Three governments and a rather swift turn in Slovakia's European policy in 2023 // 14

Pavol Baboš, Aneta Világi

- Support for integration, mistrust in institutions. How Slovak citizens make sense of the EU // 30

Martin Vlachynský

- What the new European economy will look like // 46

Veronika Oravcová

- Climate and energy policy in 2023: a challenging political landscape meets the challenge of decarbonization // 68

Matej Kandrik

- Slovak security and defense policy in 2023: a year of [dis]continuities // 90

2_Priorities of Slovakia's foreign policy

Tomáš Strážay

- Changing geometry of Central Europe – where does Slovakia fit? // 108

Juraj Marušiak

- War as the “new normal.” Slovakia's Eastern Policy in 2023 // 128

Ján Cingel

- Slovakia and the Western Balkans in 2023: a year of turbulence // 150

Matej Šimalčík

- Slovakia's relations with Asia-Pacific in light of the snap election // 172

3_Slovakia's foreign policy tools

Daniel Kaba

- 20th anniversary as a donor and Slovak development cooperation in 2023 // 188

4_Annexes // 206**5_About authors // 280**

Pavol Demeš

Foreword

■ **2023—a year of three foreign ministers**

2023 was an extraordinary year for Slovakia. Not only because it marked thirty years of independence and building diplomatic relations with countries across the world but also because of unprecedented political twists and turns at home. Never before has Slovakia had three foreign ministers (as well as prime ministers) in a single year.

The first foreign minister, professional diplomat Rastislav Káčer, replaced Ivan Korčok in September 2022 under Eduard Heger's minority government, which became the interim government from December 2022. The second foreign minister, diplomat Miroslav Wlachovský, was appointed member of the first technocratic government led by Ľudovít Ódor in May 2023, which did not win the confidence vote in parliament (it was appointed by the president). After the early elections in September, the post was taken up by politician Juraj Blanár at the end of October, who was selected by Robert Fico, prime minister for the fourth time. In a break with the past, Fico did not appoint a diplomat but stated he wanted someone agile ("pike") at the foreign ministry who would advocate a "sovereign and Slovak foreign policy." This break with the long tradition of appointing professional diplomats to lead the ministry raised questions.

The internal politics of the past year exhibited high levels of polarization, fragmentation, and vulgarization, affecting foreign policy and the country's image globally. The traditional foreign policy consensus began to erode quickly, giving rise to anti-Western tendencies. And in the run-up to the election campaign, the rhetoric of a surprising number of influential political figures sought to blame Washington (along with the billionaire philanthropist George Soros) and Brussels. This was set against the backdrop of an unsettled international situation, primarily due to the ongoing Russian aggression

toward our eastern neighbor Ukraine and Russia's open rivalry with the West alongside unpredictable developments.

This dynamic was reflected in surprisingly significant shifts in public attitudes in Slovakia between 2022 and 2023. For instance, support for NATO membership dropped from 72 per cent to 58 per cent. Most people no longer consider Russia to be primarily responsible for the war in Ukraine and oppose military support to Ukraine, while 50 per cent consider the USA a security threat. Slovakia ranks among the countries most susceptible to public manipulation, disinformation, and propaganda.

This is particularly troubling at a time when Slovakia has record-low levels of trust in institutions, the rule of law, and state governance, set against a tense economic and social backdrop and fractured social cohesion. Several international comparisons—such as the Prosperity Index, Eurobarometer, PISA testing, World Happiness Report—show that Slovakia is in the bottom tier of EU countries.

Government instability and power-shifts diminished international activity, especially at the government and parliamentary level (though government representatives still attended the EU and NATO working and official meetings).

Despite the unfavorable political situation, many high-level foreign representatives, including heads of state or government, ministers, and experts visited Slovakia during the 2023 GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum.

President Zuzana Čaputová largely compensated for the lack of dynamism through her own foreign policy activities in 2023. She hosted the presidents of Austria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Italy, France, Serbia, Ukraine, Israel, and Slovenia, as well as the Dutch royal couple and the Vice President of Indonesia. In June, a summit of the presidents of the B9 countries was held in Bratislava. Zuzana Čaputová also attended several summits, the coronation of King Charles III, and visited Ukraine together with the new Czech President Petr Pavel. In Germany, she was the recipient of two prestigious awards—the European Prize from the Schwarzkopf Foundation and the Emperor Otto Prize.

Despite her international prestige and high public support, at the end of June the president announced she would not run for re-election. Her decision was influenced by vulgar attacks on her by politicians, which had an impact on her private life. At the end of August, former foreign minister Ivan Korčok announced his decision to run for president, and another ex-foreign minister, Ján Kubiš, decided to stand as well as a civic candidate.

■ Government manifesto and the first steps of Robert Fico's government

The foreign policy section of the new government manifesto reflects the aspirations of the three-party coalition—SMER-SSD, Hlas-SD, and SNS. It states that Slovakia's EU and NATO membership are a strategic priority, besides cooperation within the Visegrad Four (especially the Czech Republic), strengthening national interests, the economy, and policy with a global reach ("in all four cardinal directions"). The government supports peace and the territorial integrity of Ukraine, but will only offer military assistance within commercial frameworks. There is no open criticism of Russia and its aggression, and limited support will be provided against hybrid threats.

The first visits by the prime minister, foreign minister, and defense minister to Brussels and Prague, as well as meetings with partners, were aimed at allaying concerns about Orbán-style practices within Euro-Atlantic structures. NATO and EU partners noted a change in the attitudes of new government officials to adherence to the rules of democracy and relations with Ukraine and Russia. Against a backdrop of volatile political and security environments, the government started sending critical messages to Western partners, further weakening unity within the Visegrad format. Inter-governmental relations with the Czech Republic and Poland cooled significantly (the Slovak prime minister had not yet made an official visit to Warsaw). The rhetoric on Ukraine from the prime minister and coalition members became very harsh, altering the country's image. Slovakia is often labeled a pro-Russian country by international media.

■ Year 2024—anniversaries and elections

The post-election political dynamics indicate persistent polarization and value clashes, which also affects foreign policy. Unfortunately, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs is being drawn into domestic political and ideological struggles, weakening its ability to build a foreign policy consensus in Slovakia.

A particularly negative development is the ministry's decision to suspend the cooperation with experts from the academic and non-governmental sectors that has been built up over many years and is essential for a young state.

Within a few months, the new government had further disrupted relations in the foreign policy and security community and removed expert teams within the state administration that were tackling disinformation and hybrid threats.

Long-standing cooperation with the oldest think tank, the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, has also been paused. Government representatives publicly attacked GLOBSEC, which had to hold its main forum in Prague this year. The government's campaign against NGOs that cooperate with or receive funding from abroad continues, undoubtedly tarnishing Slovakia's image.

Another challenge will be setting government relations with the dynamic diaspora which is interested in assisting Slovakia's development and engaging in discussions to prevent a brain drain.

2024 begins with the commemoration of the 15th anniversary of joining the eurozone, followed by the 20th anniversary of Slovakia's accession to NATO and the EU, the 80th anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising, and the 35th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution. Our citizens will head to the polls twice—to elect the sixth head of state on April 6th, and members of the European Parliament on June 6th. The way these anniversaries are commemorated and the results of both elections will have a substantial affect on Slovakia's direction and development.

From a global perspective, it is worth highlighting that 2024 will be a super-election year. Elections will not only be taking place in the EU but also in Russia, India, the USA, and many other countries as well, and will resonate far beyond their borders.

■ ■ ■

All these, and other crucial issues, are addressed and discussed in our 25th Yearbook. Obviously, the book cannot cover every field and region of our foreign policy engagement. As in previous years, the expert section is supplemented by various appendices.

I believe that this Yearbook will once again find its audience and serve all those who are interested in the past, present, and future of Slovakia and its foreign policy. I also believe that the SFPA will be able to continue this valuable project and thereby help build a modern democratic Slovak statehood.





The Slovak Republic in the international environment

Michal Štefko

MIROSLAVA PISKLOVÁ

**Three governments and
a rather swift turn
in Slovakia's European
policy in 2023**

2023 was a fairly turbulent year in politics for Slovakia with three different prime ministers and changes of government. Naturally this had an impact on the country's foreign and European policy. The early parliamentary elections in September confirmed the continued low level of interest in European affairs among politicians and general population alike and led to the formation of the fourth Robert Fico government led by his party Smer-SSD.

Upon return to power, Fico's government rather quickly started to change Slovakia's foreign policy orientation and introduce a series of reforms that could potentially have a serious impact on the rule of law. This initial set of reforms was met with resistance from the opposition, a section of the general public and, importantly, the EU institutions. Having learned their lesson in the past, over Hungary and Poland, the institutions are now more prepared to act when needed to protect European values and financial interests.

Furthermore, all three of Slovakia's governments last year faced the challenge of implementing the country's recovery and resilience plan. In the event, they coped well despite the political turmoil of 2023.

**■ Continuity of the minority
and caretaker governments**

The year 2023 started with Eduard Heger's minority government in power, following the failure of the Matovič government — in power from 2020 — to solve its internal tensions, even after a change of prime minister and amid

public disillusionment and low trust in institutions¹. After the vote of no-confidence in December 2022, Heger had been able to hold onto his mandate for another five months, before president Čaputová appointed a caretaker government of experts to lead the country into early parliamentary elections.

On the positive side, despite the sense of instability caused by consecutive leadership changes, both Heger's minority government and the government of experts led by Ľudovít Ódor (with Rastislav Káčer and then Miroslav Wlachovský as foreign minister) maintained Slovakia's clear pro-European foreign policy orientation and firm anchoring in the Euro-Atlantic structures.

Slovakia continued its intensive and complex support for Ukraine² as part of wider European efforts and Ukraine's vision of EU accession. Continuing Slovakia's long-term strategy, both governments supported further EU enlargement. Minister Káčer welcomed³ the renewal of the EU-NATO partnership declaration, conveying Slovakia's support for strong cooperation on that level, especially given the war in Ukraine and the new security environment.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic (MFEA) signed an Action Plan on Geographical Balance with the European Commission⁴ to address the insufficient representation of Slovaks

in the EU institutions. A higher proportion could benefit Slovakia, helping it get its voice heard and experience shared in pursuit of common European solutions. Also, it should help more Slovak experts to gain experience, which could enhance preparations for the country's upcoming Council presidency in 2030. It is wise to think about such details in advance given the intensity of running a presidency, particularly since the EU has found itself in constant crisis management mode over the past few years.

Ódor's caretaker government manifesto,⁵ albeit for a much briefer term than is normally the case, focused on priorities such as cultivating political discussion and calming societal tensions, overseeing the functioning of state management in preparation for the parliamentary elections, communicating and performing pro-European domestic and foreign policy, and gathering evidence and expert-based recommendations in key areas that will need to be addressed by the next government (for example tackling inflation and the state finances, or overseeing implementation of the European recovery plan). In European affairs, Ódor's government promised to be "a reliable and committed partner who prefers common European solutions to unilateral steps" and to help maximize the timely use of EU funds, rather than losing them.

■ Absence of European issues ahead of the parliamentary elections

In the campaign leading up to the September 2023 parliamentary elections, European issues attracted little attention, despite foreign policy being more important than usual. The main campaign issues changed every few weeks and Slovak political parties across the spectrum focused on day-to-day life and domestic issues, such as inflation, food prices, the cost of living, the economy, healthcare, illegal migration, and LGBTI rights. Nonetheless, some foreign policy questions found themselves under the spotlight, although political statements tended to dominate rather than wider, constructive discussion. This focus was evident in the issues Slovaks thought important

⁵ "Programové vyhlásenie vlády SR: Len spoločne môžeme čeliť výzvam 21. storočia," [Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic. Only together we can face the challenges of the twenty-first century] Government of the Slovak Republic, 2023. Available online: https://www.vlada.gov.sk/share/uvsr/vlada/pvvsr_odpocet.pdf?csrt=3704247614147270849 (accessed on February 1, 2024).

¹ "Exkluzívny prieskum agentúry AKO pre TV JOJ 24: Ktoej verejnej inštitúcii dôverujú Slováci najviac?" [Exclusive survey by AKO agency for TV JOJ 24: Which institution do Slovaks trust the most?] *JOJ 24*, September 22, 2023. Available online: <https://joj24.noviny.sk/volby/parlamentne-volby-2023/joj24-volebna-encyklopedia-slovenska/837254-exkluzivny-prieskum-agentury-ako-pre-tv-joj-24-ktoej-verejnej-institucii-doveruju-slovaci-najviac> (accessed on January 29, 2024).

² "Minister Káčer v Bruseli: EÚ vytrvá v podpore Ukrajiny tak dlho, ako to bude potrebné. Je to v našom bytostnom záujme," [Minister Káčer in Brussels: the EU will continue to support Ukraine for as long as is needed. It is of vital interest] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, of the Slovak Republic, February 13, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=16373350 (accessed on January 29, 2024).

³ "Káčer víta deklaráciu o spolupráci EÚ a NATO. Členstvo v týchto inštitúciách je pre Slovensko životne dôležité," [Káčer welcomes the EU and NATO declaration of cooperation. Belonging to these institutions is crucial for Slovakia] *TA3 & TASR*, January 10, 2023. Available online: <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/255901/kacer-vita-deklaraciju-o-spolupraci-eu-a-nato-clenstvo-v-tychto-instituciach-je-pre-slovensko-zivotne-dolezite> (accessed on January 29, 2024).

⁴ "Andrej Stančík: Čím viac Slovincov a Slovákov bude pracovať v inštitúciách EÚ, tým lepšie bude počuť náš hlas pri hľadaní európskych riešení," [Andrej Stančík: The more Slovaks work at the EU institutions, the more we will be heard in the search for European solutions], Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, March 28, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=17226092 (accessed on February 1, 2024).

according to a pre-election survey.⁶ The Slovak political parties therefore focused on issues that citizens perceived as threats to their personal life or living standards to gain more political points.

In terms of foreign policy, whether to support Ukraine and what type of support to provide were touched on, as well as Slovakia's place and role in the European Union. The rhetoric on reducing or halting the aid to Ukraine came mainly from Robert Fico and his party Smer-SSD, but also from some of the smaller nationalist and extreme far right parties (SNS, Republika, ĽSNS). On the other hand, democratic and pro-Western parties firmly advocated a pro-European orientation. These issues were, however, overshadowed by the general focus on domestic social and cultural issues.

In its election campaign, Smer-SSD called for "Slovakia's foreign policy to be sovereign again" and criticized the European Union on some issues (mainly the sanctions against Russia and questioning their legitimacy and effectiveness, but also the EU migration and the asylum system and proposed reforms). It spoke of a plan to stop Slovak military aid to Ukraine. Furthermore, it rejected outright plans to extend qualified majority voting and abolish the veto on EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) matters. These priorities later became part of the new government's plan.

However, in the discourse ahead of the 2023 parliamentary elections in Slovakia, there was little proper discussion on larger European issues and the functioning of the EU (such as the European Union reform, the possibility of further integration, the prospect and impact of the next enlargement wave, the worrying rise of nationalist and far right parties in Europe ahead of the 2024 European elections, and the impact of the Qatargate scandal on the EU institutions and their legitimacy in the eyes of citizens).

This reflects the fact that Slovak politicians continue to show little interest in discussing European affairs with citizens more broadly, with a significant proportion of Slovak political parties choosing instead to blame "Brussels"

⁶ The spring Eurobarometer (data collected in May/June 2023) shows that 41 per cent of Slovaks thought their household financial situation was bad, 78 per cent of Slovak citizens thought the economy was in bad shape, and 43 per cent expected the situation to get worse over the next 12 months. The top three issues facing Slovakia were: 1. rising prices, inflation, cost of living (57 per cent); 2. economic situation (24 per cent); and 3. energy supply (18 per cent). Source: "Standard Eurobarometer 99: Spring 2023—Country Factsheets in English Slovakia," European Commission, July 2023. Available online: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3052> (accessed on February 6, 2024).

for excessive bureaucracy and linking it to unpopular political moves (while not giving the EU credit for more popular initiatives and new legislation). In Slovakia, more visible efforts to discuss and explain EU-related topics and why it is important for citizens to be interested in them are usually relegated to the European parliamentary election period, before being dropped for another five years. That feeds into the low turnouts in Slovakia for the European elections, which has ranked lowest in the EU since accession in 2004.⁷ According to the June Eurobarometer,⁸ this is not likely to change in the upcoming 2024 European elections. By the end of 2023, there had been no significant public discussion on the 2024 European elections taking place six months later.

The situation in 2024 will be more difficult than usual, as the period usually allocated to European affairs will be even shorter, despite the importance of participating in the European elections. Slovakia had parliamentary elections in September 2023 and the presidential elections are in spring 2024, before the European elections in June. One can therefore expect election fatigue to have set in.

■ Fico returns: more radical than pragmatic?

After winning the elections in September, Robert Fico and his party Smer-SSD formed a coalition with Hlas and the Slovak National Party (SNS). The manifesto⁹ of the new government announced it would "make Slovak foreign policy sovereign again and protect Slovak interests," following a "Slovakia first" approach. As the election campaign had indicated and the government's initial

⁷ "Turnout by country (%): Final results," European Parliament, October 22, 2019. Available online: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/turnout/0019.png> (accessed on February 8, 2024).

⁸ Eurobarometer measured interest among EU citizens in the upcoming 2024 EP elections and Slovakia came last on 26 per cent. Source: "EP Spring 2023 Survey: Democracy in action—One year before the European elections—Infographics," European Parliament, June, 2023. Available online: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3093> (accessed on February 8, 2024).

⁹ "Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky 2023–2027: Lepšie, pokojnejšie a bezpečnejšie žiť," [Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic for 2023–2027. 'A better, calmer, safer life'] National Council of the Slovak Republic, November 13, 2023. Available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=535376> (accessed on February 8, 2024).

steps confirm, the fourth Fico government will reflect the shift in his rhetoric on foreign policy priorities and values over the past few years. In the current geopolitical and security environment, the government's concept of "foreign policy towards all four cardinal directions" is set to diverge from or disrupt the existing European consensus on Russia and the war in Ukraine.

While officially recognizing that Slovakia's EU membership is a given, the manifesto¹⁰ links it to the need for the EU to "return to a policy of peace" and "respect for all member states regardless of their power and size." The wording implies that this is not the case now, despite all EU member states having the right to comment on and shape policies and proposed legislation before the final decision-making stage.¹¹ While it is entirely legitimate for the new government coalition, formed as the result of democratic elections, to carry out policies and state administration under that mandate, presenting proposals, actions or policies in an overly simplistic manner, or even suggesting that there is an external threat to national sovereignty when there is not, is not helpful. It could weaken citizen trust in the institutions and international cooperation formats Slovakia belongs to, in this case the European Union, and make citizens more prone to misinformation and disinformation. This is especially true in Slovakia, where this is already a societal and security issue.¹²

Examples are the discussion on whether to introduce qualified majority voting (QMV) to the EU's CFSP, the effectiveness of the Russian sanctions, and ways of tackling illegal international migration. These narratives were used in the election campaign and appeared in the government's manifesto. Abolishing the veto is presented as "weakening smaller EU member states' position," which is a debatable interpretation¹³ and could mislead public opinion by appealing to emotions rather than helping them to understand the issue.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ "Scenario of Slovakia's foreign policy after the 2023 elections—SFPA perspective," Slovak Foreign Policy Association, November 2023. Available online: https://www.sfpa.sk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/vyvoj_pohlad_en.pdf (accessed on February 19, 2024).

¹² According to data from 2022, 54 per cent of Slovaks believe in conspiracy theories, showing that the nation is vulnerable to the disinformation threat.

Source: D. Hajdu et al., "Globsec Trends 2022: CEE amid the war in Ukraine," Globsec, May 31, 2022. Available online: <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2022.pdf> (accessed on February 20, 2024).

¹³ Several of the arguments "for" and "against" QMV in CFSP are relevant and valid on both sides. There is no clear-cut answer, which is why expert discussions have proved quite complex over the past few years. And even though it also started in some shape during previous governments in Slovakia too, these efforts were halted under the current one.

It is clear that Fico's government will not support the removal of the veto on CFSP matters. What remains to be seen is whether it will (mis)use the veto for its own benefit. Such a practice would shift Slovakia closer to Hungary's behavior, far from what the Ódor government called a "reliable and committed partner who prefer common European solutions to unilateral steps."

The new government manifesto rejects any efforts to establish mandatory EU quotas for the redistribution of illegal migrants as well as obligatory payments as an alternative. On one hand, such statements suggest that Slovakia's positions in any upcoming discussion on reforming the migration and asylum system will be quite rigid with little room for dialogue and negotiation with European partners. On the other hand, it is surprising that the Smer-SSD-led government has ruled out this system, as it was Robert Fico who originally proposed "flexible solidarity" in 2016 during Slovakia's presidency of the EU. At the time, the proposal was openly supported by the Visegrad Four,¹⁴ but it did not find sufficient support across the EU member states and so was not approved at the December European Council in 2016. Therefore, the search for a new Dublin system that would be acceptable to all EU member states continued.¹⁵

Another EU policy area that requires both the agreement of the member states and a common approach are sanction policies. The government manifesto declares that any future proposals for sanctions against a country will be considered by the government based on an analysis of their effectiveness and, above all, their economic and social impact on Slovakia. The anti-sanction rhetoric used by Fico and his partners¹⁶ has evidently carried over from their election campaigns.

¹⁴ "Joint statement of the Heads of governments of the V4 countries," Polish presidency of the Visegrad group, September 16, 2016. Available online: <https://vlada.gov.cz/assets/media-centrum/aktualne/Bratislava-V4-Joint-Statement-final-15h30.pdf> (accessed on February 21, 2024).

¹⁵ "European Council meeting (15 December 2016) — Conclusions," EUCO 34/16, European Council, December 15, 2016. Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21929/15-euco-conclusions-final.pdf> (accessed on February 21, 2024).

¹⁶ In its election campaign program, the SNS, now a coalition party, called for the sanctions to be abolished and for Russian oil, gas and nuclear fuel supplies to be reinstated. See "15 programových priorit Slovenskej národnej strany pre Slovensko," [The Slovak National Party's 15 program priorities for Slovakia], n.d. Available online: https://www.sns.sk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/VP_Web.pdf (accessed on February 21, 2024).

Fico continued disputing the effectiveness of the sanctions even as they were being defended in Brussels,¹⁷ right before the first post-election European Council meeting, but then went on to support them in the leaders' conclusions.¹⁸ Such contradictions between words and actions are unfortunate as they sow confusion among Slovakia's partners in the EU. Further repetition or doubling down on such behavior could badly damage the mutual trust between Slovakia and its foreign partners in the upcoming months and years.

Furthermore, even after supporting the Council conclusions that promised to continue sustained support to Ukraine, including military support,¹⁹ Fico's government quickly halted state-sourced military aid to Ukraine, while continuing other forms of aid and letting private companies in the Slovak defense sector continue selling military equipment to Ukraine. While this step benefits the companies²⁰ and their workforces, it contradicts Robert Fico's election campaign promises. Originally, before the elections, Smer-SSD had talked of halting all military aid to Ukraine and "not sending even a single bullet to Ukraine".²¹ It repeatedly claimed that there was no military solution to the conflict in Ukraine and that providing Ukraine with weapons was merely prolonging the war. However, after taking power and being criticized for potentially harming the defense industry in Slovakia, Fico stated that he would let private companies continue to manufacture and sell weapons to Ukraine.²²

¹⁷ J. Borell, "Yes, the sanctions against Russia are working," European External Action Service, August 26, 2023. Available online: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/yes-sanctions-against-russia-are-working_en (accessed on February 22, 2024).

¹⁸ "European Council meeting (26 and 27 October 2023)—Conclusions," EUCO 14/23, European Council, October 27, 2023. Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/67627/20241027-european-council-conclusions.pdf> (accessed on February 22, 2024).

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ The Slovak defense industry profits greatly from the supply of military aid to Ukraine. Defense company profits rose significantly (some by hundreds of per cent) and the situation will enable them to increase production. See "Zbrojársky priemysel na Slovensku oživa, tržby odvetvia vlani atakovali 400 miliónov eur," [Slovakia's defense industry is recovering, last year's profits reached €400 million] *Trend*, October 5, 2023. Available online: <https://www.trend.sk/spravy/zbrojarsky-priemysel-slovensku-oziva-trzby-odvetvia-vlani-atakovali-400-milionov-eur> (accessed on February 22, 2024).

²¹ "Robert Fico v prejave na sneme Smeru v Bratislave povedal, že chce vyhrať voľby," [In a speech at a Smer party convention in Bratislava, Robert Fico said he wanted to win the elections] *DenníkN*, November 17, 2022. Available online: <https://dennikn.sk/minuta/3111872/> (accessed on February 22, 2024).

²² "Vláda nebude brániť podnikom vo výrobe a dodávkach zbraní, povedal Robert Fico," [The government will not prevent companies from producing and supplying weapons, said Robert Fico] *Trend*, November 6, 2023. Available online: <https://www.trend.sk/spravy/vlada-nebude-branit-podnikom-vyrobe-dodavkach-zbrani-povedal-robert-fico> (accessed on February 22, 2024).

Current practices are therefore in direct conflict with the government's main campaign line.

On the future of EU enlargement, the new government is continuing the generally supportive policy in this area, like its predecessors.

In contrast to the practices of previous Smer-SSD-led government, the new minister of foreign and European affairs, Juraj Blanár, is not a professional career diplomat but a senior party member. This choice suggests that the MFEA will be more tightly subordinated to the Office of Government, shifting the source of initiative and direction on key foreign and European policy questions. Paradoxically, Fico abolished the EU affairs department at the Office of Government, which is where the prime minister's sherpa was previously based. That role is now the responsibility of a foreign ministry state secretary.

■ Slovakia and the EU institutions in 2023

President Zuzana Čaputová voiced concerns that if Fico's Smer-SSD were to win the elections, Slovakia could follow Hungary to become "an EU problem child."²³ After the fourth Fico government took power in October 2023, Slovakia's behavior quickly became a point of concern for the European institutions. This was because of attempts to amend the criminal code, abuse of the fast-track legislation procedure, proposed restrictions on media freedom through new legislation to restructure national radio and television (RTVS), government representatives ceasing to communicate with certain media channels, plans to make changes to the police force and the Slovak Information Services, and to abolish the special prosecutor's office (SPO) that was monitoring the most serious and high-level corruption cases in Slovakia.

As a consequence, in December the European Commission called on the Slovak government to halt its plans to amend the criminal code and abolish the SPO so the changes could be carefully considered and discussed with

²³ L. Bayer, "Slovakia risks succumbing to Russian disinformation, president warns," *Politico*, June 3, 2023. Available online: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-risks-losing-slovakia-russia-disinformation-president-zuzana-caputova/> (accessed on March 4, 2024).

relevant parties nationally and at European level.²⁴ On December 13th, the European Parliament (EP) held a debate on the situation in Slovakia and the potential threat to the rule of law, which subsequently led to the EP adopting a resolution in January 2024.

The EP resolution on Slovakia²⁵ is critical of the worrying reform proposals, which if adopted could threaten Slovakia's ability to fight corruption and protect the EU's financial interests. Members of the European parliament (MEPs) nominated by Smer-SSD and independent MEPs voted against the adoption of the resolution, and it was criticized at home by Fico and Blanár.²⁶ MEPs who backed the resolution and who were critical of the government's steps and the possible impact on rule of law in Slovakia were labeled traitors by the prime minister.²⁷

How the situation will develop in 2024 remains to be seen. If Fico does not persuade the Commission that the reforms will not harm the rule of law in Slovakia, provoking the EU institutions into action, "how" and "when" of the EU's response will become important. Fico has already accused the Slovak MEPs who backed the resolution and the opposition of asking the EU to financially penalize Slovakia. If the EU concludes that democracy is backsliding in Slovakia and the rule of law is being eroded and if it decides to block Slovakia's EU recovery plan funds in order to protect its financial interests, it looks as if Fico's government will accuse others instead of reflecting on and reconsidering its own actions. The EU is expected to act more quickly

²⁴ "European Commission calls on gov't not to amend penal code and scrap USP," *TASR*, December 12, 2023. Available online: <https://www.tasr.sk/tasr-clanok/TASR:2023120600000496> (accessed on March 4, 2024).

²⁵ "European Parliament resolution of 17 January 2024 on the planned dissolution of key anti-corruption structures in Slovakia and its implications for the rule of law," P9_TA(2024)0021, European Parliament, January 17, 2024. Available online: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2024-0021_EN.html (accessed on March 4, 2024).

²⁶ "Vyjadrenie ministra zahraničných vecí Juraja Blanára k aktuálnemu uzneseniu Európskeho parlamentu," [Statement by Minister of Foreign Affairs Juraj Blanár on the resolution of the European Parliament] January 17, 2024. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=20402932 (accessed on March 4, 2024).

²⁷ "Robert Fico označil europoslancov za vlastizradcov. Zrušenie špeciálnej prokuratúry sa rieši aj v Bruseli," [Robert Fico calls MEPs traitors. Brussels is looking into the abolition of the special prosecutor's office] *aktuality.sk*, December 13, 2023. Available online: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/8jotBFL/robert-fico-oznacil-europoslancov-za-vlastizradcov-zrusenie-specialnej-prokuratury-sa-riesi-aj-v-bruseli/> (accessed on March 4, 2024).

than it did on Hungary or Poland. That could act as a safety catch if Slovakia—through its system of checks and balances, citizens and civil society—fails to protect itself.

Apart from these developments, there were also two interesting changes in the Slovak representation in the EP in 2023. Firstly, Martin Hojsík, an MEP in Renew Europe, was elected Vice-President of Parliament, only the second Slovak to hold this post. He replaced Michal Šimečka, who resigned after his party Progressive Slovakia (PS) won seats in the national parliament. His European parliamentary seat went to Jozef Mihál.

Secondly, the Party of European Socialists (PES) suspended the membership of both Smer-SSD and Hlas after the "clear divergence from the values of the PES family demonstrated by Smer-SSD-SD leader Robert Fico" and "as a result of concerns raised following the announcement of a government coalition between Smer-SSD-SD, Hlas-SD and a radical-right party," the SNS.²⁸ The EP's S & D fraction welcomed and supported the decision and announced that it planned to suspend the three Slovak MEPs appointed by Smer-SSD (M. Beňová and K. Roth Nevedálová from Smer-SSD and non-partisan R. Hajšel). In its statement, S & D declared that its decision was a response to the inclusion of the SNS in the government coalition and to "comments and positions taken by Smer-SSD and Hlas party leaders regarding the Russian war against Ukraine, migration, the rule of law and the LGBTIQ community," which do not align with the party's values.²⁹ These moves were criticized by Fico and the MEPs Monika Beňová and Katarína Roth Nevedálová, who then decided to resign from the group and announced that they would continue to work as usual until the European elections. As independent MEPs, their political influence has been drastically reduced, which has also limited Slovakia's capacity to influence events in the EP and shape new European legislation. Slovakia now has only nine out of 14 members who are not in practice isolated in the European parliament in this way. This is another way in which Fico's fourth government resembles Orbán's. His party, Fidesz, was suspended from the largest fraction, European People's Party (EPP), back in 2019 for similar reasons.

²⁸ "PES membership suspended for Slovakia's Smer-SD and Hlas-SD," PES, October 12, 2023. Available online: <https://pes.eu/pes/pes-presidency-sends-message-of-support-to-israel/> (accessed on February 21, 2024).

²⁹ "S & D Group to suspend Slovak MEPs," S & D, October 12, 2023. Available online: <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/sd-group-suspend-slovak-meps> (accessed on February 21, 2024).

On the other hand, in the yearly evaluation of MEPs' influence, two Slovaks came high on the list. Michal Šimečka was the 13th most influential MEP, through his role as vice president and because his work on security, rule of law and fundamental rights was counted as a notable achievement. Martin Hojsík ranked the 5th most influential MEP on environmental policy due to his work on organic pollutants, methane emissions, sustainable investment, LULUCF, and the Aarhus Convention.³⁰

■ Three consecutive governments managed to keep the Slovak National Recovery and Resilience plan going in 2023

While Slovakia was very successful in being amongst the first member states to submit its national recovery and resilience plan to the Commission in 2021, implementation has already encountered difficulties. These arose in the initial stages, amid tensions in the coalition. Slovakia, having received its first payment in July 2022, submitted a second request in October 2022. The second payment of €814.7 million was confirmed and arrived in April 2023.

After Ódor's government of experts took control of the state administration in May 2023, it focused on finalizing preparations for the third payment request of €815 million. Despite its short term in power, Ódor's government worked hard to finalize the necessary reforms under the recovery plan so it would be able to submit the next payment request to the Commission. The reforms included changes to the school system and curriculum³¹ and coordination of the new judiciary reform ("the court map")³² which took effect on June 1st.

³⁰ "MEP Influence Index 2023: Top 100 most politically influential MEPs -Spring edition," *EUMatrix.eu*, 2023. Available online: <https://eumatrix.eu/en/blog/mep-influence-index-2023-top-100-most-politically-influential-meps/> (accessed on March 5, 2024).

³¹ "ZŠ v Budimíre sa chystá na kurikulárnu reformu, Ódor vyzdvihol prístup," [Elementary school in Budimír is getting ready for curricular reform. Ódor praised its approach] *teraz.sk*, June 20, 2023. Available online: <https://www.teraz.sk/regiony/zs-v-budimire-sa-chysta-na-kurikular/722745-clanok.html> (accessed on March 5, 2024).

³² "Od 1. júna 2023 sa na Slovensku spúšťa najväčšia reforma súdnictva," [From June 1, 2023, the largest of the judiciary reforms will be launched] Ministry of Justice of the Slovak Republic, May 31, 2023. Available online: <https://www.reform.justice.gov.sk/tlacovespravy/od-1-juna-2023-sa-na-slovensku-spusta-najvacsia-reforma-sudnictva/> (accessed on March 5, 2024).

The third stage of implementing the recovery plan consisted of 27 milestones relating to the green economy, education, science and research, innovations, effective government, and digitalization. The third payment request was submitted on September 25, 2023, a mere five days before the early parliamentary elections. Following a positive evaluation, Slovakia received the third payment in full on December 28, 2023.³³

When the Smer-SSD-led government took power in October 2023, its government manifesto stated that it would continue to implement the recovery plan and make every effort to ensure that the remaining payment requests were successfully submitted, despite the government having indicated that it did not support the recovery plan in its entirety. It also stated that it would not reverse the milestones and goals already achieved under the Slovak Republic's obligations, as violation would have financial consequences.

Fico's government planned to submit the fourth payment request by the end of 2023, and it achieved that goal. Slovakia has kept up to speed compared to other EU member states. The fourth payment request, for €924 million — the highest so far, related to 15 milestones and Slovakia was the second quickest country to submit it.³⁴

In summary, in 2023, the three Slovak governments were able to continue implementing the recovery and resilience plan despite the political turmoil in the country. However, the bulk of the plan still has to be implemented. The government has until 2026 to implement the reforms and investments amounting to €6.4 billion.

³³ "Slovensko má už doma takmer 2 miliardy eur," [Slovakia has already received almost €2 billion] Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, December 28, 2023. Available online: <https://www.planobnovy.sk/aktuality/slovensko-ma-uz-doma-takmer-2-miliardy-eur/> (accessed on March 5, 2024).

³⁴ "Darček pod Vianočný stromček pre krajinu. Slovensko si podáva ďalšiu žiadosť o platbu z Plánu obnovy a odolnosti za 924 miliónov eur," [A Christmas present for the country. Slovakia submits another payment request worth €924 million under the recovery and resilience plan] Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, December 15, 2023. Available online: <https://www.planobnovy.sk/aktuality/darcek-pod-vianocny-stromcek-pre-krajinu-slovensko-si-podava-dalsiu-ziadost-o-platbu-z-planu-obnovy-a-odolnosti-za-924-milionov/> (accessed on March 5, 2024).

■ Conclusion

Slovakia had a politically turbulent year, with two changes of governments. One of these was more significant, as Slovaks voted to return Robert Fico's Smer-SSD and his partners to power, having become disillusioned by the chaotic government during the pandemic, followed by the period of insecurity caused by war in Ukraine and inflation, among other things. Amid the overwhelming presence of domestic and everyday issues, the 2023 parliamentary election campaigns showed that Slovakia needs to do its homework on broadening public interest in European affairs, especially on improving citizens' knowledge and understanding of the interlinkage between the national and European level.

From the outset the new Fico government openly articulated its idea of "sovereign Slovak foreign policy" and "foreign policy in all four cardinal directions." In European policy, Slovakia changed its approach to aid for Ukraine and the EU's sanctions policy, and it appears to have quite fixed opinions on some issues, such as the introduction of QMV to the EU's CFSP, or migration and asylum system reform, rather than being open to discussion with partners.

Its concept of "sovereign foreign policy," in combination with the first steps of its representatives, has begun pushing Slovakia into an uncomfortable position among its partners in the European Union. After approximately three and a half years of pro-European and pro-Western leadership, and even after the more pro-Western Robert Fico governments, Slovakia could now be at risk of backsliding into a position where it is seen as an unpredictable and isolated player on the fringes of the EU—if the hints and first steps of the current government are indicative of its intentions. The European institutions have already demonstrated that they are following the situation in Slovakia closely. Whether the country will eventually be threatened by the Article 7 procedure or other complications arise remains to be seen (and lies squarely on the shoulders of the new government).



Pavol Baboš, Aneta Világi

Support for integration, mistrust in institutions. How Slovak citizens make sense of the EU¹

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This year marks the 20th anniversary of Slovakia's accession to the European Union. Slovakia's drive to become part of the EU was primarily fueled by a vision of better economic, political, and social conditions, along with a desire to establish itself as a "regular" European nation and gain respect on the global stage. The perception of the EU as a protective refuge for a small, vulnerable nation gradually became ingrained in Slovakia's evolving national identity. As highlighted by Malová and Dolný, the term "Europe" has become synonymous with actions perceived as positive and correct within Slovakia's political discourse. Similarly, key political figures have frequently leveraged this association to justify their policy decisions.

This trend has been mirrored by the broader public, which has strongly endorsed integration for many years, viewing it as a symbol of Slovakia's acceptance as a new independent state, especially given the initial skepticism from the international community following its establishment.² EU membership has effectively reshaped Slovakia's previous image as a nationalist and partially democratic entity resulting from the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. The EU's pivotal role in strengthening democracy, particularly in terms of public trust in both European and national political institutions, is evident when examining levels of trust in these entities. Slovakia used to be among the top countries for institutional trust in the EU, particularly in the initial years after EU accession.

However, in the second decade of Slovakia's membership, trust in EU institutions decreased, which is not surprising in itself. Institutional trust has declined across the European Union. However, the drop in trust in Slovakia has

² D. Malová, B. Dolný, "Economy and democracy in Slovakia during the crisis: from a laggard to the EU core," *Problems of Post-Communism*, 63(5–6), 2016, pp. 300–12. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2016.1200952> (accessed on March 15, 2024).

been particularly sharp, and 20 years after accession Slovakia is one of the least trusting nations. On the other hand, people in Slovakia still support many EU policies and integration ideas.

This study sets out to explain the apparent paradox. We argue that citizens have both low trust in EU institutions and high support for policy outputs because of the way in which they make sense of the EU. We build upon the research by Jozef Bátora and Pavol Baboš.³ They studied how people make sense of the EU, i.e. what they imagine the EU to be, how they connect the policy-making dimension of integration with the polity dimension. On that basis, Bátora and Baboš then identified so-called thought communities in six countries. Our study does not focus on how people make sense of the EU; we fully accept the findings by Bátora and Baboš. Our main contribution is the suggestion that differences in the way people make sense of the EU may help explain why they support EU policies whilst exhibiting low trust in the top EU institutions.

The introduction is followed by an explanation of the importance of institutional trust in a democratic regime. We show how high the trust in EU's institution was in Slovakia 20 years ago and where it is now. After that we show that support for public policies and further integration is still relatively high, despite the fall in trust. In the final part of this paper we argue that this discrepancy can be explained in terms of the way people make sense of the EU.

■ Trust in the EU institutions

Taking account of public opinion and obtaining democratic support from citizens has become an inseparable part of decision-making and policy-making in national, as well as European politics.⁴ It began emerging in the so-called

³ J. Bátora, P. Baboš, "Thought communities and pre-conditions for polity formation in the European Union: evidence from six EU member states," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Early view, 2024. Available online: DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13576> (accessed on March 15, 2024).

⁴ L. Hooghe, G. Marks, "A postfunctionalist theory of European integration: from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus," *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(1), 2009, pp. 1–23. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123408000409> (accessed on March 15, 2024); S. B. Hobolt, C. E. De Vries, "Public support for European integration," *Annual Review of Political Science*, 19(1), 2016, pp. 413–32. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-042214-044157> (accessed on March 15, 2024).

post-Maastricht period of European integration, and intensified only after the financial crisis, i.e. after 2008.⁵ It is also why gaining the support of the public at home is now essential for state representatives and elected politicians, as well as non-elected officials who regularly make decisions at the European level. With the deepening of European integration and institutional reforms, the national political discourse has been saturated with European topics and we can observe a shift in the importance of EU issues from the periphery to the center of political discussions.⁶ Thus, attitudes toward European integration play a crucial role when working with the public, and political trust is a key concern.

Trust is a multifaceted psychological and social construct that denotes the confidence individuals place in the expected behavior of people or institutions.⁷ Its intricate nature and perceived significance have rendered it a prominent subject of inquiry within the realm of social sciences. As stated by Uslaner, trust engenders favorable outcomes and so warrants careful consideration⁸. Within the scholarly discourse, trust is commonly divided into two primary dimensions delineated by Zmerli and Newton:⁹ social (or interpersonal) trust, which pertains to individuals' confidence in others, and institutional trust, which concerns trust invested in public entities.

Scholars have long scrutinized the foundations of institutional trust, particularly in relation to governance and political legitimacy.¹⁰ Political legitimacy is indispensable for democratic governance and is closely tied to public trust in political institutions. Democratic regimes are constrained in their capacity for coercion and so rely on cooperation with citizens, hence the pivotal role of institutional trust. Moreover, heightened levels of public trust correlate

⁵ E. Fanoulis, S. Guerra, "Anger and protest: Referenda and opposition to the EU in Greece and the United Kingdom," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 30(4), 2017, pp. 305–24. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2018.1431766> (accessed on March 15, 2024).

⁶ P. Taggart, A. Szczerbiak, "Coming in from the cold? Euroscepticism, government participation and party positions on Europe," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, 51(1), 2013, pp.17–37. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2012.02298.x> (accessed on March 15, 2024); N. Brack, N. Startin, "Introduction: Euroscepticism, from the margins to the mainstream," *International political science review*, 36(3), 2015, pp. 239–49.

⁷ A. Rose-Ackerman, "Trust and honesty in post-socialist societies," *Kyklos* 54(2-3), 2001a, pp. 415–43.

⁸ E. M. Uslaner, "Producing and consuming trust," *Political science quarterly*, 115(4), 2000, p. 581.

⁹ S. Zmerli, K. Newton, "Winners, losers and three types of trust," in S. Zmerli, M. Hooghe, eds, *Political Trust. Why Context Matters*. ECPR Press, 2011, pp. 67–94.

¹⁰ D. Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power*. Macmillan, 1991.

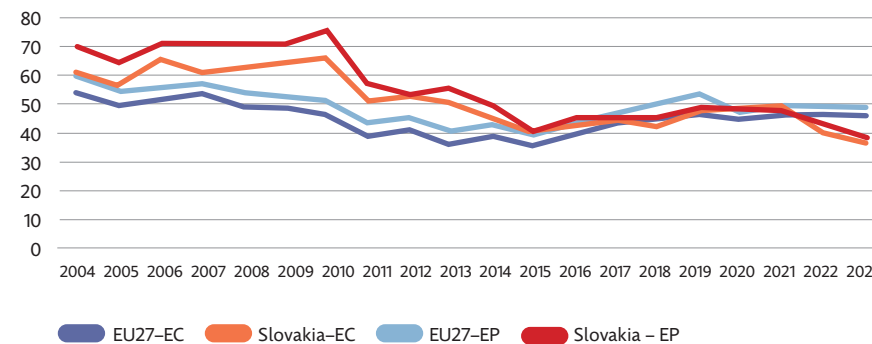
positively with civic cooperation,¹¹ fostering an environment conducive to effective institutional performance and policy implementation¹². Compliance with governmental policies and regulations also tends to increase with higher levels of institutional trust, reflecting its integral role in bolstering governance efficacy.¹³

The literature is preoccupied with the ramifications of diminished trust and less attention has been paid to its perceived significance.¹⁴ This pattern is particularly pronounced in emerging democracies like those in East Central Europe (ECE), where low levels of trust toward political systems and institutions pose challenges to legitimacy and governance effectiveness.¹⁵ In the aftermath of the regime changes in 1989, Offe underscored the complexities of transition, identifying economic, political, and social dimensions.¹⁶ Of these, the cultivation of shared values and norms for cooperation, was deemed the most arduous and time-consuming. Offe warned of the potential jeopardy posed by the burdensome transition process and accompanying economic hardships to the legitimacy of nascent democratic institutions.

In Slovakia, trust in European institutions was very high at the time of accession. According to Eurostat data, Slovakia was among the top five countries between 2004 and 2010, leading the ranking between 2008 and 2010, when it comes to trust in the European Parliament. After the financial crisis and

debt crisis, institutional trust dropped across the EU, but the decrease in Slovakia was steeper than the EU average (Figure 1). Since then, trust in the EU institutions has been relatively stable across the EU, over the long-term. Conversely, trust has been decreasing continuously in Slovakia since 2020 and reached a record low in 2023.

Figure 1. Trust in the European Parliament and European Commission

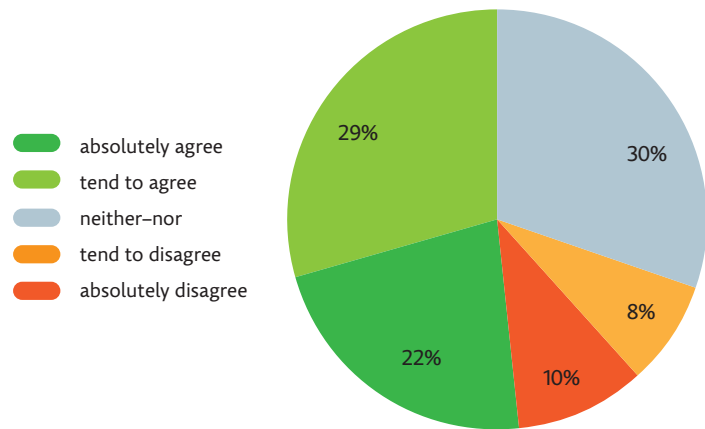


Source: Eurostat

As argued above, institutional trust is crucial for political legitimacy and governance in democratic regimes. Does that mean that the EU is losing legitimacy and support among Slovak citizens, or that Slovaks would like to exit the EU? The answer is not straightforward. Positive views of membership have been at around 70 per cent in the various Eurobarometer waves.¹⁷ In our research more than half the people agreed that membership was a good thing (Figure 2). In the next section we describe in detail the extent to which people in Slovakia support various EU policies and further integration in several policy areas.

¹⁷ Eurobarometer: S členstvom Slovenska v EÚ súhlasí väčšina Slovákov, [Eurobarometer: Most Slovaks agree with Slovakia's EU membership] *aktuality.sk*, March 24, 2023. Available online: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/CLAjms8/eurobarometer-s-clenstvom-slovenska-v-eu-suhlasivacsina-slovakov/> (accessed on March 15, 2023).

Figure 2. Views of EU membership among Slovak citizens



Source: Authors, data collected by Bátor and Baboš as part of the EU3D project (www.eu3d.uio.no).

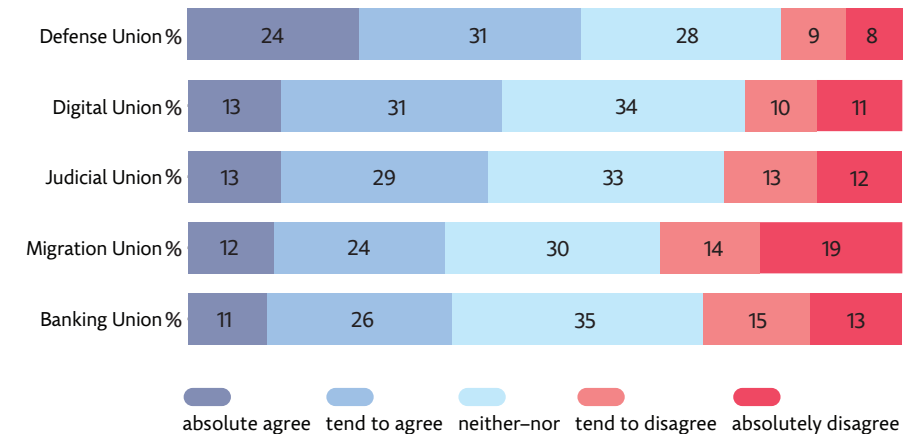
■ Support for EU policies

Support for various EU policies and measures was measured in the 2022 survey Bátor and Baboš conducted as part of larger international research EU3D. Various policies and potential scenarios were presented to respondents in six selected EU member states (France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, and Slovakia). We asked respondents to what extent they thought the EU should have them. They were divided into two sets. First, we asked people to what extent they agreed with the following statements on the competences of the European Union (results are shown in Figure 1.):

- the European Union should have a common budget, including the sharing of national debt and the issuance of common European bonds (“banking union”);
- the European Union should have a unified digital policy, including social media regulations, taxes for doing business in the digital environment, and quality standards for digital services (digital union”);
- the European Union should have a unified and common justice system, that means, European police and courts, in addition to the existing European prosecutor (“judicial union”);

- the European Union should have a unified migration and asylum policy, including decisions on the number of refugees and which countries are to receive them (“migration union”);
- the EU should have a unified defense policy and a common army that could be deployed to defend the EU’s interests (“defense union”).

Figure 3. Support for integration in selected policy areas



Source: Authors, data collected by Bátor and Baboš in the EU3D project (www.eu3d.uio.no)

The results show that, on the one hand, only the Defense Union has majority support among the Slovak population (with 55 per cent supporting it). On the other hand, all five policy areas enjoy more support than rejection, including the Migration Union with a difference of three points. Therefore, we can say that more people support further integration in any policy area than oppose it.

Importantly, support may have outweighed opposition because there were many undecided respondents. Approximately a third of the population cannot make up its mind on whether to support or reject integration in the areas given. The fact that a relatively large share of the population is neutral is not surprising. On the contrary, this is a frequent phenomenon in surveys of attitudes to European affairs and further integration.

Comparing Slovakia to the other member states we surveyed, we can see a divide between older and newer member states (Table 1). In Germany and

Italy, there is popular support for further integration in most of the policies. Italy is a special case, with all five policies finding support among citizens. On the other hand, in Central Europe support for further integration in most of the policies fell short of a majority. In Poland, similarly to in Slovakia, only the Defense Union enjoyed more than 50 per cent approval. In Hungary, slightly more than half the population supported deeper integration in justice.

Table 1. Approval rates for EU policies

	DE	IT	PL	SK	FR	HU
Defense Union	63%	61%	59%	55%	52%	51%
Digital Union	56%	63%	47%	45%	50%	46%
Judicial Union	49%	55%	43%	42%	45%	51%
Banking Union	37%	62%	37%	37%	37%	40%
Migration Union	66%	66%	46%	37%	50%	39%

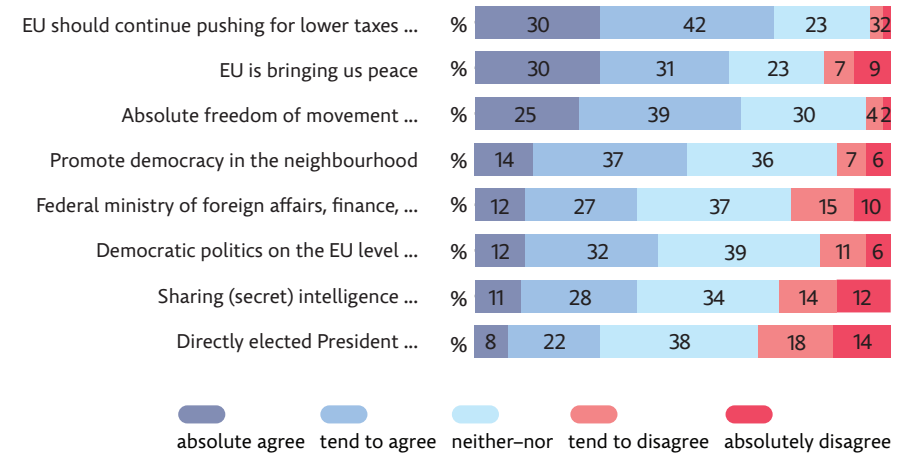
Source: Authors, data collected by Bátorá and Baboš in the EU3D project (www.eu3d.uio.no)

The second set of attitudes does not concern policy areas, but the integration of political institutions, as well as cooperation among member states. The full statements in the questionnaire designed by Bátorá and Baboš read as follows:

- the EU should have federal ministries of foreign affairs, finance, armed forces/border guard.
- the EU should have a directly elected president, decided by an all-EU election, who would lead the EC as government.
- the EU should continue pushing for lower taxes, more productivity, and more competition in our country and in other EU member states.
- the EU should push for absolute freedom of movement, including digital services and manual workers.
- We should share secret intelligence and police information extensively with other EU members.
- Democratic politics should operate at EU level, e.g., as a system of European political parties.

- The EU should promote democracy in neighboring countries, including providing financial support to civil society in neighboring countries.
- the EU brings us peace and that should remain its main purpose.

Figure 4. Attitudes toward institutional integration and member state cooperation



Source: Authors, data collected by Bátorá and Baboš in the EU3D project (www.eu3d.uio.no)

Four out of eight of the statements have the support of the majority of Slovak citizens. There is majoritarian support for freedom of movement on the one hand and cooperation to maintain peace and promote democracy on the EU's border on the other hand. Three statements received more support than rejection. These are the suggestion that there should be federal ministries in areas such as finance and foreign affairs, followed by the proposed EU level of democratic politics, and intelligence sharing among member states. The only idea that was rejected was that of directly elected president.

Again, similarly to the policy areas above, a considerable proportion had no clear opinion on the question. This ranged from 23 per cent for further economic liberalization and ensuring peace to 39 per cent for an EU level of democratic politics. Altogether this indicates that there is ample opportunity for both pro- and anti-integration political forces to work with the public.

Comparing Slovakia to some of its neighbors, and some founding member states, reveals some trends. On the one hand, Slovak citizens are keen

supporters of integration linked to general ideas, or policy ideas that are already integrated at the EU level to some extent. Examples are EU pressure for lower taxes, higher productivity, and absolute freedom of movement. On the other hand, Slovak citizens are least supportive of integration at institutional level. This indicates that views on the benefits of membership are not necessarily linked to attitudes toward institutions.

Table 2 also shows support for the given ideas in five other member states in our research. Germany, Italy, and Poland support most of the ideas. Surprisingly, France is the least supportive country in this regard. This is surprising for two reasons. First, when looking at relatively large policy areas (Table 1), France seems to favor EU integration. Second, the French president Emanuel Macron wanted France to be the engine of the EU integration after the Brexit.¹⁸

Table 2. Support for European integration in particular policy fields

	SK	DE	FR	IT	PL	HU
EU should continue pushing for lower taxes...	72%	61%	53%	72%	64%	66%
Absolute freedom of movement...	64%	54%	43%	62%	60%	61%
EU brings us peace	61%	69%	50%	61%	66%	65%
Promote democracy in the neighborhood	51%	47%	38%	61%	58%	48%
Democratic politics at EU level...	44%	52%	41%	55%	50%	42%
Sharing (secret) intelligence...	40%	59%	46%	45%	37%	39%
Federal ministries of foreign affairs, finance...	39%	48%	48%	55%	41%	41%
Directly elected president...	30%	43%	36%	59%	36%	37%

Source: Authors, data collected by Batora and Baboš in the EU3D project (www.eu3d.uio.no)

To sum up, on the one hand we see that Slovaks are among the top supporters of the EU's role in economic policy-making and securing absolute freedom of movement. Slovaks also support (by a majority) the ideas of Defense Union and Digital Union. More than half of Slovak citizens also agree that

¹⁸ "Macron lays out vision for 'profound' changes in post-Brexit EU," *The Guardian*, September 26, 2017. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/26/profound-transformation-macron-lays-out-vision-for-post-brexit-eu> (accessed on March 15, 2024).

the EU brings us peace and promotes democracy. In many of these areas support for deeper integration is higher in Slovakia than in Germany or France.

On the other hand, we have shown that trust in the European Commission and European Parliament has been continually decreasing in Slovakia in recent years, and is among the lowest in the EU. How can we explain what seems at first sight to be a contradiction? In order to do so, we draw on the research by Batora and Baboš on so-called thought communities, which explain how citizens make sense of the European Union.

■ Making sense of the EU

Batora and Baboš use "Relational Class Analysis" to identify thought communities in six European countries. Thought communities are identified through analysis that clusters together people with the same pattern of attitudes and expectations of the EU. So if there is a thought community that sees the European Union as a federal-style, state-resembling entity, then all the citizens in that thought community will express their attitudes and expectations of the EU as if it were a federal state (whether they are in favor of it or not). Batora and Baboš found two basic thought communities in Slovakia (and other countries in their study): *Statists* and *Pragmatists*.¹⁹

The *Statist* thought community consists of people whose understanding of the European Union is construed through the construct of the state, i.e. a federal-state (in the making). This has several consequences for expectations of the EU. First, in terms of public policies, once the people in this thought community expect the EU to design and implement public policies in one area (e.g. economics and finance), they will be more likely to have similar expectations in other areas as well. Similarly, if people do not expect the EU to perform public policies in one area, they will be likely to reject it doing so in other areas as well. Second, people in this thought community understand that there is a relationship between policy-making and polity building. They understand that successful and prosperous public policies can only be delivered by an authority with the competence to implement them. Expectations on the benefits of public policies thus go hand in hand with accepting more competences at EU level.

¹⁹ For an exhaustive description of the methodology and data see Batora and Baboš (2024).

The second thought community is called *Pragmatists*. Citizens in this thought community differentiate between the EU's role in governance on the one hand and the policy outcomes it produces as a political system on the other hand. Essentially, Pragmatists recognize two distinct realms: the public policies the EU should enact, and the possibility of the EU being a political system with its own executive and legislative bodies. For citizens in the second thought community these two aspects, the form of the political entity and the policy outcomes, are viewed as being independent of each other. Therefore, when Pragmatists express support for the EU delivering policies related to security, peace, or the economy, they don't automatically connect this with the need to establish structures and procedures for decision-making in these areas at EU level. They perceive these as separate domains or issues. According to the intergovernmentalist perspective of Thought Community 2, the EU can effectively produce policy outcomes akin to those of a national political system without requiring a democratic political structure at EU level. From their standpoint, there is no inherent correlation between policy and polity.

In Slovakia, Statists represent 21 per cent of the general population, while 79 per cent are Pragmatists. These figures are very similar in neighboring states, as well as in France, Germany, and Italy. That means that the majority of citizens in Slovakia (and very likely all member states) treat the benefits of public policies delivered by the EU as separate from and independent of governing bodies and positive assessments of performance translate into trust in the body.

The proposition that the link between the polity and policy is much weaker for the Pragmatist thought community is supported by correlation analysis. We correlated support for a common EU budget, sharing government debt and issuing common EU bonds on the one hand, and trust in the European Commission and European Parliament on the other hand. The correlation was 0.50 and 0.48 respectively in the Statist thought community. This indicates a strong correlation. However, in the Pragmatist thought community the correlation was 0.30 for both the European Commission and European Parliament. When tested using regression analysis (including basic socio-demographic factors as control variables), the regression coefficients for trust as predictor are three times higher in the Statist group than in the Pragmatist group.

Table 3. Characteristics of *Thought Communities*

Thought community	Characteristics of thinking style / construct
STATISTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ thinking about the democratic polity at EU level (including democratically elected officials) goes hand in hand with thinking about all the policy areas measured, be that practical/financial benefits or less tangible public goods (e.g., peace and equality) ■ governance structures — as an expression of a polity — and policy outputs at EU level are seen as mutually dependent, similarly to those in sovereign states. The EU is thus similar to a sovereign state ■ provision of policy outputs by the EU is linked to more competences and stronger governance structures at EU level ■ thinking style organized around the construal of the state ■ the opposing ends of the spectrum in this construal are EU level federalist statist and nation state statist.
PRAGMATISTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ thinking about polity-building at the EU level as a process that is independent of various types of cooperation providing policy outputs, including peace or security²⁰ ■ thinking about various types of benefits and policies is mostly aligned, but thinking about public policies at EU level is not aligned with thinking about democratic polity building at EU level ■ responses to questions about policy outputs are not in line with/separate from responses about EU level governance or EU level competences ■ thinking style organized around the construal of policy outputs de-coupled from structural/institutional governance arrangements for the delivery of such outputs ■ the opposing ends of the spectrum are supranational pragmatists and nation state pragmatists

Source: Bátor and Baboš, 2024, with the permission of the authors

Table 4. Correlation coefficients between trust and policy support, by Thought Community

CORRELATION	Support for a common budget, debt sharing and common EU bonds among Statists	Support for a common budget, debt sharing and common EU bonds among Pragmatists
Trust in European Commission	0.50	0.30
Trust in European Parliament	0.48	0.30

Source: Author's calculation

²⁰ An exception to this pattern among Pragmatists is Germany, where federalization is relatively strongly related to policy outputs.

■ Conclusion

For many years after the EU accession, Slovak society was among the top supporters of EU integration. As explained above, Slovakia ranked consistently among the top five countries between 2004 and 2010, leading the ranking between 2008 and 2010. However, 20 years after the country joined the EU, the situation is rather different. In 2023 Slovakia was one of the least trusting countries, with less than two fifths of the population trusting the EP.

A common explanation for this phenomenon that continually re-appears in the academic research is that “Slovakia’s stance on further European integration during this period was largely determined by the ideological convictions of the leading figures in government and the strong business lobby²¹”. In the early years after accession that meant relatively strong support for EU integration and the institutions, but in recent years this has been turned on its head, and the leading party elites have been undermining the EU institutions in public discourse.

In this study we pointed out the discrepancy between the two types of attitude—trust in the EU’s institutions on the one hand, and support for policies and policy outputs on the other hand. While trust has been decreasing continuously and Slovakia is among the least trusting nations in on the EU, the majority of the population still believe that EU membership brings benefits and that the EU “is good for us.” More people support than reject common public policies in various areas.

So how is it possible that the majority of citizens support the policies but do not trust the top executive and legislative bodies responsible for delivering the policies? This study builds on the research by Bátor and Baboš and shifts the argument a bit further. We argue that the reason for this is found in the way people make sense of the EU. For a large majority of people the EU is not seen as a standard political system of the type found in states. They simply do not link polity building and governance at EU level with delivering public policies. In their minds these are two separate, independent aspects of European integration. Therefore it is possible to expect the EU to have common policies that bring benefits for its citizens, while not trusting

the leading executive and legislative bodies (and other organizations, such as the European Central Bank) which are responsible for EU policy-making. This also explains public support in Slovakia and other member states for various innovative governance arrangements in the EU—since citizens do not think of the EU as a (federal) state, they are also flexible about the EU’s institutional arrangements as long as the policies are delivered.

²¹ T. Houghton, D. Malová, “Emerging patterns of EU membership: drawing lessons from Slovakia’s first two years as a member state,” *Politics*, 27(2), 2007, pp. 69–75.



Martin Vlachynský

What the new European economy will look like

Although the European Union has not caught up with the US in terms of economic size, as it once dreamed of, the last 20 years can be considered economically successful. A broad mix of small and large, southern and northern, western and eastern economies has survived, grown and, with the exception of Italy and Greece, living standards have risen.

The European growth model was built on three pillars. Cheap energy, cheap credit and a combination of know-how from old members and cheap labor from new ones. But by 2023, none of these assumptions still held. Energy had become more expensive, the cost of credit had gone up, and labor was pricier. European know-how is diminishing as new competition emerges and the industrial base changes.

The question is whether and how the structure of the European economy will change in the coming years. The official answer is that it will become a “green economy.” However, this is a fallacy. The green economy is merely a feature, a condition — not a pathway. Similarly, other terms such as “industry 4.0” or the “knowledge economy” are descriptive phrases, rather than concrete models. The events of 2020–2023 were a catalyst for change, not the cause.

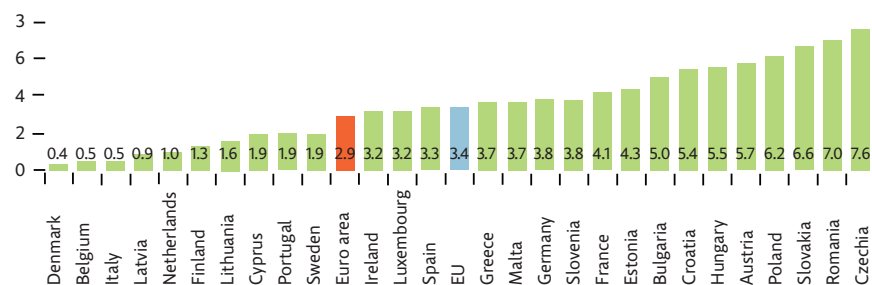
By 2023, it was increasingly clear that Europe was reaching the limits of its current economic growth model. And not just Europe. The BRICS+ countries, led by China, have not been very successful either.

■ Inflation on the retreat

The latest Eurostat inflation data¹ shows inflation is slowing:

The annual inflation rate in the eurozone was 2.9 per cent in December 2023, up from 2.4 per cent in November. A year earlier, the rate had been 9.2 per cent. European Union annual inflation was 3.4 per cent in December 2023, up from 3.1 per cent in November. A year earlier, the rate the had been 10.4 per cent.

Figure 1. Annual inflation rates (%) in December 2023



Source: "December 2023: Annual inflation up to 2.9% in the euro area, up to 3.4% in the EU," op. cit.

Although absolute differences between countries have narrowed over the year, paradoxically the situation is more complicated for the central bank now than it was then. In 2022, it could boldly step on the brake. But with several countries approaching deflation and, conversely, several other countries with very high inflation, the question is "Should we hit the brakes, or ease monetary policy again?"

Most central banks, including the ECB and the Fed, have opted for sharp interest rate hikes. Between July 2022 and September 2023, the ECB raised the rate in ten stages from zero to 4.5 per cent. Similarly, between March 2022

and July 2023 the Fed raised the rate 11 times from 0.25 per cent to 0.5 per cent and then 5.25 per cent to 5.5 per cent.

In standard economics, since Milton Friedman, inflation has been treated as a monetary phenomenon and therefore under the control of the central bank. But there are pockets of thought that seek to link inflation with fiscal (budget) policy.

One example is the fiscal theory of the price level (FTPL), currently associated mainly with the American economist John H. Cochrane. At its center is the reasoning that if a sharp increase in government spending is not paired with a sufficient expected increase in government revenues today or in the future (while not assuming bankruptcy), the increase in spending will be reflected in an increase in the price level.

The theory was first described in the 1990s. However, due to a long period of low inflation and fiscal calm, it remained a fringe issue. It was only the combination of the sharp increase in public spending around the world during the Covid pandemic and the subsequent wave of inflation that revived interest in alternative price level theories, including FTPL.

In late 2023, a study² was published by the fourth most cited economist in history, Robert J. Barro, and his colleague Francesco Bianchi. They tested the FTPL on data from 37 OECD countries in 2020–2022, aggregating 17 eurozone countries into a single entity. The input data consisted of public expenditure trends, the amount and maturity of debt and, of course, inflation. The base data provided them with the period 2010–2019.

The study concluded that 40–50 per cent of the additional public spending in 2020–2022 was "financed" by the rise in inflation. Interestingly, in the eurozone, inflation in member states responded to the change across the block in public spending rather than to a change in spending by a particular state.

This study is not a bombastic confirmation of FTPL theory (which suffers from the chicken-and-egg problem). But it clearly adds another argument in favor of the claim that the policy of lavish handouts during Covid is to blame for the wave of high inflation.

¹ "December 2023: Annual inflation up to 2.9% in the euro area, up to 3.4% in the EU," Euroindicators/Eurostat, January 17, 2024. Available online: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/18343103/2-17012024-AP-EN.pdf/9d885442-f323-cdde-e149-17ed99a63a6f> (accessed on January 17, 2024).

² R. J. Barro, F. Bianchi, "Fiscal influences on inflation in OECD countries, 2020–2022," *Working Paper Series*, National Bureau of Economic Research, 2023. Available online: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w31838> (accessed on January 17, 2024).

■ Growing debt or growing out of debt?

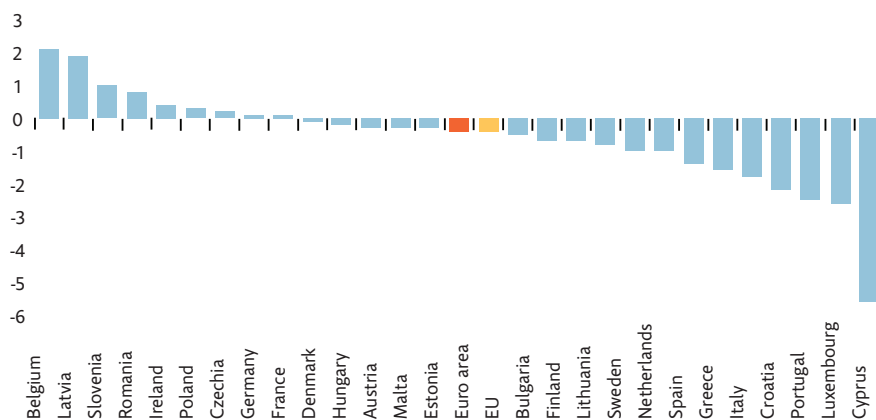
Most European governments regularly run budget deficits, some for decades on end. Slovakia, for example, has never known a budget surplus, the US last had one in 2001 and France back in the 1970s.

Yet public finances can generally function over the long term even with constant deficits. This is because of a phenomenon known as “growing up,” in which a country’s nominal economy grows faster than its nominal debt. It means that more is collected in tax than goes on the repayments on old and new debt, and the debt share of the economy can be reduced.

To grow its way out of debt the economy can produce more. But the same can be achieved if the things produced just cost more. Hence we talk of growing up through inflation. If prices rise in the economy so do tax revenues. If they grow faster than the cost of debt, the numbers improve.

We had one example of inflationary outgrowth in 2023. Despite the less than rosy economic situation and massive welfare packages, energy aid and other types of spending, there were only nine countries in the EU where the debt-to-GDP ratio rose between Q3 2022 and Q3 2023.

Figure 2. Changes in government debt to GDP ratio, 2023Q3 compared to 2023Q2 (in % points)



Source: “Government debt down to 89.9% of GDP in euro area,” Euroindicators/Eurostat, January 22, 2024. Available online: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/18357971/2-22012024-AP-EN.pdf/8b631960-6df6-b7b6-49a0-031dca1479c6> (accessed on February 4, 2024).

The decline in debt in Italy, Greece, Portugal and Spain has been particularly pleasing. Greece, together with Portugal, has even completely eliminated the debt “hump” (the sharp increase in debt) that developed during the 2020–2021 pandemic in virtually all EU countries.

The inflationary run-up in debt is only temporary. National public finances benefit from having old debt at low interest rates. The cost of debt will start to catch up with inflation in the future. The problem is that the electorate finds it very difficult to accept that the increased public spending has been bought with inflationary money and at some point it needs to be stopped.

Some economists even argue that public debt is not harmful at all. One of the world’s most quoted economists and former chief economist at the International Monetary Fund, Olivier Blanchard,³ wrote in 2019: “public debt may have no fiscal cost.” Previously, Nobel laureate Krugman,⁴ stated in 2012: “The debt of World War II was never paid off; instead, it became irrelevant as the US economy grew.” Debt is investment, investment means growth, and growth means easier debt repayment.

Proponents of this claim often refer to US debt between 1946 and 1974. The period started with record war debt of around 120 per cent of GDP and ended with a debt close to 30 per cent. It is an example of a country “growing out” of debt.

In a recent paper, the economists Acalin and Ball⁵ of Johns Hopkins University, analyzed this period in more detail. They highlighted three factors that, in addition to economic growth, have had an effect on debt: budget surpluses, artificially low interest rates and unexpected inflation.

All three factors played a significant role. Budget surpluses were common in the US until the 1970s. They were most pronounced shortly after the war following the collapse of military purchases (in 1948 there was a budget surplus

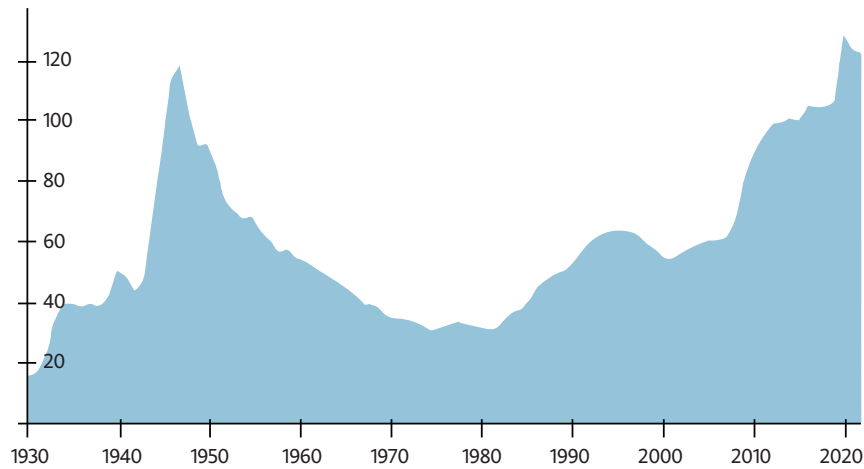
³ O. Blanchard, “Public debt and low interest rates,” *PIIE Working Papers*, February 2019. Available online: <https://www.piie.com/sites/default/files/documents/wp19-4.pdf> (accessed on February 1, 2024).

⁴ P. Krugman, “Nobody understands debt,” *NY Times*, January 1, 2012. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/02/opinion/krugman-nobody-understands-debt.html> (accessed on February 1, 2024).

⁵ J. Acalin, L.M. Ball, “Did the U.S. really grow out of its World War II debt?” National Bureau of Economic Research, *Working Paper* 31577, August 2023. Available online: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w31577> (accessed on February 1, 2024).

of 6.3 per cent of GDP), but over the entire period, 1946–1974, the US budget averaged a surplus of 1.1 per cent of GDP.

Figure 3. US public debt to GDP



Source: Fed

The interest rate was anchored in a band by the US central bank during the war, and it remained that way until 1951. This significantly reduced the interest cost of debt, but also meant periods of high inflation. The government responded to these with price controls, which in turn led to shortages of consumer goods. Once the interest rate anchor was loosened, the Fed had a freer hand to control inflation, but a few unexpected “bouts” of inflation, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, again helped to reduce the public debt.

Acalin and Ball concluded that without these three factors, US relative debt would not have fallen from 106 per cent of GDP to the 23 per cent mentioned above, but less steeply to 74 per cent.

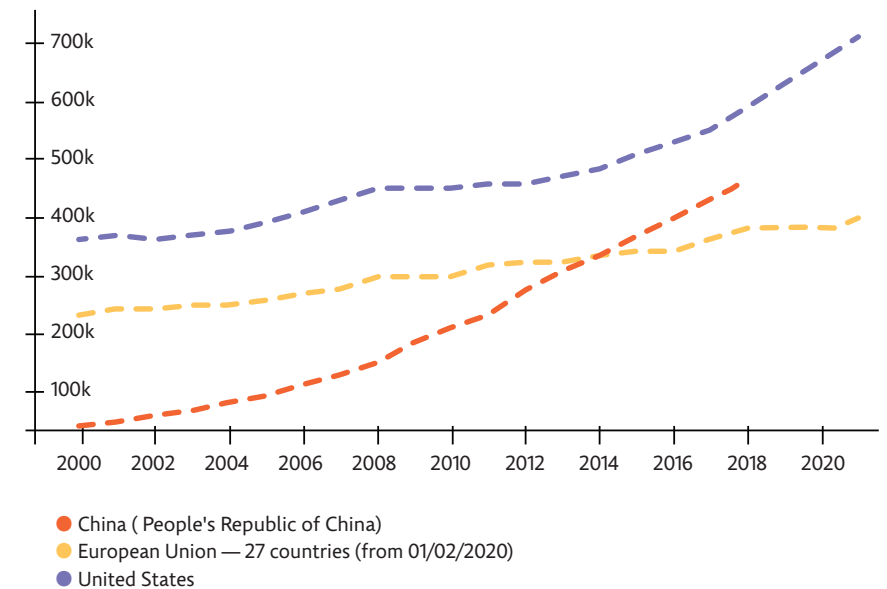
However, the authors also draw practical conclusions from this rather technical discussion. In fact, they see no scope for applying any of the factors mentioned today. Growing out of debt without the crutches of budget surpluses and inflationary disappearances is probably a bold expectation. For that to happen, there would have to be a dramatic increase in productivity. Some hope that this will happen thanks to the mass emergence of artificial intelligence. But if not, we will be left more traditional — and unpleasant — methods: inflation and spending cuts.

■ Technological underdevelopment

While the US can at least hope for that mythical leap in productivity thanks to the technological revolution, Europe is well behind in technology development. Spending on science and research is almost 80 per cent higher⁶ in the US than in the EU. Since around 2014, the sums have been higher in China as well. And the gap is growing.

The problem is linked to universities. If we look at the share for each region in the top 100 universities with the largest number of top 5 per cent cited outputs,⁷ Europe is only keeping pace in biomedicine and health sciences.

Figure 4. Gross domestic spending on R & D, in millions USD



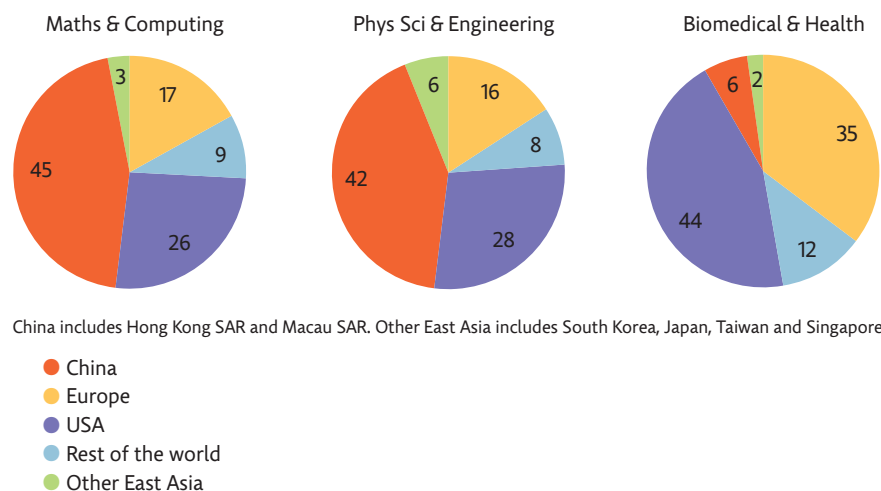
Source: OECD

⁶ “Gross domestic spending on R & D,” *OECD Data*. Available online: <https://data.oecd.org/rd/gross-domestic-spending-on-r-d.htm> (accessed on January 29, 2024).

⁷ S. Marginson, “All things are in flux: China in global science,” *Higher Education* 83(7451), April 1, 2022. Available online: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351973339_All_things_are_in_flux_China_in_global_science (accessed on January 29, 2024).

There, European universities⁸ account for 35 per cent, US ones for 44 per cent and Chinese ones for only 6 per cent. But the situation regarding mathematics and IT looks very different. China's share is 45 per cent, the US's 26 per cent and Europe's a mere 17 per cent in the top producing universities. The situation is almost identical for physics and engineering, where Chinese universities again dominate on 42 per cent, safely ahead of US ones (28 per cent) with European ones lagging far behind (16 per cent).

Figure 5. Distribution of world's 100 leading universities in number of papers in top 5% of their field by citation



Source: S. Marginson, op. cit.

■ Energy shock

In addition to the COVID pandemic, the energy crisis that followed the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine has contributed to the public debt levels in Europe. While 2022 was beset by a looming economic catastrophe, 2023 was witness to the surprising resilience of energy markets in Europe.

⁸ Including Russia and Turkey.

The key item here was shale gas and exports to Europe have fundamentally altered the picture compared to the period up to 2022. The analysis that follows was made possible by a regularly updated dataset⁹ published by the think tank Bruegel.

Gas imports in 2022 were roughly identical to 2021, with volumes of 6–8 bcm/week. In 2023, these fell to roughly half a bcm/week. This decline was not due to higher domestic production in the EU (which covers roughly 10 per cent of consumption), but to a fall in overall demand.

Russian gas accounted for just under half of the weekly imports in 2021 (about 3 bcm), but imports have fallen to half a bcm a week beginning in summer 2022. These are split 50–50 between flows via Ukraine (the Brotherhood pipeline) and TurkStream. Nord Stream (with one operational unapproved pipe) and Yamal are not supplying gas. So only a token amount of gas flows through Ukraine now. At the moment, roughly the same amount of gas flows back to Ukraine. European traders have discovered Ukraine's vast storage capacity and, with the EU's storage facilities almost full, they have been storing gas they have bought in Ukraine as well.

Flows from Norway, Algeria, Britain and Azerbaijan have increased, but not dramatically. The difference is mainly Norway, which supplies about 300 million cubic meters of gas per week more than in 2021, and from the UK, where flows are quite a bit more volatile.

The main change has been in LNG imports. These have roughly doubled from around 1.25 bcm.

Figure 6. Pipe gas and LNG flows to EU



⁹ "European natural gas imports," *Bruegel dataset*. Available online: <https://www.bruegel.org/dataset/european-natural-gas-imports> (accessed on January 26, 2024).

Where does liquefied natural gas come from? Roughly half of it comes from the Americas (USA and to a lesser extent Trinidad), around 20 per cent from Africa, with the Middle East and Russia sharing the rest at 15 per cent each. Looking at the volume figures, only the position of the Americas has changed significantly, importing three times as much into the EU as in 2021. The volumes from Africa, the Middle East and Russia have hardly changed at all.

The regional diversification of gas sources has proved quite successful in Europe. The main drawback is the high price volatility, which is very sensitive to any external events, such as strikes and technical failures in exporting countries, and changes in demand in other regions. A doubling of the gas supply from Azerbaijan and an increase in domestic production in Romania is on the horizon. The construction of smaller interconnectors within the EU and the expansion of storage facilities are also helping. However, in terms of the market, these are rather minor developments.

The European gas market will be tightly linked to the LNG market for some years. In the longer term, decades of planning for a trans-Saharan pipeline from Nigeria, the potential extraction of Ukraine's huge reserves, but most importantly a change in the energy mix, could change this. The picture is looking rosier, particularly where nuclear is concerned, but it will take a decade before things change.

The pessimistic predictions of a harsher second winter following the restrictions on Russian gas flows have not come true. On the contrary, Europe's storage facilities were full by the beginning of November 2023, and European traders have another two billion cubic meters stored in Ukrainian storage facilities that are not included in these statistics.

By the end of 2023, the price of natural gas had stabilized to around €40–50 per megawatt-hour. That is higher than the long-term average, but lower than in September 2021, prior to the invasion of Ukraine. Since 2022, new reactors have been built in Slovakia and Finland and, most importantly, the period of major outages in France has ended, helping to relieve some of the load on gas-fired generators.

On the supply side, the roughly 20 per cent increase in European LNG terminal capacity was another positive factor. The other side of the equation is more problematic—gas exports will not increase significantly until around 2026. Some LNG in the global market is being freed up following the gradual restart of nuclear in Japan, where 12 reactors are up and running again 12 years after Fukushima.

Conflict could affect the market as well. Israel has resumed production, after a month-long precautionary safety shutdown of some of its fields, and thereby supplies to Egypt, which resells some of the Israeli gas as LNG. Azerbaijan's direct conflict with Armenia could produce an unpleasant surprise. A smaller but not insignificant supplier of gas to Europe could be faced with an awkward dilemma for its customers.

Electricity prices continued their gentle but persistent decline, falling below the autumn 2021 level at a price tag of around €100–120 per megawatt hour. Prices will also be pushed down by the ramp-up of the French reactors following the long shutdowns, better water supplies after a fairly rainy summer, and improved wind profiles for the coming months, but a hard winter could push them up again.

Turning to oil, the OPEC+ summer agreement to cut production disrupted the welcome annual price decline, driving the price of a barrel of Brent up from the \$70 mark to over \$90. Since then, it has fallen back to 80, but China's growing demand is also making itself felt. Geopolitical risks were extremely high at the end of 2023, especially in the Red Sea, due to Houthi attacks on ships.

■ No real estate market fall in 2023

With the sharp rise in interest rates came the temptation to predict that the real estate bubble would burst. So what did the situation in Europe look like in 2023?

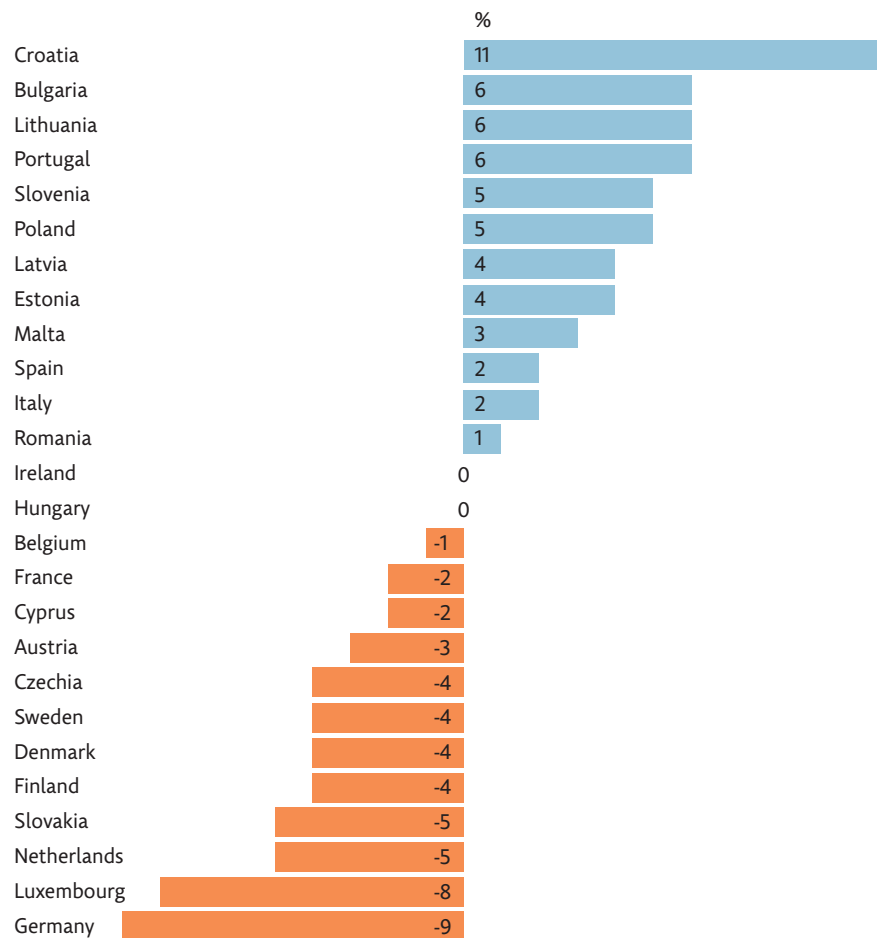
Let's look for the answer in Eurostat data. The price boom at the turn of the millennium was followed by almost a decade of stagnation. Around 2015, housing prices started to rise and by the end of 2022 they were 50 per cent higher than in 2010.

The boom was not unevenly distributed. The price of Estonian and Hungarian properties increased almost threefold, while Spain and Finland had very weak growth and the Italian market actually fell. Home owners in Slovakia saw prices rise by 87 per cent. However, these are prices in the local currency, so the exchange rate has to be taken into account (especially in Hungary).

Perceptive readers will have noticed the contradiction in the more than 70 per cent increase in most of the countries and the lower overall growth in the

EU. This is due to the fact that the value for the EU is weighted by size of country. The lower growth in Italy, Spain, Romania and France accounts for up to 40 per cent of the weighting.¹⁰ When considering the systemic effect of bursting bubbles, it is therefore important to bear in mind the size of the market.

Figure 7. Real estate prices change. Q3–2022 vs Q2–2023 (local currency)



¹⁰ "Housing price statistics—house price index," *Eurostat dataset*. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Housing_price_statistics_-_house_price_index#Annual_and_quarterly_growth_rates (accessed on 27 January 2024).

The downturn is already painful in Germany, although thus far it has been relatively short-lived. In 2021 and 2022 there were around 6 million starts per quarter, but by mid-2023 that had fallen to just under three million starts per quarter.¹¹ The quarterly value of real estate transactions is at its lowest since 2012. A number of German developers have become insolvent: the record holder so far is Gerch with projects worth €4 billion. Germany's real estate misery has contributed significantly to the EU mortgage market recording its worst growth in a decade in 2023, adding just 1.5 per cent last year. In almost all countries, the decline is slight. But the situation appears to be most serious in Europe's largest economy.

■ USA forward, China backward

When two do the same thing, it is not the same thing. Both the US and the EU are stepping hard on the monetary brake. But while the EU economy has stagnated, the US economy has grown by a solid 3 per cent. In the third quarter of 2023, growth (in annual terms) was an impressive 4.9 per cent, highest since the post-pandemic record in the last quarter of 2021.

One reason for this success is easily found. The US government deficit is expected to reach 5.3 per cent of GDP in 2023, which is higher than the estimated average for both the EU (3.7 per cent) and the eurozone (3.9 per cent).

Government spending has spurred the return of the American consumer. As a result, household consumption, which was responsible for more than half of the aforementioned GDP growth, jumped significantly in the third quarter. Private investment, including real estate investment, also rose, returning to positive figures after two years of decline.

However, the markets reacted tepidly to the positive numbers. Perhaps consumers were only temporarily opening their wallets. Real after-tax wages fell by 1 per cent in the third quarter and so more consumption was attributed to a fall in the savings rate, specifically from 5.2 per cent to 3.8 per cent. Moreover, as of October 1, the pandemic deferment of student loan payments that

¹¹ T. Sims, J. O'Donnell, "Exclusive: German builders to confront Scholz with demands to stem property rout," *Reuters*, October 13 2023. Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/german-builders-confront-scholz-with-demands-stem-property-rout-2023-10-13/> (accessed on January 29, 2024).

had lasted more than three years came to an end. Nearly 44 million Americans with an average outstanding principal of \$38,000 and a repayment of \$500 per month, were affected. This will take a significant bite out of the consumer vigor. The American consumer tiger is currently showing better growth numbers than Europe. But it faces the same challenge — matching public spending with revenues.

Moreover, in the first half of 2023, the US faced an unpleasant financial blip. The collapse of SVB in March 2023 and the subsequent mini-banking panic in the US shook the financial world, albeit without any dramatic consequences so far. This depositor-run on the banks stood out for its speed. The whole thing was over in five days, two of which fell on a weekend.

Social media was a clear catalyst for the speed. There have been instances in the past when discussions among social media users have triggered major shifts in the financial markets (notably the famous GameStop stock boom of January 2021). But this was the first time it was linked to a bank-run, and not an entirely insignificant one at that.

An international team of five academics examined the event in a paper titled “Social Media as a Bank Run Catalyst”.¹² They examined the link between Twitter conversations and the value of bank shares. They showed that the amount of conversation on Twitter was a strong predictor of movements in the bank share prices, along with the proportion of uninsured deposits and the amount of mark-to-market losses (losses from asset repricing). By analyzing Tweets, they found that content with words like “withdrawal” increased significantly prior to the depositor run on the SVB and other banks.

They were also able to trace the dynamics between different groups of users. An alarmist discussion began among investors (identified by the use of the stock name — ticker — rather than the bank’s trading name) and only then spilled over to bank depositors. Another problem for SVB was its client concentration among startups and Silicon Valley investors, who were also well networked with each other on Twitter. SVB bank took the hardest hit due to its high amount of uninsured deposits (causing depositors to panic) and due to high losses on US government bonds.

¹² J. A. Cookson, C. Fox, J. Gil-Bazo, J. F. Imbet, C. Schiller, “Social media as a bank run catalyst,” *Université Paris-Dauphine Research Paper* No. 4422754, April 18, 2023. Available online: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4422754> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4422754> (accessed on January 29, 2024).

These conclusions are fairly intuitive and will probably not surprise readers. But the paper draws attention to several interesting phenomena. The speed of communication in the financial system is one example. In trading this has been customary for many years, but less so among retail clients and products for “ordinary” people. Consequently bank-runs are harder today than 15 years ago.

Overall, 2023 turned out not too bad for the US economy. However, 2023 was not the best year for the world’s second largest economy. Its harsh, prolonged pandemic measures combined with Xi Jinping’s ambitions for power did little to shake the economy out of its lethargy even in 2023.

The official foreign direct investment (FDI) figures were released in November 2023.¹³ For the first time since they were first published in 1998, China recorded a quarterly outflow of investment. The drop was less than \$12 billion in FDI and so not a dramatic one — China normally gets a hundred billion dollars of investment per quarter. But the symbolism of the historic moment is powerful.

According to China’s Ministry of Commerce, total FDI inflows into the country for the first three quarters of 2023 were 33 per cent lower than for the whole of 2022, and according to the State Administration of Foreign Exchange (SAFE), 92 per cent lower. FDI can be measured in different ways, which accounts for the difference, but the trend is obvious. As a *Financial Times* commentator noted,¹⁴ these figures mean that China attracted half the investment in 2023 of Sweden, which is 140 times smaller.

Foreign firms have not only reduced reinvestment of profits, but some are withdrawing capital and seek greater risk diversification in the face of geopolitical concerns regarding tensions with Taiwan and the South China Sea and because of government actions. In recent months, the Chinese government has introduced a nationwide system to denounce “spies,” conducted a number of raids on international companies and even introduced the possibility of physically detaining executives of foreign companies if their employer gets into a dispute in China. Investment risk is increasing in this environment, and

¹³ “SAFE releases preliminary data of the balance of payments for the third quarter and first three quarters of 2023,” SAFE, November 3, 2023. Available online: <https://www.safe.gov.cn/en/2023/1103/2145.html> (accessed on January 28, 2024).

¹⁴ R. Wigglesworth, “How much FDI is China actually attracting?” *Financial Times*, November 27, 2023. Available online: <https://www.ft.com/content/47fc5fc5-0606-465e-bb37-61da1f67cabb> (accessed on January 28, 2024).

rising interest rates across the world are offering new opportunities for capital. No wonder, then, that up to 40 per cent plan to withdraw some capital from the country in the next six months, according to a survey of investors.

The decline in investment is not the only dark cloud. Foreign investors' profits in Chinese industry fell by more than 10 per cent year-on-year in Q1–Q3.¹⁵ The Chinese yuan hit a 16-year low against the dollar in September; although since then, intervention has been able to partially reverse the fall. Both goods imports and exports declined unexpectedly during the year. In December, Moody's changed its outlook on Chinese debt to negative. The real estate market in the country, which has been one of the pillars of economic growth, is going through a difficult period. The collapse of the property developer Evergrande, with a debt of \$300 billion, was particularly symbolic of this period. On the positive side, autumn GDP and industrial production growth were higher than expected.

China is also the main leader of the BRICS grouping. In 2023, the BRICS gained six new members: Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Argentina, Egypt and Ethiopia. This prompted new discussion on how the BRICS will change the geopolitical situation. With the new members, the BRICS now account for as much as 46 per cent of the world's population, 29 per cent of its GDP, and control 43 per cent of oil production and 25 per cent of exports.

However, these statistics reflect marketing more than real economic power. Even in 2023, the BRICS countries didn't do much together as an organization. Years ago the BRICS set up a New Development Bank to compete with the IMF and the World Bank. But a decade later the NDB is still a small player. Ironically, its transactions are not in yuan or rubles, but almost entirely in dollars. In 2012, the members inaugurated the construction of a submarine fiber-optic network between members, the so-called "BRICS cable." The most recent news on its official website is from 2013. Another reason for the underperformance of the BRICS alliance is internal relations. China and India fought a border war in 1962 and occasionally remind each other of it. The last major border skirmish between them two years ago cost the lives of several dozen border guards on both sides. Saudi Arabia is waging a major proxy war with Iran in Yemen. The Saudis even have a tacit alliance with Israel

¹⁵ "China foreign investment gauge turns negative for first time," *Bloomberg News*, November 3, 2023. Available online: <https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/china-foreign-investment-gauge-turns-negative-for-first-time-1.1993567> (accessed on January 28, 2024).

against Iran, although, at least ostensibly, relations with Iran have recently calmed down. Egypt and Ethiopia have long-standing disputes over water in the Nile. Even the current marriage of convenience between Russia and China is more of a historical anomaly.

The BRICS is supposed to be a counterweight to the West, but China's position in the BRICS is just as dominant as that of the US in the West. It would be impracticable for India to trade in a currency controlled by China or to communicate via China's fiber optic network. Opinion polls in countries like Brazil or Argentina show that China's popularity has been slipping into negative territory in recent years. More and more countries—including Montenegro, Sri Lanka and Zambia—have already learned from the bitter taste of Chinese "investment," which in practice means debt. Italy, the only G7 member in the Belt and Road Initiative, has withdrawn from it. Its appetite to tie itself to China has limits.

Then there is the reluctance to mess up relations with the US. For many members, the US is a key trading and military partner. Against that stand the very vague benefits of BRICS membership. This is why Indonesia, which prefers to look to the OECD, has refused to join. Not to mention the fact that potential members would also receive the current "benefit" of a toxic Russia. It's hard to organize a summit when there is an international arrest warrant for the president of a partner country.

With the exception of India, China, and to some extent South Africa and Brazil, the other members are economies with little added value. However, China is catching up demographically and with its property market, South Africa has 33 per cent unemployment and 10-hour blackouts are common, Ethiopia is struggling with civil war, Iran and Russia are under heavy sanctions, Argentina is close to another default after three years, the Egyptian pound has lost half its value in a year and it had to be bailed out by the IMF at the end of last year. This is no league of the elect. Conversely, we are unlikely to see Vietnam, the Philippines or Malaysia in the BRICS any time soon, thanks to the squabbles with China over the South China Sea. These countries are among the current Asian powerhouses.

So the global map did not change in 2023. The US continued to dominate the global economy and the gap between the main challengers has not narrowed, indeed the opposite is true.

Special mention should be made of the Russian economy. Hit by an unprecedented array of sanctions in 2022, its economy was widely expected to

dwindle quickly. However, more sober assessments pointed to Iran, which has been hit by various rounds of economic sanctions over the past 50 years and yet its economy has not collapsed.

There are several important points to mention regarding the state of the Russian economy in 2023. The first is the confusion between GDP growth and economic health. GDP growth represents the utilization of the economy—and during war, economy utilization is usually very high until the end. Much was written about Russia having an expected GDP growth of 2.6 per cent in 2023. Less was written about Ukraine's expected 4.9 per cent. Both countries started from the low base of 2019–2022 and are maximizing production due to the demands of war and in both countries a large part of the workforce has been conscripted, virtually eliminating unemployment. For example, German GDP per capita grew even in 1944, when it was being physically demolished city by city.¹⁶ What GDP growth does not show is the consumption of tangible and intangible capital. In Russia's case, tangible capital is represented by the sub-utilization of its vast energy infrastructure (pipelines and extraction facilities) and by consumption of the weaponry, stockpiled for the past 70 years. Shrinkage of intangible capital is represented by the flight of investors and the departure (or death on the battlefield) of the Russian populace from the country.

Second, the Russian economy is primarily held up by oil export revenues. Unlike gas exports, Russian oil exports were able to hold on to most of the markets, partly due to circumventing sanctions and partly due to oil logistics being simpler than gas ones. However, with the combination of a cooling oil market, the tightening of sanctions especially against oil carriers and recent Ukrainian efforts to damage Russian oil infrastructure, the current level of oil revenues is far from given.

Both the war and sanctions will have painful long term effects on the Russian economy. Circling back to the Iranian example: its economy gradually shrank from \$600 billion dollars in 2010 (when the CISADA sanctions were signed by president Obama) to around \$300 billion dollars in 2020. However, despite the long term economic cost, both Iran and North Korea show that even a poor country can be a considerable military threat. Economic pressure is merely a tool for reducing the capacity of a state to produce high quantities of high quality weaponry, not a tool for stopping a war per se.

¹⁶ "GDP per capita, 1500 to 2018—Germany," *Our world in Data*. Available online: <https://our-worldindata.org/grapher/gdp-per-capita-maddison?tab=chart&country=DEU> (accessed on January 30, 2024).

■ Conclusion

The slowdown in inflation in 2023 was related to the easing of supply shocks, especially in the energy sector, as well as fundamental changes in monetary policy. A sharp rise in interest rates would automatically prompt worries about economic growth, the stability of public finances, and the health of asset markets, especially equities and real estate. The geopolitical risk was not negligible either, with the rapidly deteriorating situation in the Middle East adding to the conflict with Russia, as well as China's unclear moves regarding Taiwan and claims in the South China Sea.

Given such a broad calculus of risks, we can assess 2023 in economic terms with moderate optimism. The greatest fears about Europe's energy collapse have not materialized. Public debts are rising, but so far the rise in prices has been gradual and investor sentiment calm. The US stock market has had a great year, the European one less so, but there has been no collapse. Similarly, declines in the property market are clearly visible, but there is no panic here either. Economic growth is much higher in the US than in Europe, where, on average, we can at best speak of stagnation. However, an interesting feature of this is that it has not yet been reflected in employment growth, quite the reverse. The labor market is still hungry for workers.

There has been no economic collapse of the "western world" and no change of global leaders, rather the opposite. The BRICS and especially China have not had the best year. Yet we have to ask: what will the new European economy look like? The US in particular has to deal with huge government deficits, but its economy and specifically industry are proving viable. It continues to be a global hub for startups (currently with an AI flavor) and to attract global talent. It has access to cheap energy, is the world's number two in electric mobility, has a thriving arms industry, and SpaceX, with 100 flights a year, is the world's dominant orbital transport company.

The list of achievements for European economies is much narrower. The price of natural gas is three times higher than in the US, even despite the big drop, and economic growth is lower. Only 11 companies in EU member states were in the world's top 100 most valuable companies at the end of 2023. Similarly, the EU's share of global innovation and start-ups is small. European industry faces the extremely expensive goal of decarbonization, which may not bring it major advantages in the global market. Public finances are still benefiting from low debt costs, but this situation will gradually deteriorate as average interest rates on the principal rise.

Moreover, in this chapter we have not touched on demography, a topic that will set an increasingly strong tone around the world in the coming years. The average age of the EU population will rise to 48 by 2050, and one in 20 people will be over 80. But ageing affects almost all countries in the world. In several European countries, such as Russia, Ukraine and Germany, the population is declining, as is the case in Japan.

Only African countries are experiencing high population growth. India is growing at a rate of 1.09 per cent per year and China at just 0.29 per cent. India even announced in November 2021 that its fertility rate (the number of children per woman) had fallen to 2, which means its population will decline in the future. China had zero growth during the 2021 pandemic, negative growth in both 2022 and 2023 and is likely to experience a dramatic population decline in the coming decades due to its long-standing one-child policy. Sober estimates say it will lose half its population by 2100 and bolder ones claim that it will happen before 2065. For example, Yi Fuxian, a well-known critic of the one-child policy and author of several books on Chinese demography, claims that China had at least 130 million fewer people in 2022 than claimed and that its population has been declining since 2018.

This will have a number of major implications. States will be forced to abandon the welfare systems of today, which are based on transfers between the economically inactive and the active. Economic relations in the world will change. Countries that do not have sufficient supplies of capital will not be able to rely on an economic model based on the extensive use of cheap labor, whether in industry (China) or services (India). There will be a sectoral shift, with health, wellness and social services accounting for a much larger share of GDP than they do today. The labor market will also undergo fundamental changes, where the sharp dividing line between work and retirement will blur.

It will be a creeping change. Economies should prepare for it as consistently and as early as possible. Unfortunately, in Slovakia, we are witnessing exactly the opposite trend. Pension and health care systems are already in deficit, although they will never be in a better position to generate surpluses. In 2024, it will be important to look ever more closely at public finances, not just at global politics and geopolitical shocks.



Veronika Oravcová

Climate and energy policy in 2023: a challenging political landscape meets the challenge of decarbonization

■ Political turbulence shapes the climate and energy agenda

2023 was a year of political turbulence in Slovakia, and the country had to grapple with challenges in climate and energy-related areas. The government and members of parliament faced not only global challenges such as high prices and the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but also political instability at home. The minority government led by Eduard Heger (since September 2022) remained in place for a few months before a technocratic government was appointed by President Zuzana Čaputová in May 2023, followed by early elections in September 2023. Energy and climate barely featured in the election campaign. Instead, the focus was on energy prices and state regulation,¹ particularly among the parties that would take power after the election. Hlas–SD (Voice–SD) billboards asked “Do you want cheaper energy?”²,

¹ I. Jenčová, “Energetika pred voľbami: Renovácie domov aj nový jadrový zdroj,” [Energy before the elections: Housing renovations and a new nuclear source] *Euractiv*, September 13, 2023. Available online: <https://euractiv.sk/section/dekarbonizacia-priemyslu/news/energetika-pred-voľbami-renovacie-domov-a-novy-jadrový-zdroj/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

² T. Grečko, “Vo vládnom programe chýba Pellegriniho sľub o lacnejších energiách. Potrebujú naň viac ako miliardu eur a majú len pár týždňov,” [Pellegrini’s promise of cheaper energy is missing from the government program. It needs more than a billion euros and they have just a few weeks] *Denník N*, November 14, 2023. Available online: <https://e.dennikn.sk/3678592/vo-vladnom-programe-chyba-pellegriniho-sľub-o-lacnejších-energiách-potrebuju-nan-viac-ako-miliardu-eur-a-maju-len-par-tyzdnov/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

echoing the “stable energy prices” campaign run by Smer–SSD (Direction–SSD)³ in 2016, and these parties, along with the Slovak National Party (SNS), called for increased state regulation.⁴

Another prominent campaign issue was the ban on sales of internal combustion engines by 2035, an EU policy introduced as part of the Fit for 55 package⁵ agreed by EU member states. Slovakia, represented by the Ministry of Environment, voted for a compromise version of the agreement, aligning with Germany, Czechia, Italy, and Poland, the countries that disagreed with the original proposal. However, after the vote, Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) made it one of the central issues of their campaign under the slogan “With a healthy brain against the ban on petrol and diesel engines.”⁶ It sought to reverse the ban on the sale of internal combustion engines by 2035 through a resolution in the parliament (National Council of the Slovak Republic). The resolution was approved by parliament and stated that Slovakia should vote against proposals that would make such vehicles more expensive and less competitive and seek support from other member states. A hundred and twenty-seven MPs voted in favor and only one against — former environment minister Ján Budaj.⁷ Despite being a crucial issue for Slovakia — a major car producer per capita — there was little expert discussion in society. Moreover, many car companies were already complying with decarbonization goals and accounting for e-mobility in their long-term plans.

³ R. Kazda, “Smer zabezpečil stabilné ceny energií. Pre solárnych barónov,” [Smer kept energy prices stable. For solar barons] *Energie-Portal*, November 29, 2020. Available online: <https://www.energie-portal.sk/Dokument/komentar-smer-zabezpecil-stabilne-ceny-energi-i-pre-solarnych-baronov-106637.aspx> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

⁴ “Stabilizácia cien energií je najdôležitejšou úlohou po voľbách,” [Stabilizing energy prices is the most important task after the elections] *Regionálne správy*, September 25, 2023. Available online: <https://www.regionalspravy.sk/stabilizacia-cien-energi-i-je-najdolezitejsou-ulohou-po-volbach/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

⁵ The Fit for 55 package is a set of proposals to revise and update EU legislation and to put in place new initiatives with the aim of ensuring that EU policies are in line with the climate goals agreed by the Council and the European Parliament. Under European climate law the EU’s climate goal of reducing EU emissions by at least 55 per cent by 2030 is a legal obligation. EU countries are working on new legislation to achieve this goal and make the EU climate-neutral by 2050. (European Commission, 2021).

⁶ K. Kóváry Sólymos, “Impérium biopalivového kráľa Sabola vyrástlo vďaka Slovaftu, maďarským oligarchom a utajeným akcionárom,” [Biofuel king Sabol’s empire grew thanks to Slovaft, Hungarian oligarchs, and secret shareholders] *ICJK*, February 14, 2024. Available online: <https://icjk.sk/303/Imperium-repkoveho-krala-Sabola-vyrastlo-vdaka-Slovaftu-madarskym-oligar-chom-a-utajenym-akcionarom> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

⁷ Information on voting in the National Council of the Slovak Republic on May 18, 2023. Available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=schodze/hlasovanie/hlasklub&ID=50322> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

After the parliamentary elections, the winning party Smer–SSD received a mandate from the president of Slovakia to form a government. In October 2023, it reached agreement on a coalition with Hlas–SD and SNS. None of these parties prioritizes the green transformation, climate issues, or nature protection. In fact, there is concern that these parties could roll back some policies, such as the Climate Law and reforms approved as part of the Recovery and Resilience Plan, particularly regarding national parks and their management.

Even as the government was being formed, the Ministry of Environment was gaining attention, with the SNS seeking to nominate Rudolf Huliak as environment minister. However, President Zuzana Čaputová announced that she would not appoint him, arguing that the ministry could not be guaranteed to function properly under someone opposed to the state’s long-term environmental policy and international obligations.⁸ In the end, Huliak was not appointed to the executive, but he did become Leader of the Parliamentary Committee for Agriculture and Environment, and another controversial figure with disputed opinions on environmental issues, Tomáš Taraba, became Minister of Environment. Moreover, Denisa Saková from Hlas–SD was given responsibility for the energy portfolio at the Ministry of Economy, while Smer–SSD appointed its associates to strategic energy companies. These include the Regulatory Office for Network Industries, which controls energy prices; SPP, the main gas (and electricity) supplier; Transpetrol, oil transportation company; and JAVYS, which is responsible for decommissioning nuclear power plants.⁹

The dismissal and replacement of the head of the Regulatory Office for Network Industries drew particular attention, with Prime Minister Robert Fico criticizing the former head, Andrej Juris, after he announced the new gas prices for 2024 (these are based on the energy market and announced by the Office). Fico called Juris and his colleagues “social terrorists,” saying the price

⁸ A. Belej Majerčínová, “Prezidentka nevymenuje Huliaka za ministra životného prostredia. SNS trvá na svojej nominácii,” [President will not appoint Huliak as environment minister. SNS insists he be nominated] *Pravda*, October 19, 2023. Available online: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/685497-prezidentka-nevymenuje-rudolfa-huliaka-za-ministra-zivotneho-prostredia/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

⁹ D. Funtíková, “Energetické podniky ovládal Smer, aj keď ministerstvo hospodárstva má Hlas,” [The energy companies are controlled by Smer, even though Hlas has the Ministry of Economy] *Denník N*, December 27, 2023. Available online: <https://e.dennikn.sk/3744917/energeticke-podniky-ovladol-smer-aj-ke-d-ministerstvo-hospodarstva-ma-hlas/?ref=list> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

risers would complicate citizens' lives.¹⁰ The government decided to dismiss him. The Ministry of Economy cited the failure to act independently, impartially, and transparently in at least two cases as the reason for his dismissal. Jozef Holjenčík was appointed as the new head, having served previously in 2007–2017. This was despite Fico having criticized him as well and encouraged citizens not to pay their energy bills following the energy price increase. On this occasion though, both Fico and Minister Saková advocated for Holjenčík, stating that he deserved a second chance.¹¹ On his return, Holjenčík gave an interview in which he repeated the narrative that Russian gas cannot easily be replaced. He picked up on a story in Czechia, where several media outlets had suggested that Norwegian gas supplies, in place of Russian gas, had caused equipment to fail due to the higher hydrogen sulfide content. Investigations have shown that the gas delivered to collection points meets the quality standards and that Norwegian gas has not in fact damaged gas boilers.¹²

■ Renewable energy sources

The revision of the Renewable Energy Directive (REDIII) was a key milestone in pursuing climate goals within the EU. It was aimed at helping the EU achieve its target for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Under REDII, the EU had to ensure that at least 32 per cent of its energy consumption would come from renewable energy sources (RES) by 2030. As part of the REPowerEU diversification plan, aimed at reducing reliance on Russian fossil fuels and enhancing domestic sources of energy, the target was increased to 42.5 per cent, and REDIII entered force in November 2023. The directive

¹⁰ "Šéf ÚRSO A. Juris odmieta pochybenie úradu. Ide o štandardný postup, reagoval na obvinenia premiéra R. Fica," [Head of Regulatory Office A. Juris denies misconduct. This is standard procedure, he said in response to Prime Minister R. Fico's accusations] *RTVS*, November 30, 2023. Available online: <https://spravy.rtv.slovakia.sk/2023/11/postupujeme-podla-legislativy-predseda-urso-reagoval-na-obvinenia-zo-strany-premiera-roberta-fica/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

¹¹ "Z čela regulačného úradu odstúpil pre kauzu, teraz sa vracia späť," [He resigned as head of the regulatory office on account of the scandal, now he is coming back] *SITA*, December 6, 2023. Available online: <https://index.sme.sk/c/23253302/z-cela-regulacneho-uradu-odstupil-pre-kauzu-teraz-sa-vracia-spat.html> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

¹² R. Potočár, "Ako je to s poruchami kotlov a nórsnym plynom?," [What is really going on with boiler failures and Norwegian gas?] *Energie-Portal*, March 8, 2023. Available online: <https://www.energie-portal.sk/Dokument/zemny-plyn-porucha-kotla-108832.aspx> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

was backed by 470 MEPs, while 120 were against, and 40 abstained. The new directive is expected to expedite the approval process for new solar and wind power plants and facilitate faster adaptation of existing power plants.¹³ The only Slovak MEP who did not support this proposal was Eugen Jurzyca from SaS. He argued that Slovakia would have to replace cheap nuclear-generated electricity with more expensive renewable energy, and that it would have no significant impact on emissions. Robert Hajšel (Smer-SSD) and Michal Wiezik (Progressive Slovakia) abstained in disagreement to the position on wood biomass. Wiezik argued that the directive would enable substantial subsidization of wood burning, negatively affecting the wood processing industry as well as forest ecosystems and biodiversity.¹⁴

All member states are thus expected to contribute to the EU's 42.5 per cent RES target, calculated according to a formula based on previous RES shares.¹⁵ Member states have to outline their own targets and achievement trajectories in their mid-term policy plans for 2030, known as National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs). The plans serve as the primary strategic policy planning tool for describing how the country will work toward achieving the climate goals by 2030. In 2023 the member states reviewed and updated their NECPs to reflect the higher energy and climate targets and objectives set by key EU policies (European Green Deal, European Climate Law, Fit for 55 package, and 2022 REPowerEU Plan).¹⁶

According to calculations by the European Commission, the RES share of final energy consumption indicated by countries in their revised NECPs was to be between 38.6 per cent and 39.3 per cent by 2030 for the EU. This surpasses the previous 32 per cent target in REDII, but falls short of the binding target of 42.5 per cent in REDIII. Few of the member states submitted contributions in

¹³ "Revision of the Renewable Energy Directive: Fit for 55 package," European Parliament, 2023. Available online: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698781/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)698781_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698781/EPRS_BRI(2021)698781_EN.pdf) (accessed on March 8, 2024).

¹⁴ B. Zmušková, K. Sovík, "Europoslanci schválili smernicu o energii z obnoviteľných zdrojov," [MEPs approved the directive on energy from renewable sources] *Euractiv*, September 13, 2023. Available online: <https://euractiv.sk/section/energetika/news/europoslanci-schvalili-smernicu-o-energii-z-obnovitelnych-zdrojov/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion see: V. Oravcová, "Energy security is the focus of attention again," in P. Brezáni, ed., *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2022*. Bratislava: Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, 2023, pp. 80–100. Available online: <https://www.sfpa.sk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Rocenka-ZPSR-2022.pdf> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

¹⁶ "National energy and climate plans (NECPs)," European Commission, 2023. Available online: https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/energy-strategy/national-energy-and-climate-plans-necps_en (accessed on March 8, 2024).

line with their expected national contribution. Slovakia's contributions, and those of other Visegrad Group countries, fall below the threshold (see Table 1).

Table 1. National contributions to the EU-wide target for renewable energy consumption (in %)

	2020		2030			
	national binding target	value reached	national target as per the formula (EC's 2020 recommendation)	national target proposed in 2020 NECP	national target in line with the formula (EC's 2023 recommendation)	national target proposed in revised 2023 NECP
Austria	34	36.5	46	46–50	57	N/A
Czechia	13	17.3	23	22.0	33	30
Hungary	13	13.9	23	21.0	34	29
Poland	15	16.1	25	21–23	32	N/A
Slovakia	14	17.3	24	19.2	35	23
EU total	20	22.0	32	33.1–33.7	42.5	N/A

Source: Author based on European Commission data

Slovakia has negative prior experience of RES promotion due to an unfair subsidy system. In 2009 a number of Slovak oligarchs were awarded favorable government contracts for solar power plants,¹⁷ with guaranteed purchase prices for 15 years that were nearly ten times the market price in subsequent years. Further support for the production of RES generated electricity will be provided on the basis of operating aid, following the revised support at the beginning of 2019. The support is predicated on success at auction and will be funded from the Recovery and Resilience Plan and Modernization Fund.¹⁸

¹⁷ H. Čápoová, "Slovensko: Z podpory pro solární elektrárny těžili oligarchové," [Slovakia: Oligarchs did well out of the support for solar power plants] *Investigace*, September 8, 2021. Available online: <https://www.investigace.cz/slovensko-z-podpory-pro-solarni-elektrarny-tezili-oligarchove/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

¹⁸ "Dlhodobý plán aukcií pre nové obnoviteľné zdroje energie," [Long-term auction plan for new renewable energy sources] Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic, 2023. Available online: <https://www.economy.gov.sk/uploads/files/Kyl2bBo2.pdf?csrt=10069802987357919278> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

Despite very low government support for RES in previous years, 2023 saw a revival in the renewable energy sector, as can be seen in data provided by the distribution companies to the Slovak Association of Photovoltaic Industry and RES (SAPI). Installed capacity of solar energy was up to 400 per cent higher compared to 2022, marking a significant milestone in the expansion of the solar energy market after nearly a decade of stagnation.¹⁹ The capacity comes from local installations rather than large solar parks. Energy sector experts believe that solar installation is driven by economic factors (energy bills) rather than concern for the climate.

While support for solar energy has grown, the situation regarding wind energy is more complicated. There is a small wind park at Cerová (Senica region) that dates back to 2003. Investment in wind energy has stagnated over the past two decades. Several large wind energy projects are awaiting environmental impact assessment (EIA) approval. Most are in the Nitra and Trnava regions, and there is one in Žilina.²⁰ In Slovakia's National Energy and Climate Plan the aim is to achieve an installed wind power capacity of 300 megawatts by 2026 and 500 megawatts by 2030. However, this may prove challenging without faster approval from the authorities as a lengthy and unpredictable permit process has to be navigated before new turbines can be constructed. Furthermore, wind energy expansion requires collaboration with local communities and municipalities. Concerns about noise, visual aesthetics, and the impact on wildlife, particularly bird populations, have led to opposition to wind energy projects in many countries, and some investors in Slovakia face resistance to such projects.²¹

After years of discussion with no action, progress has been made in another type of RES, geothermal energy. EIA approval has been obtained for a power plant in Ľubotice (Prešov region) and another one in Lovča (Žiar nad Hronom

¹⁹ "Rozvoj fotovoltiky v roku 2023 prekonal očakávania," [Photovoltaic expansion exceeded expectations in 2023] SAPI, January 17, 2024. Available online: <https://www.sapi.sk/clanok/sapi-rozvoj-fotovoltiky-v-roku-2023-prekonal-ocakavania> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

²⁰ "Posudzovanie vplyvov na životné prostredie (EIA/SEA)," [Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA/SEA)] *Enviroportal*, 2024. Available online: <https://www.enviroportal.sk/eia-sea> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

²¹ D. Funtíková, "Veterná turbína vysoká ako Eiffelovka? Záhorie takú elektráreň nechce," [A wind turbine as tall as the Eiffel Tower? Záhorie does not want such a power plant] *Denník N*, April 26, 2023. Available online: <https://e.dennikn.sk/3344066/veterna-turbina-vysoka-ako-eiffelovka-zahorie-taku-elektraren-nechce/?ref=list> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

region).²² Positive findings from seismic surveys in Prešov point to the possibility of geothermal energy production starting in 2028. Collaboration and support for geothermal energy, with the goal of creating a green industrial park in Prešov self-governing region, are the subject of a memorandum of mutual cooperation between the region and PW Energy.

Regarding state support for RES, in 2023 the Slovak Innovation and Energy Agency launched its “Green Enterprises” project that will make support available for small and medium-sized companies seeking to install green equipment through a simplified voucher form. The project follows the successful “Green Households” program and is aimed at heat pumps, photovoltaic systems, solar collectors, and wind turbines.²³ However, persistent issues such as the long waits incurred as a result of the administrative procedures at distribution companies continue to hinder the expansion of renewable energy.

RES is also a crucial part of discussions on electricity market reform within the EU. At the moment European electricity prices are determined by gas prices and the market design does not take into account the benefits of a greater RES share in the EU’s energy mix. The reforms aim to weaken the link, protect consumers from price spikes and accelerate RES deployment. Despite its initial reluctance, the European Commission eventually agreed to propose wider reform of the electricity market to mitigate the impact of gas prices on electricity bills for consumers and industry. In October, the Council reached a general agreement on a proposal to alter the EU’s electricity market design to make electricity prices less dependent on volatile fossil fuel prices, which would promote RES deployment and enhance consumer protection. Lengthy negotiations led to major compromises, including allowing France to finance its existing nuclear power plants through so called two-way contracts for differences, and Poland successfully advocated for further subsidies for coal-generated electricity.²⁴

²² “Posudzovanie vplyvov na životné prostredie (EIA/SEA),” [Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA/SEA)] Enviroportal, 2024. Available online: <https://www.enviroportal.sk/eia-sea> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

²³ “National Projects,” Slovak Innovation and Energy Agency, 2023. Available online: <https://www.siea.sk/strukturalne-fondy-eu/program-slovensko/narodne-projekty/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

²⁴ “Reform of electricity market design: Council reaches agreement,” European Commission, October 17, 2023. Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/17/reform-of-electricity-market-design-council-reaches-agreement/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

When it comes to the debate on RES, production site and energy storage are key, owing to the intermittency of solar and wind energy during periods of no sun or wind. While there are several solutions, battery storage is the crucial one. However, that poses another geopolitical challenge given the dependence on raw materials imported from third countries. Consequently, in July 2023, EU member countries approved draft legislation to clarify the rules for the battery sector throughout the battery life cycle—from production to recycling. This acknowledgment reflects the fact that batteries are “key enablers for sustainable development, green mobility, clean energy, and climate neutrality.”²⁵ By the end of the year, the European Parliament and the Council had reached an agreement on the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA), focused on supply chains and aiming to reduce critical dependency.²⁶ Although it is an important first step to addressing the supply challenge and has the potential to stimulate new investments,²⁷ the problems regarding the regulatory environment in other countries remain. Moreover, the mining and processing of raw materials poses additional environmental challenges.

There is an important geopolitical dimension to the discussion. China dominates the global supply of critical raw materials, leaving Europe largely behind in the Asian market. The development of the European green economy depends on Chinese supplies, be they solar panels, wind turbines, or electrical network components. Therefore Europe has to seek other options if it is to diversify this economic sector and find new markets. One possible market is Australia, which has the largest lithium sites.

Consequently the EU’s approach to China remains ambivalent: on the one hand China is crucial to RES expansion and on the other lies the dependency trap. In Slovakia, 2023 was a milestone year for cooperation between Slovak InoBat and Chinese Gotion over the construction of a battery-production plant for electric cars. In November a commitment was made to start construction

²⁵ “Regulation (EU) 2023/1542 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 July 2023 concerning batteries and waste batteries, amending Directive 2008/98/EC and Regulation (EU) 2019/1020 and repealing Directive 2006/66/EC (Text with EEA relevance),” EUR-Lex, 2023. Available online: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2023/1542/oj> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

²⁶ “Commission welcomes political agreement on the Critical Raw Materials Act,” European Commission, November 13, 2023. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_5733 (accessed on March 8, 2024).

²⁷ F. Simon, “EU’s critical minerals act welcome but falling short, say green groups and industry,” *Euractiv*, December 7, 2023. Available online: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/circular-economy/news/eus-critical-minerals-act-welcome-but-falling-short-say-green-groups-and-industry/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

in 2024, with the government pledging to provide subsidies, take care of the land, prepare the construction site, and connect it to the electrical grid.²⁸ This is positive news, as a large battery factory will be a significant boost for Slovakia, which does not yet have one, despite needing one for its automotive industry.

■ Energy subsidies. Again!

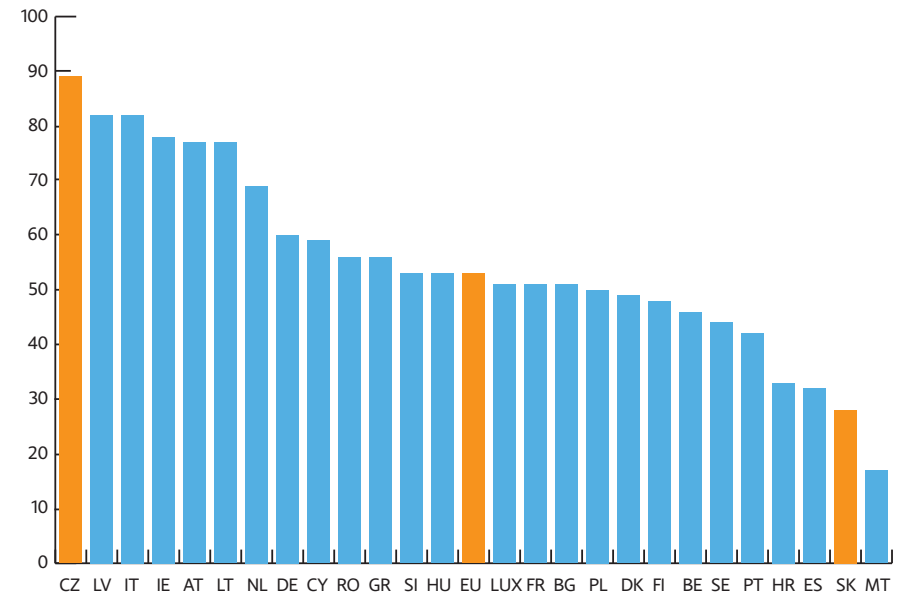
While there is a boom in renewables in the EU, Slovakia, despite some progress, continues to focus on providing energy subsidies to households, companies, and municipalities.²⁹ The problem is that the state support is not targeted at need. Even the European Commission called for more targeted support when it presented the annual European Semester Spring Package in May, including country reports, and country-specific recommendations for all 27 member states. If rising energy prices lead to the need for further interventions, support measures should be fiscally affordable, targeted at protecting vulnerable households and firms, and maintain incentives for energy savings.³⁰ The trend in Slovakia went in the opposite direction throughout 2023. Fully subsidizing higher energy prices for all households does not motivate customers into being more efficient and consuming less, not to mention that excessive subsidies contribute to high inflation. The growth of energy prices in Slovakia was the second lowest among all EU countries after Malta, only about half of the EU average and other countries in our region of Central and Eastern Europe (see Figure 1).

²⁸ "Gotion Inobat batteries (gib) has signed a memorandum of understanding with the government of the Slovak Republic to support the construction of a battery gigafactory," InoBat, November 23, 2023. Available online: <https://www.inobat.eu/newsroom/gotion-inobat-batteries-gib-has-signed-a-memorandum-of-understanding-with-the-government-of-the-slovak-republic-to-support-the-construction-of-a-battery-gigafactory/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

²⁹ For a more detailed discussion see: V. Oravcová, "Energy security is the focus of attention again," op. cit.

³⁰ "2023 European Semester — Spring Package," European Commission, May 24, 2023. Available online: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/78c2d73f-a817-4b7b-a84e-6c7b8050aee_en?filename=COM_2023_600_1_EN.pdf (accessed on March 8, 2024).

Figure 1. Energy price growth (December 2020 to October 2023; in %)



Data source: *Denník N* based on UniCredit and Eurostat

It is expected that households will continue to pay reduced electricity prices until 2027, as announced by the economy minister Karel Hirman (Democrats) and CEO of Slovenské elektrárne Branislav Strýček at a joint press conference at the Mochovce nuclear power plant. Originally, according to a memorandum signed by Hirman's predecessor Richard Sulík (SaS) and finance minister Igor Matovič (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities), prices were supposed to be frozen only until the end of 2024, with electricity from Slovenské elektrárne costing €61.2 per megawatt hour. Household electricity prices are therefore expected to be lower between 2025 and 2027 than if they were purchased on the market.

As noted earlier, energy prices featured in the election campaign, although the political parties adopted different approaches.³¹ Progressive Slovakia

³¹ D. Funtíková, "Jedni chcú dotovať ešte viac, druhí hovoria, že dotácie netreba. Ako chcú ceny energií riešiť politické strany," [Some want to subsidize even more, others say there is no need. How political parties want to solve energy prices] *Denník N*, August 28, 2023. Available online: <https://e.dennikn.sk/3542641/jedni-chcu-dotovat-este-viac-ako-teraz-druhi-hovoria-ze-ziadne-dotacie-netreba-ako-chcu-ceny-energiu-riesit-politicke-strany/?ref=list> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

preferred to focus on those at risk of energy poverty and reducing the tariff for system services and contributions to the National Nuclear Fund. Hlas–SD pointed to “market failure” and concentrated on regulated household prices, continued compensation for municipalities and companies (half the 2023 prices). Ordinary People and Independent Personalities claimed that they would leave it up to the Regulatory Office, while the Christian Democrats targeted energy poverty. SaS was not in favor of future intervention, but sought to advocate energy savings where possible and targeted support. The Government Manifesto of Hlas–SD, Smer–SSD and SNS contains the claim that “household energy prices will remain at an appropriate level,”³² which implies a willingness to intervene in energy-price setting and/or provide compensation. Moreover, the new government, with Minister of Economy Denisa Saková (Hlas–SD) and party leader Peter Pellegrini (who is also Speaker of the National Council and a presidential candidate), announced an additional €1.25 billion for energy subsidies in 2024.³³

■ Nuclear alliance on the rise

One of the most divisive issues in EU climate and energy policy has been the use of nuclear energy. There are 13 EU countries with nuclear power plants. Slovenia’s nuclear power plant Krško is co-owned by and shared with Croatia. In 2023 there were several initiatives by the nuclear alliance led by France, which has the highest share of nuclear energy in its electricity mix in the world. The initiatives sought to strengthen the role of nuclear energy in achieving climate goals and ensuring energy security in Europe. It included all the EU countries with nuclear power plants in 2023, except Germany and Spain (see Map 1). Germany phased out its last reactors in April 2023 as part of its energy transformation, known as the *Energiewende*, while Spain plans to phase out its reactors by 2035. Two countries, Belgium (nuclear country) and Italy (non-nuclear country), participated in the alliance as observers. Italy

³² “Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic,” Government Office of the Slovak Republic, November 13, 2023. Available online: <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/28969/1> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

³³ “Ceny energií sa domácnostiam v 2024 nezmenia, vyjde to na 1,25 mld.eur,” [Household energy prices will not change in 2024, that will cost 1.25 billion euros] TASR, December 6, 2023. Available online: <https://www.teraz.sk/ekonomika/ceny-energií-sa-domacnostiam-v-2024-ne/759334-clanok.html> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

abandoned the use of nuclear energy soon after the Chernobyl disaster in 1987 and steps to restart the program were halted by another referendum in 2011. However, the country has recently begun considering nuclear energy as a means of decarbonizing the energy sector.³⁴ Similarly, Poland (which has no working nuclear reactors) joined the alliance as a country constructing its first reactors.

The nuclear alliance adopted a roadmap for “a new strategy on the use of nuclear energy for the EU,” urging the EU to promote nuclear energy and ongoing joint projects in the same way as renewable energy projects and calling on the Commission to ensure that nuclear energy receives “the same support as other low-carbon energy sources” in all future EU legislation relating to the energy transition.³⁵ The alliance has already had a partial success. In mid-March, the European Commission proposed the Net-Zero Industry Act to enhance the EU’s capacity for vital climate-neutral technologies by 2050. Initially, nuclear power was not considered as strategically important as renewables. However, in December 2023, EU ministers, despite objections from Germany, Austria, and Luxembourg, designated nuclear power as a “strategic” technology under the act.³⁶

While there has been extensive debate on the future expansion of nuclear energy, there has been no debate on spent fuel. In Europe, only the nuclear powers—Finland, Sweden, and France—are likely to have their own permanent spent nuclear fuel storage within a decade. The other EU nuclear countries are far behind and plan to open deep geological repositories sometime between 2040 and the end of the century. When it comes to our region there have been suggestions of exploring the possibility of building a shared

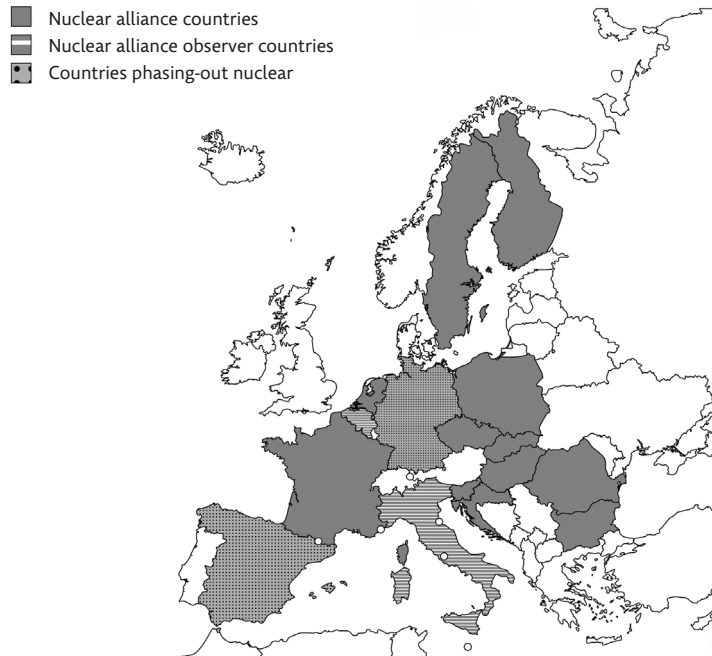
³⁴ M. Catanzaro, “Italian nuclear industry revival on the table,” *Nature Italy*, September 11, 2023. Available online: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d43978-023-00130-8> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

³⁵ P. Messad, “French-led nuclear alliance calls for equal EU treatment with renewables,” *Euractiv*, July 12, 2023. Available online: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/french-led-nuclear-alliance-calls-for-equal-treatment-with-renewables/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

³⁶ P. Messad, “EU countries reinstate nuclear among ‘strategic’ net-zero technologies,” *Euractiv*, December 8, 2023. Available online: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/eu-countries-reinstate-nuclear-among-strategic-net-zero-technologies/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

storage facility for Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia,³⁷ but that is unlikely to happen as no similar political agreement has been reached anywhere in the world.

Map 1. Nuclear alliance countries



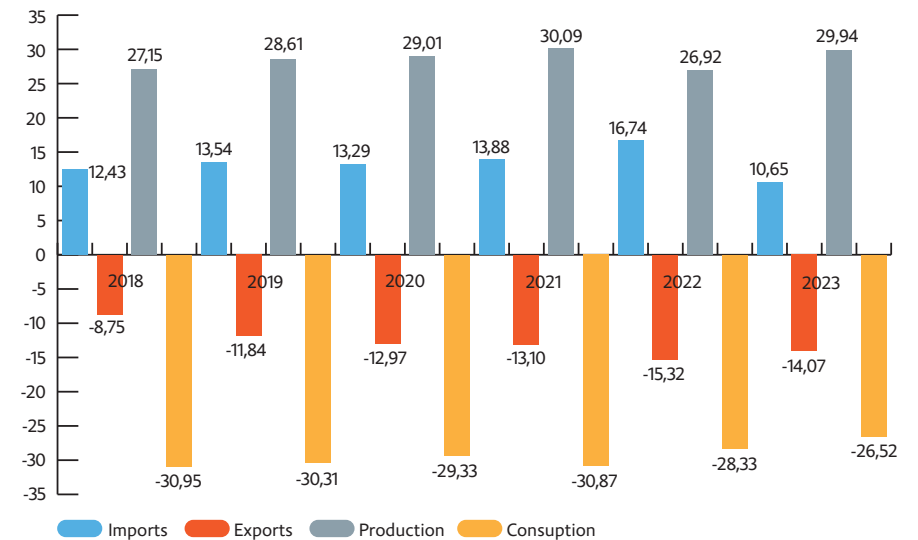
Source: Author, created in mapchart.net

In Slovakia, there have been discussions on nuclear and nuclear fuel expansion, as dependency on nuclear fuel shipped from Russia presents a problem. The current contract with the Russian company TVEL covers the period 2022–2026 with the option to extend it until 2030 and allows for the implementation of

³⁷ "Vnútroštátna politika nakladania s vyhotoreným jadrovým palivom a rádioaktívnymi odpadmi v Slovenskej republike," [National policy for spent nuclear fuel management and radioactive waste in the Slovak Republic] National Nuclear Fund, 2014. Available online: <https://www.njf.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/N%C3%A1vrh-Vn%C3%BAtro%C5%A1t%C3%A1tnej-politiky-a-Vn%C3%BAtro%C5%A1t%C3%A1tneho-programu-nakladania-s-VJP-a-RAO-v-SR.pdf> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

nuclear fuel deployment programs from alternative suppliers. Government efforts to diversify nuclear fuel continued in 2023 with two suppliers, American Westinghouse and French Framatome, being considered suitable for Slovakia's VVER 440 reactors in Jaslovské Bohunice and Mochovce. The leaders of Smer-SSD and SNS openly questioned the idea of moving away from the existing Russian fuel supplier, but after forming the government, they continued efforts to seek alternative suppliers.³⁸

Figure 2. Electricity trade, production and consumption in Slovakia (2018–2023; in TWh)



Source: Author based on SEPS data

In 2023, after more than a decade's delay, Slovakia achieved an important milestone when the third unit of Mochovce NPP was commissioned and it became self-sufficient in electricity production (see Figure 2). The future will continue to be nuclear. According to the government's program for 2023, it plans to begin preparations for the construction of a new nuclear facility at

³⁸ T. Grečko, "Od ruského paliva sa odtrhneme, potvrdila Saková aj navzdory Dankovým a Ficovým vyhláseniam," [We will end Russian fuel supplies, Sakova confirmed, despite Danko's and Fico's statements] *Denník N*, November 6, 2023. Available online: <https://e.dennikn.sk/3663904/od-ruskeho-paliva-sa-odtrhneme-potvrdila-sakova-aj-navzdory-dankovym-a-ficovym-vyhlaseniam/?ref=list> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

Jaslovské Bohunice, arguing that there will be a “substantial” increase in electricity demand.³⁹ The National Energy and Climate Plan promises that the “new nuclear facility will take account of state-of-the-art technology and competitiveness (technical and economic),” and it is expected that the project will be completed before 2040.⁴⁰ But it also states that a firm deadline can only be specified after the government’s strategic decision on construction has been adopted, and that will consider objectives and measures to ensure energy security and self-sufficiency in electricity production.

In fact, the Nuclear Energy Company of Slovakia (JESS) applied to the Slovak Nuclear Regulatory Authority in March 2023 for a permit for the location of a nuclear facility in connection with the New Nuclear Power Plant project in the area of Jaslovské Bohunice. It is argued that a substantial increase in electricity consumption is expected given the restart of production at the Svalco aluminum smelter, modernization of Košice steelworks, the commencement of production at the Volvo car factory, and the establishment of a large battery factory in Slovakia. However, a new nuclear block will require high initial investment, and thus far no one is willing to invest in it.⁴¹

Another nuclear trend is the move toward small modular reactors. Slovakia was successful with the Phoenix project, which was supported by the United States government and received a grant for financial support for the study of the feasibility of small modular reactors. The grant was applied for through Slovenské elektrárne and under the auspices of the Slovak Ministry of Economy in June 2023. The study will include an evaluation of suitable types of small modular reactors for the needs of Slovakia, a cost analysis for construction and operation, and a schedule.⁴²

³⁹ “Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic,” op. cit.

⁴⁰ “Draft update of the Integrated National energy and climate plan for 2021-2030,” European Commission, 2023. Available online: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/4f373d12-ce73-403a-a2d5-0107bf3e0c24_en?filename=SLOVAKIA%20-%20DRAFT%20UPDATED%20NECP%202021-2030_EN.pdf (accessed on March 8, 2024).

⁴¹ “Projekt novej atómkvy v Jaslovských Bohuniciach je o krok ďalej, firma JESS podala žiadosť o vydanie povolenia,” [The new atomic plant project at Jaslovské Bohunice is one step ahead, the company JESS has applied for a permit] SITA, February 16, 2023. Available online: <https://sita.sk/venergetike/projekt-novej-atomky-v-jaslovskych-bohuniciach-je-o-krok-dalej-firma-jess-podala-ziadost-o-vydanie-povolenia/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

⁴² “Slovensko získalo dôležitý grant v rámci projekt Phoenix — financovanie štúdie uskutočniteľnosti pre projekty zamerané na malé modulárne reaktory,” [Slovakia has been awarded an important grant under the Phoenix project — to fund a feasibility study for projects for small modular reactors] Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic, 2023. Available online: <https://www.mhsr.sk/top/slovensko-ziskalo-dolezity-grant-financovanie-studie-uskutocniteľnosti-pre-projekty-zamerane-na-male-modularne-reaktory> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

■ Milestones and challenges in the fossil fuel phase-out

When it comes to fossil fuels in Slovakia, 2023 marked a milestone for coal-generated electricity. Slovakia will therefore be among the few EU countries to successfully complete the phase-out — the replacement of coal-generated electricity with lower emission sources, following Belgium, Sweden, Austria, and Portugal. Countries that have no coal plants include Cyprus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, and Malta.

Slovakia’s coal sector was not only polluting, but did not even make economic sense, as it was heavily subsidized. Law No. 656/2004 on the Energy Sector, introduced under the Mikuláš Dzurinda government, established a support scheme for domestic coal as part of “general economic interest” in the energy sector, and ever since the cost has been added to electricity bills. The commitment to phasing out coal was a political decision announced by minister of economy Peter Žiga at the Central European Energy Conference in 2018.⁴³ While several countries turned back to coal during the energy crisis, the Slovak decision to continue its coal phase out can be explained using the concept of “financial Europeanisation,”⁴⁴ whereby it was more economically viable to continue the EU initiative for decarbonizing coal regions supported by EU funds. The mining region (Upper Nitra) was one of the pilot Coal Regions in the Transition Initiative that obtained financial and technical support from the European Commission, along with requalification support for miners, finding new heating solutions, and strengthening electricity networks.

The Nováky mine opened in 1940, and in December 2023 the last wagonload of coal left the mine.⁴⁵ Work in the Nováky mine has not yet finished, as liquidation work will continue. Once it has been shut down, the site will have

⁴³ “Žiga: Transformáciu ťažby uhlia do roku 2023 predstavi vláda o týždeň,” [Žiga: The government will unveil its transformation of coal mining by 2023 in a week’s time] TASR, November 19, 2018. Available online: <https://www.teraz.sk/najnovsie/ziga-transformaciu-tazby-uhlia-do-r/362047-clanok.html> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

⁴⁴ M. Mišík, V. Jursová Prachárová, “Coal is a priority for energy security, until it is not: coal phase-out in the EU and its persistence in the face of the energy crisis,” *Sustainability*, 15(8):6879, 2023.

⁴⁵ E. Štenclová, “V Novákoch odzvonili ťažbu posledného vozíka uhlia. Zišli sa pri tom desiatky dojatých baníkov,” [In Nováky the last coal wagon signals the end. Dozens of emotional miners gathered] *Pravda*, December 20, 2023. Available online: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/regiony/clanok/693461-v-novakoch-odzvonili-tazbu-posledneho-vozika-uhlia-zisli-sa-pri-tom-desiatky-dojatych-banikov/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

to be approved by the Slovak Environmental Inspectorate, and the tailings ponds will need recultivating. The owner of the site, Slovenské elektrárne, plans to build a large solar energy park in the location.

When it comes to other fossil fuel sources, Slovakia continued its diversification efforts, looking across the globe to reduce dependence on Russian gas, although it retains an opt-out from the sanctions on Russian oil, allowing it to process Russian oil at the Slovnaft refinery in Bratislava. Although the refinery signed an agreement with Croatia to import non-Russian oil, the transit fees were high. The Croatian state enterprise Janaf proposed a major hike in the cost of using the Adria pipeline from the port of Omišalj, where oil is offloaded by ocean tankers.⁴⁶ The Adria pipeline is currently the only viable route open to the Slovak refinery for importing large volumes of non-Russian oil.

Gas diversification efforts to eliminate Russian imports continued within the EU and several tools were introduced. Joint gas purchases should secure sufficient fuel and low prices on international markets before next winter. On its first attempt, the European Commission obtained offers for 10.9 billion cubic meters (bcm), almost enough to meet member state obligations to ensure storage tanks are filled to at least 15 per cent of capacity, a total volume of 13.5 bcm. The platform was created to make Europe energy secure ahead of winter, as well as to reduce skyrocketing prices owing to supply constraints and falling imports from Russia. The Commissioner responsible was Maroš Šefčovič.⁴⁷ However, amid efforts to eliminate Russian gas, the Spanish presidency (starting in July) in the EU pointed out that although Russian pipeline imports were declining, LNG imports were on the rise. In total, Russian pipeline gas fell to 40 percent of EU imports in 2021 to around 8 per cent in 2023. Russian pipeline gas and LNG combined amounted to less than 15 per cent of total EU gas imports.⁴⁸

Besides the discussions on finding non-Russian gas supplies, questions were also raised about infrastructure, as the use of gas amid the pursuit of climate

⁴⁶ M. Hudec, "Oil transit fees at heart of Slovak-Croat dispute," *Euractiv*, February 9, 2023. Available online: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/oil-transit-fees-at-heart-of-slovak-croat-dispute/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

⁴⁷ "EU Energy Platform," European Commission, 2023. Available online: https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/energy-security/eu-energy-platform_en (accessed on March 8, 2024).

⁴⁸ "Where does the EU's gas come from?" European Council, 2023. Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/eu-gas-supply/> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

goals is still very controversial. While some see it as an important transitional fuel, others are calling for it to be phased-out as soon as possible to meet the green transition goals and so oppose the building of new infrastructure. After the parliamentary elections, the government appears to have adopted the first approach, as the government manifesto claims that

the government declares that gas is an important energy carrier and will play a crucial role in the transition toward a low-carbon economy. It is therefore necessary to ensure the diversification of transport routes, with the support of international partners and emphasizing development and cooperation in the construction of LNG terminals.⁴⁹

Indeed, the discussion sparked a big controversy over the LNG terminal on the Danube River in Bratislava. A project by the state-owned company Public Ports undergoing an EIA had already received positive feedback from the Ministry of the Environment prior to the elections in March. The rationale behind the terminal is to meet growing demand and reduce GHG emissions and pollutants in river transport on the Danube by making LNG available as an alternative fuel for river vessels at the port of Bratislava.⁵⁰ Minister of Environment Tomáš Taraba has become a vocal advocate of the project, stating that the terminal will provide gas for industry, the public sector, and households.⁵¹ However, the claim is dubious at best since the LNG project is primarily aimed at river transport, as stated by both the former minister of economy Karel Hirman and Public Ports.⁵² But the plans are not just environmentally controversial but also financially questionable as well. Several global analyses have indicated that there is sufficient infrastructure in place and that there may already be more LNG projects than will be needed in the

⁴⁹ "Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic," op. cit.

⁵⁰ "Posudzovanie vplyvov na životné prostredie (EIA/SEA)," [Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA/SEA)] *Enviroportal*, 2024. Available online: <https://www.enviroportal.sk/eia-sea> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

⁵¹ D. Funtíková, M. Zdút, "Bratislava bude mať LNG terminál. Jeho schválenie stojí na mylných argumentoch, hovorí Greenpeace," [Bratislava will have an LNG terminal. Its approval is based on false arguments, says Greenpeace] *Denník N*, January 3, 2024. Available online: <https://e.dennikn.sk/3756955/bratislava-bude-mat-lng-terminal-jeho-schvalenie-stoji-na-mylnych-argumentoch-hovori-greenpeace/?ref=list> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

⁵² J. Ryník, "Hirman: 'Sankcie proti Rusku? Taraba je úplne mimo, z Ruska sa plyn stále dováža,'" [Hirman: Sanctions against Russia? Taraba is way off mark, gas is still being imported from Russia] *Sme*, January 5, 2024. Available online: <https://index.sme.sk/c/23264399/hirman-rozhovor-lng-terminal-bratislava-taraba.html> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

future. According to the European Commission, LNG has transitional importance for large long-distance shipping vessels, as there is no other zero-emission technology currently available. However, this rationale does not apply to river transport.

■ Future challenges

2024 will be important for the future of the green transformation, as the EU is heading into elections. The fate of the European Green Deal initiative with its substantial legislative initiatives and strategies (such as European Climate Law, Fit for 55 package, but also 2022 REPowerEU Plan) is uncertain; it could be halted or made even more ambitious. The green transition agenda is becoming increasingly robust and difficult for people to understand, as revealed, for instance, in an opinion poll conducted by Institute 2050 showing that approximately one third of respondents were unable to evaluate the Green Deal's aims and targets.⁵³

While the trajectory of adopting climate policies has been relatively smooth thus far, with a few exceptions, voices of dissatisfaction are gaining strength as the EU election date in June 2024 approaches. Across Europe, especially on the right of the political spectrum, there is growing opposition to a broad set of policies aimed at meeting the EU's climate goals. But decarbonization and emissions reduction are no more the responsibility of the energy sector and large industrial companies only; everyone will have to help meet the ambitious targets, for instance by changing consumption patterns and travel habits. This will inevitably affect people's everyday lives, especially with the framing of the 2040 climate and energy targets announced by the Commission in February 2024.

Another common challenge for Europe, and particularly Slovakia, is cooperation with Ukraine. In addition to providing financial, humanitarian, and military aid, Europe has presented several ambitious goals for the reconstruction of Ukraine. The recovery process has to be transparent and take account of climate goals. In times of war though, ecological efforts tend to

⁵³ "Slovak climate, transformation and Green Deal 2023," Institut 2050, 2023. Available online: <https://institut2050.cz/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/SKTGD2023web.pdf> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

take a backseat. Carbon footprints become too complicated to consider when a third of your energy capacity has been destroyed, and industries and people face daily blackouts. Moreover, under Fico's government, it is hard to imagine smooth cooperation on this between countries.



Matej Kandrák

Slovak security and defense policy in 2023: a year of (dis)continuities

The objective of this chapter is to present a detailed analysis of Slovakia's security and defense policy in 2023. However, one has to acknowledge that the analysis cannot be confined solely to the year 2023. Russia's illegal and illegitimate military invasion of Ukraine launched on February 24, 2022, remains a pivotal external influence on Slovak policy. The war has brought major changes to Slovakia's military, societal, economic and energy security. Its implications are undoubtedly global; yet one can argue that the Eastern Flank countries bordering Ukraine, including Slovakia, are most affected. Furthermore, Slovakia is a member of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and so is both involved in and subject to adaptation processes. The external factors shaping Slovak security and defense policy are uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.

Domestically, the landscape has been marked by significant political instability and uncertainty. These dynamics led to the downfall of Eduard Heger's minority government in the spring of 2023, the subsequent establishment of a caretaker government by President Zuzana Čaputová, and early parliamentary elections in September 2023.¹ The elections led to the formation of a new governing coalition, comprising Smer-SSD, Hlas-SD, and the SNS, under the leadership of Prime Minister Robert Fico. In 2023, Slovakia had three different prime ministers, defense ministers, foreign ministers and, technically speaking, four interior ministers. That is no basis for stable and predictable policymaking. Moreover, the new government's political positions on the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine are in stark contrast to the positions held by the two previous governments, which presents another major source of discontinuity in security and defense policy.

¹ Heger's government lost its majority in September 2022 after one of the coalition parties, SaS (Freedom and Solidarity), withdrew from the coalition agreement and joined the opposition.

This analysis employs a conceptual framework of continuities, discontinuities, and (mal)adaptations within Slovakia's security and defense policy. The analysis will encompass selected domains such as security and defense planning and the legislative framework, international cooperation, the defense industry, and countering hybrid threats. These will be examined within the wider context of the evolving security dynamics, with a particular focus on developments within NATO and the EU. The concluding section provides a comprehensive summary, but also indicates potential future directions for Slovak security and defense policy in 2024.

■ 2022 as a departure point

This analysis starts from the findings of the "Security report of the Slovak Republic for 2022" and "Comprehensive assessment of Slovak defense in 2022," both of which were published in 2023. The Security Report is produced by the Office of the Security Council and serves as a formal annual evaluation of measures set out in previous Security Reports. It also offers a broad assessment of Slovakia's external and internal security environment. It contains chapters on cyber security, the economy, public health, and the environment.²

The 2022 Security Report correctly notes that the Russian aggression against Ukraine presents a multidimensional threat and risk multiplier for Slovakia. It has had a direct or indirect effect in various areas of security: from the massive wave of refugees to Slovakia's energy dependency on Russia, from high inflation and the cost of living to deepening societal polarization and gaps in military capabilities. Lessons that should have been learned from the COVID-19 pandemic on serious shortcomings in crisis management and crisis preparedness, insufficient personal capacities, material support, and municipal and national equipment, resurfaced amid the consequences of the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine. For example, in both cases timely first response was spearheaded by civil society and municipalities, rather than central government.

² "Správa o bezpečnosti Slovenskej republiky za rok 2022," [Security report of the Slovak Republic for 2022] Security Council of the Slovak Republic, June, 2023. Available online: https://www.vlada.gov.sk/share/uvsr/br-sr/sprava_o_bezpecnosti_sr_2022.pdf (accessed on February 2, 2024).

The defense assessment is the main military policy evaluation conducted by the ministry of defense (MoD) that focuses on state defense and reports any shortcomings and measures taken.³ It concludes that Slovakia's defense capability was strengthened by the deployment of an international NATO battle group and further modernization of the Slovak armed forces. Slovakia's allies provided the country with modern air defense systems on a rotation basis to fill the capability gap caused by delays to the delivery of F-16 fighters from the US, the grounding of MiG-29 fighters serviced by Russian contractors, and the donation of two S-300 surface-to-air defense systems to Ukraine. The Czech Republic, Poland, and later Hungary and Germany agreed to provide temporary protection for Slovak airspace.⁴ The assessment does not shy away from criticism and points to fluctuations in operational readiness, high attrition rates among military personnel, long-term underinvestment in military infrastructure and the slow pace of modernization. Among the long-term challenges it highlights are gaps in commitments to NATO collective defense such as a heavy mechanized brigade and reforming and expanding the active reserves system.

The 2022 NATO Summit in Madrid represented an important milestone. After more than a decade a new Strategic Concept was approved which sets out strategic tasks for the next few years. Russia's invasion of Ukraine had a major impact on the Strategic Concept and underlined the importance of collective defense. The New Force Model, agreed at the 2022 Summit, considerably strengthens NATO's military presence on the Eastern Flank, including the establishment of new multinational battle groups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia.⁵ In addition, Finland and Sweden were invited to join NATO. Both are countries with which Slovakia has major defense contracts: an intergovernmental contract with Sweden for 152 CV90 combat vehicles⁶ and an intergovernmental contract with Finland for 76 Patria 8x8 armored

³ "Komplexné hodnotenie obrany Slovenskej republiky za rok 2022," [Comprehensive assessment of Slovak defense in 2022] Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, 2023. Available online: https://www.mosr.sk/data/files/5111_komplexne-hodnotenie-obrany-sr-za-rok-2022.pdf (accessed on February 2, 2024).

⁴ All thirteen Slovak Mig-29 fighters were donated to Ukraine in spring 2023.

⁵ "NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance," NATO, December 8, 2023. Available online: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm (accessed on February 2, 2024).

⁶ "Slovakia signed contract for 152 CV90 vehicles, Czech Republic to be the next CV90 user," *CZ Defence*, December 12, 2022. Available online: <https://www.czdefence.com/article/slovakia-signs-contract-for-152-cv90-vehicles-czech-republic-to-be-the-next-cv90-user> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

combat vehicles.⁷ The Slovak parliament approved both countries' NATO accession protocols in September 2022.⁸ Finland officially joined NATO in April 2023, but the Hungarian parliament still hadn't approved Sweden's membership as of January 2024.

In 2022, the European Union adopted its Strategic Compass, a plan for strengthening EU security and defense policy in four areas by 2030, consisting of actionable capabilities and capacities, threat anticipation and resilience, investments, and partnerships.⁹ Slovakia has long been a strong proponent of closer EU–NATO cooperation and of creating synergies between these institutions.

Broadly speaking, Slovakia's clear stances and support to Ukraine did much for its diplomatic reputation internationally and earned it political capital with partners. Right from the outset of the war, Slovakia helped provide military and humanitarian assistance. In 2022 alone, the Slovak government donated more than €160 million in weapons, ammunition, and military materiel and €9 million in humanitarian assistance.¹⁰ There were high-level political visits and the country backed new initiatives aimed at supporting Ukraine, such as the Ukraine Defense Contact Group and new mechanisms and projects at NATO and EU level. The Slovak government's actions took place against a backdrop of a divided public, particularly regarding military support but also general views of the Russia–Ukraine war. In May 2023, polling conducted by IPSOS for *Dennik N* showed that 60 per cent of respondents disagreed with sending Slovak Mig-29 to Ukraine and only 24 per cent agreed. Moreover, 60 per cent agreed with the statement that “arms deliveries

⁷ “Slovakia and Finland with Patria signed an agreement on Patria AMVxp 8x8 vehicles,” Patria, Available online: <https://www.patriagroup.com/newsroom/news/2022/slovakia-and-finland-with-patria-signed-an-agreement-on-patria-amvxp-8x8-vehicles> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

⁸ “Poslanci súhlasia s prístupím Fínska a Švédska do NATO,” [MPs agree to Finland and Sweden joining NATO] National Council of the Slovak Republic, September 27, 2022. Available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=udalosti/udalost&MasterID=56151> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

⁹ “A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence,” European External Action Service, March 20, 2023. Available online: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf (accessed on February 2, 2024).

¹⁰ “Slovensko patrí medzi najväčších darcov pomoci Ukrajine.” [Slovakia is among the largest aid donors to Ukraine] *Sme Daily*, February 23, 2023. Available online: <https://www.sme.sk/minuta/23139762/slovensko-patri-medzi-najvaecsich-darcov-pomoci-ukrajine> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

prolong the war in Ukraine” as against 26 per cent who disagreed.¹¹ Slovakia led on 69 per cent in a question in another poll, a cross-country survey held in the same month for Globsec, asking whether providing military support to Ukraine was provocative and increased the likelihood of war with Russia. By contrast, in Czechia only 38 per cent agreed with that statement, while Romania and Bulgaria were closest to Slovakia, with 59 per cent of respondents there agreeing.¹² Polling from July 2023 for *TV JOJ* captured views on the provision of military assistance to Ukraine. Fifty-one per cent supported the position that the new government should not continue the military support as against 43 per cent who said it should.¹³

■ Defense planning and changes to the legislative framework

In the first half of 2022, the internal long-term programming for 2023 to 2028 was completed, resulting in the “Long-term development plan for the Ministry of Defense for the 2035 horizon.”¹⁴ It is the main long-term defense planning document and sets out the goals and processes for maintaining and developing the capabilities and capacities of the armed forces and the MoD including other organizational entities within its jurisdiction. It builds on the political and military objectives defined in the Security Strategy, Defense

¹¹ “Migy by Ukrajine poslala len štvrtina Slovenska, väčšina sa však nechce vrátiť do sféry vplyvu Ruska,” [Only a quarter of Slovaks would send MIGs to Ukraine, but the majority do not want to return to Russia's sphere of influence] *Dennik N*, March 15, 2023. Available online: <https://den-nikn.sk/3281334/migy-by-ukrajine-poslala-len-stvrtina-slovenska-vacsina-sa-vsak-nechce-vratit-do-sfery-vplyvu-ruska-prieskum-ipsosu/> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

¹² “Globsec Trends 2023.” Globsec, May 26, 2023. Available online: <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/GLOBSEC%20Trends%202023.pdf> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

¹³ “Exkluzívny prieskum agentúry AKO pre TV JOJ24: Ma budúca vláda pokračovať vo vojenskej pomoci Ukrajine?” [Exclusive polling by AKO agency for TV JOJ24: Should the next government continue the military aid to Ukraine?] *TV JOJ*, August 2, 2023. Available online: <https://joj24.noviny.sk/volby/parlamentne-volby-2023/joj24-volebna-encyklopedia-slovenska/820189-exkluzivny-prieskum-agentury-ako-pre-tv-joj-24-ma-buduca-vlada-pokracovat-vo-vojenskej-pomoci-ukrajine> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

¹⁴ “Dlhodobý plán rozvoja rezortu ministerstva obrany s výhľadom do roku 2035,” [Long-term development plan for the Ministry of Defense for the 2035 horizon] Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, March 18, 2022. Available online: <https://www.mosr.sk/dlhodoby-plan-rozvoja-rezortu-ministerstva-obrany-s-vyhľadom-do-roku-2035/> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

Strategy, and Military Strategy, which, after sixteen years, were finally updated and approved by parliament in 2021.¹⁵

The strategic framework is bolstered by a number of other key documents. The “Long-term development plan to support state defense for the 2035 horizon” updates the armed force’s requirements and priorities and defines the goals and processes for developing military infrastructure, state material reserves, critical services, and research and development. “Law No. 281/2015 on professional soldiers in service” was amended to simplify recruitment processes. It also provides for a Military Ombudsman for the armed forces.¹⁶ The amendment is designed to streamline the recruitment process and mitigate the high turnover of recruits. It is also worth mentioning “Law No. 500/2022 on military intelligence,” which replaces the old, outdated law from 1993 that is not fit for purpose in the current security environment.¹⁷ Furthermore “Law No. 321/2002 on the armed forces” was amended to ban the use of unmanned aerial vehicles in airspace above military areas, installations, convoys, and transfers.¹⁸

An amendment to “Law No. 570/2005 on conscription,” introducing several changes relating to active reserves, did not gain enough votes in parliament. For some years now the active reserves have suffered from low appeal and a restrictive recruitment process. In 2023, 28 candidates applied to the active reserves, which have only 153 members.¹⁹ There were several factors behind

¹⁵ “Poslanci schválili po 16 rokoch novú Bezpečnostnú stratégiu,” [After 16 years MPs approved a new Security Strategy] National Council of the Slovak Republic, January 28, 2021. Available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=udalosti/udalost&MasterID=55539> (accessed on February 2, 2024); Slovakia updated its Security and Defense Strategy in 2017 but it was approved by the government only, and did pass through parliament.

¹⁶ “Zákon č. 281/2015 o štátnej službe profesionálnych vojakov,” [Law No. 281/2015 on professional soldiers in service] Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, August 28, 2022. Available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=515556> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

¹⁷ “Zákon č. 500/2022 o Vojenskom spravodajstve,” [Law No. 500/2022 on Military intelligence] Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, February 1, 2023. Available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=518303> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

¹⁸ “Zákon č. 321/2002 o Ozbrojených silách Slovenskej republiky,” [Law No. 321/2002 on the Armed Forces] Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, February 1, 2023. Available online: <https://zakony.judikaty.info/predpis/zakon-321/2002/audit-dovodove-spravy> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

¹⁹ “Do aktívnych záloh sa prihlásilo 28 nových záujemcov, stav je neuspokojivý,” [28 new recruits signed up for active army reserves, the situation is unsatisfactory] *Daily Pravda*, October 3, 2023. Available online: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/683664-do-aktivnych-zaloh-sa-prihlasilo-28-novych-zaujemocov-stav-je-neuspokojivy/> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

the lack of support for the amendment in parliament. At the end of January 2023, MPs passed a resolution shortening the electoral term. Internal disagreements and pre-election positioning by the political parties created a situation in which the amendment was linked to the situation in Ukraine and was therefore unpopular, making it difficult for MPs to support it.

Internationally, the 2023 NATO Vilnius Summit signaled clear continuity with the goals set at the Madrid Summit. The Allies submitted regional defense plans and further implementation plans for the New Force Structure. Under “Law No. 92/2022 on other measures relating to the situation in Ukraine,” the commands of designated army units may be reinforced by relevant NATO commanders on Slovak territory.²⁰ Slovakia was among the countries pushing for a rotational air and missile defense model and the creation of the NATO–Ukraine Council. Both proposals were adopted at the summit.

In 2022/2023 substantial changes were made to defense planning and parts of the legislation. These were driven in part by the immediate need to respond to the dramatic changes in the security environment, such as the “drone” amendment, or by long-term issues, such as the need to update the legislation on military intelligence, unsuccessful active reserves projects and staff shortages (75 per cent) in the armed forces. Therefore the war should be seen as a catalyst, rather than the cause of these changes. Some were the result of national pressure, while others were part of broader changes decided and implemented by NATO and the EU.

■ International cooperation

Arguably the most important example of international cooperation affecting security and defense is the formation of the NATO multinational battlegroup in Slovakia. The decision to strengthen the Eastern Flank was a direct response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and, were it not for that, it is highly likely that the new battlegroups in Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania would not exist. The battlegroup in Slovakia was officially certified as NATO

²⁰ “Zákon č. 92/2022 o niektorých ďalších opatreniach v súvislosti so situáciou na Ukrajine,” [Law No. 92/2022 on further measures relating to the situation in Ukraine] Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, March 16, 2023. Available online: <https://www.epi.sk/dovodova-sprava/dovodova-sprava-k-zakonu-c-92-2022-z-z.htm> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

combat-ready in October 2023.²¹ It consists of units from the Czech Republic, Germany, Slovenia, Netherlands, United States, and Slovakia.²² In the summer of 2023, it was announced that Spain would join the battlegroup, supplying 700 soldiers and taking over the battlegroup leadership from the Czech Republic.²³

The presence of the multinational battlegroup has enhanced Slovak relations with all the participating nations but has probably had the greatest effect on relations with Germany and the United States. Prior to 2022 German-Slovak relations in security and defense were not especially close. But since the Russian invasion, in addition to Berlin's participation in both the land force and air-defense components of the NATO battlegroup,²⁴ German companies have set up workshops to repair and maintain German-manufactured military equipment used by Ukrainian military forces. Slovakia has received two MANTIS air-defense systems and Germany has agreed to provide air force support to help protect Slovak airspace under the NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defense System.²⁵ Slovakia also participated in the German "ringtausch" scheme, under which its military acquired fifteen Leopard 2A4 tanks in return for the thirty BVP-1 vehicles it donated to Ukraine.²⁶ In the space of just two years, the two countries have undertaken major defense cooperation. We can expect this new dimension in bilateral relations to continue in the coming years. Although relations may not be as smooth as they could be. Especially since Robert Fico remarked in February 2022 that "the coalition is

²¹ "Multinational Battle Group Slovakia awarded NATO combat ready status," NATO, October 3, 2023. Available online: <https://jfcbs.nato.int/page5964943/2023/multinational-battle-group-slovakia-awarded-nato-combat-ready-status-> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

²² "Rok ruskej agresie: Mnohonárodná bojová skupina NATO posilňuje obranyschopnosť Slovenska," [A year of Russian aggression: NATO's multinational battle group strengthens Slovakia's defense capabilities] Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, February 23, 2023. Available online: <https://www.mosr.sk/52551-sk/rok-ruskej-agresie-mnohonarodna-bojova-skupina-nato-posilnuje-obranyschopnost-slovenska/> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

²³ "Pedro Sanchez: Spain will lead the battle group in Slovakia, where we will deploy 700 soldiers," *La Moncloa*, July 17, 2023. Available online: https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/lang/en/presidente/news/paginas/2023/20230712_nato-summit.aspx (accessed on February 2, 2024).

²⁴ "Germany to send company of troops to Slovakia to join new NATO battlegroup," Reuters, February 25, 2022. Available online: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germany-send-company-troops-slovakia-join-new-nato-battlegroup-2022-02-25/> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

²⁵ "German fighters boosting protection of Slovak airspace as of September," TASR, September 1, 2023. Available online: <https://newsnow.tasr.sk/german-fighters-boosting-protection-of-slovak-airspace-as-of-september/> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

²⁶ "Ringtausch: Germany delivers the second Leopard 2A4 tank to Slovakia," Defence Industry Europe, April 17, 2023. Available online: <https://defence-industry.eu/ringtausch-germany-delivers-the-second-leopard-2a4-tank-to-slovakia/> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

welcoming the Wehrmacht to Slovakia", in response to the announcement of a German military presence Slovakia under the NATO framework, which may have an impact on future cooperation.²⁷

Turning to the US, security and defense have always been key sectors of cooperation. The US is described as Slovakia's most important strategic partner in key national security documents. In 2022, the two governments agreed the "Defense Cooperation Agreement between the United States of America and Slovakia" (DCA).²⁸ The US is also part of the NATO multinational presence in Slovakia. Moreover, Congress approved a Foreign Military Financing grant of \$200 million for the modernization and professionalization of the Slovak armed forces and \$5.8 million from the Countering Russian Influence Fund for projects to counter hybrid threats and build strategic communication capabilities in September 2022.²⁹ Although the caretaker government signed a contract for 160 JLTV 4x4 vehicles, the procurement project for 5000 M4 assault rifles was not finalized. In addition to the rifles and 4x4 vehicles, there is talk of purchasing twelve AH-1Z Viper attack helicopters at a significant discount. The new defense minister, Robert Kaliňák from SMER-SSD, has openly questioned and criticized these plans.³⁰ SMER-SSD has also been highly critical and led protests against the signing of the DCA in 2022. Prominent party members including Prime Minister Robert Fico and Robert Kaliňák have repeatedly called for the agreement to be renegotiated, both during the election campaign and while in office.³¹

²⁷ "Koalícia chce privítať nemecký Wehrmacht," [The coalition wants to welcome the German Wehrmacht] *Dennik N*, February 26, 2022. Available online: <https://dennikn.sk/minuta/2740846/> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

²⁸ "Defense Cooperation Agreement between the United States of America and Slovakia," Department of State of United States of America, February 3, 2022. Available online: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/22-401-Slovakia-DCA.pdf> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

²⁹ "U.S. Congress passes a grant of more than 200 million USD for Slovakia to help modernize the Slovak Armed Forces," Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, September 28, 2022. Available online: <https://www.mosr.sk/52014-en/kongres-spojonych-statov-schvalil-grant-pre-slovensko-vo-vyske-viac-ako-200-mil-dolarov-pouzite-budu-na-modernizaciu-os-sr/> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

³⁰ "Kaliňák avizuje súťaž na útočné pušky, uprednostní chce slovenských výrobcov," [Kaliňák announces an assault rifle tender, he wants Slovak manufacturers to be given precedence] *Daily Pravda*, January 1, 2024. Available online: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/695491-kalinak-avizuje-sutaz-na-utocne-pusky-uprednostnit-chce-slovenskych-vyrobco/> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

³¹ "Kaliňák: Nebudeme servilní. Obrannú dohodu s USA bude nutné upraviť," [Kaliňák: We will not be servile. The defense agreement with the USA has to be altered] *Daily Pravda*, October 28, 2023. Available online: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/686595-kalinak-nejbudeme-servilni-obrannu-dohodu-s-usa-bude-utne-upravit/> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

It is likely that the rhetorical positions of the new Slovak government will negatively affect our relations with allies and partners, including Ukraine. While dramatic shifts are unlikely to occur at the highest political level, working level cooperation with Slovakia could easily be deprioritized, slow down or even stagnate. For example, the Ján Kuciak Investigative Centre has stated that the intelligence services of our allies and partners have already begun restricting information-sharing with Slovak counterparts.³² Strong continuity can be seen in spheres that were already established before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, like the international presence of the Slovak armed forces. Slovak soldiers have been part of the NATO enhanced Forward Presence in Latvia since 2018. Furthermore Slovakia is a long-term participant in the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus and the EU's Operation ALTHEA in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

■ Defense industry

For the defense industry, 2023 was marked by a massive surge in demand that could not be met by existing production capacity, amid the decline of European militaries and the lack of large customers which would require bigger production lines. Although this has been true across the board, there was great demand for 155 mm artillery ammunition. Demand for shells shot up in European countries as well as in Ukraine, as they found themselves having to build up ammunition supplies.

At the NATO Vilnius Summit the Allies agreed the Defense Production Action Plan and to support the Defense Industrial Production Board in accelerating joint procurement and boosting production capacity, interoperability, and standardization.³³ Coordination between Allies led to a €1.2 billion contract with the NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) for 155 mm artillery

³² "How a compromised Fico ally could lead Slovak Intelligence into isolation," *VSQUARE*, January 22, 2024. Available online: https://vsquare.org/robert-fico-tibor-gaspar-intelligence-police-jan-kuciak/?fbclid=IwAR3u8ZJkqckTCjj7N5E5uUXJKezghw6m73EcONCM5BKKltjA18rxf_zj8PQ (accessed on February 2, 2024).

³³ "NATO's new Defence Industrial Production Board meets to boost defence industry potential," NATO, December 12, 2023. Available online: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_221435.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed on February 2, 2024).

ammunition. Since summer 2023, the NSPA has signed contracts for purchases amounting to almost \$10 billion.³⁴

The European Union came up with a number of initiatives to streamline procurement and expand production capacity. In March 2023, the Council approved a three-track policy for supplies from existing stocks, joint procurement with industry and an overall increase in production. It also pledged to deliver one million shells to Ukraine for one year, although the pledge was never made good. In July and October 2023, the Regulation on Supporting Ammunition Production (ASAP) and Regulation on Establishing an Instrument for the Reinforcement of the European Defense Industry through Common Procurement (EDIRPA) were adopted to ramp up ammunition and missiles production through joint procurement on the customer side and to provide financial support for producers on the supply side.³⁵

The ASAP scheme, in particular, served as an opportunity for the Slovak defense industry to find much-needed capital to expand production lines. In March, EU Commissioner Breton, responsible for the implementation of the European Defense Fund, visited Slovakia while on a fact-finding mission to EU member states to survey industrial production capacity. Only 15 companies in 15 of the 27 member states were manufacturing 155 mm ammunition.³⁶ In Slovakia, the manufacturer is the public-private company ZVS Holding. Before the war, it had been operating at around 60 per cent of production capacity. In the first seven months of 2023, its sales totaled €44 million, surpassing the €40 million it achieved for the whole of 2022.³⁷ The company

³⁴ "NSPA supports a coalition of NATO nations with 1.1 B EUR multinational contracts for 155 mm ammunition," *European Defence Review Online*, January 23, 2024. Available online: <https://www.edrmagazine.eu/nspa-supports-a-coalition-of-nato-nations-with-1-1-beur-multinational-contracts-for-155-mm-ammunition> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

³⁵ "State of Play—Ammunition Plan for Ukraine," European Parliament, November 2, 2023. Available online: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/754602/EPRS_ATA\(2023\)754602_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/754602/EPRS_ATA(2023)754602_EN.pdf) (accessed on February 2, 2024).

³⁶ "Eurokomisár Breton navštívil Slovensko," [EU Commissioner Breton visited Slovakia] European Commission's Representation to the Slovak Republic, March 23, 2023. Available online: <https://slovakia.representation.ec.europa.eu/news/eurokomisar-breton-navstivil-slovensko-2023-03-23-sk> (accessed on February 2, 2024)

³⁷ "Zbrojáři z Dubnice hlásia rekordné zisky. Vyrábajú veľkokalibrovú muníciu, nabrali dvesto ľudí," [Arms manufacturers in Dubnica report record profits. They produce large-caliber ammunition, they have hired two hundred people] *Daily Pravda*, September 5, 2023. Available online: <https://ekonomika.pravda.sk/firmy-a-trhy/clanok/680332-zbrojari-z-dubnice-hlasia-rekordne-zisky-vyrabaju-velkokalibrovu-municu-nabrali-dvesto-ludi/> (accessed on February 2, 2024)

plans to invest €31 million in 2023 and 2024 on modernizing and automating production lines.³⁸

Konstrukta Defence, which manufactures Zuzana 2 self-propelled howitzers, was in a similar situation. In 2022, the Slovak government decided to send eight Zuzana 2s to Ukraine which had originally been procured in 2018 for the Slovak armed forces. Subsequently, the governments of Denmark, Norway, and Germany ordered another 16 howitzers for Ukraine. Konstrukta's year-on-year profits increased 10-fold in 2022 and the workforce increased by 36 per cent to almost 200 workers. The company is currently able to produce around 20 howitzers a year. Production could double if new contracts were signed with immediately available capital. Under current capacity, its order book is full until 2025.³⁹

In the summer of 2023, Konstrukta Defence signed a memorandum of cooperation with PJSC Kramatorsk Heavy Duty Machine Tool Building Plant. The two companies agreed to jointly develop a new 155 mm howitzer and modernize Ukraine's Bohdana artillery platform.⁴⁰ In addition, Zuzana 2 has been gradually upgraded for use in combat, for example, the firing system has been adapted for the use of older artillery shells. The election of a new government in Slovakia has led to changes in this area of security and defense policy as well. The management of state-owned companies has been sacked, including proponents of joint ventures with Ukraine.⁴¹ The Zuzana 2 deliveries will be delayed, partly owing to the lack of a contract with a Ukrainian

producer for the barrels and muzzle brakes: the new management at Konstrukta favors Slovak companies.⁴²

Generally, Slovakia's defense industry has tended to lack sufficient capital, directly affecting both production capacity and research and development, which is already severely underfunded. High demand has led to growing problems finding skilled workers. And lastly, export support is both unsystematic and underdeveloped.⁴³ Many of these issues are structural and cannot be addressed quickly.

■ Countering hybrid threats

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has not just simply exposed hard security or military security issues but has also drawn attention to security challenges in the form of hybrid threats, increasingly known as hybrid influencing. Strategic communications, resilience, cognitive security, cyber-attacks, and countering disinformation are some of the most common issues framing policy and public debate in this area.

In Slovakia, the year 2023 was supposed to be focused on institutions and capacity building in public administration. The blueprint for the course of action was created as part of the "National project for enhancing resilience and capabilities of public administration against hybrid threats" led by the Ministry of Interior (MoI), and the "Action plan for coordination of countering hybrid threats" led by the MoD.⁴⁴

³⁸ "ZVS holding investuje do rozšírenia kapacít takmer 31 miliónov eur," [ZVS Holding invests almost €31 million to expand capacity] DMD Group, August 8, 2023. Available online: <https://www.dmdgroup.sk/novinky/zvs-holding-investuje-do-rozsirenia-kapacit-takmer-31-milionov-eur/> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

³⁹ "Adapt to survive: Slovakia's arms industry faces new reality," The Center For European Policy Analysis, January 9, 2024. Available online: <https://cepa.org/article/adapt-to-survive-slovakias-arms-industry-faces-new-reality/> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

⁴⁰ "Slovakia's no bullets for Ukraine pledge* (Conditions Apply)," The Center For European Policy Analysis, December 5, 2023. Available online: <https://cepa.org/article/slovakias-no-bullets-for-ukraine-pledge-conditions-apply/> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

⁴¹ "Skončil šéf zbrojovky, ktorá vyrába húfnice Zuzana. Mal spory s Kaliňákovým človekom, za kľúčový trh považoval Ukrajinu," [The boss of the Zuzana howitzers arms manufacturer is finished. He disagreed with Kaliňák's man, he considered Ukraine a key market] *Denník N*, November 16, 2023. Available online: <https://e.dennikn.sk/3681068/skoncil-sef-zbrojovky-ktora-vyraba-hufnice-zuzana-mal-spory-s-kalinakovym-clovekom-za-klucovy-trh-povazoval-ukrajinu/> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

⁴² "Slovenské húfnice pre Ukrajinu meškajú," [Slovak howitzers for Ukraine delayed] *Denník N*, January 16, 2024. Available online: <https://e.dennikn.sk/3766498/slovenske-hufnice-pre-ukrajinu-meskaju/?ref=tit> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

⁴³ "Slovak defence industry up to 2023: navigating through new reality towards rebirth," Adapt Institute, December 15, 2023. Available online: <https://www.adaptinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Slovak-Defence-Industry-Up-to-2030.pdf> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

⁴⁴ "Národný projekt: Zvýšenie odolnosti Slovenska voči hybridným hrozbám pomocou posilnenia kapacít verejnej správy – základné informácie," [National project: Making Slovakia more resistant to hybrid threats by improving public administration capacity—basic information] Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats, Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic. Available online: <https://www.hybridnehrozby.sk/narodny-projekt/> (accessed on February 2, 2024); See also "Akčný plán koordinácie boja proti hybridným hrozbám: 2022–2024," [Hybrid Threat Coordination Action Plan: 2022–2024] Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic. Available online: <https://www.hybridnehrozby.sk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/APHH-2022.pdf> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Security Authority, Government Office, National Security Analysis Centre and a few other agencies were also involved.

Implementation was slow from the beginning and suffered from a lack of prioritization, excessive bureaucracy, vaguely formulated tasks and the failure of some stakeholders to understand their agendas properly. Furthermore, countering hybrid threats became increasingly politically sensitive. The situation culminated in May 2023 when Robert Fico and a couple of other opposition MPs claimed that a Slovak group had asked the NATO Counter-Hybrid Support Teams to interfere in the parliamentary election to the detriment of the opposition—a claim that was based on documents leaked from a working meeting between NATO officials, a Slovak NGO expert, and members of the Slovak public administration.⁴⁵ That put paid to even the little progress achieved, with the new government forcing resignations and not extending the contracts of some members of staff at the new Countering Hybrid Threats and Strategic Communications Units.⁴⁶

■ Conclusion

Overall the picture of Slovak security and defense policy in 2023 is somewhat fragmented. On one hand, defense planning, the legislative framework, international cooperation, modernization, and the arms industry have adapted to the new reality following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. On the other hand, there is a solid case for saying that the domestic political turmoil and instability slowed and, in some cases, even blocked initiatives like the active reserves reform. On the top of that, the early parliamentary elections in September 2023 led to a new government whose policy positions on the Russian–Ukrainian war conflict with those prevailing in NATO and the EU.

⁴⁵ “Fico: state officials and NGOs called opposition [a] hybrid threat in Brussels,” *TASR*, May 31, 2023. Available online: <https://www.tasr.sk/tasr-clanok/TASR:2023053100000250> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

⁴⁶ “Vláda sa mstí úradníkom, ktorí bojovali proti ruskej propagande. V hre sú milióny eur,” [The government is taking revenge on officials who fought against Russian propaganda. Millions of euros are at stake] *Sme Daily*, December 6, 2024. Available online: <https://domov.sme.sk/c/23252927/propaganda-hybridne-hrozby-hoaxy-stat-zmeny.html> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

Reading the Government Program Manifesto 2023–2027: “A better, calmer, safer life” raises concerns about possible attempts to erect a new Iron Curtain between the West and the East. Within the remits of its EU and NATO membership, Slovakia will act sovereignly and continue to develop foreign policy in all four “cardinal directions.” This and the “Slovakia first” principle evoked in the manifesto means that we can assume that foreign policy and therefore security and defense policy will be more transactional than values-based.⁴⁷ The “new pragmatism”, as it was called by Prime Minister of Ukraine Denis Smyhal at a meeting with the Slovak Prime Minister in January 2024 is the baseline of Slovak–Ukrainian relations.⁴⁸ Tensions may appear between the sovereignty rhetoric and EU and NATO discussions. For now though, the actions and decisions the Slovak government has taken so far have been more moderate than the rhetoric. Talking the talk but not walking the walk could be the emerging modus operandi of Slovak foreign policy. Nonetheless, we cannot rule out the possibility of Slovak leaders living up to the rhetoric and breaking the consensus within the EU and the NATO.

Many would argue that choosing opportunism and a transactional foreign policy over the values-based partnerships and alliances that have taken many years to create is a dubious strategy for a small country with a highly integrated and open economy, a frontline state, in a far worse and uncertain security environment. While it is certainly possible to find a delicate balance between these two positions, one can argue that it requires experienced statesmanship backed by a highly professional administration. Whether Slovakia is capable of following such a fine line remains to be seen.

⁴⁷ “Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic for 2023–2027. ‘A better, calmer, safer life,’” Government of the Slovak Republic, November 13, 2023. Available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=535376> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

⁴⁸ “Ukrainian and Slovak PMs agree to ‘New Pragmatism’ to aid strained relations,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 24, 2024. Available online: <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-slovakia-shmyhal-meeting-pragmatism-relations-aid/32790125.html> (accessed on February 2, 2024).





Priorities of Slovakia's foreign policy



Tomáš Strážay

Changing geometry of Central Europe—where does Slovakia fit?

2023 was a special year as it was the 30th anniversary of the Slovak Republic. The occasion was used as a pretext for organizing commemorative events, both bilateral and multilateral.

It also stood out because Slovakia had three different governments in the space of 12 months. The changes affected the dynamics of bilateral ties with neighboring countries and various regional formats.

The ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine continued to be an important factor in bilateral relations with neighbors and regional cooperation. Prior to the last parliamentary election in Slovakia political cooperation among the Visegrad Four countries had been put on hold due to deep dividing lines between Hungary on one side and the remaining three countries on the other over positions on supporting Ukraine and cooperation with Russia. The creation of a new government led by Robert Fico brought Slovakia symbolically closer to Hungary, whereas in Poland the new government has distanced itself from the Viktor Orbán government and intensified cooperation with the Czech Republic.

Internal developments in Central European countries were another factor affecting the intensity and scope of regional cooperation. The willingness of the new Slovak government to revitalize Visegrad cooperation has clashed with the political reality of deepening dividing lines between the participating countries. The Slavkov Triangle (S3) format, despite being heavily promoted by the previous Heger and Odor governments, has stagnated, mostly owing to divergences among the participating countries over key EU policies. The Three Seas Initiative (3SI), originally set up by the Polish and Croatian presidents has had to confront underfunding and a lack of interest among some participating countries, including Slovakia. As a result Bucharest Nine (B9) was one of the most effective regional formats in 2023, partly because of its focus on NATO and security issues and partly because the summit of the presidents of B9 countries was held in Slovakia.

Besides assessing Slovakia's engagement in these regional initiatives, the article analyzes bilateral relation between Slovakia and four neighboring countries — Austria, Czechia, Hungary, and Poland. Bilateral relations with Ukraine, the remaining neighboring country, are assessed in a separate chapter of the Yearbook.

■ Bilateral relations with neighboring countries

Relations with the Czech Republic

Slovak–Czech relations continued to be very close, as demonstrated by newly elected Czech President Petr Pavel making Slovakia the destination of his first official visit and the holding of a commemorative joint meeting of the Slovak and Czech governments. Relations remained close between the prime ministers, with both Ľudovít Ódor and Robert Fico traveling to Prague on official visits.

Excellent neighborly relations were exemplified by Czech President Miloš Zeman attending a ceremony commemorating the founding of the Slovak Republic in January 2023. Miloš Zeman visited Slovakia again in February, but this time it was to bid farewell.¹ Then, in March, President Pavel paid an official visit.² Besides honoring the memory of the first President of the Czechoslovak Republic Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the presidents also underlined the need to respond adequately to hybrid threats and fight disinformation. President Zuzana Čaputová thanked her Czech counterpart for the Czech Republic's contribution to Slovakia's air defense and the presence of the Czech troops on Slovak territory as part of the NATO multinational battle group

¹ "Miloš Zeman sa rozlúčil so Slovenskom vo Vysokých Tatrách," [Miloš Zeman said goodbye to Slovakia in the High Tatras] Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, February 7, 2023. Available online: <https://www.prezident.sk/article/milos-zeman-sa-rozlucil-so-slovenskom-vo-vysokych-tatrach/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

² "Petr Pavel pricestoval na nástupnú návštevu Slovenska," [Petr Pavel has arrived on an initial visit to Slovakia] Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, March 13, 2023. Available online: <https://www.prezident.sk/article/petr-pavel-pricestoval-na-nastupnu-navstevu-slovenska/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

being set up as part of the Forward Presence. President Pavel's official visit was not his first meeting with his Slovak counterpart, as Zuzana Čaputová took the opportunity to take part in Petr Pavel's election night and congratulate him in person on his victory. Soon after his first official visit to Slovakia the presidents met again in April on a joint trip to Kyiv. There they met with the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenski. The three presidents published a joint statement condemning the Russian aggression against Ukraine and noting that it was Ukraine's sovereign right to make its own decisions on its future and that it had chosen the EU and transatlantic integrationist structures. The Slovak and Czech presidents also declared that their countries would provide all possible support for Ukraine's defense capabilities. To achieve the common goals set out in the statement, the three presidents declared that they would exploit all opportunities at the "bilateral, trilateral and multilateral levels."³

The Czech prime minister also attended Slovakia's independence celebrations, together with the speaker of the lower chamber of the Czech parliament Markéta Pekarová Adamová. The main prime ministerial event was a joint governmental session between the two countries, which took place in Trenčín on April 3rd. During the eighth governmental meeting, the prime ministers and ministers agreed to provide unconditional support to Ukraine, help with the post-war reconstruction, and collaborate on security and defense, as well as energy security.⁴ These issues were further discussed during

³ "Spoločné vyhlásenie prezidentov SR, ČR a Ukrajiny," [Joint statement of the presidents of the Slovak Republic, the Czech Republic and Ukraine] Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, April 28, 2023. Available online: <https://www.prezident.sk/article/spolocne-vyhlasenie-prezidentov-sr-cr-a-ukrajiny/> (accessed on February 10, 2023).

⁴ "Spoločné zasadnutie členov vlád Slovenskej republiky a Českej republiky v Trenčíne," [Joint meeting of members of the governments of the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic in Trenčín] Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, April 3, 2023. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/spolocne-zasadnutie-clenov-vlad-slovenskej-republiky-a-ceskej-republiky-v-trencine/> (accessed on February 10, 2024). See also "Slávnostné spoločné vyhlásenie predsedov vlád Slovenskej republiky a Českej republiky dňa 3. apríla 2023 v Trenčíne," [Ceremonial joint declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic on April 3, 2023 in Trenčín] Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, April 2, 2024. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/slavnostne-spolocne-vyhlasenie-predsedov-vlad-slovenskej-republiky-a-ceskej-republiky-dna-3-aprila-2023-v-trencine/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

the Czech prime minister's May visit to Bratislava⁵ and the official visit by the recently appointed Prime Minister Ódor to Prague⁶.

The new government led by Prime Minister Robert Fico, created following the September 30th parliamentary elections, launched its official relations with the Czechs at the EU summit in Brussels on October 27, 2023. The prime ministers agreed to continue the very good bilateral relations and the Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský invited his Slovak counterpart Juraj Blanár to Prague.⁷ Blanár's visit paved the way for the first official visit by the new Slovak prime minister, Robert Fico, although it took some effort.⁸ The two prime ministers agreed on the need for close relations to continue between the two countries despite the deepening political differences; however, it soon became clear that Slovakia's positions on supporting Ukraine and its categorical refusal to supply military aid to Ukraine would become a major dividing factor.⁹ The hostile rhetoric of the Slovak prime minister, particularly in his video statements shared on social media as well as in media articles, was also in evidence at a long-expected summit between the Visegrad prime ministers in Prague.¹⁰ That led to a further deterioration in political relations between

⁵ Prime ministers Ódor and Fiala also met French president Emmanuel Macron in Bratislava. See "Ódor s Fialom rokovali o povojnovej obnove Ukrajiny či energetike," [Ódor and Fiala discussed the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine and energy] Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic May 31, 2023. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/odor-s-fialom-rokovali-o-povojnovej-obnove-ukrajiny-ci-energetike/> (accessed on February 10, 2023).

⁶ "Premiér Ludovít Ódor na oficiálnej návšteve Českej republiky," [Prime Minister Ludovít Ódor on an official visit to the Czech Republic] Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, July 4, 2023. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/premier-ludovit-odor-na-oficialnej-navsteve-ceskej-republiky/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

⁷ "Fico sa v Bruseli stretol s Fialom, zhodli sa na potrebe pokračovať v spolupráci," [Fico met with Fiala in Brussels, they agreed on the need to continue cooperation] Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, October 27, 2023. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/fico-sa-v-bruseli-stretol-s-fialom-zhodli-sa-na-potrebe-pokracovat-v-spolupraci/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

⁸ The meeting between Robert Fico and Petr Pavel was confirmed at the very last moment. During his visit, Robert Fico met President of the Senate Jan Vystrčil and Speaker of the Lower Chamber of the Czech Parliament Markéta Pekarová Adamová, as well as the former prime minister and leader of the opposition party ANO, Andrej Babiš and former Czech President Miloš Zeman.

⁹ "Fico: Vzťahy SR a ČR narušil zub času, musíme im dať konkrétny obsah," [Fico: Relations between the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic have been ravaged by time, we must give substance to them] November 24, 2023. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/fico-vztahy-sr-a-cr-narusil-zub-casu-musime-im-dat-konkretny-obsah/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

¹⁰ "Premiér: Bolo to jedno z najpodstatnejších stretnutí pre budúcnosť V4," [Prime Minister: It was one of the most important meetings for the future of the V4] February 27, 2024. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/premier-bolo-to-jedno-z-najpodstatnejších-stretnuti-pre-buducnost-v4/> (accessed on February 29, 2024).

the two prime ministers and the two countries. Then Blanár met with Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov on the margins of the Antalya Diplomatic Forum on March 2, 2024,¹¹ leading the Czech government to cancel a joint session of the Czech and Slovak governments. Fico's critical response to the cancellation was another key factor, amid his claim that the decision to cancel decision could harm Slovak–Czech relations.¹² Members of the Czech opposition were also critical. Slovak–Czech relations have hit another low, comparable to that of relations between the two republics after the split of Czechoslovakia. Although bilateral relations continue on other levels, partly because of the activities of the two ambassadors—experienced diplomats Ingrid Brocková and Rudolf Jindrák—the unanimous decision of the Czech side can be taken as a signal that Slovakia is diverging from its closest neighbor as well as jointly respected values.

Slovak–Hungarian relations

Hungarian President Katalin Novák did not attend the 30th anniversary celebrations of Slovak statehood, in contrast to her partners from Austria, the Czech Republic and Poland. She sent her apologies and had the opportunity to meet her Slovak counterpart multilaterally at the summit of the presidents of B9 countries held in Bratislava in June. The main outcome of the summit was a declaration of unconditional support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.¹³ Following that there was the Three Seas Initiative Summit in Bucharest on September 6, 2023. The Slovak and Hungarian presidents

¹¹ "Minister Juraj Blanár na diplomatickom fóre v Antalyi: Bez diplomacie sa nedá nájsť diplomatické riešenie a žiadne vojny sa neskončia," [Minister Juraj Blanár at the diplomatic forum in Antalya: Without diplomacy, a diplomatic solution cannot be found and no war can end] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, March 4, 2024. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=21045492 (accessed on March 6, 2024).

¹² "Česká vláda ukončila medzivládne konzultácie so Slovenskom. Ohrozila naše vzťahy, lebo má záujem podporovať vojnu, reaguje Fico," [The Czech government has ended intergovernmental consultations with Slovakia. It threatened our relations because it is in its interest to encourage the war, responds Fico] *ta3/TASR*, March 6, 2024. Available online: <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/928169/ceska-vlada-ukoncila-medzivladne-konzultacie-so-slovenskom-ohrozila-nase-vztahy-lebo-ma-zaujem-podporovat-vojnu-reaguje-fico> (accessed on March 8, 2024).

¹³ "Spoločné vyhlásenie prezidentov B9," [Joint statement of the B9 presidents] Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, June 6, 2023. Available online: <https://www.prezident.sk/article/spolocne-vyhlasenie-prezidentov-b9/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

used that meeting as an opportunity to discuss illegal migration, which was a major issue in the summer. The presidents agreed that better protection of the Schengen border between Hungary and Serbia was a necessary step in tackling the migration challenge.¹⁴ The regular summit of the presidents of the V4 countries organized by President Pavel as part of the Czech V4 Presidency in November was another opportunity to discuss important regional issues.¹⁵

The breaking point in relations with Hungary was the Slovak parliamentary elections. Prior to the elections, the Foreign Minister, Miroslav Wlachovský, had paid an official visit to Budapest. He touched upon the issue of the Russian aggression in Ukraine at a meeting with his Hungarian counterpart, stating that the proximity of the war meant that no country could declare that the conflict was not a concern. The Minister thanked Hungary for joining the Czech Republic and Poland in protecting Slovak airspace.¹⁶ Closer to the elections, the ambassador of Hungary was summoned twice to the foreign ministry—once to explain the Hungarian prime minister's inappropriate statements about the territorial integrity of Slovakia¹⁷ and once concerning the behavior of the Hungarian foreign minister in southern Slovakia regarding interference in the election campaign¹⁸.

¹⁴ "Prezidentka sa zúčastnila na samite lídrov Iniciatívy Trojmorja," [The President attended the summit of the leaders of the Three Seas Initiative] Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, September 6, 2023. Available online: <https://www.prezident.sk/article/prezidentka-sa-zucastnila-na-samite-lidrov-iniciativy-trojmorja/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

¹⁵ "Prezidentka sa zúčastnila na samite hláv štátov V4 v Prahe," [The President attended the summit of the V4 heads of state in Prague] Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, November 22, 2023. Available online: <https://www.prezident.sk/article/prezidentka-sa-zucastnila-na-samite-hlav-statov-v4-v-prahe/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

¹⁶ "Minister Miroslav Wlachovský v Maďarsku: Chceme stavať na tom, čo nás spája a pozeráť sa do budúcnosti," [Minister Miroslav Wlachovský in Hungary: We want to build on what unites us and look to the future] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, July 3, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=18464835 (accessed on February 10, 2024).

¹⁷ "MZVEZ SR si predvolalo veľvyslanca Maďarska na Slovensku," [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic summoned the Hungarian ambassador to Slovakia] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, July 24, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=18675832 (accessed on February 10, 2024).

¹⁸ "MZVEZ SR si pre vyjadrenia ministra P. Szijjártóa na Slovensku predvolalo maďarského veľvyslanca," [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic summoned the Hungarian ambassador to Slovakia because of statements made by Minister P. Szijjártó] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, September 27, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19304641 (accessed on February 10, 2024).

Slovak government representatives changed approach after the formation of the Robert Fico government. The European Nuclear Forum meeting attended by the Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó presented an opportunity to arrange a meeting with the Slovak Prime Minister, as well as the Foreign Minister Blanár. The message from the meeting was positive, indicating tangible results of cooperation in the economic sphere and on infrastructure, as well as a mutual interest in strengthening Visegrad cooperation.¹⁹ It was clear there was support for regional cooperation in the V4 format at a meeting between the state secretary Marek Eštok and the Hungarian Minister for European Affairs János Bóka in Budapest in December.²⁰ Economic cooperation, nuclear energy, transport infrastructure and cross-border cooperation were the main topics discussed during Juraj Blanár's visit to Budapest in December. Another issue touched on during the visit was the Slovak minority in Hungary, as the Slovak minister met with representatives of the Slovak community.²¹ The most visible sign of a change in attitude toward Hungary was Robert Fico's official visit to Hungary in January 2024. At a meeting with Viktor Orbán, the importance of good neighborly relations was noted by both and the two had similar attitudes to the war in Ukraine, nuclear energy and the importance of revitalizing Visegrad cooperation. The prime ministers opposed interference by the EU and EU institutions in domestic affairs, stating that such actions were incompatible with sovereignty. Robert

¹⁹ "Minister Juraj Blanár: Nezabúdame na hodnotu dobrého susedstva s Maďarskom, preto sa usilujeme o korektné vzťahy a rozvoj spolupráce," [Minister Juraj Blanár: We will not forget the importance of having a good neighborhood with Hungary, which is why we seek respectful relations and cooperation] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, November 7, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19719366 (accessed on February 10, 2024).

²⁰ "Štátny tajomník Marek Eštok v Budapešti: Strategický význam regionálnej spolupráce vrátane V4 vidíme aj v riešení aktuálnych otázok európskej agendy," [State Secretary Marek Eštok in Budapest: The strategic importance of regional cooperation, including the V4, is partly about solving issues on the European agenda] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, December 7, 2022. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19982101 (accessed on February 10, 2024).

²¹ "Minister Juraj Blanár v Budapešti: Záleží nám na rozvoji partnerstva a obojstranne prospešnej spolupráce," [Minister Juraj Blanár in Budapest: Working on our partnership and mutually beneficial cooperation is important to us] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, December 20, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=20067432 (accessed on February 10, 2024).

Fico rejected all attempts to remove Hungary's EU voting rights, pointing out such a step required EU member state unanimity.²²

Slovak-Polish relations

Bilateral relations between Slovakia and its northern neighbor were influenced by the parliamentary elections in the two countries and the formation of new governments. The Polish general elections were held just two weeks after the Slovak elections.

The Slovak president met her Polish counterpart at multilateral meetings (B9, 3SI, V4), and the presidents communicated directly as well. In January they discussed important issues related to regional and European security over the phone.²³ The strategic importance of Poland was underlined at a bilateral meeting between the Slovak Foreign Minister Miroslav Wlachovský and his Polish counterpart Zbigniew Rau in Warsaw. The ministers discussed the post-war security architecture in Europe and the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine.²⁴ Support for Ukraine had previously been discussed by the state secretaries when Ingrid Brocková met with her Polish counterpart Wojciech Gerwel. Opportunities for economic cooperation, and cooperation in transport and energy were another topic. The two state secretaries attended the 6th Slovak-Polish Discussion Forum, organized in Warsaw in cooperation with the Slovak Foreign Policy Association and Warsaw-based Centre for Eastern

²² "Robert Fico v Budapešti: Krajina nemôže byť potrestaná za to, že bojuje za svoju suverenitu," [Robert Fico in Budapest: A country cannot be punished for fighting for its sovereignty] Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, January 16, 2024. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/robert-fico-v-budapesti-krajina-nemoze-byt-potrestana-za-to-ze-bojuje-za-svoju-suverenitu/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

²³ "Prezidentka telefonovala s A. Dudom, hovorili o situácii v Rusku," [The President spoke on the phone with A. Duda, they talked about the situation in Russia] Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, June 25, 2023. Available online: <https://www.prezident.sk/flash-news/4/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

²⁴ "Minister Wlachovský vo Varšave: Ruská agresia zintenzívnila našu spoluprácu s Poľskom, spoločne sa pripravujeme aj na obnovu Ukrajiny, kde práve jej najbližší susedia zohrajú kľúčovú úlohu," [Minister Wlachovský in Warsaw: the Russian aggression has intensified our cooperation with Poland, we are jointly preparing for the restoration of Ukraine, in which its closest neighbors will play a key role] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, May 25, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=18006320 (accessed on February 10, 2024).

Studies.²⁵ The deputy foreign ministers — Andrej Stančík and Arkadiusz Mułarczyk — met near the Slovak border, in Nowy Sacz. Besides security issues, the main focus was on cross-border and regional cooperation.²⁶

The Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Szymon Szykowski vel Sęk, who had only been in office for two weeks, visited Bratislava during his quick tour of the Central European capitals. At a meeting with the Slovak Foreign Minister Blanár he concentrated on the coordination of positions on the European Union reforms.²⁷ However, given that the Morawiecki government had only been in power for a short period after the October elections, the meeting was not of great importance. Soon after his visit Radosław Sikorski was appointed foreign minister and his position on the EU is quite different. The only bilateral contact with Sikorski was a phone call. Besides other issues, ministers Blanár and Sikorski discussed border protection and illegal migration.²⁸ In response to an increase in the numbers of migrants, Poland introduced temporary border controls on the Slovak-Polish border. Minister Blanár also invited his Polish counterpart to visit Slovakia. As of February 2024, there

²⁵ "Štátna tajomníčka Brocková po rokovaní s poľským partnerom: Máme spoločný záväzok pomáhať Ukrajine brániť svoju nezávislosť a slobodu," [State Secretary Brocková after meeting her Polish partner: We share a commitment to helping Ukraine defend its independence and freedom] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, March 28, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=17230761 (accessed on February 10, 2024).

²⁶ "Andrej Stančík v Nowom Saczi: Poľsko je nielen našim susedom, ale aj spojencom a priateľom. Máme záujem o posilnenie našej cezhraničnej spolupráce, [Andrej Stančík in Nowy Sacz: Poland is not just our neighbor, but also an ally and friend. We are interested in strengthening cross-border cooperation] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, March 13, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=17027415 (accessed on February 10, 2024).

²⁷ "Minister Szymon Szykowski vel Sęk holds bilateral consultations on reform of Treaties," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, December 1, 2023. Available online: <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/minister-szymon-szykowski-vel-sek-holds-bilateral-consultations-on-reform-of-treaties> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

²⁸ "Minister Juraj Blanár telefonoval s novým poľským ministrom: Poľsko je náš dôležitý partner, oceňujeme význam susedstva a chceme rozvíjať vzťahy v regióne aj v rámci EÚ," [Minister Juraj Blanár spoke on the phone with the new Polish minister: Poland is an important partner, we appreciate the importance of the neighborhood and want to improve relations in the region and within the EU] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, December 14, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/web/varsava/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=20027360 (accessed on February 10, 2024).

has been no official bilateral visit by a Slovak or Polish government official. However, we should note that the new Polish ambassador Maciej Ruczaj took office in October 2023.

Bilateral relations with Austria

The main channel of communication with the Austrian Foreign Minister was the Slavkov Triangle (S3) meetings, although regular bilateral contact was maintained.

President of Austria Alexander van der Bellen accepted an invitation to the commemoration of Slovak independence, at which he was joined by counterparts from the Czech Republic and Poland. In January 2024 he traveled to Bratislava for an official bilateral visit. It was his first official visit after his ceremonial inauguration as President of Austria for his second term. During the visit he had a meeting with the President Zuzana Čaputová and with the prime minister Eduard Heger.²⁹

Illegal migration was also an important issue in bilateral relations with Austria. Foreign Minister Miroslav Wlachovský talked to his Austrian partner Alexander Schallenberg on the phone and highlighted the need to coordinate steps on migration. He was critical of Hungary's position on the issue as Hungary does not register migrants and does not allow them to ask for asylum. Hungary also refused to implement the readmission agreement with Slovakia and released people smugglers from prison — all of which were factors behind the increase in migration across Slovak territory.³⁰

Following a phone call in October with the newly appointed foreign minister, Juraj Blanár, Alexander Schallenberg visited Vienna. In talks with his Austrian counterpart the minister focused on illegal migration, the Western

²⁹ "Rakúsky prezident pricestoval na oficiálnu návštevu SR," [The Austrian president has arrived on an official visit to Slovakia] Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, January 31, 2023. Available online: <https://www.prezident.sk/article/rakusky-prezident-pricestoval-na-oficialnu-navstevu-sr/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

³⁰ "Minister Wlachovský after talks with his Austrian counterpart: we are actively communicating and coordinating. Migration is a regional problem, we can only solve it together with a rules-based, responsible approach by each country," Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, September 7, 2023. Available online: https://mzv.sk/en/web/vieden/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19117518 (accessed on February 10, 2024).

Balkans, and the situation in Ukraine and the Middle East. Interestingly, although regional cooperation was discussed, there was no mention of the Slavkov Triangle (S3). Minister Juraj Blanár also met with Karoline Edtstadler, Federal Minister for the European Union and the Constitution. The main discussion topic was European policy, particularly EU enlargement.³¹ Regarding bilateral relations, we should not overlook the change of ambassadors — the new Slovak ambassador in Vienna is Jozef Polakovič and the Austrian ambassador in Bratislava is Johannes Wimmer.

■ Regional Cooperation

Visegrad Cooperation (V4)

Thirty years of V4 cooperation has led to the formation of ties and contacts at government and non-government levels. The Visegrad Group has represented an important tool for Slovakia, a relatively small country, for promoting its own interests and agendas in selected areas, not just in the Central European region, but also in the EU. The Slovak Republic therefore quite naturally considered cooperation within the V4 to be an important priority in foreign and European policy, despite the V4's role having varied.

At one time Slovakia was an agenda setter in Visegrad cooperation, but that changed after the new government took office in 2020. The emphasis shifted to an individual approach, bilateral cooperation or ad hoc cooperation with various EU members, not necessarily in Central Europe. Of all the regional cooperation formats, preference was given to the S3. That informed the way the government responded to the different positions of other V4 countries on issues of strategic importance, e.g. the rule of law mechanism. The situation became even more complicated after the escalation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. The deepening differences between Poland, Czechia and Slovakia on one side and Hungary on the other

³¹ "Minister Juraj Blanár in Vienna: Austria is more than a neighbour to us. We want to continue to turn our proximity and close cooperation into successful projects that will benefit both citizens and businesses," Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, November 22, 2023. Available online: https://mzv.sk/en/web/vieden/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19852316 (accessed on February 10, 2024).

meant that the V4 was most affected by the war in Ukraine. Despite more than 30 years together and robust sectoral cooperation, the V4 fell victim to divergences in political positions. The slowdown in cooperation was already in evidence during the 2021/2022 Hungarian presidency: with substantially fewer political meetings compared to previous presidencies. The Slovak V4 Presidency in 2022/23, as well as the 2023/24 Czech V4 Presidency continued the trend. With the exception of the meeting of V4 prime ministers which formally concluded Slovakia's V4 presidency and summit of the presidents of V4 countries hosted by President Petr Pavel, in 2023 no official political meeting was held in the V4 format.³²

Following the September parliamentary elections, revitalizing Visegrad cooperation was one of the aims set out by the newly formed Slovak government.³³ Revitalization was also stressed in various statements by Prime Minister Fico³⁴ and at meetings between foreign minister Blanár and his Czech and Hungarian counterparts³⁵. Minister Ján Lipavský was not terribly enthusiastic,

³² "Prezidentka sa zúčastnila na samite hláv štátov V4 v Prahe," [The President attended the summit of the V4 heads of state in Prague] Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, November 22, 2023. Available online: <https://www.prezident.sk/article/prezidentka-sa-zucastnila-na-samite-hlav-statov-v4-v-prahe/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

³³ "Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky 2023 – 2027," [Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic 2023–2027] National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2023. Available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=535376> (assessed on February 10, 2024).

³⁴ See, for instance, "Premiér: Našou ambíciou je oživiť silu a dynamiku V4," [Prime Minister: It is our ambition is to revive the power and dynamism of the V4] Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, December 29, 2023. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/premier-nasou-ambiciou-je-ozivit-silu-a-dynamiku-v4/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

³⁵ See, for instance, the press conference of the Slovak Foreign Minister Juraj Blanár and his Czech counterpart Jan Lipavský. "Minister Juraj Blanár v Prahe: Naše výnimočné vzťahy s Českom nesmú zostať len tradíciou. Niet pre nás bližšieho partnera, preto chceme rozvíjať strategickú spoluprácu vo všetkých smeroch a v prospech našich občanov," [Minister Juraj Blanár in Prague: Our exceptional relations with the Czech Republic must not remain a tradition only. There is no closer partner, therefore we want to work on strategic cooperation in all directions and for the benefit of our citizens] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, November 6, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19710559 (accessed on February 10, 2024). Slovakia's active approach to the V4 was stressed at a meeting between Blanár and the Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó. "Minister Juraj Blanár: Nezabúdame na hodnotu dobrého susedstva s Maďarskom, preto sa usilujeme o korektné vzťahy a rozvoj spolupráce," [Minister Juraj Blanár: We will not forget the importance of having a good neighborhood with Hungary, which is why we seek respectful relations and cooperation] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, November 8, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19719366 (accessed on February 10, 2024).

but Péter Szijjártó was more positive. The need to rejuvenate the V4 was underlined at a meeting between Fico and Orbán in Budapest.³⁶ The long-expected summit of the V4 prime ministers revealed a deep cleavage between the Czech Republic and Poland on one side and Hungary and Slovakia on the other; nonetheless, the prime minister referred to it as one of the most important summits of V4 regional cooperation.³⁷

Disregarding the political issues overshadowing what was in many ways well-functioning sectoral cooperation, the most active element of Visegrad cooperation was the International Visegrad Fund. In fact, civic Visegrad had begun to supersede political Visegrad. Revealingly the V4 embassies in third countries focused their joint activities on cultural events, avoiding regular political consultations.

The Slavkov Triangle (S3)

With the deepening dividing lines and hibernation of V4 political cooperation, the preferred format of regional cooperation among Slovak political leaders has become the Slavkov Triangle (S3), or at least that was the case up until the change of government in Slovakia in autumn 2023.

S3 was seen as a platform for mutually beneficial relations between the three countries, including sectoral cooperation and issues of European importance, such as the EU budget, the rule of law, support for the Western Balkans and migration. The main goals of Slovakia's presidency of the S3 (July 2022–July 2023) were supporting Ukraine and the Czech presidency of the Council of the EU, where Austria and Slovakia were expected to help their Czech

³⁶ "Robert Fico v Budapešti: Krajina nemôže byť potrestaná za to, že bojuje za svoju suverenitu," [Robert Fico in Budapest: A country cannot be punished for fighting for its sovereignty] Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, January 16, 2024. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/robert-fico-v-budapesti-krajina-nemoze-byt-potrestana-za-to-ze-bojuje-za-svoju-suverenitu/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

³⁷ "Premiér: Bolo to jedno z najpodstatnejších stretnutí pre budúcnosť V4," [Prime Minister: It was one of the most important meetings for the future of the V4] Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, February 27, 2024. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/premier-bolo-to-jedno-z-najpodstatnejших-stretnuti-pre-buducnost-v4/> (accessed on February 29, 2024).

partner to implement the presidency agenda.³⁸ The ministerial level dominated in 2023, and the S3 ministers even met on a joint discussion panel at the Globsec Bratislava conference.³⁹

Cooperation did not simply take place between the three S3 countries; the S3+ formula presented opportunities to involve other actors. A joint trip by the foreign ministers Alexander Schallenger, Ján Lipavský and Miroslav Wlachovský to Skopje, where they gave full backing to North Macedonia's ambitions regarding EU accession, serves as an example.⁴⁰ The S3 even sought cooperation with partners outside Europe, as can be seen in the S3+India foreign minister meeting.⁴¹ A joint waste management project by S3 countries in Lebanon.

Given the nature and focus of S3, Slovak governments did not consider it a competitor to or even a replacement for the Visegrad Group until 2020. Prior to the September 2023 snap elections in Slovakia, the tendency was to favor the S3 format for discussing EU related issues because both the Czech Republic and Austria were considered like-minded countries on this (in contrast to Hungary and Poland.) Whether this will continue remains unclear and will depend on the willingness of Austria and especially the Czech

³⁸ "Ivan Korčok: Počas nášho predsedníctva vo formáte Slavkovskej spolupráce budeme stavať na spoločných hodnotách," [Ivan Korčok: In our presidency of the Slavkov cooperation format, we will build on common values] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, June 20, 2022. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=12822955 (accessed on February 29, 2024).

³⁹ "Minister Wlachovský: Spolupráca v rámci Slavkovského formátu je čoraz aktívnejšia, rozvíjať ju chceme aj smerom k našim partnerom na západnom Balkáne," [Minister Wlachovský: Cooperation within the Slavkov format is increasing, we want to extend it to our partners in the Western Balkans] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, May 29, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=18047587 (accessed on February 10, 2024).

⁴⁰ "Minister Wlachovský v Skopje: Oceňujeme pokrok, ktorý Severné Macedónsko dosiahlo pri eurointegračnom procese, teraz však nesmie poľaviť, ale stavať na dosiahnutých výsledkoch," [Minister Wlachovský in Skopje: We appreciate the progress that North Macedonia has achieved in the European integration process, but it must not slack off now, it has to build on the existing results] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, July 13, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=18569504 (accessed on February 10, 2024).

⁴¹ "S3 countries and India want to end the war in Ukraine," *Radio Slovakia International* [online], January 3, 2023. Available online: <https://enrsi.rtvs.sk/articles/news/313416/s3-countries-and-india-want-to-end-the-war-in-ukraine> (accessed on February 29, 2024).

Republic to invest in the format given the new political reality in the region. The new foreign minister, Juraj Blanár, expressed his support for cooperation within S3⁴² in a phone call with his Austrian counterpart Schallenberg just a few days after the formation of the new Slovak government, despite Robert Fico emphasizing the "revitalization" of the V4.

Other formats

Of the other formats of regional cooperation, two deserve more attention given some of the developments in 2023. The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) focuses on physical infrastructure, energy and digitalization, whereas the main goal of the Bucharest nine (B9) is to intensify security cooperation among the NATO eastern flank countries. Both are seen as primarily presidential, but have a sectoral agenda.

Even today the 3SI is still perceived as a relatively new, evolving regional initiative that will exist alongside the other Central European regional groupings.

At the 2023 3SI summit in Bucharest President Zuzana Čaputová underlined the importance of Slovakia's participation in such events, as they "provide certain financial and investment opportunities for the country, especially when infrastructure projects are concerned. If we were not there, interconnectors might avoid us in the future."⁴³ President Čaputová also stressed the importance of the business summit that followed the 3SI summit, which

⁴² Besides other issues, such as migration, cooperation in the S3 format was discussed during a phone call between Juraj Blanár and his Austrian counterpart Schallenberg just a few days after the formation of the new Slovak government. "Minister Juraj Blanár: S Rakúskom nás spája množstvo spoločných záujmov i cieľov, máme záujem o posilnenie spolupráce v regióne aj v rámci EÚ," [Minister Juraj Blanár: Numerous common interests and goals unite us with Austria, we are interested in strengthening cooperation in the region and within the EU] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, October 31, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19645063 (accessed on February 10, 2024).

⁴³ "Čaputová: Summit Trojmorja môže dať Slovensku investičné príležitosti," [Čaputová: The Three Seas Initiative Summit can bring Slovakia investment opportunities] *teraz.sk*, September 6, 2023. Available online: https://www.teraz.sk/najnovsie/caputova-summit-trojmorja-moze-dat/739011-clanok.html?utm_source=teraz&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=click&utm_content=.%253BsNajnov%25C5%25A1ie%253Bimg (accessed on February 29, 2024).

she attended accompanied by a group of Slovak businessmen.⁴⁴ The year 2023 could be considered a turning point to some extent in enhancing Slovakia's presence in the 3SI, since Prešov was the only region out of Slovakia's eight self-governing regions to join the Forum of the Regions of 3SI.⁴⁵ The forum can be seen as a useful tool for regional cooperation. And that is especially true of the two easternmost self-governing regions that share a border with Poland.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, in Slovakia, the 3SI is only discussed by a very limited number of stakeholders who are directly connected to the initiative. 3SI receives little mention in the media and in political discourse. Slovakia continued to have doubts about the added value of investing in the Three Seas Investment Fund, though the fund is rather symbolic.

In the framework of the B9 initiative, President Zuzana Čaputová had an opportunity to meet the US President Joe Biden in Warsaw. The meeting took place just after Biden's visit to Kyiv. President Čaputová underlined the necessity of continually supporting Ukraine, but also maintaining strong ties between the USA and Central Europe.⁴⁷ The ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine and related security challenges were the main topics of the eighth B9 leaders' summit in Bratislava in June, just a few weeks prior to the NATO Vilnius summit.⁴⁸ The meeting was attended by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky participated online. At the end of the Bratislava summit the presidents of the B9 countries adopted a joint declaration condemning Russia's aggressive behavior

⁴⁴ "Prezidentka sa zúčastnila na samite lídrov Iniciatívy Trojmorja," [The President attended the summit of the leaders of the Three Seas Initiative] Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, September 6, 2023. Available online: <https://www.prezident.sk/article/prezidentka-sa-zucastnila-na-samite-lidrov-iniciativy-trojmorja/> (accessed on February 29, 2024).

⁴⁵ "Keď môže Balaton, tak aj Domaša. Prešovská župa sa pridá k prímorským krajinám," [If Balaton can, then Domaša can. Prešov county will join the coastal regions] *Korzář* [online], April 17, 2023. Available online: <https://presov.korzar.sme.sk/c/23158337/ked-balaton-tak-aj-domasa-presovska-zupa-sa-prida-k-primorskym-krajinam.html> (accessed on February 29, 2024).

⁴⁶ "Improving the European cooperation of local authorities in order to streamline territorial self-government," Slovak-Polish online roundtable, December 8, 2020. Available online: <https://archiv.sfpa.sk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Slovensko-polsky-okruhly-stol-program.pdf> (accessed on February 29, 2024).

⁴⁷ "Prezidentka rokovala s lídrami B9 a prezidentom USA Joeom Bidenom," [The President held talks with the B9 leaders and US President Joe Biden] Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, February 23, 2023. Available online: <https://www.prezident.sk/article/prezidentka-rokovala-s-lidrami-b9-a-prezidentom-usa-j-bidenom/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

⁴⁸ "Prezidenti krajín B9 sa stretli na Bratislavskom hrade," [The presidents of the B9 countries met at Bratislava Castle] Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, June 6, 2023. Available online: <https://www.prezident.sk/article/prezidenti-krajin-b9-sa-stretli-na-bratislavskom-hrade/> (accessed on February 10, 2024).

against Ukraine and violation of international law. The leaders were also unanimous in backing Ukraine and underlined their commitment to invest more in their defense capabilities.⁴⁹

■ Concluding remarks

The dynamism in bilateral relations between Slovakia, its Visegrad neighbors and Austria was affected by internal developments at home. Over the course of the year Slovakia had three different governments and three different foreign ministers. While there was obvious continuity between Rastislav Káčer and Miroslav Wlachovský, there were noticeable differences between Miroslav Wlachovský and Juraj Blanár, particularly in the style and intensity afforded to bilateral ties.

Politically, the emphasis on protecting the "national interest" and especially on "sovereign foreign policy," connected with the new position of the Slovak government on supporting Ukraine and the lack of criticism against Russia, pushed Slovakia away from its closest partner—the Czech Republic. Although the thorny path to a new government in Poland following the October parliamentary elections is likely to have been a factor, the fact that there was no official visit by the Slovak prime minister (or foreign minister) to Warsaw (or vice versa) is a sign that relations between Slovakia and its northern neighbor have deteriorated. Though bilateral relations with Austria have remained cooperative, the ties are weaker and cooperation is more sluggish in the Slavkov format, where Austria was always the informal leader. The only bilateral relationship to have strengthened is with Hungary. The common interest in the EU agenda, connected with criticism of the EU and its institutions, the shared position on Ukraine, as well as openness to cooperation with Russia have pushed Bratislava and Budapest closer together than ever.

Despite the new Slovak government declaring its willingness to revitalize cooperation in the Visegrad format, in practice the V4 continued to be divided, though along different lines from previously. Therefore, in the foreseeable future practical/technical cooperation will continue at the lower levels of state administration and non-governmental organizations in various sectors, but political cooperation will continue in hibernation mode.

⁴⁹ "Spoločné vyhlásenie prezidentov B9," op. cit.

Since the Slavkov Triangle was largely aimed at cooperation/coordination of EU policies, Slovakia's new position on some important issues of joint interest following the snap elections may make cooperation in this format less interesting for both Czechia and Austria. And, vice versa, Slovakia may not be willing to invest deeply in the format. On the other hand, issues like illegal migration could still serve as binding denominators, but would probably reduce the loosely anchored Slavkov format to a very limited sectoral agenda.

In the past the Slovak government showed little interest in increasing its involvement in the Three Seas Initiative. Together with Austria (and to a certain extent the Czech Republic) Slovakia has been one of the most hesitant members of the 3SI. The initiative remains a work in progress. Given the reduced efficiency of both the V4 and S3 formats, 3SI may well be an interesting window of opportunity for the new Slovak political representation in terms of regional cooperation. However, making more of 3SI will depend on strong engagement from Poland, and particularly the new Polish government, as well as interest in playing an active role from the new Slovak president. And though the B9 is driven by the presidents as well, the intensity of future engagement from Slovakia will depend significantly on the outcome of the presidential elections.

All in all, the rather weak performance of most of the regional initiatives can be explained by divergent positions on the war in Ukraine, particularly over providing assistance to Ukraine and intensifying cooperation with Russia. Another reason might be the inability to deliver tangible results. Ad hoc coalitions with countries outside the region could be an option, but may not prove such an easy task given the policy preferences of the new Slovak government.



Juraj Marušiak

War as the
“new normal.”
Slovakia’s Eastern
Policy in 2023

The key event that framed Slovakia’s “Eastern” policy was the war in Ukraine, which began in February 2022. The war also determined Slovakia’s relations with some former USSR states, especially the Russian Federation. Other post-soviet states have played only a marginal role in Slovakia’s foreign policy. The war in Ukraine has become a key issue in the debate on Slovakia’s foreign policy, and has affected Slovakia’s relations with neighboring states, within the EU and NATO. Moreover it fed through into domestic politics, as it became the subject of the election campaign leading to the snap elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic scheduled on September 30, 2023.

Slovakia’s “Eastern Policy” was also framed by the unstable domestic political situation, as Eduard Heger’s government lost the confidence of parliament after the departure of the Freedom and Solidarity Party ministers in December 2022. Although it was given a mandate to continue its work after being dismissed, it returned the mandate to the president five months later on May 7, 2023,¹ and a new, technocratic government headed by Ľudovít Ódor was appointed on May 15, 2023. As this government, composed of non-partisan experts, had failed to win the confidence of parliament, it had no right under “Article 115(3), Constitution of the Slovak Republic” to take decisions on major domestic and foreign policy issues.

Nevertheless, this government of non-partisan experts pursued similar foreign policy approaches as the previous cabinet under Eduard Heger. Its manifesto spoke of “Russia’s aggression against Ukraine” and supporting Ukraine,

¹ D. Hajčáková, Z. Kovačič Hanzelová, “Heger ohlásil koniec, premiérom v úradníckej vláde bude ekonóm Ódor,” [Heger has announced the end, the economist Ódor will be prime minister of the technocratic government] *Sme*, May 7, 2023. Available online: <https://domov.sme.sk/c/23165851/heger-pad-vlady-prezidentka-kriza.html> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

while considering support for Ukraine and solidarity to be in Slovakia's interest. Among other things, the government identified as its priority the creation of instruments through which Slovak entities could participate in the reconstruction of Ukraine and the building of capacities to combat hybrid threats and disinformation².

The elections held on September 30, 2023 not only brought to power the opposition parties Smer-SSD, Hlas-SD and the Slovak National Party (SNS), but also represented a significant shift in eastern policy. If the Slovak governments led by Eduard Heger and Ľudovít Ódor had maintained a "clear and unambiguous position" on Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, with Slovakia being among the states helping Ukraine the most,³ the change of government meant a significant about-turn, both in the rhetoric and political action of the Robert Fico government and under the new leadership of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, represented by Juraj Blanár (Smer-SSD).

■ Continuation of the war on Slovakia's eastern border

In the first half of 2023, Slovakia was among the states that actively supported Ukraine's war effort to defend itself against the aggression of the Russian Federation. Slovakia continued this line from 2022, advocating granting Ukraine candidate status for EU membership. Slovakia's representatives declared their support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and interest in joining the post-war reconstruction process. Building relations with Ukraine was a priority foreign policy issue for the Slovak governments in 2020–2023. The importance of this agenda was symbolized by the fact that prime minister

² "Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky. Len spoločne môžeme čeliť výzvam 21. storočia," [Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic. Only together can we face the challenges of the twenty-first century] Government of the Slovak Republic, 2023. Available online: https://www.vlada.gov.sk/share/uvvsr/vlada/pvvsr_odpocet.pdf?csrt=13545196653950632286 (accessed on March 20, 2024)

³ A. Duleba, "Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022: a credibility test for Slovakia," in P. Brežáni, ed., *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2022*. Bratislava: Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association 2023, p. 122. Available online" <https://www.sfpa.sk/en/publication/yearbook-of-slovakias-foreign-policy-2022/> (accessed on March 29, 2024)

Heger's advisory council in 2021 included the SFPA analyst and political scientist from Prešov University, Alexander Duleba, who has long been the country's leading expert on Ukraine and who remained in this position after the Ľ. Ódor government took office, and Eduard Buraš, who served as an advisor on cross-border cooperation issues in 2022–2023.

At a meeting on March 17, 2023, the Slovak government decided to donate MiG-29 fighter jets and two Kub air defense system units to Ukraine along with spare parts and spare parts depots. In total, 13 aircraft were delivered, ten with engines and three without. The donation included a Kub radar station and over two hundred anti-aircraft missiles. According to the defense minister Jaroslav Naď, Slovakia would receive compensation of €200 million from the European Peace Facility for providing the fighter jets, and the US had promised to deliver military equipment to Slovakia worth approximately €700 million. The delivery was made based on an agreement between the governments of Slovakia and Ukraine, with President Zuzana Čaputová's approval. While the ruling coalition parties backed the proposal, the leader of opposition party Smer-SSD accused the government of making Slovakia a war target. Other opposition parties, such as Hlas-SD and the SNS, rejected the government's move.^{4,5}

Prime minister-designate E. Heger visited Ukraine after the agreement had been approved. The negotiations with the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, concerned issues relating to the export of wheat from Ukraine and Slovakia's assistance in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine. The Ukrainian side expressed particular interest in the rebuilding of schools and

⁴ P. Madro, "Vláda odobrila darovanie migov Ukrajine, Heger vycestuje do Kyjeva," [Government approves donation of Migs to Ukraine, Heger to travel to Kyiv] *Pravda*, March 17, 2023. Available online: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/660639-vlada-odobrila-darovanie-mig-29/> (accessed on March 20, 2024); "Návrh na uzavretie Dohody medzi vládou Slovenskej republiky a Kabinetom ministrov Ukrajiny o darovaní vojenského materiálu," [Proposal for the conclusion of the Agreement between the Government of the Slovak Republic and the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine on the donation of military equipment] 141st Session of the Government of the Slovak Republic, March 17, 2023. Available online: <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/28175/1> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

⁵ "Čaputová rešpektuje rozhodnutie vlády poslať stíhačky na Ukrajinu, Smer avizuje trestné oznámenie," [Čaputová respects the government's decision to send fighter jets to Ukraine, Smer announces it will report the crime to the police] *Pravda*, March 17, 2023. Available online: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/660654-za-ludi-a-sas-vitaju-rozhodnutie-o-dodani-stihaciek-mig-29-na-ukrajinu/> (accessed on March 20, 2024)

hospitals. Disinformation and Russian propaganda in Slovakia were also discussed.⁶ The visit was E. Heger's second to Ukraine after the start of the war.

Negotiations on creating a joint Slovak-Ukrainian enterprise to produce munitions for Ukraine were also on the agenda of the visit by Heger and Naď to Ukraine. The Minister of Defense of Ukraine, Olexii Reznikov, declared an interest in 155 and 152 caliber ammunition.⁷ Increasing the production capacity of the Slovak defense industry especially for artillery ammunition was another priority for the Ministry of Defense after the Ľudovít Ódor government took power. Cooperation in providing military assistance to Ukraine was the subject of negotiations between the new Slovak Defense Minister Martin Sklenár and the German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius.⁸

In cooperation with Norway, Denmark and Germany, Slovakia started supplying Ukraine with Zuzana 2 self-propelled howitzers produced by Konštrukta-Defence, based in Dubnica nad Váhom, in 2023. The first two units of the planned 16-unit delivery were officially handed over to Ukrainian Ambassador Myroslav Kastran in early August 2023,⁹ but did not actually reach Ukraine until late October 2023 because they did not meet the Ukrainian side's requirements. The howitzers were delivered under a bilateral commercial contract.¹⁰

⁶ "E. Heger sa stretol s V. Zelenským, hovorili o pšenici i obnove Ukrajiny," [E. Heger met with V. Zelensky, they talked about wheat and the reconstruction of Ukraine] Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, March 31, 2023. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/e-heger-sa-stretol-s-v-zelenskym-hovorili-o-psenici-i-obnove-ukrajiny/> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

⁷ "Slovensko a Ukrajina rokujú o spoločnom podniku na výrobu munície," [Slovakia and Ukraine discuss joint venture for munitions production] *aktuality.sk*, April 1, 2023. Available online: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/101kdtW/slovensko-a-ukrajina-rokuju-o-spolocnom-podniku-na-vyrobu-municie/> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

⁸ "Minister Sklenár v Bruseli: 'Pokračovanie podpory Ukrajiny je naďalej prioritou číslo jeden,'" [Minister Sklenár in Brussels: 'Continued support to Ukraine remains the number one priority'] Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, May 23, 2023. Available online: <https://www.mosr.sk/52870-sk/minister-sklenar-v-bruseli-pokracovanie-podpory-ukrajiny-je-nadalej-prioritou-cislo-jeden/> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

⁹ "Ukrajina dostala dve samohybné húfnice Zuzana 2 od Konštrukty-Defence," [Ukraine received two Zuzana 2 self-propelled howitzers from Konštrukta-Defence] *Sme*, August 1, 2023. Available online: <https://domov.sme.sk/c/23200264/ukrajina-dostala-prve-dve-samohybne-hufnice-zuzana-2-od-konstrukty-defence.html> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

¹⁰ "Húfnice dostane ukrajinská armáda skôr ako tá slovenská. Rozhodol o tom Naď, Kaliňák žiada audit," [The Ukrainian army will receive howitzers before the Slovak army does. Naď made the decision, Kaliňák is demanding an audit] *Pravda*, December 6, 2012. Available online: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/690974-hufnice-dostane-ukrajinska-armada-skor-ako-ta-slovenska-rozhodol-o-tom-nad-kalinak-ziada-audit/> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

In total, the Slovak Republic provided thirteen packages of military assistance to Ukraine in 2022–2023, totaling €671 million. The Ľ. Ódor government was preparing a fourteenth package worth more than €40 million, including 4 million pieces of ammunition, 140 missiles for the KUB air defense system and eight minesweepers with 1,200 mines. However, following the parliamentary elections in September 2023, the new government headed by Robert Fico rejected the package at a session on November 8th.¹¹

■ Alliance divided by trade dispute

Hostilities in the Black Sea and Russian attacks on Ukrainian ports, a major export route for Ukrainian grain and other agricultural products, threatened this important source of revenue for the Ukrainian economy. Following the outbreak of Russian aggression, the EU introduced zero tariffs on imports of agricultural products from Ukraine in May, to take effect for one year.¹²

One consequence was that the EU, namely the countries immediately neighboring Ukraine, became the main transit and export route for Ukrainian grain. However, the unexpected growth in agricultural imports from Ukraine began to threaten the situation of farmers in these countries, as they could not compete with the price of Ukrainian products. It also negatively affected public opinion of Ukraine. After Poland and Hungary moved to ban imports of selected agricultural commodities from Ukraine, and Bulgaria announced it was preparing similar measures, the Slovak government introduced a similar measure on April 17, 2023 as well. Selected agricultural products and foodstuffs from Ukraine or originating in Ukraine were banned from entry into the Slovak Republic, except under the customs transit procedure, and

¹¹ "Návrh na vydanie súhlasu vlády Slovenskej republiky s darovaním vojenského materiálu Ukrajine," [Proposal for the Government of the Slovak Republic to consent to the donation of military equipment to Ukraine] 3rd Session of the Government of the Slovak Republic, November 8, 2023. Available online: <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/28960/1> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

¹² M. Koreň, "Únia diskutuje, či predĺži zrušené clá na ukrajinské obilie," [EU discusses whether to extend abolished tariffs on Ukrainian grain] *Euractiv.sk*, January 27, 2023. Available online: <https://euractiv.sk/section/ekonomika-a-euro/news/unia-diskutuje-ci-predlzi-zrusene-cla-na-ukrajinske-obilie/> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

applied to release for free circulation, end-use, inward processing and customs warehousing.¹³

That led to the European Commission Implementing Regulation 2023/1100 introducing precautionary measures concerning certain products originating in Ukraine being adopted on June 5, 2023,¹⁴ in place until September 15, 2023, and covering Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. The Slovak government, like the governments of Poland and Hungary, extended the ban on imports of selected agricultural products and foodstuffs from the territory of Ukraine or originating in Ukraine (except for seeds for crop sowing) at a meeting on September 15, 2023. The measures covered imports of wheat, maize, rapeseed and oilseed rape seeds and sunflower seeds and applies until the end of 2023.¹⁵

Ukraine responded with a WTO action against Poland, Slovakia and Hungary.¹⁶ However, the action against Slovakia was suspended following a meeting

¹³ "Návrh zákazu dovozu vybraných poľnohospodárskych produktov a potravín z Ukrajiny alebo pôvodom z Ukrajiny na územie Slovenskej republiky a zavedenia osobitného režimu tranzitu zásielok poľnohospodárskych produktov a potravín z Ukrajiny alebo pôvodom z Ukrajiny cez územie Slovenskej republiky," [Proposal for a ban on the import of selected agricultural products and foodstuffs from Ukraine or originating from Ukraine into the territory of the Slovak Republic and the introduction of a special regime for the transit of consignments of agricultural products and foodstuffs from Ukraine or originating from Ukraine through the territory of the Slovak Republic] 147th Session of the Government of the Slovak Republic, April 17, 2023. Available online: <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/28295/1> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

¹⁴ "Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2023/1100 of 5 June 2023 introducing preventive measures concerning certain products originating in Ukraine," *Official Journal of the European Union*, L1 144/1. Available online: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg_impl/2023/1100/oj (accessed on March 20, 2024).

¹⁵ "Návrh zákazu dovozu vybraných poľnohospodárskych produktov a potravín z Ukrajiny alebo s pôvodom z Ukrajiny na územie Slovenskej republiky a zavedenia osobitného režimu tranzitu zásielok poľnohospodárskych produktov a potravín z Ukrajiny alebo s pôvodom z Ukrajiny cez územie Slovenskej republiky vynúteného absenciou systémového celoeurópskeho riešenia a jednostrannými zákazmi dvoch susedných krajín Slovenskej republiky," [Proposal for a ban on the import of selected agricultural products and foodstuffs from Ukraine or originating from Ukraine into the territory of the Slovak Republic and the introduction of a special regime for the transit of consignments of agricultural products and foodstuffs from Ukraine or originating from Ukraine through the territory of the Slovak Republic enforced by the absence of a systemic Europe-wide solution and unilateral bans by two neighboring countries of the Slovak Republic] Session of the Government of the Slovak Republic via correspondence, September 15, 2023. Available online: <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/28793/1> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

¹⁶ "Poľsko napriek žalobe zachová zákaz dovozu obilia z Ukrajiny," [Poland to retain ban on grain imports from Ukraine despite lawsuit] *teraz.sk*, September 19, 2023. Available online: <https://www.teraz.sk/spravy/polsko-zachova-zakaz-dovozu-obilia-z/741497-clanok.html> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

between the Minister of Agriculture of the Slovak Republic, Jozef Bíreš, and the Minister of Agrarian Policy and Food of Ukraine, Mykola Skolskyi, on September 21, 2023, at which they agreed to establish a system for grain trade by issuing and inspecting permits, while the ban on the import of the above-mentioned agricultural commodities remained in force.¹⁷ However, the solution adopted by the Slovak government has only partially satisfied Slovak farmers, as only some EU member states have adopted the ban.¹⁸ Transiting Ukrainian agricultural products to third-country markets was also the subject of negotiations between the V4 and Ukrainian Ministers of Agriculture on September 26, 2023. The participants agreed on the need to work out a solution at EU level.¹⁹ Because of the failure to find a systemic solution at EU level, the Slovak government decided on November 29, 2023, to indefinitely extend the embargo on imports of agricultural products from Ukraine.²⁰

¹⁷ "Ukrajina nebude žalovať Slovensko pre zákaz dovozu obilia, ministri sa dohodli na inom riešení," [Ukraine will not sue Slovakia over grain import ban, ministers agree another solution] *Trend*, September 21, 2023. Available online: <https://www.trend.sk/spravy/ukrajina-nebude-zalovat-slovensko-pre-zakaz-dovozu-obilia-ministri-dohodli-inom-rieseni> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

¹⁸ D. Funtíková, "Ukrajinské obilie je problém pre farmárov, podľa dopravcov zas premrhaná príležitosť," [Ukrainian grain is a problem for farmers, and a missed opportunity for shippers] *DenníkN*, September 21, 2023. Available online: <https://e.dennikn.sk/3580818/ukrajinske-obilie-rozhadalo-europu-slovensko-konflikt-s-kyjivom-zazehnal/> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

¹⁹ "Ministri členských krajín V4 rokovali s ukrajinským ministrom o dovoze agrokomodit z Ukrajiny," [Ministers of the V4 member states held talks with the Ukrainian minister on the import of agro-commodities from Ukraine] Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic, September 26, 2023. Available online: <https://www.mpsr.sk/ministri-clenskych-kraj-in-v4-rokovali-s-ukrajinskym-ministrom-o-dovoze-agrokomodit-z-ukrajiny/52-240-18916> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

²⁰ "Návrh zákazu dovozu poľnohospodárskych produktov a potravín z Ukrajiny alebo s pôvodom z Ukrajiny na územie Slovenskej republiky a zavedenia osobitného režimu tranzitu zásielok poľnohospodárskych produktov a potravín z Ukrajiny alebo s pôvodom z Ukrajiny cez územie Slovenskej republiky vynúteného absenciou systémového celoeurópskeho riešenia a jednostrannými zákazmi dvoch susedných krajín Slovenskej republiky," [Proposal for a ban on the import of selected agricultural products and foodstuffs from Ukraine or originating from Ukraine into the territory of the Slovak Republic and the introduction of a special regime for the transit of consignments of agricultural products and foodstuffs from Ukraine or originating from Ukraine through the territory of the Slovak Republic to be enforced in the absence of a systemic Europe-wide solution and unilateral bans by two neighboring countries of the Slovak Republic] 6th Session of the Government of the Slovak Republic, November 29, 2023. Available online: <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/29033/1> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

■ Post-war reconstruction of Ukraine

Slovakia's participation in the reconstruction of Ukraine should be seen both in the context of the EU's joint efforts and the Slovak government's own initiative. The EU presented a proposal for establishing a Ukraine Facility in June 2023;²¹ however, a political agreement between the European Parliament and the Council on the regulation was reached only on February 6, 2024. The new Ukraine Facility will provide stable, sustainable financing to support Ukraine's recovery, reconstruction and modernization, including the key reforms required for EU accession. For this purpose, €50 billion was allocated for 2024–2027. It consists of €17 billion in grants and €33 billion in loans.²²

In parallel individual member states have pursued their own activities. Schemes to support domestic business involvement have been set up by the governments of Poland and the Czech Republic. The impetus for similar activity in Slovakia was provided by a round table with the participation of state and public administrations, business associations and NGOs, initiated on July 7, 2022, by prime minister Heger. In 2022 a call was issued by the Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic and SARIO²³ to identify preliminary interest among Slovak businesses. In line with its priorities, the outgoing government of Ľ. Ódor, advocated producing a conceptual design for state schemes using existing and emerging EU financial instruments, at a meeting on October 18, 2023. Bilateral cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine involves the use of two instruments: Slovak–Ukrainian Trade and Investment Support Facility and the Slovak Ukrainian Donor Partnership for Non-returnable Aid.²⁴ The new Robert Fico government has confirmed its

interest in continuing to participate in Ukraine's reconstruction programs, which has become part of Deputy Prime Minister Petr Kmec's portfolio. In November 2023 he confirmed that Slovakia's participation in the reconstruction of Ukraine is among the new government's priorities.²⁵

This was further confirmed at a working visit by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy of Ukraine Yulia Svyrydenko to Bratislava on January 19, 2024. The discussions covered three large-scale infrastructure and energy projects. The first would accelerate the reconstruction of the interconnector linking the Slovak and Ukrainian electricity distribution systems from Mukachevo to Veľké Kapušany, the second concerned the construction of a rail link between Košice and Kyiv using the broad-gauge line from Uzhhorod to Slovakia and new border crossings between the two countries, or the modernization of the border crossing at Vyšné Nemecké. Another project Slovakia was involved in was the demining of Kherson oblast, under Ukrainian control. Ukraine expressed an interest in Slovakia participating in the process for returning Ukrainian children who were forcibly taken to Russia from the occupied territories. These infrastructure projects were the subject of discussions between prime ministers R. Fico and Denys Shmyhal in Uzhhorod on January 24, 2024.²⁶

²¹ "Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing the Ukraine Facility," European Commission, COM(2023) 338 final, June 20, 2023. Available online: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/dd8cd260-1897-4e37-81dc-c985179af506_en (accessed on March 20, 2024),

²² "Commission welcomes political agreement on the up to €50 billion Ukraine Facility. Press Release," European Commission, February 6, 2024. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_658 (accessed on March 20, 2024).

²³ "Výzva na povojnovú obnovu Ukrajiny," [Call for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction] SARIO: Slovak Investment and Trade Development Agency. Available online: <https://www.sario.sk/sk/exportujte-do-zahranicia/exportne-prilezitosti/vyzva-na-povojnovu-obnovu-ukrajiny> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

²⁴ "Mechanizmy podpory obnovy Ukrajiny prostredníctvom slovenských subjektov," [Mechanisms for supporting Ukraine's reconstruction through Slovak entities], 20th Session of the Government of the Slovak Republic, October 18, 2023. Available online: <https://rokovania.gov.sk/RVL/Material/28885/1> (accessed on March 20, 2024),

²⁵ "Vicepremiér Peter Kmec na ITAPA: Na pomoc Ukrajine sú vyčlenené veľké financie. Chceme ich získať," [Deputy Prime Minister Peter Kmec at ITAPA: A large amount of funding has been earmarked for aid to Ukraine. We want to obtain them] *Nextech*, November 22, 2023. Available online: <https://www.nextech.sk/a/Vicepremier-Peter-Kmec-na-ITAPA--Na-pomoc-Ukrajine-su-vy-clenene-velke-financie--Chceme-ich-ziskat> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

²⁶ "Ukraine and Slovakia work on implementation of three large-scale projects in energy and logistics: Yuliia Svyrydenko in Bratislava," Ministry of Economy of Ukraine, January 19, 2024. Available online: <https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/news/ukraina-ta-slovachchyna-pratsiuiut-nad-vtilen-niam-trokh-masshtabnykh-proektiv-v-enerhetytsi-ta-lohistrytsi-iuliia-svyrydenko-v-bratyslavi> (accessed on March 20, 2024); "Premiér: S D. Šmyhaľom sme mali napriek nezhodám priateľský rozhovor," [Prime Minister: we had a friendly conversation with D. Shmyhal despite our disagreements] Office of Government of the Slovak Republic, January 24, 2024. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/premier-s-d-smyhalom-sme-mali-napriek-nezhodam-priatel'sky-rozhovor/?cs-rt=11152397393199035421> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

■ Energy: the slow process of disengagement from Russia

After the Russian aggression against Ukraine began in 2022, Slovakia's highest level relations with Russia diminished. Efforts have concentrated on the diversification of energy supplies. But it is not an easy process as Russian oil imports are affected, and they are the subject of the sixth package of sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation by the European Union in 2022. Initially the sanctions did not apply to pipeline oil imports; Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary were granted a one-year exemption.²⁷

The Slovnaft oil refinery, part of the MOL group, had planned to reduce its dependence on Russian oil from 95 per cent to 60 per cent by 2023 but only managed to reduce it by 30 per cent. Given their dependence on the Russian Federation, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary have requested a one-year exemption from the embargo on oil imports from the Russian Federation. Hungary requested an extension in July 2023, and Slovakia did so in November 2023.²⁸

Although the share of Russian gas in pipeline supplies in the EU decreased from 40 per cent to 8 per cent in 2023 and to 15 per cent after taking into account LNG supplies, Slovakia, in the words of representatives of the Slovak gas industry (SPP), was able to replace 70 per cent of total consumption with imports from alternative suppliers.²⁹ The process of diversifying gas supplies

started in 2022, and was partly made possible by the completion of an interconnector linking the gas pipeline systems of Slovakia and Poland in the same year. In terms of transmission routes, the announced 50 per cent increase in the transmission capacity of the Slovak–Hungarian interconnector from July 1, 2024, will improve the security of the gas supply to Slovakia.³⁰ The EU sanctions did not apply to natural gas. Nevertheless, Slovakia has to prepare for when the contract for the transport of gas from Russia to Central Europe via Ukraine expires at the beginning of 2025. Although R. Fico was in favor of continuing with the transit, Ukraine had not changed its position by the end of March 2024.³¹

In 2023, the process of diversifying the one-sided dependence on nuclear fuel supplies from the Russian Federation began. The strategy of the nuclear power plant operator in Slovakia — Slovenské elektrárne — is to acquire at least two alternative nuclear fuel suppliers and a number of potential suppliers of materials and services across the supply chain for nuclear fuel production. In August 2023, Slovenské elektrárne signed a nuclear fuel supply contract with the US company Westinghouse. However, the condition is that it has to undergo a licensing process demonstrate safe use.³² Cooperation on a long-term fuel diversification solution for nuclear power plants is also foreseen in the Memorandum of Understanding between Slovenské elektrárne and the French company Framatome signed on May 31, 2023. However, no specific agreements between the two companies had been announced by the

²⁷ "European Council conclusions on Ukraine," European Council, May 30, 2022. Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/05/31/european-council-conclusions-on-ukraine-30-may-2022/> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

²⁸ "Maďarsko chce predĺžiť výnimku zo sankcií dovozu ruskej ropy pre MOL a Slovnaft," [Hungary wants to extend the exemption from sanctions on Russian oil imports for MOL and Slovnaft] *Trend*, July 3, 2023. Available online: https://www.trend.sk/spravy/maďarsko-chce-predlzit-vynimku-sankcii-dovožu-ruskej-ropy-pre-mol-slovnaft_ (accessed on March 20, 2024); "Slovensko žiada predĺženie výnimky pre export palív z ruskej ropy do Česka," [Slovakia is asking for the exemption on the export of fuels made from Russian crude oil to the Czech Republic] *O Peniazoch*, November 24, 2023. Available online: <https://openiazoch.zoznam.sk/energetika/slovensko-ziada-predlzenie-vynimky-pre-export-paliv-z-ruskej-ropy-do-ceska/> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

²⁹ "Where does the EU's gas come from?" European Council, n.d. Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/eu-gas-supply/> (accessed on March 20, 2024); "V zime Slovákov zohreje aj ruský plyn, hoci ho v plných zásobníkoch nie je veľa," [Russian gas will heat Slovaks in winter, although there is not much of it in the filled storage tanks] *Trend*, September 29, 2023. Available online: <https://www.trend.sk/spravy/zime-slovakov-zohreje-aj-rusky-plyn-hoci-ho-plnych-zasobnikoch-nie-je-vela.> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

³⁰ "Increased capacity at the Interconnection Point Veľké Zlievce/Balassagyarmat," Eustream, January 31, 2024. Available online: <https://www.eustream.sk/en/about-us/press/news/zvyse-na-prepravna-kapacita-prepojovacom-bode-velke-zlievce-balassagyarmat.html> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

³¹ "Central Europe makes progress towards energy independence," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, September 8, 2023. Available online: <https://www.eiu.com/n/central-europe-makes-progress-towards-energy-independence/> (accessed on March 20, 2024); "Premiér: S D. Šmyhaľom sme mali napriek nezhodám priateľský rozhovor," [Prime Minister: we had a friendly conversation with D. Shmyhal despite our disagreements] Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, January 24, 2024. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/premier-s-d-smyhalom-sme-mali-napriek-nezhodam-priatelicky-rozhovor/?csrt=11152397393199035421> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

³² "Strengthening Slovakia's energy security: Slovenské elektrárne concluded a fuel supply agreement with Westinghouse," Slovenské elektrárne, August 25, 2023. Available online: <https://www.seas.sk/tlacove-spravy/dohoda-slovenske-elektrarne-westinghouse-jadrove-palivo/> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

beginning of 2024.³³ Slovenské elektrárne is also considering developing its own nuclear fuel, but the company's CEO has said that will take 8 to 9 years.³⁴

Ending the unilateral dependence on the Russian Federation for the supply of energy raw materials is a “long-term” project. Slovakia's vulnerability amid the ongoing fighting in Ukraine is partly a consequence of the failure among political elites to consider the security of transport routes to be a primary concern before 2022. An exception was the North–South Gas Corridor project—a set of interconnectors linking the gas pipeline systems of Central European states. It was launched after 2011 with EU support, and its effects became apparent following the onset of war in Ukraine. It demonstrates the need for close cooperation between the region's countries and across the EU.

■ Political contacts with the Russian Federation

The absence of contact at the highest level in the run-up to the parliamentary elections did not mean that the Russian Embassy in Slovakia did not enter into contact with Slovak entities. For example, it was in communication with Smer–SSD representatives, namely the deputy leader Ľuboš Blaha, who commemorated the 80th anniversary of the victory of the USSR in the Battle of Stalingrad at the beginning of February 2023.³⁵ Another example is the open letter from the Russian Ambassador in Bratislava, Igor Bratchikov, addressed to the leader of Smer–SSD, Robert Fico, on the eve of the Victory over Fascism Day celebrations, in which he praised the latter's stance against the “falsification of history,” i.e. interpretation of the role of the USSR in the defeat

³³ “Slovenské elektrárne and Framatome signed a Memorandum of Understanding,” Slovenské elektrárne, May 31, 2023. Available online: <https://www.seas.sk/tlacove-spravy/slovenske-elektrarne-framatome-memorandum/> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

³⁴ M. Rojko, “Slovenské elektrárne chcú vlastné jadrové palivo. Vývoj potrvá niekoľko rokov,” [Slovenské elektrárne want their own nuclear fuel. Developing it will take several years] *Energie-portal.sk*, May 31, 2023. Available online: <https://www.energie-portal.sk/Dokument/slovenske-elektrarne-palivo-modularne-reaktory-110046.aspx> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

³⁵ “Odpoveď veľvyslanca Ruska na otvorený list poslanca NR SR Ľ. Blahu,” [Reply from the Ambassador of Russia to the open letter from the Slovak MP Ľ. Blaha] Embassy of Russian Federation in the Slovak Republic, February 2, 2023. Available online: https://slovakia.mid.ru/sk/o_velvyslanectve/spravy/odpove_ve_vyslanca_ruska_na_otvoreny_list_poslanca_nr_sr_blahu (accessed on March 20, 2024).

of fascism. Representatives of the embassies of the Russian Federation and Belarus in Slovakia attended the Slovak National Uprising 1944 celebrations in Banská Bystrica, organized by Smer–SSD.³⁶ Cultivating the Russian interpretation of the Second World War, and commemorating the Russian military presence in Slovakia during the First World War, were among the crucial elements of the agenda of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Slovakia and its communication with the Slovak public. The Russian Embassy also maintained contact with pro-Russian organizations such as the Slovak-Russian Society, and in an open letter on the occasion of the 160th anniversary of *Matica slovenská*, it highlighted its role in cultivating Slavic reciprocity and urged the organization to continue doing so.³⁷

■ Slovakia's eastern policy as a parliamentary election issue

It is in relation to opinions on the nature of Slovakia's relations with Ukraine and Russia that the collapse of the foreign policy consensus in Slovak politics can be noted. The schism was further exacerbated in Slovak politics in 2023. It was also in evidence on the floor of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, in connection with the adoption of the Declaration on crimes against Ukrainian women and children on March 28, 2023. The Declaration condemned the unlawful deportation of women and children to the Russian Federation and called on Russia to end its military action in Ukraine and withdraw its troops from all of the internationally recognized territory of

³⁶ “Otvorený list veľvyslanca Ruska I. B. Bratčikova predsedovi strany SMER-SSD R. Ficovi,” [Open letter from Ambassador of Russia I. B. Bratchikov to R. Fico, Leader of Smer-SSD], Embassy of Russian Federation in the Slovak Republic, May 5, 2023. Available online: https://slovakia.mid.ru/o_velvyslanectve/spravy/otvoren_list_ve_vyslanca_ruska_i_b_brat_ikva_predsedovi_strany_smer_ssd_r_ficovi (accessed on March 20, 2024); “Smer si vo Zvolene pripomenul SNP, nevyhol sa však kritike situácie v krajine,” [Smer commemorated the Slovak National Uprising in Zvolen, but did not refrain from criticizing the situation in the country] *TA3*, August 29, 2023. Available online: <https://www.ta3.com/clanok/244640/smer-si-vo-zvolene-pripomenul-snp-nevyhol-sa-vsak-kritike-situacie-v-krajine> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

³⁷ “Otvorený list veľvyslanca Ruska I. B. Bratčikova členom Matice slovenskej,” [Open letter from Ambassador of Russia I. B. Bratchikov to the members of Matica slovenskej] Embassy of Russian Federation in the Slovak Republic, August 3, 2023. Available online: https://slovakia.mid.ru/sk/o_velvyslanectve/spravy/otvoren_list_ve_vyslanca_ruska_i_b_brat_ikova_lenom_matic_slovenskej/ (accessed on March 20, 2024).

Ukraine.³⁸ The motion was supported by the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO), Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) and We are Family (Sme rodina) parliamentary groups, as well as members of For the People and Democrats; members of the opposition parties (Smer–SSD, Hlas–SD and Republika) either did not vote or were not present in the chamber. Members of the People’s Party — Our Slovakia voted against the resolution.³⁹

A similar division in the political spectrum was evident in the vote on the Slovak Parliament declaration recognizing the famine in Ukraine in 1932–1933 as genocide. While the MPs from the coalition parties that were in government in 2020 supported the motion, and, with a few exceptions, MPs from the opposition parties either did not vote or abstained.⁴⁰

Different attitudes to “Eastern policy” were also manifested during the parliamentary election campaign. The parties of the outgoing coalition voted to continue with the policy of sanctions against the Russian Federation for waging military aggression against Ukraine and violating its territorial integrity. This included the strongest government entity, OĽaNO, which, although it spoke of the need for dialogue with Russia, given its historical and cultural links with Europe, advocated extending the sanctions in the interests of a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Ukraine.⁴¹ The party’s election manifesto

³⁸ “Deklarácia Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky o zločinoch páchaných na ukrajinských ženách a deťoch,” [Declaration of the National Council of the Slovak Republic on crimes against Ukrainian women and children] Resolution of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, No. 2156, March 28, 2023 (accessed on March 20, 2024).

³⁹ “Návrh poslankýň Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky Anny MIERNEJ, Moniky KOZELOVEJ, Martiny BRISUDOVEJ a Anny ZEMANOVEJ na prijatie Deklarácie Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky o zločinoch páchaných na ukrajinských ženách a deťoch (tlač 1524),” [Proposal by Anna Mierna, Monika Kozelová, Martina Brisudová and Anna Zemanová for the adoption of the Declaration of the National Council of the Slovak Republic on Crimes Committed against Ukrainian Women and Children (Print 1524)] Voting, National Council of the Slovak Republic, Session No. 88, March 28, 2023. Available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=schodze/hlasovanie/hlasklub&ID=49863> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

⁴⁰ “Návrh skupiny poslancov Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky na prijatie uznesenia Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky k uznaniu hladomoru na Ukrajine v rokoch 1932 – 1933 za genocídu (tlač 1734),” [Proposal by a Group of Members of the National Council of the Slovak Republic for the adoption of a resolution of the National Council of the Slovak Republic on the recognition of the famine in Ukraine in 1932–1933 as genocide (Print 1734)], Voting, National Council of the Slovak Republic, Session No. 94, June 20, 2023. Available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=schodze/hlasovanie/hlasklub&ID=50635> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

⁴¹ L. Yar, “Zahraničnopolitická agenda v programoch: Strany najviac rozdeľuje prístup k Moskve a Pekingu,” [Foreign policy agenda in the manifestos: the parties are most divided over approaches to Moscow and Beijing] *Euractiv.sk*, September 11, 2023. Available online: <https://euractiv.sk/section/vonkajsie-vztahy/news/zahranicnopoliticka-agenda-pred-volbami-politicke-strany-na-jviac-rozdeluje-pristup-k-moskve-a-pekingu> (accessed on March 20, 2024),/

mentioned the need for Slovakia to participate in reconstructing Ukraine as it presented an economic opportunity.⁴² The need to maintain a united EU stance toward Russia was also stressed by Sme Rodina. However, its leader, Boris Kollár, argued that the existing sanctions were sufficient and strict enough.⁴³ However, the party’s election manifesto did not include foreign policy issues. Continued support for Ukraine was mentioned by the Democrats, the party of the former prime minister E. Heger (2021–2023), which described Ukraine’s efforts as “a just struggle for territorial integrity and independence” and supported the gradual reconstruction of Ukraine.⁴⁴

The language of the opposition parties was markedly different. Smer–SSD subscribed to the “four cardinal directions” policy. But it claims to be committed to Slovakia’s EU and NATO membership. It described the use of Russian military force in Ukraine as a violation of international law; however, it has also described the US invasion of Iraq and the creation of Kosovo as violations of international law. Smer–SSD supports the provision of humanitarian aid to Ukraine. However, it rejects the provision of further military aid because that “only leads to the prolongation of the war and to the suffering of civilians without changing the attitude of the Russian Federation.” It stated it would only support sanctions if they are effective and do not have a negative economic and social impact on Slovakia. Smer–SSD expressed concern about “attempts to erect a new Iron Curtain between the West and the East” and promised to take the necessary steps to standardize relations between Slovakia, the EU and the Russian Federation after the conflict ends.⁴⁵ Similarly, before the elections, Hlas–SD spoke of the need to discuss the types of sanctions against Russia along with their effects, and, in the context of the war in Ukraine, it spoke of the need for a common, strong and united EU. That could prevent international law violations, such as the war in Ukraine. Like Smer–SSD, Hlas–SD also talks of a foreign policy toward “four cardinal

⁴² “Vyhrá mafia alebo ľudia: ty rozhodneš. Volebný program OĽaNO a priatelia 2023,” [The mafia or the people: you decide who wins. Election manifesto of OĽaNO and friends 2023] Hnutie Slovensko [Slovakia Movement]. Available online: <https://www.obycajniludia.sk/vyhra-mafia-alebo-ludia/> (accessed on March 20, 2024). OĽaNO changed its name to Slovensko [Slovakia] in October 2023

⁴³ L. Yar, op. cit.

⁴⁴ “Plán pomoci ľuďom. Volebný program strany Demokrati,” [A plan to help people. The Democrats election manifesto] Demokrati 2023.

⁴⁵ “Volebný program strany Smer – slovenská sociálna demokracia,” [Election manifesto of Smer–Slovak Social Democracy]. Available online: <https://www.strana-smer.sk/aktuality/blogy/post/volby-2023> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

directions.”⁴⁶ The Slovak National Party (SNS), the third coalition party, has the most accommodating program toward the Russian Federation, which continues the approach it adopted when in government in 2016–2020. Like its other coalition partners, it has spoken of a “four cardinal points” policy, called directly for the lifting of sanctions against the Russian Federation and the resumption of the supply of energy raw materials from Russia.⁴⁷

The current opposition has a different position. Progressive Slovakia (PS) has declared its support for Ukraine’s EU membership and the continuation of “such humanitarian, financial, diplomatic and military support to Kyiv as the country needs to succeed in its fight against Russian aggression.” The party described the war in Ukraine as “a struggle for Slovakia’s security and sovereignty and the rules of the game in Europe, which suit Slovakia extremely well.” Unlike the coalition parties, PS clearly supports the continuation of sanctions against Russia and Belarus as they reduce Russia’s financial resources for waging war.⁴⁸ Based on the war experience so far, the party announced it would transform state defense policy.

The SaS has paid considerable attention to the war in Ukraine. Its election manifesto speaks of the Russian Federation’s “illegal military aggression” and states that the Ukrainian territory occupied by Russia rightfully belongs to Ukraine. The party announced the continuation of its policy of “strong support for Ukraine’s resistance against Russian aggression” and supporting its territorial integrity in the spirit of the Budapest Conventions. It described the actions of the Russian Federation against Ukraine as illegal and rejected the idea of separate bilateral agreements with the Russian Federation on the settlement of Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia. The party advocated the continuation of “the supply of military and humanitarian material to Ukraine at the upper limit of the financial and logistical possibilities of the Slovak Republic.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ L. Yar, op cit.

⁴⁷ “15 programových priorit SNS pre Slovensko,” [15 SNS program priorities for Slovakia] *Slovenský národ* Vol. 3, No. 5, pp. 18–20.

⁴⁸ “Plán pre budúcnosť,” [Plan for the future] Electoral manifesto. Progressive Slovakia, 2023, pp. 90, 92

⁴⁹ “Program ekonomického rastu,” [Economic growth agenda] *Sloboda a solidarita* [Freedom and Solidarity Party] 2023.

In energy policy, SaS pointed out the need to diversify oil sources and the adaptation of Slovnaft to process different types of oil.⁵⁰

The Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) paid attention to Ukraine, but also to the debate on the future of Russia. It believes Ukraine’s stability, integrity and development are in Slovakia’s best interests. It also backs Ukraine’s EU association process. It considers respect for international law and recognized borders is of vital interest to Slovakia. The KDH rejects interference in the territorial integrity of Moldova and Georgia. It has accused the Russian Federation of aggression, and the party’s program speaks of supporting pro-democracy forces and protecting human rights in Russia. Sanctions against the Russian Federation are to continue as long as the “legal grounds for doing so persist.”⁵¹

The parties’ election manifestos show that Slovakia’s “eastern policy” has once again become a dividing line in Slovak society. There is only limited common ground between the governing coalition parties and the opposition parties, and the question of providing military aid to Ukraine and continuing sanctions against Russia is a fundamental one.

■ “Four cardinal directions policy” – between continuity and discontinuity

In 2023, Slovakia had three successive governments, similarly to in 1994. After the parliamentary elections, Robert Fico (Smer–SSD) again became prime minister of Slovakia, having already held the post in 2006–2010 and 2012–2018. The coalition partners were Hlas–SD, led by Peter Pellegrini, who held the post of prime minister from 2018 to 2020. Besides the two coalition parties claiming to be social democratic, there is a third coalition party, the national-conservative SNS, which openly sympathizes with the Russian Federation.

⁵⁰ “Kostra energetickej politiky,” [The backbone of energy policy] *Sloboda a solidarita* [Freedom and Solidarity Party], 2023.

⁵¹ “Rozumnejšie, zodpovednejšie, lepšie: Volebný program KDH 2023,” [Smarter, more responsible, better: KDH election manifesto 2023] *Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie* [Christian Democratic Movement], 2023, p. 126.

Its leader, Andrej Danko, even claims that Russia is not the aggressor in Ukraine and that it is simply defending its interests in Ukraine.⁵²

The new government's manifesto speaks of "returning sovereignty" to foreign policy, implicitly branding the policy of previous governments as non-sovereign. In line with the election manifestos of all three coalition parties, it declares foreign policy will continue along "all four cardinal points." Regarding the war in Ukraine, Fico's government declares support for all meaningful peace plans and "diplomatic solutions that comply with international law." The government announced it would stop the war aid to Ukraine, while continuing the humanitarian aid. It "views with concern the attempts to erect a new Iron Curtain between the West and the East." There is a separate part of the manifesto devoted to Slovakia's involvement in reconstructing Ukraine.⁵³ The government's program statement thus largely mirrors Smer-SSD's program priorities and the way they are articulated. After the elections, the government's "eastern policy" followed the lines of the government manifesto. As the analysis of the programs of the three coalition parties shows, this issue will not divide the coalition as the coalition partners' approaches are very similar.

Shortly after the new Fico government was approved by the National Council of the Slovak Republic, the Prime Minister met with the Ambassador of the Russian Federation on November 30, 2023. During a meeting with the US ambassador on the same day, he criticized the US and EU strategy toward Ukraine. However, there is no information as to whether similar reservations about Russia's policy were expressed at the meeting with I. Bratchikov, although R. Fico spoke about sovereign foreign policy.⁵⁴ After the elections, the Russian Ambassador met the Speaker of the Slovak Parliament, Peter Pellegrini, and Deputy Speakers Andrej Danko (SNS) and Ľuboš Blaha (Smer-SSD).

⁵² "Andrej Danko: Rusko nie je na Ukrajine agresor," [Andrej Danko: Russia is not the aggressor in Ukraine] *Denník Postoj*, March 8, 2024. Available online: <https://www.postoj.sk/148662/rusko-nie-je-na-ukrajine-agresor-tvrdi-andrej-danko> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

⁵³ "Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky 2023–2027: Lepšie, pokojnejšie a bezpečnejšie žiť," [Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic for 2023–2027. 'A better, calmer, safer life'] National Council of the Slovak Republic, November 13, 2023. Available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=535376> (accessed on February 8, 2024).

⁵⁴ "Fico sa stretol s veľvyslancami USA a Ruska. Kritizoval americkú a újijnú stratégiu voči Ukrajine," [Fico met with the ambassadors of the USA and Russia. He criticized US and EU strategy on Ukraine] *Pravda*, November 30, 2023. Available online: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/690387-fico-sa-stretol-s-velvyslancami-usa-a-ruska-kritizoval-americku-a-ujjnu-strategiu-voci-ukrajine/> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

An obvious discontinuity was the meeting between the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, Juraj Blanár, and the Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation during the diplomatic forum in Antalya, Turkey, on March 2, 2024, despite the Russian foreign minister being under EU sanctions. The Russian side requested the meeting, according to J. Blanár:

I called for the resumption of peace negotiations between the parties to the conflict and an end to the fighting as soon as possible. I stressed that what happened in Ukraine should never have happened and that we are against the creation of an iron curtain between Russia and the European Union.⁵⁵

However, he did not say anything about human rights in Russia and nor did he demand the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine. It was the first meeting at this level between Slovakia and the Russian Federation since the start of Russia's open aggression in 2022.

On the other hand, Slovakia is continuing to provide humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and expand infrastructure cooperation. The government is also encouraging Slovak companies to participate in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine, which largely follows the policy of the previous governments led by E. Heger and Ľ. Ódor. Despite the rhetoric from the coalition parties about stopping arms supplies to Ukraine, the project to produce 155 caliber ammunition for Ukraine at the production facilities of ZVS holding, which is partly owned by the state and the state-owned DMD holding but belongs to the Czech MSM Group, has not been halted either. The ammunition produced at the plants in Dubnica nad Váhom, Nováky and Snina is exported on a commercial basis and that can be expected to intensify in 2024.⁵⁶ The same applies to the delivery of Zuzana 2 self-propelled howitzers to Ukraine.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ "Blanár sa v Turecku stretol s Lavrovom. Rusko je vrah pripravené obnoviť naše vzťahy," [Blanár met with Lavrov in Turkey. Russia is said to be ready to renew relations with us] *Noviny.sk*, March 2, 2024. Available online: <https://www.noviny.sk/politika/897285-blantar-sa-v-turecku-stretol-s-lavrovom-rusko-je-vrah-pripravene-obnovit-nase-vztahy> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

⁵⁶ D. Hutko, "Výroba delostreleckej munície v SR porastie, páliť ju bude môcť aj Morana," [Production of artillery ammunition in the Slovak Republic will grow, it can be fired by Morana] *Future Army*, June 12, 2023. Available online: <https://www.futurearmy.sk/2023/06/12/vyroba-delostreleckej-municie-v-sr-porastie-palit-ju-bude-moct-aj-morana/> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

⁵⁷ M. Katuška, "Prečo Fico napriek sľubom vojenskú pomoc Ukrajine úplne nezastaví? (odpovede)," [Why won't Fico completely stop military aid to Ukraine despite his promises? (answers)] *Sme*, November 1, 2023. Available online: <https://domov.sme.sk/c/23238526/ukrajina-vojna-pomoc-slovensko-fico-nova-vlada.html> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

However, Prime Minister Fico refuses to support Ukraine's NATO membership. In the past he presented a similar position at a meeting with the Prime Minister of Ukraine, D. Shmyhal; however, he stated that he would block such a move as a representative of a NATO member state.⁵⁸ After the Uzhhorod meeting, the Ukrainian prime minister referred to Fico's approach to Ukraine as "a new pragmatism."⁵⁹

Shortly after the parliamentary elections, R. Fico declared at a Parliamentary Committee on European Affairs meeting that he would not support further sanctions against the Russian Federation. Subsequently, however, despite the criticism of A. Danko, he nevertheless voted in favor of a European Council resolution which confirmed the commitment of the EU and its member states to "continue to provide sustainable military support to Ukraine, notably through the European Peace Facility and the EU Military Assistance Mission, as well as bilateral assistance by member states."⁶⁰ Ahead of the European Council summit on December 14–15, 2023, the Slovak government approved the adoption of the twelfth package of sanctions against Russia.⁶¹

⁵⁸ "Premiér: S D. Šmyhalom sme mali napriek nezhodám priateľský rozhovor," [Prime Minister: we had a friendly conversation with D. Shmyhal despite our disagreements] Office of Government of the Slovak Republic, January 24, 2024. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/premier-s-d-smyhalom-sme-mali-napriek-nezhodam-priatel-sky-rozhovor/?csrt=11152397393199035421> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

⁵⁹ D. Shmyhal, X @Denys_Shmyhal, January 24, 2024. Available online: https://twitter.com/Denys_Shmyhal/status/1750120099875332169 (accessed on March 20, 2024).

⁶⁰ P. Madro, "Fico pred samitom EÚ odmieta ďalšie sankcie proti Rusku. Bude podporovať nulovú vojenskú pomoc Ukrajine," [Fico rejects further sanctions against Russia ahead of EU summit. He will support zero military aid to Ukraine] *Pravda*, October 26, 2023. Available online: <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/686318-fico-pred-summitom-eu-odmieta-dalsie-sankcie-proti-rusku-bude-podporovat-nulovu-vojensku-pomoc-ukrajine/> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

⁶¹ "European Council meeting (26 and 27 October, 2023)," European Council, October 27, 2023. Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/67627/20241027-european-council-conclusions.pdf> (accessed on March 20, 2024); K. Horváthová, "Dankovi sa nepáči, že Fico na samite EÚ podporil pomoc Ukrajine a skritizoval aj ministrov Hlasu," [Danko unhappy at Fico backing aid for Ukraine at the EU summit and he criticized Hlas ministers as well] *SITA*, November 6, 2023. Available online: <https://sita.sk/dankovi-sa-nepaci-ze-fico-na-samite-eu-podporil-pomoc-ukrajine-a-skritizoval-aj-ministrov-hlasu/> (accessed on March 20, 2024).

■ Conclusions

Slovakia's policy toward the states of the former USSR underwent turbulent changes during the year. The government of Ľ. Ódor continued the course of the previous governments after 2020, especially the cabinet of E. Heger. The new government has taken diametrically different positions not only to earlier governments (2020–2023) but also to Slovakia's closest partners, such as the Czech Republic and Poland, on several key issues, such as military aid for Ukraine and Ukraine's NATO membership. Indeed, it is not only in rhetoric that it comes close to the policy of Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary. Before September 2023, Slovakia's position was clear, as Slovakia supported Ukraine and clearly emphasized that the principle of territorial integrity was both a fundamental priority of its foreign policy and EU and NATO membership. The new governing coalition is partly continuing with the policy of the pre-2020 Fico governments, applying a different rhetoric when addressing the domestic public and its voters from that aimed at its EU and NATO partners. This rhetoric, centered around the cessation of arming Ukraine and brokering immediate peace, whilst frequently escalating anti-Ukrainian sentiment among the Slovak public, contradicts the continued commercial export of arms to Ukraine, which is carried out through "semi-state" and wholly privately owned companies. Such practices thus represent an attempt to resume the course of "eastern multi-vectoralism,"⁶² complemented by economic pragmatism on building relations with Ukraine, in conditions where it is tough to implement given the war on the EU's and NATO's eastern borders.

Although there are clear differences between the SNS's and other governing coalition members' approaches to Russia, they have not become a source of tension within the ruling coalition yet. However, they are a source of political conflict between the coalition and the opposition, comparable to the conflict that prevailed in Slovak society during the third Vladimír Mečiar government (1994–1998). Unlike today, though, there was no escalated conflict between the West as a whole and the Russian Federation on the scale there is today. At that time, the Russian Federation was not seeking to assert its interests through large-scale aggression against a neighboring state, which, moreover, has been linked to the EU through its Association Agreement since 2017.

⁶² J. Marušiak, "Slovakia's Eastern policy – from the Trojan horse of Russia to 'Eastern multivectoralism,'" *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs* Vol. XII, No. 1–2, 2013, pp. 42–70.



Ján Cingel

Slovakia and the Western Balkans in 2023: a year of turbulence

The year 2023 can be described as a year of turbulence both in Slovakia and in the Western Balkans (WB6). While in Slovakia the early elections of September 30, 2023, led to the formation of a new government that is changing the country's foreign policy, the Western Balkans came as close to a "hot" violent war as they have ever been since 1999. The armed incident in Banjska in the north of Kosovo¹ on September 23–24th was a reminder of the fragility of peace in the region and how easily it can be disrupted by actors pursuing narrow agendas that could indirectly damage the peace process in a broad sense. The region is on the brink partly because of the escalation in tension that led to violence in Kosovo in May, June and then September 2023 but also because the Serb leader Milorad Dodik has continued to "play with fire" in Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH).

Furthermore, echoes of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine were felt in the Western Balkans, with geopolitical implications for the region, such as an increase in Russia's hybrid activities.² The WB6 also faced challenges in regional cooperation and bilateral relations, as well as a minor shift in the EU's approach to the region. The November 2023 EU enlargement package and the financial aid package announced after the December 2023 EU–Western Balkans Summit in Brussels, secured a commitment to a €680 million package for investments in railways and renewable energy in the Western Balkans, with an expected additional €16.6 billion to be raised for the region.³

¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

² J. Cingel, R. Burianová, O. Memišević, "Hybrid threats in the Western Balkans: State and non-state perspective," *Strategic Analysis*. Available online: <https://www.strategicanalysis.sk/hybrid-threats-in-the-western-balkans-state-and-non-state-perspective/> (accessed on March 5, 2024).

³ "European Commission announces additional €680 million investment package for the Western Balkans under the Economic and Investment Plan," European Commission, *Press Release*, December 13, 2022. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_6364 (accessed on March 5, 2024).

■ The year 2023 in the Western Balkans in hindsight

The beginning of the year looked promising for the Belgrade–Prishtina Dialogue amid the explicit agreement on the path to normalization between **Kosovo** and **Serbia** in Brussels in February and then in Ohrid, North Macedonia, in March. The agreement, drafted in December 2022 based on the outlines of the “Franco–German proposal,” was negotiated by the EU special representative Miroslav Lajčák and the US special representative Gabriel Escobar, and paved the way for the recognition of national ID cards and car license plates. The long-term goal was to solve a whole salvo of general bilateral relations including the distant goal of de facto mutual recognition. It was a fairly ambitious plan, but a well-founded approach to achieving the international community’s aim to change the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. At the beginning of 2023, there was sufficient momentum to push both sides into a compromise. Indeed, had the agreement and annex been pursued, the two countries would have been on course to normalize relations a year and a half before the European Parliament elections (June 2024) and the possibility of changes in the EU’s most senior political bodies. That could have allowed sufficient time to bring about more lasting change, but there seemed to be zero appetite for compromise on either side and both Serbia and Kosovo were taking steps to undermine the implementation of the agreement and the annex, which led to violent interethnic clashes in Kosovo on at least two occasions.

Our assessment is that the agreement, which Serbia’s President Vučić refused to sign, was well intended by the international community, but did not survive contact with the reality of the political agendas of the two leaders, Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia and Albin Kurti of Kosovo, both of whom appeared to lack the political will to make the difficult compromises required to implement the agreement. Kurti was against the creation of the Association of Serbian Municipalities in Kosovo (ASM-K) that would possess political and executive powers to support the Serbian minority in Kosovo. On the other hand, Serbia and President Vučić had issues with Kosovo being admitted into regional organizations and did not want to terminate Serbia’s de-recognition campaigns and cut off Serbia’s parallel structures operating in Kosovo.

Kosovo tested the waters fairly early on — in April 2023, it applied for Council of Europe (CoE) membership. Serbia was strongly opposed, despite the Ohrid Annex which Serbia interpreted as meaning that the ASM-K had to be

established before Kosovo could apply for membership of such an international body. However, the motion passed, with two-thirds of CoE members supporting Kosovo’s bid in the first round; abstentions by countries that do not recognize the status of Kosovo, such as Slovakia, played a role too. Interestingly, Hungary, which does recognize Kosovo’s independence, voted against the CoE application. Although that was only the first round of the decision on Kosovo’s CoE membership — the Parliamentary Assembly (PACE) still has to approve Kosovo’s bid in spring 2024,⁴ and there will be more questions than last year, especially since the parliamentary landscape has changed since then — including in Slovakia.

In April 2023, elections were held in four Serb-majority municipalities in the North of Kosovo, Leposavić, North Mitrovica, Zubin Potok and Zvečan. These were boycotted by local Serbs (a continuation of the boycotts against the Kosovo institutions started by the Serbs in the fall of 2022), which led to the election of ethnic Kosovo–Albanian mayors and, subsequently massive protests by the Serbian majoritarian population in the four towns. In the ensuing clashes, over 30 soldiers belonging to NATO’s KFOR operation were injured. After these events, the US and EU imposed sanctions on the Kosovo administration — limiting interaction with Western leaders and blocking parts of projects in the country with the aim of forcing the Kurti administration to be more cooperative on issues relating to the cohabitation of the ethnically diverse population, especially in the north. Kurti later agreed to call new local elections in the four municipalities which will take place in 2024. Kosovo Serbs agreed to participate in these new local elections, but again only after other events in Kosovo and Serbia weakened the Vučić administration’s position vis-à-vis the West and set Belgrade on a course of having to manage any political damage. The Kurti administration still has to meet some of the preconditions set by the international community and so the EU/US sanctions against Kosovo remain in place.⁵

The unrest in the north of Kosovo culminated in the September “Banjska incident,” during which a group of heavily armed Serb militants attacked a Kosovo police unit, killing one police officer. The militants then took refuge in

⁴ A. Taylor, “Kosovo progresses to next stage of Council of Europe membership,” *Euractiv*, April 25, 2023. Available online: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/kosovo-progresses-to-next-stage-of-council-of-europe-membership/> (accessed on March 5, 2024).

⁵ As of February 2024.

a nearby Banjska monastery, which was later captured by the Kosovo Special Police Force. During the shootout, three Serbian militants were killed, and two more were arrested by Kosovar authorities. The remainder of the group withdrew across the “green border” to Serbia. Drone footage taken in the aftermath confirmed links between Belgrade and the militants through Milan Radoičić, Vice President of Srpska Lista, the main Serb political party in Kosovo and Belgrade’s primary ally in Kosovo. The incident sparked international outrage and resulted in the dismissal of Serbian Intelligence Chief Aleksandar Vulin, under pressure from Western capitals. Radoičić managed to escape to Serbia, where he was briefly detained and then released. Despite this being the most dangerous security escalation in the region for over 20 years and Belgrade’s fingerprints being all over the “incident,” neither the EU nor the US have taken a hard position against Serbia and nor have they imposed sanctions. In the EU’s case, Hungary probably threatened to veto any sanctions against Serbia, given Orbán’s closeness to Vučić and Hungary’s interests in Serbia.

It is now clear — nearly one year later — that the political momentum around the agreement and Ohrid Annex has been lost and that both sides are waiting to see which leaders will emerge from the European Parliament (EP) elections and US Presidential elections in 2024.

The Serbian administration, led by President Vučić, had a challenging year in 2023 as well. Apart from the “trouble in Kosovo,” **Serbia** witnessed mass shootings in Belgrade and Mladenovac at the beginning of May. These events shook the public in Serbia and led to mass protests against the omnipresence of violence in Serbia’s society, especially in the media. The demonstrations were held under the slogan “Serbia against violence,” targeted the SNS-led government and developed into a political movement with the same name later in the year. Protests occurred in Serbia throughout the summer, pushing for change, including political change and early elections. The government finally consented, aware that prolonged protests might undermine their own support base. President Vučić announced the early election would take place on December 17th, a mere 20 months since the previous ones.

The elections resulted in yet another SNS victory, with the opposition coalition, the “Serbia against violence” platform, coming in a few seats behind. The election campaign and the elections themselves attracted an international outcry amid accusations of election rigging and influence peddling, with international observers criticizing the disproportionate amount of air-time given to opposition parties compared to government ones in the state

media and voters being bussed in from Republika Srpska in BiH. This last act gave rise to mass opposition demonstrations in Belgrade.⁶ The early local elections for the city council of Belgrade were held on the same day, angering the opposition and voters, as the electoral manipulation and vote rigging was most significant there, and the result was particularly close-run.

In an apparent attempt to pacify the West after the aftermath of the elections and the earlier Banjska fiasco, President Vučić quickly agreed to recognize Kosovo ID cards and car license plates at the end of 2023. He ordered his loyal Srpska Lista in Kosovo to cooperate with the Kosovar authorities and help them to re-run the local elections in the north, this time with Kosovo–Serb politicians standing. These moves were meant to signal to the West that Vučić was the more constructive figure, as opposed to staunch ideologue Kurti or the nationalist Serbian opposition and someone the West can cooperate with on issues such as Kosovo, which is most important to the West. However, in return Vučić seeks a “card blanche” from the West on his actions at home and on consolidating power in Serbia after the elections. He is offering vague hints and signs of a potentially constructive approach toward Kosovo. That will probably change over time once he has consolidated political power in Serbia and is no longer in need of a grace period from the West. He has done this so many times before there is no reason to think he will not do it again.

Kosovo’s consolation prize is the visa liberalization starting on January 1, 2024, which will allow its citizens to travel visa-free to EU member countries. It is long overdue. Back in 2018, the European Commission established that Kosovo had fulfilled the technical criteria, but the issue became politicized and the EU postponed it on multiple occasions, causing lots of frustration among ordinary Kosovo citizens.

On the other hand, by 2023 Serbia had still not adopted sanctions against Russia, which would align it with the EU’s CFSP. It and Bosnia and Herzegovina are the only two countries west of Belarus not to do so. Serbia appears to be benefitting economically from this — exports from Serbia to Russia rose 13 per cent in 2023 in comparison to 2022, an increase of nearly \$100 million

⁶ “Serbia, early parliamentary elections, 17 December 2023: Statement of preliminary findings and conclusions,” OSCE, December 18, 2023. Available online: <https://www.osce.org/odhr/elections/serbia/560650> (accessed on March 4, 2024).

and in absolute numbers just above the one billion US dollars' worth of total exports.⁷

However, Serbia is still very dependent on Russian energy imports, especially natural gas. By the end of 2022, 95 per cent of gas consumption in Serbia had been imported from Russia.⁸ Nonetheless, some progress was made in energy diversification in 2023. Serbia and Bulgaria completed a key gas interconnector in December that enables non-Russian gas to be imported from the east.⁹ Moreover, Serbia signed a new gas deal with Azerbaijan in November allowing it to import as much as 400 million m³ per year and thereby partially diversify annual consumption of around 2.2 billion m³, starting in 2024.¹⁰ However, NIS, which is majority-owned by Gazprom Neft and is the only oil derivatives producer in Serbia, continues to be the most significant source of Russian influence in Serbia's energy sector.¹¹

Furthermore, there are still direct flights between Moscow and Belgrade several times a day, used by Russians wishing to either leave Russia and then travel further into Europe or to visit Serbia to buy goods and brands that were pulled out of the Russian market in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. There are also more serious instances of sanction circumvention via Serbia, and the US has already warned it will impose sanctions against some Serbian companies.¹²

⁷ "Rusima prodajemo sve više robe: Strani investitori iz EU najveći izvoznici iz Srbije u Rusiju," [We sell more and more goods to the Russians: Foreign investors from the EU are the biggest exporters from Serbia to Russia] *Politika.rs*, January 2, 2024. Available online: <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/592286/Rusima-prodajemo-sve-vise-robe-Strani-investitori-iz-EU-najveci-izvoznici-iz-Srbije-u-Rusiju> (accessed on March 4, 2024).

⁸ "Serbia activates natural gas supply efforts," Institute of Central Europe, *IES Commentaries*, July 28, 2023. Available online: <https://ies.lublin.pl/en/comments/serbia-activates-natural-gas-supply-efforts/> (accessed on March 5, 2024).

⁹ "Inauguration of the Bulgaria-Serbia gas interconnector," European Commission, *News Announcement*, December 11, 2023. Available online: https://energy.ec.europa.eu/news/inauguration-bulgaria-serbia-gas-interconnector-2023-12-11_en (accessed on March 5, 2024).

¹⁰ M. Stojanović. "Serbia signs natural gas deal with Azerbaijan," *BalkanInsight*, November 15, 2023. Available online: <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/11/15/serbia-signs-natural-gas-deal-with-azerbaijan/> (accessed on March 5, 2024).

¹¹ "Serbia's energy dilemma: between Russian ownership and the path to renewable transition," *European Western Balkans—Srbija*, November 10, 2023. Available online: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/11/10/serbias-energy-dilemma-between-russian-ownership-and-the-path-to-renewable-transition/> (accessed on March 6, 2024).

¹² At the time of writing (February 2024) the US had still not published the updated list of sanctioned entities.

Montenegro was another country in which crucial political changes took place in 2023. First, in March/April its longest-serving president, Milo Đukanović, lost out in the presidential elections to a young politician, Jakov Milatović, from the Europe Now Movement (PES). Then, in June, early parliamentary elections were held following the resignation of the government led by prime minister Dritan Abazović. The elections were won by PES, with Đukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) following close behind under the leadership of another ascending young politician—Danijel Živković. The Serbian nationalist party came third, followed by the moderately pro-Serbian political parties and then the ethnic minority parties. The parliamentary seat allocation made it difficult for PES—led by another very young politician, Miloško Spajić, to form a new government. It took more than four months to form a broad coalition made-up of moderate pro-Serbian political parties supported by the Albanian minority parties with support from extremist nationalist pro-Serbian parties (former Demokratski front). The nationalist pro-Serbian leaders were promised ministerial positions after the government reshuffle of 2024 and the post of Speaker of Parliament. Prime Minister Spajić juggled all these demands amid clear warnings from both the US and key EU countries against forging a coalition with the support of Serb nationalists. However, given that he wanted to exclude the arch-enemy—the opposition party DPS—he had no other choice but to include them.

The composition of the government of Montenegro is already raising serious questions: after an expected reshuffle and the allocation of ministerial posts to former-Demokratski front members, its foreign policy vector will be even more strongly anchored toward Belgrade and potentially Moscow. There are good reasons to be concerned about the future of the EU integration process, which has been at a standstill for over three years now. The reforms are progressing very slowly, and motivation is lukewarm, to put it mildly. The government coalition is shaky, with the coalition divided on various issues and internal divisions within the leading political party PES, the latter having already split due to the personal ambitions of its two leaders—Prime Minister Spajić and President Milatović. Eight months after the early elections, there are again talks of yet another early election to hand a new pack of cards to the politicians. Montenegro is slowly but surely slipping into political instability.

The internal instability is exacerbated by external malign influences that are further dividing society. Montenegro was one of few Western Balkan countries that did not have inter-ethnic tensions. That is no longer true, and in 2023, the internal struggle over Montenegro's identity continued. It was

concentrated around the national census, which was highly politicized and postponed more than once before being held in December 2023. There was a massive campaign encouraging citizens to declare their preferred ethnicity. Citizens were encouraged to identify as Serbs to increase the Serbian population of Montenegro and thereby lay the foundations for further claims to political and minority rights. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), which has a very strong position in the country, stepped in, persuading its followers to tick the SOC box in Montenegro in order to increase the number of followers for political purposes.

Bosnia and Herzegovina was another country on a rocky road to a new administration. Following the elections of October 2022, the new Council of Ministers was not formed until late January 2023, and the Government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity eventually emerged in late April 2023. Moreover, the integrity of the elections was swept into the public limelight as the Office of the High Representative (OHR) pushed for sweeping changes to the country's electoral system, to be achieved through an amendment to the state election law to introduce new technologies that would stop electoral fraud and vote buying. Obviously, this move was not welcomed by any of the BiH political elites, as far too many of them cling to power through various kinds of electoral manipulation.

Furthermore, in 2023, Milorad Dodik, the leader of Republika Srpska, attempted to stir up inter-ethnic tension amid a financial and economic crisis within the Serbian entity in an effort to attract money from international donors and allies like Serbia, Hungary or Russia. Despite the efforts of some sections of the new government, BiH did not proceed with the implementation of the 14 priorities relating to the EU accession process. And so BiH became the only candidate country to leave the EU-Western Balkans summit in December 2023 empty-handed, apart from a promise that the member countries would re-evaluate BiH's reform track record in March 2024.

North Macedonia also had difficulty gaining traction in the EU integration process—the internal political situation meant that it failed to get the constitutional changes sought by neighboring Bulgaria through parliament and thereby unblock its EU accession process. The proposed constitutional change to add some ethnic minorities, including the Bulgarian minority, to the official list became politicized, with the strongest opposition party—the nationalist VMRO-DPMNE—rejecting it outright as a political diktat from Bulgaria and attempting to build political support around the issue. According to the polls, VMRO-DPMNE is likely to win the most votes in the elections of spring 2024, both the presidential and parliamentary ones. The inertia in the EU accession process has led to a fall in support for the EU in North Macedonia,

especially among ethnic Macedonians, as well as disillusionment and a feeling of being left out by member states, as North Macedonia has been in the waiting room for far too long. That and the worsening economic and social situation and the failed anti-corruption fight by the government under the leadership of SDSM have meant that the nationalist and anti-EU opposition led by VMRO-DPMNE and anti-system Levica have gained traction.

Albania had a politically turbulent 2023 as well. In February, thousands of people protested against corruption and government economic policy, calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Edi Rama. In the local elections in May, the main government party—the Socialist Party—achieved a major landslide victory. Although voter turnout was extremely low, as part of the opposition boycotted the elections. The deep polarization between government and opposition that has been dragging on since at least 2021 finally culminated in the fall of 2023. There were violent scuffles between MPs, fire-crackers, smoke grenades and entry to parliament was blocked by the opposition Democratic Party. One reason for this was that the de facto leader of the Democratic Party (contested), Sali Berisha, was accused of corruption and is being prosecuted. The US and the UK have imposed personal sanctions against Berisha and some of his family relatives for corruption. Apart from the political polarization, Albania also suffered a devastating cyber-attack on its digital state administration. The attack occurred in the fall of 2022, but its systems and state networks were still not fully operational even in late 2023. Iran is generally believed to be behind the cyber-attack, in retaliation for the Iranian opposition group—the People's Mojahedins' Organization (MEK)—being hosted in Albania. MEK has found refuge in Albania since 2016, and the cyber-attack is the second damaging such attack to have affected Albania's cyber infrastructure since 2020.¹³

■ European integration and regional cooperation

Unlike in 2022, little progress in European integration was seen in the Western Balkans in 2023. There were high expectations that Bosnia and Herzegovina, at least, would be invited to start negotiations, but that did not materialize at the European Council (EUCCO) meeting in December 2023. Instead, Ukraine

¹³ J. Cingel, R. Burianová, O. Memišević, op. cit.

and Moldova got the green light to move ahead, and Georgia—despite the worsening domestic political situation—was awarded EU candidacy status. Bosnia and Herzegovina was promised negotiations could start if they fulfilled at least some of the 14 points outlined by the European Commission.

From the developments at the EUCO meeting, it is clear that the center of gravity of EU enlargement has shifted east, and the Western Balkans failed to seize the momentum created by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The EU is adapting its approach to integration to a more "geopolitical mode" with just a few soft touches of a "merit-based" one. The political leaders of the Western Balkans failed to grasp this shift and thought it was business as usual; they did not, therefore, follow the efforts of their Eastern colleagues, who managed to adopt at least some of the needed legislation and reforms. Their reward was the next benchmark on their EU integration path. This caused frustration in the Western Balkans, among politicians and pundits alike, who accused the EU of adopting "double standards" in the way it treated candidates in the East and those in the Western Balkan region. While technically correct, the calls indicated a failure to understand the change in the EU's approach toward enlargement going back to February 2022 and that it was in fact, the Western Balkans that had failed to seize the opportunity.

The EUCO meeting in December 2023 was linked to the EU-Western Balkan summit, at which agreement was reached on "gradual integration," strengthening economic cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans, reinforcing security and building resilience. The EU announced the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans aimed at accelerating socio-economic convergence between the Western Balkans and the EU and encouraging the region to hasten EU-related reforms and regional economic integration through the Common Regional Market (CRM), based on EU rules and standards.¹⁴ The EU announced that almost half (€450 mil.) of the Energy Support Package worth €1 billion in total had been disbursed and that over €500 million in grants remained for 2024, to be provided through the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) and invested in energy transition and green technologies around the region.

Regarding security and resilience building, the EU opened up the European Peace Facility to the WB6 to further develop capabilities and capacities. The EU also stated it would continue to support the Western Balkans in their fight against Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), including

¹⁴ "EU-Western Balkans Summit Brussels Declaration, 13 December 2023." Available online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/68822/brussels-declaration-en.pdf> (accessed on March 5, 2024).

disinformation as well as other hybrid threats intended to undermine the region's stability, democratic processes and EU perspective.¹⁵

Regional cooperation seems to have picked up pace in 2023, largely owing to the reinvigoration of the *Berlin Process*, and the associated summit in October in Tirana, Albania. While the political EU integration agenda in the Western Balkans seems to be stuck, the Berlin Process offers a platform and, most importantly, resources for connecting up the Western Balkan region economically, technically, and infrastructurally, and thereby with the EU as well. Within the Berlin Process, the WB6 agreed to the mutual recognition of professional qualifications and, together with EU partners, to reduce data roaming costs between the EU and the Western Balkans. The establishment of the College of Europe campus in Tirana was also announced, which has the aim of fostering EU affairs expertise across the region.¹⁶ On the side-lines of the Berlin Process Summit, France, Slovenia and Montenegro signed an agreement to create the Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Center based in Montenegro, with the participation of the WB6 countries and some EU member states.¹⁷ The aim is to significantly boost the region's cyber security following the serious cyber-attacks against almost all of the WB6 countries. The Green Agenda for the Western Balkans was discussed as well.

The Berlin Process is also delivering on connectivity—the first section of the Niš–Merdare–Prishtina highway (the Peace Highway)¹⁸ was opened in July 2023, made possible by the Western Balkans Investment Framework financial mechanism. More ambitiously, the Peace Highway is expected to connect southern Serbia with the port of Durrës in Albania, improve transportation links and promote economic integration.¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ "Conclusions and Agreements—Berlin Process Summit 2023 in Tirana," Berlin Process Summit, Tirana 2023. Available online: <https://www.berlinprocess.de/en/the-berlin-process-is-coming-back-to-berlin> (accessed on March 4, 2024).

¹⁷ "Cyber security—Signing of the treaty on the Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre (16 October 2023)," France Diplomacy, October 16, 2023. Available online: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/press-room/latest-news/article/cyber-security-signing-of-the-treaty-on-the-western-balkans-cyber-capacity> (accessed on March 5, 2024).

¹⁸ "Peace Highway: Niš–Merdare–Pristina," Western Balkan Investment Framework, July 2023. Available online: https://www.wbif.eu/storage/app/media/Library/FactSheets/Factsheets%202023/1-Peace%20Highway%20Factsheet_230726.pdf (accessed on March 5, 2024).

¹⁹ "Otvorena prva deonica autoputa koji povezuje jug Srbije sa Prištinom i lukom Drač," [The first section of the highway connecting the south of Serbia with Prishtina and the port of Durrës was opened] *Radio Free Europe*, July 26, 2023. Available online: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-autoput-nis-merdare/32520799.html> (accessed on March 4, 2024).

As we have recommended many times before and on different platforms, Slovakia should consider joining the Berlin Process, which at the moment seems to be the only pragmatic, content-oriented platform for much closer cooperation between the WB6 and EU countries.

In an apparent reaction to the eastward shift in the EU integration process, the Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexander Schallenberg, together with his Slovak colleague Miroslav Wlachovský, Czech Minister Jan Lipavský and Gordan Grilić Radman from Croatia, launched an informal initiative called “Friends of the Western Balkans” (*Göttweig Declaration*) on June 23, 2023, at the Europa Forum Wachau in Krems, Austria. Within weeks Italy, Slovenia, and Greece had joined the initiative. Minister Schallenberg believes that “while the EU rightly focuses on Ukraine, it cannot afford to lose sight of the states in Southeast Europe. If EU member states send a signal to their neighbours in the East, they must also fulfil their geopolitical responsibility towards Southeastern Europe.”²⁰ The aim of the group is to support the inclusion of Western Balkan countries in the EU’s affairs — one proposal is to invite the Western Balkans foreign ministers to join the EU Foreign Affairs Council’s formal and informal meetings “at least once per semester” and the countries’ ambassadors to join their counterparts in the Political and Security Committee (PSC) at informal meetings “on topics of common interest at least once per semester.”²¹

The Western Balkan leaders met in the broader format of the *European Political Community (EPC)* at the summits in Chişinău, Moldova, in June and then in Granada, Spain, in October 2023. The platform, dubbed the “Instagram Summit” due to its focus on form and PR rather than content, presented an opportunity for Western Balkan leaders to meet with representatives of other EU candidate and partner countries to engage in political coordination and in-depth exchanges on pressing issues concerning the continent.

²⁰ “Friends of the Western Balkans — Call for concrete steps towards the integration of the Western Balkans into the European Union,” Federal Ministry, Republic of Austria, *Press Release*, June 23, 2023. Available online: <https://www.bmeia.gv.at/en/the-ministry/press/news/2023/06/friends-of-the-western-balkans-call-for-concrete-steps-towards-the-integration-of-the-western-balkans-into-the-european-union> (accessed on March 4, 2024).

²¹ A. Brzozowski, “Friends of Western Balkans’ push for more cooperation with region on EU foreign policy,” *Euractiv*, November 13, 2023. Available online: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement-neighbourhood/news/friends-of-western-balkans-push-for-more-cooperation-with-region-on-eu-foreign-policy/> (accessed on March 5, 2024).

■ Slovakia and the Western Balkans in 2023

Amid the turbulent internal politics in 2023, Slovakia had three ministers of foreign affairs with responsibility for Slovak foreign policy, including on the Western Balkans. Rastislav Káčer was replaced by Miroslav Wlachovský, who was followed, after the elections, by Minister Juraj Blanár from SMER–SSD. The Western Balkans was a fairly important part of the work of all three ministers. For example, it was under Minister Wlachovský that Slovakia joined the Austrian initiative — Friends of Western Balkans — and, in the *Slavkov format* (S3), he and his Austrian and Czech colleagues visited Skopje under a mandate from the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Joseph Borrell to attempt to break the political stalemate on constitutional change in North Macedonia.

We have yet to see what direction foreign policy will take under the new minister, Juraj Blanár. Unlike many of his predecessors, he is not a career diplomat but a politician who is very close to the party leaders of SMER–SSD. However, given his close ties to the party leadership and Prime Minister Robert Fico, the rhetoric and some of their positions on Ukraine are already having an impact on Slovak foreign policy in the Western Balkans. As Minister Blanár has still to organize his first trip to the Balkans,²² it is not yet clear how that will play out, but his meetings at multilateral fora show that he is paying more attention to the Western Balkans and specifically to relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro — in that order.

As for the multilateral platforms, initial signs are that the positions of the current Slovak government may mean the Slavkov Format will not continue: both Austria and Czechia have different views on key points regarding Ukraine. The *Visegrad Group* (V4) has been politically defunct for a long time — and following the elections in Poland (October 2023) and Slovakia (September 2023), the block will again be divided in half — with Czechia and Poland on one side and Hungary and Slovakia seeing each other as close allies on the other, as declared by Prime Minister Fico during his inaugural visit to Budapest.²³

²² As of February 2024.

²³ “Premiér Fico v Budapešti vyhlásil, že spolupráca V4 bola úmyselne znefunkčnená,” [Prime Minister Fico declared in Budapest that the V4 cooperation had been deliberately derailed] *aktuality.sk*, January 16, 2024. Available online: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/VxmHqaz/premier-fico-v-budapesti-vyhlasil-ze-spolupraca-v4-bola-umyselne-znefunkcnená/> (accessed on March 5, 2024).

Hungary has its own interests in the Western Balkan region and is pursuing them relentlessly, investing significant sums of money, as well as political and diplomatic capital. Hungary tends to support like-minded autocratic wannabes like Vučić in Serbia or Dodik in BiH, who copy Orbán and his policies. Such an axis of assistance and mutual political support does not inspire confidence among EU member countries that are more skeptical of enlargement policy. Slovakia, perceived in similar terms as Orbán's regime in Hungary, is weakening its position in the Balkans. Slovakia will probably have to pursue bilateral relations on its own, which may further reduce its influence in the region, long perceived in the country as a foreign policy priority.

The new government in Bratislava puts huge emphasis on economic diplomacy in foreign policy and sees its embassies abroad as hubs for promoting Slovakia and the business sector. One section of the Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic is specifically dedicated to Slovak diplomacy as economic diplomacy.²⁴ It expects that economic diplomacy will open doors for Slovak companies, leading to new markets and new export destinations and will identify investment opportunities. The term economic diplomacy features 13 times in the manifesto. It is obviously a commendable goal, but in practice it will require serious investments especially in the personnel who will conduct the economic diplomacy. For example, at the moment of writing, there are no specifically earmarked economic diplomats at any of the six Western Balkan embassies. The embassies are understaffed, and economic diplomacy is conducted on a more or less ad hoc basis, alongside a plethora of other duties. At the same time, the Western Balkans is Slovakia's closest (neighboring) region — geographically, culturally, linguistically and mentally — so doing business here should be a lot easier than in more distant countries. Logically, then, the Slovak embassies in this part of the world should be supported by specifically earmarked economic diplomats. It is time to put our money where our mouths are.

The stability and security of the Western Balkans has a direct impact on Slovakia too, as we witnessed in the fall of 2023 during the "illegal migration wave." The number of illegal migrants arriving via the "Balkan route" and apprehended in Slovakia far exceeded those in 2015/2016, when the migration crises peaked in Central Europe (Germany, Austria). This is a paradox, as even the EU concluded at the EUCO-WB6 meeting in December that 2023

²⁴ "Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic for 2023–2027. 'A better, calmer, safer life,'" Government of the Slovak Republic, November 13, 2023. Available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=535376> (accessed on February 2, 2024).

was a much calmer year for illegal migration along the so-called Balkan route than 2022 had been — as regards the total number of illegal crossings.²⁵ In Slovakia, illegal migration across its territory had an impact on the early parliamentary elections — held in September 2023 — when the issue was heavily politicized and inflamed by disinformation media.

■ **Bilateral relations between Slovakia and the Western Balkan countries in 2023**

Relations with **Albania** are slowly picking up pace as the country negotiates its way into the European Union. The Deputy Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, Megi Fino, visited Bratislava in late May 2023, meeting her counterpart State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Ingrid Brocková. The two signed a double-taxation avoidance agreement to help businesses and entrepreneurs in both countries foster economic cooperation. After that, Deputy Minister Fino attended the GLOBSEC Forum 2023, where she spoke on a panel about the EU integration of the Western Balkans. In October 2023, Slovakia's Ambassador to Albania, Albín Otruba, met with the Speaker of the Albanian Parliament, Lindita Nikolla, to discuss furthering relations between the parliaments of the two countries. In December 2023, the Ambassador of Albania to Slovakia, Enkeleda Mërkuri, ended her term in Bratislava by meeting with Slovak officials, including the State Secretary of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Rastislav Chovanec.

The National Convention on European Integration in Albania project implemented by the European Movement of Albania and the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA) continued, with working group meetings in February, March and then December 2023 on Albania's most important negotiation chapters. A plenary session was organized in March 2023. The project aims to share Slovak experience and knowledge on EU integration and to help Albania prepare for the EU accession negotiations. It is supported by *EuropeAid* and partly co-financed by *SlovakAid*.²⁶

²⁵ "EU-Western Balkans Summit Brussels Declaration, 13 December 2023." op. cit.

²⁶ More information on the National Convention in European Integration in Albania project can be found online: <https://eurokonventa.al/en/> (accessed on March 5, 2024).

Relations with **Bosnia and Herzegovina** were very intensive. The new Minister of Foreign Affairs of BiH, Elmedin Konaković, visited Bratislava in May 2023 to meet Minister Wlachovský and discuss BiH's EU and NATO membership. Afterwards, Minister Konaković spoke at the GLOBSEC Forum 2023 on a panel on the EU integration of the Western Balkans. It was his first international public appearance at such a forum following his appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs of BiH.

Slovakia has a military contingent in the EUFOR/Althea operation that contributes to the security and stability of BiH. In June 2023, the Ambassador of Slovakia to BiH, Roman Hloben, together with the NATO HQ Commander in the country, presented a donation of €20,000 to the Defense Ministry of BiH. In July 2023, Slovak Minister Wlachovský met with the Deputy Foreign Minister of BiH, Josip Brkić, during the NATO Summit in Vilnius, at which the NATO and EU accession processes were discussed. Minister Wlachovský declared Slovakia's full support for BiH's accession to NATO.²⁷

In September 2023, photos²⁸ of the Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik's visit to Bratislava appeared in BiH media. The visit was not an official one; however, Dodik met with Robert Fico, who was the leader of the main opposition party SMER-SSD and his deputy Juraj Blanár just three weeks before the Slovak elections, which the SMER-SSD won later that month. The meeting raised many eyebrows in Sarajevo, BiH and around the region, as Dodik has been under increasing pressure from the EU, US and UK due to his secessionist moves in BiH. Dodik was also one of the first leaders to congratulate Fico on his victory in the early parliamentary elections in Slovakia, prompting some in the Balkans to conclude there may be an axis from Bratislava through Budapest and Belgrade to Banja Luka. Whether these assessments are accurate remains to be seen.

²⁷ "Minister Wlachovský: Nobody and nothing protects our citizens, values and freedom more than NATO. The outcomes of the Vilnius Summit is good news for Slovakia and an important signal of support for Ukraine," Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, July 12, 2023. Available online: https://mzv.sk/en/web/sarajevo-en/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=18556584 (accessed on March 5, 2024).

²⁸ The photos were incorrectly labeled in BiH media as a visit by Robert Fico and Juraj Blanár to Banja Luka, see e.g.: "Dodik se sastao sa bivšim premijerom Slovačke Robertom Ficom," [Dodik met with the former prime minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico] *Mondo*, September 8, 2023. Available online: <https://mondo.ba/Info/Politika/amp/a1244021/Dodik-i-Robert-Fico.html> (accessed on February 28, 2024).

On November 29, 2023, the Post-Conflict Research Center (PCRC) and the Slovak Embassy in Sarajevo organized an experience-sharing workshop on Slovakia's perceptions of the benefits of EU membership and the fight against disinformation.

Finally, on December 18, 2023, the President of the Slovak Republic, Zuzana Čaputová, accompanied by the Minister of Defense, Robert Kaliňák, visited Bosnia and Herzegovina to meet Slovak troops serving on the EUFOR/Althea operation and to discuss cooperation with their BiH interlocutors. A potential increase in the Slovak contingent of the operation was also discussed.^{29,30}

The Slovak Republic has not changed its position on **Kosovo's** unilateral declaration of independence. Moreover, recognition is highly unlikely to occur with the new Slovak government in power. The Kosovo administration has not provided any reason for it to reconsider Slovak foreign policy on Kosovo's independence. With the constant deterioration in the security situation and the Kosovo administration raising more potentially explosive issues, such as banning payments in Serbian dinars (RSD) on its territory, there is a growing need to maintain peace and security in the country. Therefore it is worth reiterating that Slovakia returning to the KFOR mission would be the most meaningful way of contributing to security and stability in the region.

The most interesting event in bilateral relations between Slovakia and Kosovo in 2023 was back in April, when Slovakia abstained during the Council of Europe (CoE) Committee of Ministers vote on Kosovo's membership application. The motion passed through to the second round — partly thanks to Slovakia. The Kosovo administration welcomed Slovak's constructive position. However, it remains to be seen what position Slovakia will adopt in the next round of CoE voting in April 2024. The present Slovak parliament has a very different composition from the one a year ago.

²⁹ "Prezidentka navštívila vojakov pôsobiacich v Bosne a Hercegovine," [The President visited soldiers serving in Bosnia and Herzegovina] Office of the President of the Slovak Republic, December 14, 2023. Available online: <https://www.prezident.sk/article/prezidentka-navstivila-vojakov-posobiacich-v-bosne-a-hercegovine/> (accessed on March 4, 2024).

³⁰ "Minister obrany R. Kaliňák obdaroval slovenských vojakov v Bosne a Hercegovine a stretol sa s tamojším ministrom obrany," [Minister of Defense R. Kaliňák presented gifts to Slovak soldiers in Bosnia and Herzegovina and met with the Minister of Defense] Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, December 15, 2023. Available online: <https://www.mosr.sk/53596-sk/minister-obrany-r-kalinak-obdaroval-slovenskych-vojakov-v-bosne-a-hercegovine-a-stretol-sa-s-tamojsim-ministrom-obrany/> (accessed on March 5, 2024).

In 2023, Slovakia sought to improve economic and tourism links with **Montenegro**. In May 2023, the Embassy of Slovakia in Podgorica organized a business forum for Slovak companies working in the HORECA sector and food production, in cooperation with the Business Chamber of Montenegro. Over 40 companies attended and engaged in B2B meetings. In June 2023, a regular flight was launched between Bratislava and Podgorica, operated by Air Montenegro. The twice-weekly flights are scheduled during the tourist season in Montenegro each year from June until the end of September.

The customary good relations between Slovakia and **North Macedonia** were underscored by a visit by Foreign Minister Bujar Osmani to Bratislava, who also attended the GLOBSEC Forum 2023 and spoke on the EU integration panel in May 2023. The Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, Miroslav Wlachovský, together with his Austrian and Czech colleagues Alexander Schallenberg and Jan Lipavský, visited North Macedonia in July 2023. The visit was organized in the Slavkov Format under a mandate from the EU HR for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell in order to emphasize the importance of the message delivered by the three ministers in Skopje. The main mission was to support and encourage North Macedonia on its rocky EU integration path. During the visit, they met with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bujar Osmani, and representatives of the government of North Macedonia, the opposition and civil society.³¹

In 2023, the National Convention on European Integration in North Macedonia continued, with support from *SlovakAid*, *USAid* and the EU Delegation to North Macedonia. The project is being implemented by the European Movement of North Macedonia in cooperation with the SFPA, and in 2023, it organized two plenary conferences in March and December 2023 in Skopje and six working group meetings covering various aspects of North Macedonia's EU accession process. The platform was set up to exchange experience and share Slovak knowledge acquired through its own EU integration process.³²

³¹ "Minister Wlachovský v Skopje: Oceňujeme pokrok, ktorý Severné Macedónsko dosiahlo pri eurointegračnom procese, teraz však nesmie poľaviť, ale stavať na dosiahnutých výsledkoch," [Minister Wlachovský in Skopje: We welcome the progress that North Macedonia has achieved in the European integration process, but we cannot slack off now, we have to build on the results] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, July 13, 2023. Available online: https://mzv.sk/sk/web/skopje/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=18569504 (accessed on March 5, 2024).

³² "National Convention on the EU in North Macedonia." Available online: <https://nkeu.mk/category/news/> (accessed on March 4, 2024).

In **Serbia**, Slovakia has pursued a soft-power approach and organized a number of cultural visits, exchanges and exhibitions. It also promoted the culture and heritage of the Slovak minority in Serbia. Foreign trade between Slovakia and Serbia continued to break records after 2022, when it reached a turnover of over €1.17 billion, the highest ever volume in bilateral history. The volume of bilateral trade for 2023 seems to be following a similar path, reaching over €1.03 billion as of November 2023.³³ Most of that bilateral foreign trade involves car parts, electronics and cables for cars produced in Serbia for Slovak car factories. The successful year concluded with the Slovak Ambassador to Serbia, Fedor Rosocha, bidding farewell in December 2023 when he met with President Aleksandar Vučić, Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić as well as the Serbian Orthodox Church Patriarch Porfirije as he completed his tenure in Belgrade. The new Ambassador of Slovakia to Serbia, Michal Pavúk, took office in February 2024.

■ Instead of a conclusion

The year 2023 was very turbulent in both the Western Balkans and Slovakia. In the Balkans, we came closest to a new hot war since the end of hostilities in Kosovo in 1999 and North Macedonia in 2001. Downplaying the Banjska incident is dangerous; yet the EU and the US chose to remain silent about the incident — at least publicly. Severe threats and warnings were probably issued behind closed doors, given that Vučić's loyal ally Vulin, the ideologue of "Srpski svet", had to vacate the position of director of Serbia's intelligence service. In any case, the Banjska incident shows us what the very near future might look like in such countries as Kosovo or BiH if an ethnic group has a significant grievance against the majority under conditions in which the international community is perceived to play a weak, ineffective or biased role in conflict prevention and reconciliation.

The fact that the Banjska incident took place mere days after Azerbaijan took military control of Nagorno Karabakh, incorporating it into its territory and ethnically cleansing nearly 150,000 ethnic Armenians despite the ongoing internationally driven peace negotiations, with no consequences for Azerbaijan.

³³ The final figures for Slovakia–Serbia bilateral trade for 2023 were not available at the time of writing.

It must have been read as a recipe for action at least among some power circles in Belgrade. Unfortunately, there still remains a number of armed and paramilitary groups in the Western Balkans that could be used as plausibly deniable actors to achieve the political goals of a regional or even external player. Russia would be more than happy to spread instability just to keep the West even busier and its eyes off Ukraine, which is in a very vulnerable situation at the moment.

As EU leaders are pledging not to send soldiers to Ukraine, they should use the preventive mechanisms in the Balkans to stop things spinning out of control there, such as the EUFOR/Althea operation in BiH and the KFOR mission in Kosovo. Both should be reinforced with additional troops and key capabilities to enhance mobility and situational awareness to allow quick and decisive responses to potential escalations. Since Slovakia considers the Western Balkans a foreign policy priority, it should contribute to these two mechanisms for maintaining peace and security in the region. Slovakia could send at least two Black Hawk helicopters to the EUFOR/Althea operation (with crews and personnel) and return to the KFOR mission. The contribution need not be huge at the beginning — but should involve deploying capabilities that improve situational awareness, such as the CIMIC team, staff officers at the KFOR Command structures and tactical as well as strategic intelligence components. Later, this can be expanded by adding protection troops, Military Police or additional mobility capabilities. Logically the area of operation should be the north of Kosovo or Serbian communities south of the river Ibar, given the language similarities and Slovakia's overall policy on Kosovo.

The new government that formed in Slovakia following the September 30, 2023, elections has already deviated from the foreign policy pursued by previous governments. That is especially true on Ukraine, where the rhetoric and messaging are very negative and nearly on par with that of Orbán's administration in Hungary. The use of similar vocabulary and actions has meant that Slovakia is being perceived as a second Hungary in the EU. In terms of foreign policy on the Western Balkans, the messaging has been much softer and has tended to build on where previous governments left off. We have yet to see what practical steps will be taken and what Slovak foreign policy on the Western Balkans will actually look like in 2024. Based on the bilateral meetings of the new Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovakia, Juraj Blanár, it seems that he is very interested in the region; on various occasions, he has met with counterparts from the WB6 on the side-lines of multilateral formats. He also attended the meeting of Friends of Balkans in Rome on February 5, 2024, thereby continuing Slovakia's involvement in the initiative

launched by his predecessor, Miroslav Wlachovský, which is clearly a commendable approach. On the other hand, as of early March 2024, Minister Blanár still had to plan his first official trip to the Western Balkans, and the destination of that visit will reveal more.

One thing is clear, though: Slovakia will have to be more self-reliant in pursuing interests in the region — neither the S3 nor V4 formats will provide additional diplomatic and political weight. Also, within the EU, Slovakia is already being watched with suspicion in light of the external communication and rhetoric of some of the state's leading representatives on foreign policy and security, and so is already losing access to informal but important diplomatic groups, efforts and initiatives in Balkan countries led by partner EU countries. This means that Slovakia will have to mobilize internal diplomatic capacities to act on its own, and if it follows the new government's manifesto, in economic diplomacy it will have to boost the personnel capacities of its embassies around the region by supplying dedicated economic diplomats. Otherwise, there will be little room to compete with other actors in the Western Balkans region — such as our closest neighbors, Austria and Hungary, who are highly active in the region.



Matej Šimalčík

Slovakia's relations with Asia-Pacific in light of the snap election

The year 2023 was characterized by political entropy, resulting in the collapse of the government of prime minister Eduard Heger, the appointment of a caretaker government under prime minister Ľudovít Ódor, and subsequent snap parliamentary elections that ushered in the government of Prime Minister Robert Fico, his fourth non-consecutive term in office.

Naturally this fragmentation impacted all areas of political life, and foreign policy was no exception. Relations with East Asia have manifested in very different views among the political parties, ultimately resulting in yet another policy shift following the appointment of Robert Fico and his administration.

■ East Asia makes it into the election campaign¹

In Slovak politics, Asia-related topics tend to be ignored in election campaigns. The 2023 parliamentary election and preceding campaign are an exception to this rule. An analysis of the party manifestos revealed quite varied views of East Asian affairs in general and, more specifically, of China and Taiwan.

The political parties Smer–SSD, Hlas–SD, SNS, and Republika generally exhibited China-friendly positions, largely grounded in the perceived economic opportunities. On the other side of the spectrum, parties like the KDH, SaS,

¹ This section is adapted from M. Šimalčík, B. Pavlovičová, "Peking alebo Taipei? Politické strany nemajú zhodu," [Beijing or Taipei? Political parties are not aligned] CEIAS, September 27, 2023. Available online: <https://ceias.eu/peking-alebo-taipei-politicke-strany-nemaju-zhodu/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

Democrats, or Hnutie Slovensko (formerly OĽANO) expressed far more critical views of China in their election manifestos, and at times very positive views of Taiwan. Among the relevant political parties, SNS, Progressive Slovakia, and SaS failed to make proper mention of China, Taiwan, or the broader Asian region in their political programs.

Smer-SSD promoted its idea of a foreign policy aimed “in all four cardinal directions” and the “return of sovereignty” in practice. China is mentioned in the context of the growing conflict between the US, the European Union, and China as a result of the Chinese Communist Party’s close cooperation with Russia. The EU and US are blamed for the deterioration in relations. Smer-SSD also communicated China’s talking points about the Russian invasion of Ukraine during the election campaign, and applauded China for publishing a policy paper on a political settlement for the conflict (sometimes incorrectly labeled as “China’s peace plan”). The party’s position was not surprising, though. Smer-SSD representatives have long advocated a pragmatic policy toward China, while repeatedly spreading propaganda and disinformation in public discourse that has been taken from Chinese sources.

Hlas-SD made only cursory references to China in its election manifesto, calling for deeper economic ties with China.

The far-right Republika was another party wishing to promote economic ties with China. Its election manifesto uncritically adopted an image of China as a source of political and economic growth and promised to strengthen trade relations and increase the share of investments in Slovakia. On Taiwan, Republika explicitly subscribed to the one-China policy.

Regarding discussion of China, KDĽ’s program was the most comprehensive. The KDĽ saw China as a “long-term complex threat to the democratic world,” and it was the only party to draw attention to violations of international law and norms, the repressive policies against Taiwan, and human rights abuses inside and outside the country. The KDĽ was aiming at the protection of the “single market, together with the protection of critical infrastructure and intellectual property, as well as the protection of the digital sovereignty of citizens’ personal data from misuse,” and coordination of these policies at the European or global level.

OĽANO mentioned China in the context of economic and economic diplomacy, but also pointed to the potential risks of such cooperation. Economic relations should not override the Slovakia’s foreign and security policy values. Among other things, OĽANO was interested in strengthening cooperation with Taiwan in the field of technology, supporting “the conclusion of

a bilateral investment agreement at EU level and the establishment of chip production in Slovakia.”

The Democrats explicitly called for freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights to be strengthened around the world, including in China. They also called for deeper relations with Taiwan as a prospective partner.

■ Manifesto of the Government points to a new approach

Ultimately, the views of Smer-SSD and its partners in Hlas-SD and SNS became part of official governmental policy once the government took office in November 2023. The government’s manifesto noted the following:

The government views with concern the attempts to erect a new Iron Curtain between the West and the East. The Slovak Republic intends to pursue a sovereign foreign policy in all four cardinal directions under its membership of the European Union and NATO. Taking into account the shift of the geopolitical and economic center of gravity to the Indo-Pacific region, the government will deepen and significantly strengthen diplomatic and economic activities in this area. Emphasis will be placed on the countries of the Global South and particularly on areas with traditional political and economic ties to Slovakia.²

While the pledge to deepen relations with Indo-Pacific (or Asia-Pacific) countries is commendable in and of itself, it needs to be stressed that it must go hand in hand with a greater political understanding of the region and more attention being paid to the potential security implications, since the region is home to a number of authoritarian states.

While it is too soon to evaluate the approach of Fico’s fourth cabinet toward the region, the first few months in office provide indications on where it will be heading. Since the election we have seen a rapid decline in interactions

² “Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky 2023 – 2027: Lepšie, pokojnejšie a bezpečnejšie život,” [Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic for 2023–2027. ‘A better, calmer, safer life’] Government of the Slovak Republic, November 13, 2023. Available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=535376> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

with Taiwan.³ On the other hand, Fico has already announced that he plans to visit China in order to foster economic ties. The visit is planned for June 2024.

Fico has also indicated that he would like to visit Vietnam (possibly on the same trip in June 2024). Should the visit happen, it would be an important milestone in the controversy-ridden relationship. Bilateral relations with Vietnam were frozen in 2018, following the kidnapping of Trinh Xuan Thanh in Germany and his transportation to Vietnam via Slovakia, allegedly using the Slovak government plane that was provided to the Vietnamese delegation visiting Slovakia at the same time. In response, Slovakia recalled its ambassador from Vietnam and its delegation in Hanoi is still headed by a chargé d'affaires.⁴ The visit of the Vietnamese cover delegation was supposedly organized by Quang Le Hong, Prime Minister Fico's former adviser and former chargé d'affaires in Hanoi.⁵ This course of events was confirmed by an investigation by the German authorities and a court ruling.⁶ A visit by the prime minister would be a significant shift in the relationship. That being said, the groundwork for a reset of the relationship was laid under Heger's administration in December 2022. At that time, Hanoi hosted Slovak–Vietnamese political consultations at Director-General level, confirming both parties' desire to improve mutual relations, both bilaterally and under the EU–Vietnam cooperation framework.⁷

³ Data collected by the CEIAS EU–Taiwan Tracker (for more see <https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker> (accessed on March 10, 2024)), no government or parliamentary interaction with Taiwan has been recorded between Slovakia and Taiwan since the appointment of Fico's administration. This applies to the early months of 2024 as well.

⁴ J. Debnár, "Premiér Fico sa chystá do Číny, dôvodom má byť veľká investícia," [Prime Minister Fico is going to China, the reason is thought to be a big investment] *Aktuality*, October 30, 2023. Available online: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/uwzQNVd/premier-fico-sa-chysta-do-ciny-dovodom-ma-byt-velka-investicia/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

⁵ M. Tódová, "Ani Žilinkovi sa nechce vyšetrovať únos Vietnamca. Viaceré podozrenia zostali nepreverené," [Even Žilinka doesn't want to investigate the kidnapping of the Vietnamese. Several suspicions remain] *Denník N*, March 8, 2021. Available online: <https://dennikn.sk/2301824/ani-zilinkovi-sa-nechce-vysetrovat-unos-vietnamca-viacere-podozrenia-zostali-nepreverene/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

⁶ M. Tódová, "Únos Vietnamca sa stal, potvrdil znovu berlínsky súd. Aj druhý obžalovaný je vinný," [The Vietnamese man was abducted, a Berlin court has again confirmed. The second defendant is also guilty] *Denník N*, January 30, 2023. Available online: <https://dennikn.sk/3215587/unos-vietnamca-sa-stal-potvrdil-znovu-berlinsky-sud-aj-druhy-obzalovany-je-vinny/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

⁷ "Việt Nam coi trọng quan hệ hợp tác hữu nghị truyền thống và hợp tác nhiều mặt với Slovakia," [Vietnam values traditional friendly cooperation and multi-faceted cooperation with Slovakia] *Báo mới*, 3 December 2022. Available online: <https://baomoi.com/viet-nam-coi-trong-quan-he-hop-tac-huu-nghi-truyen-thong-va-hop-tac-nhieu-mat-voi-slovakia-c44446539.epi> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

■ Strategy still lacking

As in previous years, Slovakia's approach to the Asia–Pacific region continued to lack strategic coherence. The process of formulating and adopting an Asia–Pacific strategy, which was identified as a priority in the 2021 foreign-policy plan,⁸ was not completed in 2023.

The inability to finalize the strategic planning document can largely be attributed to the political chaos of 2023, and the substantially different views on the Asia–Pacific region among the subsequent administrations, the amount of attention paid to it, as well as differing views on the risks and opportunities for Slovakia. As can be seen in the views of the political parties outlined above.

Nevertheless, the ability (or lack thereof) to finalize and adopt the strategy remains an important litmus test for Slovak foreign policy, as it is an indicator of Slovakia's ability to respond to the changing geopolitical reality, and the Asia–Pacific region is at the forefront of global affairs.

■ V4+ framework underutilized

Between July 2022 and June 2023, Slovakia held the rotating presidency of the Visegrad Group (V4). As the previous Yearbook noted, the presidency program indicated the intention was to "continue cooperation with third partners such as Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Israel and will seek the possibility of establishing parallel cooperation with other interested countries (e.g., Singapore, India)."⁹

⁸ "Zahraničná a európska politika Slovenskej republiky v roku 2021: Slovensko a svet v čase pandémie," [Foreign and European policy of the Slovak Republic in 2021: Slovakia and the world during the pandemic] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovak Republic, 2021. Available online: <https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/4238286/2021-Zahrani%C4%8Dna--a-%20europska-politika-SR-v-roku-2021.pdf/063025ca-14fa-4298-b240-4ee01c50339b> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

⁹ "Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group (July 2022–June 2023)," Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovak Republic, 2022. Available online: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=493> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

In the past, the V4+ format has proved helpful in promoting relations with Japan and South Korea, as it allowed for a more efficient arrangement of high-level ministerial and prime ministerial meetings.¹⁰

Neither prime minister Heger's government-in-demission, nor the caretaker cabinet of prime minister Ódor seized the opportunity to use the V4 platform to engage with East Asian counterparts. Consequently, the Asia-related plans of Slovakia's V4 presidency were not fulfilled in 2023.

■ New investment revitalizes economic relations

In economic relations, news of two large investments dominated relations with Asian states.

In early September 2023, a Slovak startup focused on battery development announced that the Chinese battery producer Gotion had purchased a 25 per cent stake in the Slovak company for an undisclosed sum. This move occurred a few months after the initial signing of an MOU to explore opportunities for EV battery development and production. Besides the equity purchase, the two sides formed a new joint venture to open an EV battery factory in the Slovak town Šurany. According to the November MOU signed with the Slovak government, construction on the factory is to commence in 2024 and begin operating in the second quarter of 2026, reaching full scale production in 2027.

The Gotion investment and expansion plans in Slovakia highlight two important points about relations with China.

First, even though the full scope of Gotion's plans was unveiled only in November, i.e. after the snap election and appointment of Fico's government, the bulk of the negotiations had already been undertaken by the previous administration, which followed a China-critical policy. This demonstrates that Chinese investments with added value that follow economic rather

¹⁰ K. Dubravčíková et al., "Prospects for developing the V4+China cooperation platform," CEIAS, 2019. Available online: <https://ceias.eu/prospects-for-developing-the-v4-china-cooperation-platform/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

than political principles are not substantially hindered by approaches that are critical of China, as is often claimed by China-accommodationist political representatives.

Second, the investment in the battery sector highlights some of the challenges faced by the Slovak automotive sector, which is already rather export-dependent on China. As European car producers are facing ever stiffer competition from Chinese EV producers, they need to transition to EV production to remain competitive. Batteries are of course a key input in this process. Relying on Chinese battery producers rather than alternatives will simply reinforce the automotive sector's existing dependency on China.

The second investment news worth looking at relates to the U.S. Steel plant in Košice, one of the largest employers in Slovakia. Although the American owners of the steel mill entertained the idea of selling the plant to the Chinese company Hesteel, in the end that did not happen. In December 2023, Japan's Nippon Steel offered to purchase the entire global operations of U.S. Steel, including the Slovak plant. Should the deal be finalized (there is growing opposition to it within the USA), it will raise questions about the Slovak plant's future, which requires further investment in production decarbonization.¹¹ This uncertainty motivated one of the highest level visits by a Slovak official to Japan: Economy Minister Denisa Saková and Environment Minister Tomáš Taraba visited in February 2024. The visit was largely interpreted as an attempt to save the steel mill in Košice.¹²

Smaller-scale Asian investments were also made in the startup sector. In 2022, Taiwania Capital, a Taiwanese venture capital fund, launched a CEE Fund aimed at investments in high-tech startups in the CEE region. The fund made two investments in Slovakia in 2023. In January, Taiwania Capital invested €8 million in a robotics company called Photoneo.¹³ Then in June, the

¹¹ "CEEasia Briefing #48: EU-China summit in December, arms deals between Poland and South Korea, Japan to buy US Steel, EU-India MoU on semiconductors," CEIAS, January 8, 2024. Available online: <https://ceias.eu/ceeasia-briefing-48/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

¹² "Saková s Tarabom boli zachraňovať U.S. Steel Košice v Japonsku. Čo sa im podarilo vyjednať?" [Saková and Taraba were rescuing U.S. Steel Košice in Japan. What did they manage to negotiate?] *Pravda*, February 11, 2024. Available online: <https://ekonomika.pravda.sk/firmy-a-trhy/clanok/699207-sakova-s-tarabom-boli-zachranovat-u-s-steel-kosice-v-japonsku-co-sa-im-podari-lo-vyjednat/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

¹³ K. Kironská, et al., "Taiwan's Central and Eastern Europe Investment Fund Taiwania Capital approved..." EU-TW Tracker by CEIAS, January 4, 2023. Available online: <https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/287> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

company finalized a second deal and invested €6.2 in Sensoneo, a smart waste management company.¹⁴

■ Defense cooperation trend continues

The 2022 Yearbook identified a new trend in Slovakia's relations with the Asia-Pacific region in defense cooperation, which emerged as a consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The trend continued throughout 2023 as well.

Turning to exports, cooperation with Malaysia, India, and potentially Indonesia, seems to be viable. Throughout 2022 and 2023, Slovak SOE Konštrukta Defense submitted a bid to a Malaysian procurement tender (via a private sector intermediary) for 16 to 24 155 mm self-propelled howitzers. In March 2024, Slovak EVA howitzers became one of the frontrunners in the tender.¹⁵

Should the sale materialize, it will be an important milestone in the internationalization of the Slovak defense industry and a potential entry point into the Southeast-Asian region, which has historically been largely dependent on weapons supplies from Russia, demand for which has plummeted since the invasion of Ukraine.¹⁶

India is potentially another country interested in defense technology cooperation. In order to foster mutual ties and present the capabilities of Slovak producers, the Slovak Embassy in New Delhi hosted Slovak Defense Technology Day in March 2023, which was opened by the foreign minister, Rastislav

¹⁴ K. Kironka, et al, "Taiwan Capital announced its 4th investment worth €6.2 million in...", EU-TW Tracker by CEIAS, June 8, 2023. Available online: <https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/359> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

¹⁵ "Suddenly, We're Discussing Slovakia's 155 mm 'EVA' SPH System," *Defence Security Asia*, 28 February 2024. Available online: <https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/suddenly-were-discussing-slovakias-155-mm-eva-sph-system/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

¹⁶ I. Storey, "The Russia-Ukraine war and its potential impact on Russia's arms sales to Southeast Asia," ISEAS, May 5, 2022, Available online: <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-47-the-russia-ukraine-war-and-its-potential-impact-on-russias-arms-sales-to-southeast-asia-by-ian-storey/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

Káčer, during his visit to India.¹⁷ In a follow-up, the Slovak and Indian embassies cohosted a webinar on defense industry cooperation in September 2023.¹⁸

Defense cooperation with South Korea is taking shape. After Slovakia donated its Soviet-era S-300 missile defense system to Ukraine in 2022, there were discussions about procuring replacement systems. In September 2023, the Slovak government formally opened the process of procuring new systems. By March 2024, South Korea, together with Israel, and a Norwegian-American consortium were the frontrunners for supplying a new mid-range anti-aircraft defense system.¹⁹

■ Visits back on the agenda

In contrast to 2022, there were several prominent visits in 2023 to the Asia-Pacific region by high-ranking public officials, who travelled to China, Japan, India, and Taiwan. These were all connected to the Eduard Heger or *Ludovít Ódor* administrations. As Prime Minister Fico and his cabinet took office only in late October, trips to Asia were not yet on the agenda for 2023. Nonetheless, high profile visits to the region have already taken place or are planned for the first half of 2024, as illustrated above.

In China's case, there were two subsequent visits in 2023. First, in April, Speaker of the National Council Boris Kollár traveled to China, then deputy foreign minister Ingrid Brocková visited in May. The two visits could not be more dissimilar. During his visit, Kollár focused largely on economic cooperation,

¹⁷ "Minister Káčer in Delhi: Growing Indian economy ranks among the global leaders, promoting cooperation and ongoing political dialogue are in our interest," Embassy of Slovakia in New Delhi, March 4, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/en/web/dilli/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=16920305 (accessed on March 10, 2024).

¹⁸ "Webinár o možnostiach slovensko-indickej spolupráci v obrannom priemysle," [Webinar on opportunities for Slovak-Indian cooperation in the defense industry] Embassy of Slovakia in New Delhi, 23 September 2023. Available online: https://mzv.sk/web/dilli/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19209074 (accessed on March 10, 2024).

¹⁹ "Ministerstvo obrany očakáva rozhodnutie o obstaraní systémov protivzdušnej obrany v priebehu niekoľkých týždňov," [The Ministry of Defense expects a decision on the procurement of air defense systems within a few weeks] *Denník N*, March 25, 2024. Available online: <https://dennik.sk/minuta/3904364/?ref=ampm> (accessed on March 25, 2024).

as well as developing ties in tourism, science, technology, and innovation. He also touted the potential for China to develop railway infrastructure projects in Slovakia, a highly problematic endeavor. Nevertheless, while Kollar's agenda originally included a meeting with Huawei representatives, it was scrapped from the final plans, indicating that security considerations had weighed more heavily in preparations for the visit.²⁰

The second visit to China — by deputy foreign minister Ingrid Brocková — was much more critical in tone. While economic cooperation was still on the agenda, Brocková did not shy away from raising contentious issues.²¹ During the political consultations with Deng Li, Brocková raised topics like China's position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, human rights in China, and on Taiwan and the need to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Among the contentious issues in bilateral relations, Brocková objected to Chinese sanctions against Members of the European Parliament, including Slovak MEP Miriam Lexmann, as well as the presence of an illegal, extraterritorial Chinese police station in Bratislava.

On the second leg of her trip to Asia, Ingrid Brocková visited Japan, where bilateral economic relations, as well as the provision of aid to Ukraine, were the top topics of discussion with Japanese partners.²²

June 2023 saw a visit by the deputy minister of economy Peter Švec to Taiwan, on the occasion of the third meeting of the Taiwanese–Slovak Commission on Economic Cooperation. The result was eight MOUs and an agreement to

deepen partnership in the fields of culture, economy and trade, academic exchanges, healthcare, and semiconductors.²³ The deputy minister was accompanied by a business delegation that attended a mutual investment forum,²⁴ and there was also an investment deal between Taiwan Capital and Slovak startup Sensoneo.²⁵

Foreign minister Rastislav Káčer and economy minister Karel Hirman both visited India in March (on separate occasions). Káčer visited India to attend the Raisina Dialogue 2023, a prominent regional conference on matters of international relations and global security. At the conference, Káčer discussed the impact of Russia's war against Ukraine on the architecture of the international order. During the visit, he also engaged in bilateral talks with the Indian Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and Defense Secretary Shri Giridhar Aramane at the Indian Ministry of Defense²⁶

Karel Hirman traveled to India a few weeks after Káčer's trip, where he attended and opened the Smart Cities India Expo 2023, alongside Indian Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari. He also had talks with the Indian Economy Minister Piyush Goyal. The talks were not just about bilateral cooperation, but also touched upon the negotiations for the EU–India Free Trade Agreement, relaunched in 2022, which Slovakia supports.²⁷ The prospects for Slovakia–India economic relations were further debated at the 11th meeting of the Slovak–Indian Joint Commission for Economic Cooperation, which took place in Bratislava in June, four years after the last session.²⁸

²⁰ Kern, M. "Boris Kollár je v Číne, zrušil plánovanú návštevu Huawei a verí, že Peking nepošle zbrane Rusku," [Boris Kollár is in China, he cancels planned visit to Huawei and believes Beijing will not send weapons to Russia] *Dennik N*, April 18, 2023. Available online: <https://dennik.sk/3332472/boris-kollar-je-v-cine-zrusil-planovanu-navstevu-huawei-a-veri-ze-pekings-neposle-zbrane-rusku/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

²¹ "I. Brocková v Pekingu: Čína by ako zástanca Charty OSN a stály člen Bezpečnostnej rady mala odsúdiť ruskú agresiu proti Ukrajine," [I. Brocková in Beijing: as a supporter of the UN Charter and a permanent member of the Security Council, China should condemn Russia's aggression against Ukraine] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovakia, May 22, 2023. Available online: https://mzv.sk/web/peking/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=17960879 (accessed on March 10, 2024).

²² "Ingrid Brocková v Tokiu: Aj napriek geografickej vzdialenosti sme si s Japonskom hodnotovo, politicky i ekonomicky veľmi blízki," [Ingrid Brocková in Tokyo: Despite the geographical distance, we are very close to Japan in terms of values, politics and the economy] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovakia, May 24, 2023. Available online: https://mzv.sk/web/tokio/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=17992630 (accessed on March 10, 2024).

²³ K. Kirovská, et al, "Attended by Taiwan and Slovak diplomatic representatives, David Lee and...", EU–TW Tracker by CEIAS, June 6, 2023. Available online: <https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/358> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

²⁴ K. Kirovská, et al, "Led by Slovakia's Deputy Minister of Economy Peter Svec, a...", EU–TW Tracker by CEIAS, June 5, 2023. Available online: <https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/357> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

²⁵ K. Kirovská, et al, "Taiwan Capital announced its 4th investment worth €6.2 million in...", op. cit.

²⁶ "Minister Káčer in Delhi: Growing Indian economy ranks among the global leaders, promoting cooperation and ongoing political dialogue are in our interest," op. cit.

²⁷ "Karel Hirman otvoril Smart Cities India Expo 2023 v Naí Dillí a stretol sa s indickým ministrom pre obchod a priemysel Piyushom Goyalom" [Karel Hirman opened Smart Cities India Expo 2023 in New Delhi and met with India's Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal] Ministry of Economy of Slovakia, March 28, 2023. Available online: <https://www.mhsr.sk/top/karel-hirman-otvoril-smart-cities-india-expo-2023-v-nai-dilli-a-stretol-sa-s-indickym-ministrom-pre-obchod-a-priemysel-piyushom-goyalom-1> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

²⁸ "11. zasadnutie Zmiešanej slovensko-indickej komisie pre hospodársku spoluprácu," [11th Session of the Slovak-Indian Joint Commission for Economic Cooperation] Ministry of Economy of Slovakia, June 23, 2023. Available online: <https://www.mhsr.sk/press/11-zasadnutie-zmiesanej-slovensko-indickej-komisie-pre-hospodarsku-spolupracu> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

■ Conclusion

Events within Slovakia–Asia relationships in 2023 confirm the ongoing malaise in Slovakia’s relationship with the region. On one hand, there were clear declarations of interest in pursuing relations with the region. On the other hand the actors failed to adopt a coherent approach to relations and look beyond individual bilateral relations to take note of the broader regional intricacies.

Slovakia’s Asia–Pacific strategy, under preparation since 2021, has the potential to close this gap and provide the country with a blueprint on how to navigate the complex and complicated relations with countries in the Asia–Pacific region. But until that has been adopted, Slovakia will have to improvise in its approach to the region.

To some extent the political chaos of 2023 highlighted the drawbacks of the current framework for relations. Still, the fact that an unusually high number of political parties commented on various aspects of relations with the Asia–Pacific region shows that the region’s importance in global affairs and for Slovakia is starting to seep in.

Ultimately, the vision of an economic pragmatic approach presented by SMER–SSD and allies has won out. Given that Robert Fico’s cabinet was only appointed toward the end of the year, there has not been sufficient opportunity to fully realize this vision on relations with Asia–Pacific. Nonetheless, the steps the government takes will need to be closely observed and evaluated, as pure economic pragmatism carries the risk of running afoul of the EU’s overall approach to the region, which has recently been framed within the concept of “de-risking.”





Slovakia's foreign policy tools



Daniel Kaba

20th anniversary as a donor and Slovak development cooperation in 2023

More than 350 million people around the world are in need of lifesaving humanitarian assistance—which is more than a 20 per cent increase compared to 2022 and more than a 40 per cent increase compared to 2021. Over 100 million people have been forcibly displaced and 43 million people in 51 countries are on the brink of starvation.¹

The following chapter summarizes developments in 2023, first by setting the scene and commenting on the big numbers in Slovak ODA, aid distribution, and the Ukraine response, followed by a depiction of the domestic processes, focusing on the political level and the preparatory work for the new “Medium-Term Strategy for Development Cooperation.”

It is important to take stock of these issues because the large humanitarian crisis in the vicinity of Slovakia—the war in Ukraine and the largest refugee crisis in the world, the massive earthquake in Syria and Turkey in February, and the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza after October 7th, to name but a few—are having and will continue to have a profound impact on Slovakia’s national interests, e.g., in terms of irregular migration.

When it comes to the internal or domestic side of Slovak ODA, last year was a triple ODA anniversary, i.e., 20 years since Slovakia became a donor country, ten years as a member of DAC-OECD, and 20 years of the formal existence of Ambrela, a civil society platform for non-governmental development organizations.² It also marked the end of another five year cycle, of the “Medium-Term Strategy for Development Cooperation of the Slovak Republic.”

¹ “Council Conclusions on addressing the humanitarian funding gap,” Council of the European Union, May 22, 2023. Available online: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9598-2023-INIT/en/pdf> (accessed on February 5, 2024).

² More on Ambrela available online: <https://ambrela.org/> (accessed on February 5, 2024).

Turning to the political landscape, the community was presented with three different foreign affairs ministers from different parts of the political spectrum. There was the pro-democratic, Western, pro-Ukrainian government, followed by a caretaker government for a few months until the end of the year, and then after the parliamentary elections a populist government came to power. For the first time in the many years of the MFA being led by nonpartisan foreign ministers, a politician not an expert was appointed as its leader.

However, much of the above left the Slovak ODA system resistant to almost any change, with extremely limited or inadequate responses and strategic/political decisions from the government and foreign ministry. In the sections that follow you can read about what exactly happened and why.

■ Dichotomy between words and deeds: commitments and economy

If the economy is getting better, why is ODA lagging behind?

The total spend on ODA in 2023 was €162 million,³ a figure that barely shifted from the €163 million in 2022. In that same period GNI increased from €108 billion to an expected €120 billion for 2023. Whereas in the two previous years GNI had increased by approximately 10 per cent each year, the same cannot be said of the trends in the ODA budget.⁴ Bilateral aid appears

³ The data may be adjusted slightly in June 2024, but no major updates/corrections are expected.

⁴ "Hrubý národný dôchodok dosiahol medziročný nárast o 10,7%," [Gross national income reached a year-on-year increase of 10.7%] Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, October 20, 2023. Available online: https://slovak.statistics.sk/wps/portal/ext/products/informationmessages/inf_sprava_detail/5393d05d-370f-42cd-9826-acc3151e2c0a!/ut/p/z1/tVPBcolwFPwajiEPIgR7Q2dELXYGFRUunYhBqElOpND-fYPjpTOttOfmkmSyu-tJsEx3uG4ZG1-ZDIXJTurfRTbzwGdO-aOR4QKmfAKz-ePqaTqemF5o4e0FMPbc6YD6AI7vWTBzp-FyGBACsGxOnaDIFj5mw14G-3MCM2J48BSGSs2-8uGH4ci9_gbHOE5KWckMR2LfsAw1J5SXXWInqYFaiLpQbtqSo6aqWfuh-QdtweVKzRYbkANYBEQopGpjJAQ0d00YsSYhhGdxMgPXyVZlfcPQr9PZeXvFtt9u-3g3Ha_sKu-JX4vSKRapL-2KRB8bbNeYfDso_ujFd_zGAKeH5p4UYM6L3L6-vsasuT5SSv0u8-4_bU3XMe-jFeHJUDJrNeWuDdr6jKQ74v9C4pdNcPQ4FQ6gzMwdC2COMF3XJPHCVc85TXvNbfavVfMim-r5kEDDbqu049CHM9cTOShwXeUTDTK-FckroowLBzygU5Lp1un2bn104W0ok-vE1kj/dz/d5/L2dBl-EvZ0FBIS9nQSEh/ (accessed on February 5, 2024).

to have been even more neglected, plummeting from €39 million in 2022 to €35 million in 2023. The main question is why, if Slovakia had managed to improve its GNI, was there no increase at all in ODA?

This gloomy trajectory is in sharp contrast to Slovakia's national interests and international commitments.

With approximately 0.14 per cent GNI/ODA in 2023, Slovakia is not only far from reaching its commitment of 0.33 per cent GNI, but has failed to make any significant progress on this in recent years.

And yet on May 22, 2023, it supported the Council of the EU conclusions aimed at tackling the humanitarian funding shortfall, emphasizing the mobilization of additional resources, enhancing efficiency, and minimizing requirements. Notably, the Council reiterated the EU's joint pledge to allocate a minimum of 0.7 per cent of collective GNI to official development assistance (ODA) by 2030 and urged its member states to uphold this commitment.⁵ It also encouraged member states

to continue their efforts to close the humanitarian funding gap by contributing at a level commensurate with their financial means, and ensuring that an appropriate share, for example 10 per cent, of their ODA is devoted to humanitarian action, on the basis of existing humanitarian needs.

■ Deterioration and distribution of Slovak ODA

In 2023 the €162 million spent on Slovak ODA consisted of multilateral aid amounting to €127 million and €35 million in bilateral aid. It is worth looking at the breakdown of Slovak ODA by partner.

In 2023 Slovakia channeled €22 million in bilateral and multilateral aid to 48 international organizations excluding the EU. Mandatory contributions to the European Commission — the Development Share of Budget and the European Development Fund amounted to €109 million. Central and local

⁵ "Council Conclusions on addressing the humanitarian funding gap," op. cit.

government in partner countries received €7.4 million, with Kazakhstan receiving an in-kind donation of Comirnaty vaccines worth € 3.1 million. NGOs implemented €6.8 million.⁶

Humanitarian aid provided as in-kind donations was worth €1.8 million. In-kind donations accounted for approximately 14 per cent of all bilateral aid.

SlovakAid assistance was distributed as follows: €29 million was allocated to partner countries and €128.5 million to international organizations. The remaining €5 million was spent on administrative costs and other spending in Slovakia.

In total, 35 countries received Slovak ODA, an average of €0.8 million per country.

partner	in € mil.
EU	109.0
international organizations	22.0
governments of partner countries	7.4
NGOs	6.8
in-donor refugee costs and scholarships	3.6
admin, regional and other costs	13.2

The three program countries — Kenya, Moldova, and Georgia — were allocated only €3.2 million, which means they received a mere 11 per cent of country channeled bilateral aid!^{7,8}

ODA was also fragmented by the use of inflated aid. Last year scholarships, in-donor refugee costs, and vaccines accounted for €6.7 million. Therefore one euro in five, or almost 20 per cent of total bilateral aid, was either spent in Slovakia and/or cannot strictly be considered ODA. If we add in administrative costs, then that figure is 25 per cent, which means that 25 cents of

⁶ Donor-based NGOs received €4.3 mil., local NGOs €2.5 mil. and INGOs €0.1 mil.

⁷ Kenya €0.98 mil., Moldova Georgia €1.45 mil, Georgia €0.82 mil.

⁸ Even omitting all the aid to Ukraine, the program countries would still have received only 15 per cent. If calculated in terms of total bilateral ODA, the program countries would have a 9 per cent share.

every euro of bilateral aid was either inflated, used to administer ODA and/or otherwise spent at home.⁹

■ Ukraine, a lukewarm neighbor and a distant family friend

According to the UN OCHA Situation report in January–December 2023,¹⁰ humanitarian aid reached 11 million people, including 3.7 million internally displaced persons. In December alone the World Health Organization verified almost 30 attacks on health care in Ukraine — 25 of which damaged health care facilities — an average of almost one attack per day. The prospects are still not looking good, given that more than 30 per cent of the required humanitarian funding had still to be found as of January 31, 2024. Nominally, it is still €1.2 billion short.

After the previous, hectic year due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Slovakia's lack of preparedness in the humanitarian sector, 2023 looked promising, if not in terms of systemic change, then at least in terms of increased funding. Initial impressions were good with a meeting between civil society — represented by Ambrela — and the newly appointed minister Káčer, the general appetite of foreign ministry officials, and the initial drive to work on the new strategy. However, soon after, by spring 2023, hopes were dampened. Not everything can be blamed on the erosion of the Heger government; events simply confirmed that substantial improvements to the way Slovakia supports Ukraine through ODA is not a political priority, and nor is it a priority of the foreign ministry leadership.

Numerous statements from the new government since October have reiterated “no military aid, we want to support Ukraine by other means including humanitarian aid.” The government manifesto stated:

⁹ Of course the administrative costs also went toward the multilateral aid. On the other hand, other costs that stay in Slovakia such as indirect project costs and administrative costs incurred by ministries other than the MFA are not included.

¹⁰ “Ukraine humanitarian response 2023: situation report in January-December 2023 [EN/UK],” *reliefweb*, February 12, 2024. Available online: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/ukraine-humanitarian-response-2023-situation-report-january-december-2023-enuk> (accessed on February 29, 2024).

It will also continue to provide all necessary humanitarian support to the country and to citizens who have had to leave the country as a result of the conflict and are in the Slovak Republic... The Government will not proceed with any further deliveries of military aid from the Ministry of Defense. However, the Government will continue to support humanitarian and technical assistance to Ukraine in every way.¹¹

The annual bilateral aid plan reads as follows:

The aim in 2024 is to show that the Slovak Republic is a strong and innovative partner that is actively involved in improving the humanitarian situation and mitigating the impact of the conflict on the citizens of Ukraine as well as other countries affected by the consequences of the conflict and responds sensitively to their needs.¹²

Thus far the rhetoric has not been put into practice.

Slovakia's €8 million in humanitarian aid for Ukraine in 2023 places it 31st in the ranking of humanitarian commitments by GDP.¹³ Assistance to Ukraine provided by civil society assistance is harder to calculate; nevertheless, only five of the largest Slovak NGOs have implemented projects in Ukraine since 2022 and these total €20 million.

On a positive note, and amid the fatigue among the general public and private donors, Taiwan announced it would donate \$5 million to be spent on humanitarian aid for Ukraine, which is equal to the Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation's (SAIDC) annual grant budget for all SlovakAid partner countries. It is administered by two Slovak foundations, and the first projects implemented by Slovak NGOs began in the autumn.

¹¹ "Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky 2023—2027: Lepšie, pokojnejšie a bezpečnejšie život," [Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic for 2023–2027. 'A better, calmer, safer life'] National Council of the Slovak Republic, November 13, 2023. Available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=535376> (accessed on February 20, 2024).

¹² "Zameranie dvojstrannej ODA SR na rok 2024 je schválené," [The bilateral ODA of the Slovak Republic for the year 2024 has been approved] SlovakAid, March 6, 2024. Available online: <https://slovakaid.sk/zameranie-dvojstrannej-oda-sr-na-rok-2024-je-schvalene/> (accessed on March 15, 2024).

¹³ Based on the data in "Ukraine Support Tracker," Kiel Institute for the World Economy, updated February 16, 2024. Available online: <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/> (accessed on February 5, 2024). The data on the Slovak ODA may be adjusted slightly in June 2024, but no major updates/ corrections are expected.

Following a bilateral dialogue and the Slovak president's visit to Ukraine, part of these projects will be implemented in the Chernihiv region.

■ Government, ODA and civil society

Almost none of the manifesto commitments made by the Matovič and Heger governments¹⁴ were accomplished, although partial improvements were made.

There was little progress on the government commitment to improve cooperation and humanitarian aid instruments.¹⁵ Despite the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the government did not adopt a rapid response instrument and nor did it upgrade the existing instruments.

Other commitments, such as speeding up the increase in financial resources for bilateral development cooperation activities, remained untouched.¹⁶ There has been no increase in resources;¹⁷ on the contrary, development cooperation funding has fallen by approximately a quarter owing to inflation, among other things. Although the EU Delegated Competence can be positively perceived, it is funded externally, i.e. not from the state budget, but from the EU. In the case of the Strategic Partnership, it came at the expense of other grants, i.e., funding has been cut from other *SlovakAid* grants open to NGOs.

¹⁴ "Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky na obdobie rokov 2021—2024," [Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic for 2021–2024] Government of the Slovak Republic, 2021. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/vlada-sr-od-21032020-do-15052023/?csrt=16680380194016710825> (accessed on February 5, 2024).

¹⁵ For more see "AidWatch 2021," Ambrela, 2022. Available online: https://ambrela.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Ambrela_report_Aidwatch_za_rok_2020.pdf (accessed on February 5, 2024); "AidWatch 2022: the year 2021 in the ODA SR viewed as a missed opportunity," Ambrela, November 30, 2022. <https://developmentforum.ambrela.org/news/aidwatch-2022-the-year-2021-in-the-oda-sr-viewed-as-a-missed-opportunity/> (accessed on February 5, 2024).

¹⁶ "Vláda schválila zameranie dvojstrannej rozvojovej spolupráce na rok 2022," [The government approved the bilateral development cooperation plan for 2022] SlovakAid, January 27, 2022. Available online: <https://slovakaid.sk/vlada-schvalila-zameranie-dvojstrannej-rozvojovej-spoluprace-na-rok-2022/> (accessed on February 5, 2024); "Vláda schválila zameranie dvojstrannej rozvojovej spolupráce na rok 2021," [The government approved the bilateral development cooperation for the year 2021 plan] SlovakAid, January 13, 2021. <https://slovakaid.sk/vlada-schvalila-zameranie-dvojstrannej-rozvojovej-spoluprace-na-rok-2021/> (accessed on February 5, 2024).

¹⁷ Except for the non-systemic increase in the SlovakAid grant budget in 2022.

In terms of the close dialogue with the non-governmental sector, civil society still had access to selected ODA processes and actors, but this should not be mistaken for a participatory approach. Although the foreign ministry made frequent public reference to civil society being a key partner and Ambrela having access to selected processes, this does not constitute a proper participatory approach, perhaps with the exception of the SAIDC. Civil society positioning has not improved in multiple ways, whether on transparency, predictability, consistency, or participation.

However, it is worth highlighting positive examples of cooperation—the Ambrela Development Forum, and the *SlovakAid* Development Summit. The Ambrela Development Forum (ADF) was organized by Ambrela, and supported by the foreign ministry, in November, hosting more than 200 participants from around 25 countries. Unlike the first ADF, at this one there was more negotiation and behind-the-scenes meetings on numerous levels: government to government, government to civil society and government to international organizations. Speakers included representatives of the European Commission, Concord, WFP, GENE, Ukraine, Czech Republic, Taiwan, and Germany, to name but a few.

The two events were complementary and held in the same week.

■ New impetus and the end of the Slovak strategy for development cooperation?

The new strategy, including the ideas, drive, processes and instruments, for among other things modernizing humanitarian aid such as rapid response mechanisms, has to be backed by, first and foremost, a substantial budget increase after years of financial starvation and by adequate ministerial and political support.

The preparatory work started at the beginning of 2023 with multiple meetings led by the foreign ministry and involving other ministries, civil society, and business representatives. Despite these necessary and useful talks on refocusing Slovak ODA and narrowing down the sectoral and geographic priorities, the process did not lead to a written draft or deeper agreement in specific areas of the Slovak system.

The strategy to get the foreign minister on board whilst also asking for a budget increase for 2024 further evaporated during the Heger government's final months before the summer.

However, one part of the process stood out: the role of Kenya¹⁸ in the new strategy as a *SlovakAid* partner country. The ministry's attempt to practically stop any substantial assistance for Kenya in the new ODA cycle, by reducing it to minor instruments, such as microgrants, was met by strong dissent not only from civil society but other actors too. A statement by Ambrela contained nine major reasons for keeping Kenya as a program country, one was strategic continuation following Slovakia's decision to withdraw from South Sudan, ditch its East Africa regional approach, and close down the embassy in Addis Ababa. Kenya is now the only country in Africa where the Slovak Republic has an embassy and long-term development interventions. The letter continued:

At the same time, we feel that the decision does not and cannot be reduced to it being Kenya or Ukraine. *SlovakAid* funding and instruments, including financial contributions, need to be focused on a smaller set of countries. Similarly, it is necessary for the MFEA leadership to push for an increase in bilateral aid as stated in the government manifesto.¹⁹

In autumn, the ministry communicated its willingness to reconsider its position on Kenya. However, the final decision remained unknown at the time of writing (March, 2024).

The technical government that was appointed afterwards produced a manifesto with realistic ODA commitments, i.e., not very ambitious ones:

Proposal for reforming development cooperation and humanitarian aid. The increasing incidence of crisis situations caused by natural phenomena or human activity will raise demands for intensified development cooperation and humanitarian aid. Our official development cooperation and humanitarian aid mechanisms have long suffered from under-resourcing, consequently Slovakia has fallen behind on its capabilities and international commitments. In order to remedy this situation, the government

¹⁸ Similarly, the future of Slovak ODA in the Western Balkans is up for negotiation as well.

¹⁹ From a letter by Ambrela to the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic dated March 15, 2023, and disseminated to the members of the working group on strategy preparation. It is available on request.

will draft a new medium-term development cooperation strategy for 2024–2030. It will include a financial resource plan for bilateral development cooperation and humanitarian aid activities.²⁰

The ministry submitted to the government its proposed priorities for the fifth “Medium-Term Strategy for Development Cooperation of the Slovak Republic 2024–2030” along with the structure of the financial resources needed to meet these priorities.

The new government approved the extension of the current strategy to 2024.²¹ After roughly seven months of inertia, work on the new strategy is expected to resume in spring 2024.

■ SlovakAid agency: developments in 2023

On a positive note regarding the SAIDC, there was a significant increase in the funding allocation for grant proposals compared to 2022, though not a systemic one. The total amount available was €6.1 million, with a final allocation of €6 million. This was an increase of approximately €1.2 million over the previous year. On the other hand the allocation for Kenya was reduced and the Western Balkan call was canceled. In humanitarian aid, the ceiling for the project budget was increased from €200,000 to €250,000.

It is important to note that the amount allocated to Public Private Partnership proposals significantly exceeded the original plan. The 80.5 per cent increase was mainly down to the second call for Ukraine. However, there is a lack of clarity, given the difficulty of deciphering the needs and criteria behind the call.

A strategic partnership call for Moldova was added as well (after the pilot in 2022 for Kenya). However, the criteria for assigning a country to the Strategic

²⁰ “Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky. Len spoločne môžeme čeliť výzvam 21. storočia,” Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic. Only together we can face the challenges of the 21st century] Government of the Slovak Republic, 2023. Available online: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/vlada-sr-od-16052023-do-24102023/?csrt=16680380194016710825> (accessed on February 5, 2024).

²¹ Given this, it would be premature to evaluate the implementation of the current Strategy. Nevertheless, an external evaluation is planned in spring 2024.

Partnership (SP) in the following years remain unclear, as do the geographical or sectoral criteria for selection. The introduction of a capacity building element to the SP is welcome, but the instrument needs further qualitative fine-tuning, otherwise it will be just the same as an ordinary grant mechanism with a longer implementation period and larger budget.

There was a significant reduction in the allocation of volunteer grants. Two aspects that could significantly improve effectiveness that are not politically or budgetarily sensitive but were not enhanced last year are the need for a new instrument—a “rapid response mechanism” and optimization of internal foreign ministry/SAIDC processes to shorten the approval period from months to weeks.

Good practices or improvements included an indicative timetable for call proposals, adequate intervals between calls, guidelines available in English, greater flexibility on budgetary changes, and the removal of the requirement for applicants to submit public authority certificates applicants.

On a more strategic level the EU delegated competence of the SAIDC could be a temporary way forward for larger and longer term funded projects.

Unfortunately, the SAIDC’s excessive dependency on the foreign ministry makes any systemic improvements close to impossible.

■ All quiet on the global education front

Slovakia has been sinking deeper into a sea of disinformation and conspiracy, amid the extreme polarization of society and dwindling trust in public authorities and liberal democracy. Global education could be one of the key tools for tackling this. Yet, 2023 was not a very impressive year regarding Slovakia’s international commitment to adopt a global education strategy.²² Personnel changes at the education ministry and a third round of drafting (since 2022 each round has started from scratch under a different leadership) did little to help. It soon became clear that it could not be finalized by the end of the year. The community of global education actors therefore tried to negotiate an extension running into 2024.

²² The previous strategy expired in 2016.

In spite of the advocacy work of civil society and a promising meeting at Ambrela Development Forum in November between the head of GENE and the director general of the Secondary Schools and Lifelong Learning section of the Ministry of Education, the new government canceled the previous government assignment on the strategy soon after this. Thus, the strategy is now no longer mandatory, but solely within the discretionary power of the education ministry.

The *SlovakAid* agency has seen no change in the amount allocated to Global Education projects in 2023 compared to 2022. The figure is still €150,000. There is a need for discussion on the purpose of the grant, including whether the primary aim should be global education or public awareness. Given the small financial allocation it is obviously not possible to do both (in public awareness, the costs of a campaign or opinion poll can eat up an excessively large portion of the maximum project budget leaving little for education activities or vice versa). At the same time, according to the DAC-OECD documents, global education should also be reportable as development cooperation.

■ Conclusions – no illusions

In the light of this year's anniversaries, we should reflect on Slovakia's 20 years as a donor country. Over the years various reforms have become necessary and recommendations have been suggested by OECD-DAC, other partners, evaluation reports and civil society, in addition to our international commitments toward the EU and UN. Over this period many expectations and unresolved issues have built up. In the meantime, the world around us has changed tremendously.

When thinking about the perspectives, we should try to avoid being lured further into two impasses.

First, development cooperation cannot be considered a superstructure, a whim, or the *crème-de-la-crème* that deserves attention only once we have tackled *x* number of domestic issues. We need to recognize that the domestic and the international are interconnected in much the same way as we use Amazon to order items used at home that are produced on the other side of the globe.

Second, we should not fool ourselves by gambling with our commitments. Not only because of the international partners we have entered into agreements with, but also because of our self-esteem.

Instead we should think about ODA as a public good that belongs to everybody. Yes, it is an area of public and foreign affairs that is highly resistant to major change and modernization, but that is not because of resources and capacities, nor because of how we perceive the crisis around us, but first and foremost because of how we think about ourselves.

That means that almost everything that is needed has already been described and put on the table.

What Slovak ODA needs now is action.

Table 1. Effects of policy and management decisions on the Slovak ODA system

deterioration	damage control	improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ukraine-related: ■ no rapid response mechanism /policy adopted ■ very little humanitarian funding for Ukraine (Slovakia ranks 31st by GDP) ■ no significant new funds for <i>SlovakAid</i> humanitarian projects (most resources pulled from other countries and previous savings) ■ very low to zero strategic communication on humanitarian aid ■ no Lex Ukraine to enable short or midterm quick fixes ■ personnel and expert capacities not boosted ■ lack of willingness to accelerate implementation of the humanitarian <i>SlovakAid</i> project ■ no or limited adherence to Good Humanitarian Donorship, including but not limited to cash assistance, flexible funding 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ SlovakAid Development Summit ■ Strategic partnership launched for Kenya
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ missed opportunity to raise bilateral aid at the political level 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ launch of other SAIDC EU delegated cooperation in Serbia and South Africa and Kenya
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ inability to draft the new Medium Term Strategy 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ cooperation between MFEA and CSO at Ambrella Development Forum
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ No LDC project/program country 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ value based approach that does not count extremely high in-donor refugee costs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ continuation of ODA geographic and sector fragmentation 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Slovak commitment of 0.33 per cent of GNI increasingly under threat 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ ODA report not presented to parliament 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Global Education strategy not finished 		





Annexes

4

A chronology of important events in Slovak foreign policy in 2023

January 1 ▪ Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Rastislav Káčer commemorates the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Slovak Republic. He considers Slovakia's accessions to the EU and NATO to be its most significant achievements.

January 13 ▪ President Zuzana Čaputová has a phone conversation with her Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy. He congratulates Slovakia on her 30th anniversary and expresses gratitude for the assistance provided to Ukraine during the war.

January 19 ▪ Minister Káčer commemorates the 30th anniversary of the Slovak Republic's accession to the UN. He recalls that Slovakia door to the UN was open from the very beginning, as demonstrated by the short time between the country's foundation and its accession.

January 24 ▪ President Čaputová travels to Germany at the invitation of President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. The two presidents agree that Slovakia and Germany are united above all through common values and priorities.

January 24 ▪ State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs Andrej Stančík welcomes his counterpart Leo Docherty, Under-Secretary of State for Europe of the United Kingdom. They discuss deepening cooperation and combating hybrid threats and disinformation, including in the context of the war in Ukraine.

January 28 ▪ State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs Ingrid Brocková pays a working visit to Portugal and holds talks with her counterpart, Bernardo Ivo Cruz, State Secretary for Internationalization of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Portugal. The discussion focuses on the energy crisis caused by the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the use of renewable energy sources, as well as deepening economic cooperation.

Prepared by Timotej Kováčik, Slovak Foreign Policy Association intern, based on data from the websites of the President of the Slovak Republic, the Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, National Council of the Slovak Republic, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, and Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic.

January 31 ■ President of the Republic of Austria Alexander Van der Bellen arrives on an official visit to Slovakia and is welcomed by President Čaputová. This is his first foreign trip since re-election. Afterwards, he meets with Prime Minister Eduard Heger.

January 31 ■ Minister Káčer speaks with his Czech counterpart Jan Lipavský. The partners discuss bilateral and regional cooperation and the international security situation in the context of the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

February 1 ■ State Secretary Andrej Stančík visits Austria and holds talks with Peter Launsky-Tieffenthal, Secretary General of the Austrian Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs. The partners are united in their goal of ensuring free movement between the countries with no controls and a functioning Schengen. The State Secretary praises Austria's active approach to negotiations with the Western Balkan countries.

February ■ Minister Káčer travels to Italy, where he meets Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Antonio Tajani and Minister for European Affairs Raffaele Fitto. The main topics of the meeting are the war in Ukraine, energy security and migration policy.

February 7 ■ President Čaputová welcomes Czech President Miloš Zeman on his official farewell visit to Slovakia. She notes that their mutual relationship proves that politics can bridge differences.

February 9 ■ Prime Minister Eduard Heger attends an extraordinary European Council meeting in Brussels. The topics discussed include the war in Ukraine, and the summit is attended by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. The leaders discuss economic issues, especially boosting EU competitiveness and migration.

February 11 ■ Speaker of the National Council Boris Kollár makes an official visit to the Czech Republic. He meets with the Speakers of both chambers of the Czech Parliament. They speak warmly of the excellent relations between the two countries.

February 14 ■ State Secretary Stančík pays a two-day visit to the Czech Republic, where he meets with Minister for European Affairs Mikuláš Bek and National Coordinator for Slavkov Cooperation Jaroslav Kurfürst.

February 14 ■ Minister Káčer receives the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Georgia, Ilia Darchiashvili. They discuss the situation in the South Caucasus and the security situation in Europe. Minister Káčer notes that Slovakia has very good relations with Georgia.

February 21 ■ Minister Káčer meets with James Spencer Cleverly, Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Cooperation of the United Kingdom, in London. Minister Káčer spoke appreciatively of the cordial relations and is in favor of launching a strategic dialogue between Slovakia and the UK.

February 22 ■ President Čaputová attends talks with the leaders of the B9 countries and US President Joe Biden in Warsaw. In the days leading up to the first anniversary of Russia's aggression in Ukraine, they talk about the unity of NATO countries.

February 24 ■ Minister Káčer addresses a meeting of the UN Security Council marking the first anniversary of the start of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine. The Minister points out that the only way to achieve peace in Ukraine is for the Russian Federation to stop the fighting.

March 2 ■ State Secretary Andrej Stančík arrives in Finland for a meeting with the Minister for European Affairs of the Republic of Finland, Tytti Tuppurainen. The topics of the talks are the fight against disinformation, energy, the rule of law and Russia's war against Ukraine.

March 3 ■ Speaker of Parliament Kollár officially visits the Swiss Confederation. He meets with the Speaker of the National Council of the Swiss Parliament, Martin Candinas.

March 5 ■ Prime Minister Eduard Heger pays a two-day official visit to Israel to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the fields of technology, innovation, science and tourism. Prime Minister Heger meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Isaac Herzog.

March 7 ■ President Čaputová welcomes King William Alexander and Queen Maxima of the Netherlands on the occasion of their official three-day visit to Slovakia.

March 7 ■ Minister Káčer holds talks with his Dutch counterpart, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Wopke Hoekstra. Minister Káčer thanks the Netherlands for providing Slovakia with the Patriot defense system and praises the Netherlands for being a reliable partner.

March 13 ■ President Čaputová welcomes the new President of the Czech Republic, Petr Pavel, on his first official foreign trip. Both speak warmly of the cordial relations between the nations and share common values. Prime Minister Heger welcomes President Pavel at the Government Office.

March 13 ■ State Secretary Stančík visits Poland and meets with State Secretary for European Affairs of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Arkadiusz Mularczyk. He speaks warmly of the close relations between the countries and notes that Slovakia is interested in capacity at the Polish LNG terminals and the further diversification of gas supplies.

March 17 ■ Prime Minister Heger announces that Slovakia will donate 13 Mig-29 fighter jets, part of the Kub air defense system and other components to Ukraine.

March 20 ■ Secretary of State Brocková holds policy discussions with Deputy Foreign Minister of Ukraine Yevhen Perebyjnis. She talks of Slovakia's support for Ukraine in the war against Russia and Ukraine's future EU membership.

March 22 ■ Defense Minister Jaroslav Naď welcomes Thierry Breton, EU Commissioner for the Internal Market. At a weapons manufacturing plant they discuss options for increasing the production of artillery ammunition intended for Ukraine.

March 23 ■ Prime Minister Heger attends a European Council summit in Brussels. The main topics on the agenda are Russia's aggression in Ukraine, the EU's foreign trade policy and energy security.

March 28 ■ Upon the invitation of President Čaputová, Estonian President Alar Karis pays an official two-day visit to Slovakia. She notes that Slovakia and Estonia have similar historical experiences of the totalitarian era and both are members of the EU and NATO.

March 31 ■ Prime Minister Heger visits Kyiv and meets with President Zelensky. They discuss importing Ukrainian wheat and Zelensky again thanks Heger for the donation of Mig-29 fighter jets.

March 31 ■ Minister Káčer speaks at a meeting of the Bucharest Nine (B9) in Poland. The Minister draws attention to the security threat posed by Russia following its attack on Ukraine and the need to strengthen security on NATO's Eastern flank.

April 3 ■ Prime Minister Heger and Ministers Káčer and Naď attend a joint meeting of the governments of the Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic in Trenčín. The partners agree on the importance of mutual relations and support for the integration efforts of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkan countries.

April 3 ■ Minister Naď travels to Ukraine to meet his counterpart Oleksiy Reznikov. The possibility of further assistance for Ukraine is discussed and the Minister is awarded the medal of the Minister of Defense of Ukraine for supporting Ukraine in the war against Russia.

April 4 ■ Minister Káčer attends a ceremony marking Finland's accession to NATO. He notes that Finland's membership will strengthen NATO as a defense alliance.

April 12 ■ Minister Naď travels to Brazil to meet with the Minister of Defense of Brazil. He indicates that Slovakia is interested in deepening cooperation in defense and security.

April 19 ■ President Čaputová receives the President of Italy, Sergio Mattarella. She thanks him for providing the air defense system that is reinforcing security in Slovakia and on NATO's Eastern flank.

April 20 ■ State Secretary Stančík visits his counterpart, Peter Burke, Minister of State for European Affairs and Defense of the Republic of Ireland. He spoke of the large community of Slovaks living in Ireland, and both partners agreed to help defend Ukraine against Russian hostility.

April 21 ■ Prime Minister Heger receives the EU Commissioner for Budget and Administration, Johannes Hahn. They discuss the European Commission's plans for revising the EU's seven-year budget. The Prime Minister noted that the flexibility in the EU budget has helped Slovakia to overcome periods of crisis.

April 21 ■ State Secretary Brocková receives Yong-jin Jang, First Deputy Minister of Commerce, Industry and Energy of the Republic of Korea. She stated, "South Korea is our natural partner and Asia's largest investor." She also praised South Korea's principled stand against Russian aggression in Ukraine.

April 26 ■ Speaker of Parliament Kollár visits the People's Republic of China. He expresses willingness to deepen relations between the two countries and welcomed the recent Chinese investment near Valaliky.

April 28–30 ■ President Čaputová visits war-torn Ukraine together with Czech President Petr Pavel.

May 3 ■ State Secretary Brocková receives the State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Moldova, Vladimir Cuc. She conveyed Slovakia's support for Moldova's pro-European orientation.

May 4 ■ Minister Káčer visits Paris and is received by the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Catherine Colonna. He confirms that Slovakia is interested in deepening relations with France, particularly in energy and especially nuclear energy.

May 15 ■ President Čaputová appoints the first technocratic government in Slovak history. Prime Minister Ľudovít Ódor will lead the new caretaker cabinet until the general elections on September 30th, with Miroslav Wlachovský as Foreign Minister and Martin Sklenár as Defense Minister.

May 16 ■ President Čaputová arrives at the historic Council of Europe summit in Reykjavik, Iceland. Slovakia agrees to the establishment of the Register of damage caused by the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

May 19 ■ On his first official foreign visit, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Miroslav Wlachovský visited his counterpart, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic Jan Lipavský.

May 22 ■ State Secretary Brocková visits the People's Republic of China. She is received by Deng Li, Vice Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China, and they discuss mutual relations, emphasizing economic cooperation and global issues, including Russia's war against Ukraine and cooperation with Taiwan.

May 24 ■ State Secretary Brocková undertakes an official visit to Japan and is received by Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Kenji Yamada. She speaks warmly of the two countries' proximity in terms of values, politics and economics despite the geographical distance.

May 25 ■ Minister Wlachovský pays an official visit to Poland and holds talks with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, Zbigniew Raŏ. The Minister notes the key partnership with Poland and the need for future cooperation in the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine.

May 29 ■ Prime Minister Ľudovít Ódor receives Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrid Šimonytė. At the meeting they discuss bilateral cooperation and the agenda for the upcoming NATO summit in Vilnius.

May 29 ■ President Čaputová receives Roberta Metsola, President of the European Parliament. They discuss issues such as democracy, the rule of law and hybrid threats.

May 29 ■ Minister of Defense Martin Sklenár receives his counterpart from Estonia, Hanna Pevkura. They discussed opportunities for bilateral cooperation, positions on the Russian aggression in Ukraine and strengthening NATO's collective defense.

May 30 ■ State Secretary Brocková meets with Megi Fino, State Secretary at the Albanian Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs. During the meeting, they sign a double taxation avoidance treaty between the Slovak Republic and the Republic of Albania.

May 30 ■ Minister Wlachovský welcomes the Vatican's Secretary for Relations with States, Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher. They discuss mutual relations, humanitarian aid and the war in Ukraine.

May 30 ■ Minister Wlachovský welcomes Israeli Foreign Minister Elim Cohen on his official visit to the Slovak Republic. He states, "We consider Israel a key partner in the Middle East region, and I am convinced that there is potential for expanding mutual cooperation, especially in the fields of science, research, innovation and high-tech economy."

May 31 ■ President Čaputová welcomes French President Emmanuel Macron on an official visit. They underlined the strategic partnership between Slovakia and France and the link between the two countries symbolized by Milan Rastislav Štefánik.

May 31 ■ Prime Minister Ódor meets with President Ursula von der Leyen, French President Emmanuel Macron and Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala.

June 2 ■ In line with tradition, Minister Sklenár travels to the Czech Republic for his first bilateral foreign visit, where he meets with the Minister of Defense, Jana Černochová.

June 6 ■ The heads of state of the B9 grouping arrive in Bratislava. President Čaputová receives with the heads of states and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. The leaders align positions ahead of the NATO summit in Vilnius and are joined by the Ukrainian President.

June 7 ■ Minister Wlachovský receives the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Jeyhun Bajramov, who is paying an official visit to Slovakia. The meeting focused on cooperation, particularly in economic affairs and energy.

June 11 ■ Minister Sklenár holds talks with partners from the Visegrad Group and Germany. They discuss deepening mutual relations and strengthening NATO's Eastern flank.

June 12 ■ State Secretary Mišík pays an official visit to Malta and attends talks with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Malta, Ian Borg. The topics included migration and mutual cooperation, as well as the importance of protecting journalists.

June 14 ■ Minister Wlachovský undertakes a working visit to Lebanon. He stresses the importance of the Slavkov Format, under which Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Austria, finance humanitarian projects in Lebanon.

June 29 ■ Prime Minister Ódor attends the European Council summit in Brussels. The main topics of the summit are Ukraine, security and defense, the economy, migration, China and external relations.

July 3 ■ Minister Wlachovský visits Budapest and meets with Péter Szijjártó, Minister of Foreign Trade and Foreign Affairs of Hungary. He welcomes the fact that Hungary has joined the Czech Republic and Poland in protecting Slovakia's airspace.

July 4 ■ Prime Minister Ódor travels to the Czech Republic for his first official foreign visit. He meets with his counterpart Petr Fiala, and they discuss topics such as energy and defense cooperation and the situation in Ukraine.

July 7 ■ President Čaputová receives her counterpart Volodymyr Zelensky, on his official visit to Slovakia. He reiterates his thanks for the assistance Slovakia is providing Ukraine in defending itself against Russia.

July 11 ■ President Čaputová travels to Lithuania for the NATO leaders' summit. The deployment of air defense systems on the eastern border is a key issue for Slovakia. The leaders also address Ukraine's future in NATO.

July 13 ■ Minister Wlachovský visits North Macedonia. He points out that Slovakia will continue to stand by North Macedonia on its pathway to EU accession.

July 24 ■ The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs summons the Hungarian Ambassador to Slovakia, Csaba Balogh, in connection with remarks made by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. It is made clear to him that the prime minister's statements questioning Slovakia's territorial integrity and sovereignty are unacceptable.

July 29 ■ Minister Wlachovský addresses the Bled Strategic Forum in Slovenia. He stresses the importance of partnerships between democratic countries and the need to improve awareness of the EU among Slovak citizens.

August 30 ■ Minister Sklenár attends a meeting of EU defense ministers in Spain. They discuss further EU support for Ukraine and new initiatives relating to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.

September 6 ■ President Čaputová attends the summit of the Presidents of the Three Seas Initiative in Bucharest. She has bilateral talks with the presidents of Hungary and Austria.

September 7 ■ Following his phone call with the Austrian Federal Minister for European and International Affairs, Alexander Schallenberg, Minister Wlachovský warned that migration problems can only be solved through joint coordination.

September 7 ■ State Secretary Brocková pays a working visit to the Kingdom of Sweden. She and her counterpart, State Secretary of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs Håkan Jevrell, discuss the growing bilateral cooperation in security and the defense industry and Slovakia's support for Sweden's integration into NATO.

September 7 ▪ Minister Sklenár travels to the United States of America on an official working visit for talks with the Under Secretary of Defense for Political Affairs, Sasha Baker. He states that Slovakia is able to modernize its Armed Forces thanks to cooperation with the US.

September 11 ▪ Minister Wlachovský speaks with Dominique Hasler, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Education and Sport of the Principality of Liechtenstein. He speaks favorably of the economic cooperation and calls for it to be extended, for example, in IT technologies.

September 14 ▪ The Slovak Republic decides to expel an official of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Slovak Republic for flagrant violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

September 20 ▪ President Čaputová delivers a speech at the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. She attends talks with Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and participates in side events.

September 21 ▪ Minister Wlachovský addresses an open debate of the UN Security Council on the occasion of the 78th session of the UN General Assembly. He calls on Russia to cease its military aggression in Ukraine.

September 26 ▪ State Secretary Mišík speaks online at the Permanent Council of the OSCE. He notes that Europe's security architecture is collapsing as a result of Russia's aggression in Ukraine but nonetheless he is of the opinion that there is no viable alternative to the OSCE.

September 27 ▪ The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic summons Csaba Balogh, Ambassador of Hungary to Slovakia, in relation to statements made by Péter Szijjártó, the Hungarian Minister for Foreign Trade and Foreign Affairs, during meetings in municipalities in southern Slovakia.

September 28 ▪ Minister Wlachovský attends a meeting of the informal C5 grouping in Vienna. He warns that support for Ukraine in the war against Russia cannot be allowed to wane.

September 29 ▪ Minister Sklenár pays a working visit to Ukraine, where he is received by President Volodymyr Zelensky. The latter expresses gratitude for the assistance Slovakia is providing to Ukraine in the war against Russia.

October 2 ▪ The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic summons a representative of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Slovakia in relation to statements made by the Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation, Sergei Naryshkin, during the moratorium on the eve of the early parliamentary elections in Slovakia.

October 2 ▪ Minister Wlachovský attends the first-ever meeting of EU foreign ministers in Ukraine. He notes that protecting Ukrainian statehood and sovereignty must remain a strategic priority for the EU.

October 5 ▪ Prime Minister Ódor attends the European Political Community summit in Granada, Spain. He points out the necessity of continuing to support Ukraine in the face of Russia's interference in the internal affairs of European countries.

October 7 ▪ The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic issues a statement strongly condemning the terrorist attacks against Israel and its people, expressing solidarity and full support for Israel in its right to self-defense.

October 11 ▪ Speaker of the Parliament Kollár pays a working visit to Austria.

October 25 ▪ President Čaputová appoints the new government of Robert Fico with Juraj Blanár as Foreign Minister and Robert Kaliňák as Defense Minister.

October 26 ▪ Prime Minister Fico attends a European Council summit. The summit focuses on the current situation in the Middle East and Ukraine, migration, the economy and external relations.

October 30 ▪ Foreign Minister Juraj Blanár speaks on the phone with his colleague Alexander Schallenberg, Federal Minister for European and International Affairs of the Republic of Austria. The partners emphasize the close relations between the two countries.

November 6 ▪ President Čaputová receives Rafael Grossi, Director General of the International Atomic Energy Organization. She states that Grossi spoke warmly of Slovakia's nuclear energy achievements.

November 6 ▪ Minister Blanár makes his first official foreign trip to Prague, where he meets with Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský. He underscores the unique relationship between the two countries and their strategic importance in the current geopolitical situation.

November 7 ▪ Minister Blanár welcomes Péter Szijjártó, Minister of Foreign Trade and Foreign Affairs of Hungary. They discuss further opportunities for bilateral cooperation, migration and the impact of the war in Ukraine. Minister Blanár notes that Slovakia is interested in strengthening cooperation at the V4 level.

November 8 ▪ State Secretary Rastislav Chovanec meets with State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy Maria Tripodiava. They agree to closer relations in the fields of energy, defense and research.

November 16 ▪ President Čaputová meets with her counterpart, Czech President Petr Pavel, in Prague.

November 21 ▪ Minister Blanár participates in an online meeting of foreign ministers in the G7+ format. He notes that Slovakia is prepared to provide emergency support for the Ukrainian energy grid and to supply electricity on a commercial basis.

November 22 ▪ President Čaputová attends the V4 Summit of Heads of State in Prague. The leaders discuss mutual cooperation, investment opportunities between the two countries and the security situation in Europe.

November 22 ▪ Minister Blanár travels to Vienna for talks with Alexander Schallenberg, Federal Minister for European and International Affairs of the Republic of Austria. After the meeting, he stresses that Austria is more than just a neighbor to Slovakia and that we wish to continue successful cooperation.

November 23 ▪ Minister Blanár speaks with Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen on the phone. He welcomes the agreement for a temporary ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.

November 24 ▪ Prime Minister Robert Fico undertakes his first official foreign visit to Prague, where he is received by his counterpart Petr Fiala. He also meets with President Petr Pavel.

November 27 ▪ State Secretary Marek Eštok visits Paris and meets with Laurence Boone, State Secretary for European Affairs, at the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs. "France is a key European ally of Slovakia, and we want to continue our extensive cooperation," he said.

November 30 ▪ Speaker of Parliament Peter Pellegrini pays his first official working visit to the Czech Republic. He meets with his partners and the speakers of both chambers of the Czech Parliament.

December 1 ▪ President Čaputová delivers a speech at the UN climate conference COP28 in Dubai. She stresses that an ambitious joint effort is required to mitigate the impact of the climate crisis. Slovakia, she says, is fulfilling its tasks in the climate sector.

December 4 ▪ Prime Minister Robert Fico speaks with his Ukrainian counterpart Denys Shmyhal on the phone. Fico states that he does not think a military solution is the answer to the conflict between Ukraine and Russia.

December 7 ▪ In response to the US Embassy's opinion on the proposed changes to the Criminal Procedure Code, approved by the Slovak government, Minister Blanár rejects any interference of the US Embassy in the internal affairs of the Slovak Republic.

December 8 ▪ State Secretary Eštok pays a working visit to Budapest, where he holds talks with János Bók, Minister for EU Affairs of Hungary. The topics of discussion are the forthcoming Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the EU and mutual cooperation at the V4 level.

December 12 ▪ State Secretary Eštok welcomes Deng Li, Deputy Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China (PRC), under the regular policy dialogue between the Foreign Ministries. "We are keen to strengthen cooperation with China, revive political dialogue and trade ties," the State Secretary says.

December 14 ▪ President Čaputová visits Slovak soldiers serving on the EUFOR Althea mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She thanks them for their service and for representing Slovakia.

December 20 ▪ President Čaputová welcomes President of Slovenia Nataša Pirc Musar on her official visit to Slovakia. President Čaputová stresses that both countries have embarked on the path of nature protection, the green transition and innovative economy.

December 20 ▪ State Secretary Eštok holds a working meeting with the State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovenia, Marko Štučič. The two welcome the mutual cooperation and express an interest in further strengthening relations, including in trade and economics.

December 20 ▪ Minister Blanár meets with his counterpart Péter Szijjártó on an official visit to Hungary. He stressed the importance of peaceful cooperation and spoke in favor of strengthening bilateral relations.



Treaties, agreements, conventions published in 2023

Source: Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic

■ Presidential treaties and agreements

Association Agreement between the Slovak Republic and the European Space Agency (Noordwijk, June 14, 2022, published under No. 44/2023 Z. z.)

■ Governmental treaties and agreements

Agreement between the Government of the Slovak Republic and the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine concerning the donation of military equipment (Bratislava, March 17, 2023, published under No. 83/2023 Z. z.)

Agreement between the Government of the Slovak Republic and the Government of the State of Israel on employment of family members of members of diplomatic missions and consular posts (Bratislava, November 7, 2016, published under No. 102/2023 Z. z.)

Framework Agreement between the Government of the Slovak Republic and the Swiss Federal Council on the Implementation of the Second Swiss Contribution to selected member states of the European Union to reduce economic and social disparities within the European Union (Bratislava, September 19, 2023, published under No. 411/2023 Z. z. and No. 476/2023 Z. z.)

Correction of an error in the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs notice No. 89/1992 Z. z. on the conclusion of the Treaty between the Government of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic and the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland on the avoidance of double taxation in the field of income taxes and gains from property (published under No. 420/2023 Z. z.)

■ Ministerial treaties and agreements

Amendments to the Agreement between the Government of the Slovak Republic and the Government of Romania on the avoidance of double taxation and the prevention of fiscal evasion in the field of income and property taxes
(published under No. 104/2023 Z. z.)

Cooperation Agreement between the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic and NEDERLANDSE TAALUNIE
(Bratislava, March 8, 2023, published under No. 217/2023 Z. z.)

Amendments to the Agreement between the Government of the Slovak Republic and the Government of the Republic of Finland on the avoidance of double taxation and the prevention of tax evasion in the field of income taxes
(published under No. 321/2023 Z. z.)

Amendment No. 1 to the Program of Cooperation between the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic and the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine in the field of education for the years 2005–2008
(Kyiv, September 22, 2023, published under No. 394/2023 Z. z.)

Agreement between the Presidium of the Police Force of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic and the National Police Headquarters of Hungary on amending the Agreement between the Presidium of the Police Force of the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic and the National Police Headquarters of Hungary on joint patrols in the territory of Hungary within the framework of Joint Operations of October 19, 2015
(Bela, August 31, 2023, published under No. 433/2023 Z. z.)

Cooperation Agreement between the Ministry of Interior of Slovak Republic and the Southeast Europe Law Enforcement Center
(Bratislava, July 10, 2023, Bucharest, July 12, 2023, published under No. 445/2023 Z. z.)

Implementation protocol between the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic and the Federal Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Austria on the provision of cover registration plates
(Vienna, November 23, 2023, published under No. 505/2023 Z. z.)

Amendments to the Agreement between the Government of the Slovak Republic and the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on the avoidance of double taxation and the prevention of fiscal evasion in the field of income taxes
(published under No. 510/2023 Z. z.)

Amendments to the Agreement between the Government of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic and the Government of the Republic of Tunisia on the avoidance of double taxation and the prevention of tax evasion in the field of income and property taxes
(published under No. 511/2023 Z. z.)

Amendments to the Agreement between the Slovak Republic and the United Mexican States on the avoidance of double taxation and the prevention of fiscal evasion in the field of income taxes
(published under No. 512/2023 Z. z.)

■ Multilateral treaties and agreements

European Agreement on important international combined transport lines and related installations (AGTC)
(October 30, 1991, published under No. 45/2023 Z. z.)

Amendments to the Annexes I and II to the Protocol to the 1979 Convention on long-range transboundary air pollution on persistent organic pollutants
(Geneva, December 18, 2009, published under No. 103/2023 Z. z.)

Amendments to the Annexes to the European Agreement concerning the international carriage of dangerous goods by inland waterways (ADN)
(Geneva, October 10, 2022, published under No. 147/2023 Z. z.)

Rules relating to fees of the European Patent Convention of 20 October 1977 as adopted by decision of the Administrative Council of the European Patent Organisation of 14 December 2022
(Munich, December 14, 2022, published under No. 149/2023 Z. z.)

Regulations under the Protocol relating to the Madrid Agreement concerning the international registration of marks
(Geneva, July 20, 2022, published under No. 150/2023 Z. z.)

Regulations under the Protocol relating to the Madrid Agreement concerning the international registration of marks
(Geneva, April 7, 2021, published under No. 151/2023 Z. z.)

Amendments to the Annexes A and B of the European Agreement concerning the international carriage of dangerous goods by road (ADR)
(published under No. 215/2023 Z. z.)

International Convention on standards of training, certification and watchkeeping for seafarers (STCW)
(London, July 7, 1978, published under No. 216/2023 Z. z.)

Global Convention on the recognition of qualifications concerning higher education
(Paris, November 25, 2019, published under No. 218/2023 Z. z.)

Amendments to the Annexes A and B of the Agreement concerning the international carriage of dangerous goods by road
(published under No. 221/2023 Z. z.)

Amendments to the Agreement on international goods transport by rail (SMGS)
(Warsaw, November 14, 2022, and December 7, 2022, published under No. 222/2023 Z. z.)

Agreement establishing the EU–LAC international foundation
(Santo Domingo, October 25, 2016, published under No. 262/2023 Z. z.)

Protocol to the North Atlantic Treaty on the accession of the Republic of Finland
(Brussels, July 5, 2022, published under No. 322/2023 Z. z.)

Additional Protocol to the Convention on cybercrime, concerning the criminalization of acts of a racist and xenophobic nature committed through computer systems (Strasbourg, January 28, 2003, published under No. 382/2023 Z. z.)

Common Regulations under the Lisbon Agreement for the protection of appellations of origin and their international registration and the Geneva Act of the Lisbon Agreement on appellations of origin and geographical indications (Geneva, July 20, 2022, published under No. 418/2023 Z. z.)

Common Regulations under the Lisbon Agreement for the protection of appellations of origin and their international registration and the Geneva Act of the Lisbon Agreement on appellations of origin and geographical indications (Geneva, July 11, 2023, published under No. 419/2023 Z. z.)

Regulations under the Protocol relating to the Madrid Agreement concerning the international registration of marks (Geneva, July 11, 2023, published under No. 423/2023 Z. z.)

Regulations under the Protocol relating to the Madrid Agreement concerning the international registration of marks (Geneva, July 11, 2023, published under No. 424/2023 Z. z.)

Amendments to the International Convention on standards of training, certification and watchkeeping for seafarers (STCW Code) (published under No. 444/2023 Z. z.)

Optional Protocol to the Convention against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (New York, December 18, 2002, published under No. 448/2023 Z. z.)

Withdrawal of the Slovak Republic's reservation to the Article 7(2)(c) of the Council of Europe Convention on laundering, search, seizure and confiscation of the proceeds from crime and on the financing of terrorism (November 22, 2023, published No. 453/2023 Z. z.)

■ Terminated treaties and agreements

Agreement establishing the International Investment Bank and the Charter of the International Investment Bank, Protocol amending the Agreement establishing the International Investment Bank and its Charter, Agreement on organization and activities of the International Bank for Economic Co-operation, Statutes of the International Bank for Economic Co-operation as amended by the protocols (January 29, 2023, published under No. 46/2023 Z. z.)

Cooperation Agreement between the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic and the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Belarus for 1996–1998 (September 19, 2022, published under No. 148/2023 Z. z.)

Agreement between the Government of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the Government of the Hungarian People's Republic on railway transport (June 1, 2023, published under No. 223/2023 Z. z.)

European Cooperating State Treaty between the Slovak Republic and the European Space Agency (published under No. 130/2016 Z. z.) (October 13, 2022, published under No. 323/2023 Z. z.)

Agreement between the Government of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the mutual provision of land for the construction of technical service assistance centres for machinery, equipment, and apparatus supplied in mutual trade and on the conditions for the construction of these centres (published under No. 422/2023 Z. z.)



Structure of the state administration authorities acting in international and European affairs in 2023

As of February 2024

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Prepared by Roland Fleischhacker, intern, Slovak Foreign Policy Association

Source: websites of the bodies and agencies of the Government of the Slovak Republic

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Robert Fico (since October 25th)

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Peter Dovhun (May 15th–October 25th)
Denisa Saková (since October 25th)

■ Deputy Prime Minister for Investments and Informatization

Veronika Remišová (until May 15th)
Peter Balík (May 15th–October 25th)
Richard Raši (since October 25th)

■ Deputy Prime Minister for the Recovery and Resilience Plan and the use of EU funds

Lívia Vašáková (May 15th–October 25th)
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■ **Personnel Office**

Director General: Juraj Macháč, tel.: +421259782101, juraj.machac@mzv.sk

Headquarters Personnel and Payroll Department

Head of the Department: Zuzana Warderová, tel.: +421259782120,

zuzana.warderova@mzv.sk

Diplomatic Academy

Head of the Department: Monika Tomašovičová, tel.: +421259782140,

monika.tomasovicova@mzv.sk

Foreign Personnel and Payroll Department

Head of the Department: Oľga Beňová, tel.: +421259782130, olga.benova@mzv.sk

Human Resources Management Department

Head of the Department: Michal Tonhauser, tel.: +421259782110,

michal.tonhauser@mzv.sk

■ **Directorate-General for Economics and General Administration**

Director General: Silvia Hríbová, tel.: +421259782801, silvia.hribova@mzv.sk

Finance Department

Head of the Department: Ivana Čermáková, tel.: +421259782810,

ivana.cermakova@mzv.sk

Public Procurement Department

Head of the Department: Adriana Gajdošová, tel.: +421259782890,

adriana.gajdosova@mzv.sk

Accounts and Properties Reporting Department

Head of the Department: Andrea Ondrišeková, tel.: +421259782700,

andrea.ondrisekova@mzv.sk

Investments and Real Estate Department

Head of the Department: Eva Bezáková, tel.: +421259782850,

eva.bezakova@mzv.sk

Building Management and Services Department

Head of the Department: Petra Pabišová, tel.: +421259782850,

petra.pabisova@mzv.sk

Department of Budget and Project Management

Head of the Department: Petra Tvrdoňová, tel.: +421259782840,

petra.tvrdonova@mzv.sk

■ **Directorate-General for Information Technology and Security**

Director General: Rastislav Kubán, tel.: +421259782001, rastislav.kuban@mzv.sk

Department of Security

Head of the Department: Katarína Hanzalová, tel.: +421259782050,

katarina.hanzalova@mzv.sk

Department of Administration and Operation of Information and Communication Technologies

Head of the Department: Aleš Pauer, tel.: +421259782080, ales.pauer@mzv.sk

Department of Electronization Services and Processes

Head of the Department: Vladimír Ježek, tel.: +421259782090, vladimir.jezek@mzv.sk

Department of Cyber and Information Security

Head of the Department: Martin Kalinka, tel.: +421259782010,

martin.kalinka@mzv.sk

▪ Directorate-General for Economic and Development Cooperation

Director General: Marek Csabay, tel.: +421259783801, marek.csabay@mzv.sk

Department of Global Economic Policies

Head of the Department: Manuel Korček, tel.: +421259783830,
manuel.korcek@mzv.sk

Business Center Department

Head of the Department: Branislav Pochaba, tel.: +421259783890,
branislav.pochaba@mzv.sk

Department for Development Assistance and Humanitarian Aid

Head of the Department: Maroš Mitrik, tel.: +421259783640, maros.mitrik@mzv.sk

▪ MINISTRY OF ECONOMY OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Mlynské nivy 44, 827 15 Bratislava 212
tel.: +421248541111
www.mhsr.sk

▪ Minister

Karel Hirman (until May 15th as Interim Minister)
Peter Dovhun (since May 15th–until October 25th)
Denisa Saková (since October 25th)

▪ State Secretaries

Peter Švec (until October 25th)
Peter Gerhart (until May 31th)
Branislav Sušila (since June 1th–until October 25th)
Kamil Šaško (since October 26th)
Vladimír Šimoňák (since October 26th)

▪ MINISTRY OF DEFENCE OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Kutuzovova 8, 832 47 Bratislava
tel.: +421960112233
www.mosr.sk, mod.gov.sk

▪ Minister

Jaroslav Naď (until May 15th as Interim Minister)
Martin Sklenár (since May 15th–until October 25th)
Robert Kaliňák (since October 25th)

▪ State Secretary

Marián Majer (until October 18th)
Igor Melicher (since October 26th)
Martin Vojtašovič (since February 7th 2024)

▪ MINISTRY OF INTERIOR OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Pribinova 2, 812 72 Bratislava
tel.: +421250941111, +421250944397
www.minv.sk

▪ Minister

Roman Mikulec (until May 15th as Interim Minister)
Ivan Šimko (since May 15th–until July 19th)
Ludovít Ódor (since July 19th–until October 25th)
Matúš Šutaj Eštok (since October 25th)

▪ State Secretaries

Tomáš Oparty (until September 13th)
Lubomír Šablica (until August 9th)
Martin Královič (since August 10th–until October 25th)
Lucia Kurilovská (since October 26th)
Patrik Krauspe (since October 26th)

▪ MINISTRY OF FINANCE OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Štefanovičova 5, 817 82 Bratislava
tel.: +421259581111
www.mfsr.sk, www.finance.gov.sk

▪ Minister

Eduard Heger (until May 15th, serving as Interim Minister)
Michal Horváth (since May 15th–until October 25th)
Ladislav Kamenický (since October 25th)

▪ State Secretaries

Marcel Klimek (until May 17th)
Luboš Jančík (until May 17th)
Eva Gonçalves (since May 18th–until October 25th)
Branislav Reľovský (since May 18th–until October 25th)
Radovan Majerský (since October 26th)
Daniela Klučková (since November 3rd)

▪ MINISTRY OF CULTURE OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Námestie SNP 33, 813 31 Bratislava
tel.: +421220482111
www.culture.gov.sk, www.mksr.sk, mksr@culture.gov.sk

▪ Minister

Natália Milanová (until May 14th serving as Interim Minister)
Silvia Hroncová (since May 15th–until October 25th)
Martina Šimkovičová (since October 25th)

▪ State Secretaries

Radoslav Kutaš (until June 30th)
Viera Leščáková (until May 31th)
Matúš Bieščad (since June 1th–until October 25th)
Štefan Kuffa (since October 26th–until November 29th)
Mário Maruška (since November 30th)
Tibor Bernaťák (since November 14th)

■ MINISTRY OF HEALTH OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Limbová 2, 837 52 Bratislava 37

tel.: +421259373111

www.health.gov.sk, office@health.gov.sk

■ Minister

Vladimír Lengvarský (until March 3rd serving as Interim Minister)

Eduard Heger (since March 3rd–until May 15th serving as Interim Minister)

Michal Palkovič (since May 15th–until October 25th)

Zuzana Dolinková (since October 25th)

■ State Secretaries

Róbert Babela (until March 13th)

Lenka Dunajová Družkovská (until May 19th)

Michal Palkovič (since March 14th–until May 14th)

Monika Jankechová (since May 18th–until November 2nd)

Michal Štofko (since November 3rd)

Ladislav Slobodník (since November 3rd)

■ MINISTRY OF LABOUR, SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND FAMILY OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Špitálska 4, 6, 8, 816 43 Bratislava

tel.: +421220460000

www.employment.gov.sk

■ Minister

Milan Krajniak (until May 15th serving as Interim Minister)

Soňa Gaborčáková (since May 15th–until October 25th)

Erik Tomáš (since October 25th)

■ State Secretaries

Juraj Káčer (until October 25th)

Soňa Gaborčáková (until May 14th)

Anna Aftanasová (since May 17th–until October 25th)

Branislav Ondruš (since November 1st)

■ MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE, RESEARCH AND SPORT OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Stromová 1, 813 30 Bratislava

tel.: +421259374111

www.minedu.sk

■ Minister

Ján Horecký (until May 15th serving as Interim Minister)

Daniel Bútora (since May 15th–until October 25th)

Tomáš Drucker (since October 25th)

■ State Secretaries

Slavomír Partila

Michal Fedák (until October 25th)

Richard Nemeč (since February 16th–until July 6th)

Ján Krišanda (since October 26th–until February 1st 2024)

Róbert Zsembera (since October 26th)

Ján Hrinko (since February 2nd 2024)

■ MINISTRY OF JUSTICE OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Župné námestie 13, 813 11 Bratislava

tel.: +421288891111

www.justice.gov.sk

■ Minister

Viliam Karas (until May 15th serving as Interim Minister)

Jana Dubovcová (since May 15th–until October 25th)

Boris Susko (since October 25th)

■ State Secretaries

Peter Sepeši (until October 25th)

Edita Pfundtner (until May 25th)

Milan Hodás (since October 26th)

Pavol Gašpar (since October 26th)

Katarína Roskoványi (since February 7th 2024)

■ MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Nám. L. Štúra 1, 812 35 Bratislava

tel.: +421259561111

www.enviro.gov.sk, www.minzps.sk

■ Minister

Ján Budaj (until May 15th serving as Interim Minister)

Milan Chrenko (since May 15th–until October 25th)

Tomáš Taraba (since October 25th)

■ State Secretaries

Juraj Smatana (until May 17th)

Michal Kiča (until May 17th)

Katarína Butkovská (since May 18th–until October 25th)

Jozef Smatana (since October 26th–until November 29th)

Štefan Kuffa (since November 30th)

Filip Kuffa (since October 26th)

Gabriela Matečná (since February 6th 2024)

■ MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

Dobrovičova 12, 812 66 Bratislava

tel.: +421259266111

www.mpsr.sk

■ **Minister**

Samuel Vlčan (until May 4th serving as Interim Minister)
Jozef Bíreš (since May 4th–until October 25th)
Richard Takáč (since October 25th)

■ **State Secretaries**

Martin Kováč (until October 25th)
Henrich Haščák (until May 31th)
Mário Maruška (since November 3rd–until November 29th)
Vladimír Vnuk (since October 26th)
Jozef Smatana (since November 30th)

■ **MINISTRY OF TRANSPORT AND CONSTRUCTION
OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC**

Námestie slobody 6, 810 05 Bratislava
tel.: +421259494111
www.telecom.gov.sk

■ **Minister**

Andrej Doležal (until May 15th serving as Interim Minister)
Pavol Lančarič (since May 15th–until October 25th)
Jozef Ráž mladší (since October 25th)

■ **State Secretaries**

Katarína Bruncková (until October 25th)
Jaroslav Kmeť (until October 25th)
Igor Choma (since October 26th)
Denisa Žiláková (since October 26th)

■ **MINISTRY OF INVESTMENTS, REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT
AND INFORMATIZATION OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC**

Štefánikova 15, 811 05
Bratislava tel.: +421220928149
www.mirri.gov.sk

■ **Minister**

Veronika Remišová (until May 15th serving as Interim Minister)
Peter Balík (since May 15th–until October 25th)
Richard Raši (since October 25th)

■ **State Secretaries**

Dušan Velič (until May 12th)
Ján Hargaš (until February 8th)
Jozef Graňáčka (since February 8th–until June 21th)
Barbora Lukáčová (since May 31th–until October 25th)
Martin Bezek (since June 22th–until November 13th)
Michal Kaliňák (since October 26th)
Ivan Ivančin (since November 14th)

■ **ANTIMONOPOLY OFFICE OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC**

Drieňová 24, 826 03 Bratislava
tel.: +421222122110
www.antimon.gov.sk

Chairman: Juraj Beňa, tel.: +421222122141, predseda@antimon.gov.sk

■ **STATISTICAL OFFICE OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC**

Miletičova 3, 824 67 Bratislava
tel.: +421250236222
www.statistics.sk

Chairman: Peter Peťko, tel.: +421250236334, peter.petko@statistics.sk



List of the embassies in the Slovak Republic

as of January 2024

▪ Country	▪ Start of diplomatic relations	▪ Address of embassy	▪ In charge of embassy (LoC)
The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan	–	Nad Šárkou 1512/63 160 00 Praha 6 Czech Republic	
The Republic of Albania	1. 1. 1993	Ventúrska 16 811 01 Bratislava	Enkeleda Merkuri Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
People's Democratic Republic of Algeria	1. 1. 1993	Rudolfingergasse 18 A-1190 Vienna Austria	Larbi Latroch Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Principality of Andorra	3. 6. 1996	Kärtnering 2 A/13 A-1010 Vienna Austria	Enric Tarrado Vives Ambassador-Designate
The Republic of Angola	30. 9. 1993	Leonard Bernstein Straße 10 A-1220 Vienna Austria	Fernando Marques Chargé d'affaires
The Argentine Republic	1. 1. 1993	Lugeck 1–2/7/44 A A-1010 Vienna Austria	Holger Federico Martinsen Ambassador-Designate
The Republic of Armenia	14. 11. 1993	Hadikgasse 28 1140 Vienna Austria	Armen Papikyan Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Commonwealth of Australia	1. 1. 1993	Gertrude-Froehlich- Sandner-Str. 2 1100 Vienna Austria	Ian David Grainge Biggs Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Cooperative Republic of Guyana	–	Guyana High Commission 3 Palace Court Bayswater Road W2 4LP London United Kingdom	Frederick Hamley Case Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Azerbaijan	27. 11. 1993	Hügelgasse 2 A-1130 Vienna Austria	Rovshan Nusrat oglu Sadigbayli Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary

Prepared by Roland Fleischhacker, intern, Slovak Foreign Policy Association
Source: Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic

Country	Start of diplomatic relations	Address of embassy	In charge of embassy (LoC)
The Kingdom of Bahrain		Klingelhöfstrasse 7 10785 Berlin Germany	Abdulla Abdullatif Abdulla Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The People's Republic of Bangladesh	3. 3. 1993	Peter-Johan-Straße 50 1190 Vienna Austria	Rahat Bin Zaman Chargé d'affaires
The Kingdom of Belgium	1. 1. 1993	Schönburgstrasse 10 1040 Vienna Austria	Caroline Vermuelen Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Benin	19. 1. 1993	Englerallee 23 D-14159 Berlin Germany	Josseline Marie Louise da Silva Gbony Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Belarus	1. 1. 1993	Hüttelbergstrasse 6 1140 Vienna, Austria	Andrei Moroz First Secretary
The Plurinational State of Bolivia	5. 3. 1993	Prinz-Eugen-Strasse 18 A-1040 Vienna Austria	Maria Jolanta Materna Gorna Chargé d'affaires
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1. 1. 1993	Opletalova 27 110 00 Praha Czech Republic	Martina Mlinarević Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Botswana	–	6 Stratford Place W1C 1AY London United Kingdom	Roy Warren Blackbeard Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Federative Republic of Brazil	1. 1. 1993	Palisády 47 811 06 Bratislava	Gabriel Boff Moreira Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Bulgaria	1. 1. 1993	Kuzmányho 1 811 06 Bratislava 1	Vasil Petkov Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Burkina Faso	1. 8. 1997	Strohgasse 14c A-1030 Vienna Austria	San Simon Coulibaly First Counselor
The Republic of Burundi	29. 6. 1999	Berliner Strasse 36 D-10715 Berlin Germany	Else Nizigama Ntamagiro Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Côte d'Ivoire	–	Muthgasse 13/3/332+333 A-1190 Vienna Austria	Gueu Albert Dole Chargé d'affaires
The Republic of Cyprus	1. 1. 1993	Michalská 12 811 01 Bratislava	Michael Karagiorgis Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Chad		Lepsiusstrasse 114 D-12165 Berlin Germany	Mariam Ali Moussa Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Czech Republic	1. 1. 1993	Hviezdoslavovo nám. 8 P. O. Box 208 810 00 Bratislava	Rudolf Jindrák Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Montenegro	1. 1. 1993	Lothringerstrasse 14–16 1030 Vienna Austria	Dragana Radulović Chargé d'affaires

Country	Start of diplomatic relations	Address of embassy	In charge of embassy (LoC)
The Republic of Chile	1. 1. 1993	Lugeck 1/311 A-1010 Vienna Austria	Eliseo Rodrigo Ruiz Ortiz Chargé d'affaires
The People's Republic of China	1. 1. 1993	Jančova 8 b 811 02 Bratislava 1	Cai ge Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Kingdom of Denmark	1. 1. 1993	Führichgasse 6 A-1010 Vienna Austria	Christian Grønbech-Jensen Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Representation of European Commission in the SR	–	Palisády 29 811 06 Bratislava	Vladimír Šucha Head of Representation
European Parliament Information Office	–	Palisády 29 811 06 Bratislava	Robert Sermek Director
The Arab Republic of Egypt	1. 1. 1993	Panská 14 811 01 Bratislava	Ayman Aly Kamel Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Ecuador	1. 1. 1993	Goldschmiedgasse 1010 Vienna Austria	Mireya del Carmen Munoz Mera Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Estonia	1. 1. 1993	Wohlebengasse 9/12 A-1040 Vienna Austria	Merle Pajula Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia	–	Boothstrasse 20a D-12207 Berlin Germany	Mulu Solomon Bezuneh Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of the Philippines	1. 1. 1993	Donau City Strasse 11 A-1220 Vienna Austria	Evangelina Lourdes A. Bernas Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Finland	1. 1. 1993	Hellichova 1 118 00 Prague Czech Republic	Pasi Tuominen Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The French Republic	1. 1. 1993	Hlavné námestie 7 812 83 Bratislava 1	Pascal Le Deunff Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Islamic Republic of the Gambia	18. 8. 1995	Avenue F. D. Roosevelt 1261050 Brussels Belgium	Ebrima Ousman Camara Counselor
The Republic of Ghana	–	Na Zatorce 89/6 160 00 Praha 6—Bubeneč Czech Republic	Ahmed Tijani Abubakari Chargé d'affaires
Georgia	25. 11. 1993	Michalská 9 811 01 Bratislava	Revaz Beshidze Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Guatemala	15. 4. 1993	Prinz Eugen Strasse 18/1/ A-1040 Vienna Austria	Jorge Skinner- Klée Arenales Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Guinea	16. 3. 1993	Jägerstrasse 67–69 DE-10117 Berlin Germany	Aboubacar Sidy Konate Chargé d'affaires

Country	Start of diplomatic relations	Address of embassy	In charge of embassy (LoC)
The Republic of Guinea-Bissau	–	Kronenstrasse 72 DE-10117 Berlin Germany	Malam Djassi Ambassador Designated
The Hellenic Republic	1. 1. 1993	Hlavné námestie 4 811 01 Bratislava 1	Athanasios Ioannou Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Kingdom of the Netherlands	1. 1. 1993	Fraňa Kráľa 5 811 05 Bratislava 1	Gabriella Sancisi Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Honduras		Cuxhavener Strasse 14 DE-10555 Berlin Germany	
The Republic of Croatia	1. 1. 1993	Mišikova 21 811 06 Bratislava 1	Aleksandar Heina Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of India	1. 1. 1993	Dunajská 4 811 08 Bratislava	Apoorva Srivastava Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Indonesia	1. 1. 1993	Brnianska 31 811 04 Bratislava 1	R. Pribadi Sutiono Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Iraq	1. 1. 1993	Johannesgasse 26 1010 Vienna Austria	Baker Fattah Husen Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Islamic Republic of Iran	1. 1. 1993	Jauresgasse 9 A-1030 Vienna Austria	Abbas Bagherpour Ardekani Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Ireland	1. 1. 1993	Carlton Savoy Building Mostová 2 811 02 Bratislava	Dermot McGauran Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Iceland	1. 1. 1993	Naglergasse 2/3/8 A-1010 Vienna Austria	María Vigdís Kjartansdóttir Chargé d'affaires
The State of Israel	1. 1. 1993	Slávičie údolie 106 811 02 Bratislava	Eitan Levon Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Jamaica	1. 1. 1993	Schmargendorfer Str. 32 D-12159 Berlin Germany	Deniese Ava-Lou Sealey Chargé d'affaires
Japan	1. 1. 1993	Hlavné nám. 2 813 27 Bratislava	Yasuhiro Kawakami Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Yemen	1. 1. 1993	Reisnerstrasse 18—20 1030 Vienna Austria	Haytham Abdulmomen Shoja 'Aadin Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan	3. 3. 1993	Rennweg 17/4 A-1030 Vienna Austria	Rana Abida Counselor
The Republic of South Africa	1. 1. 1993	Sandgasse 33 A-1190 Vienna Austria	Rapulane Sydney Molekane Ambassador Designated
The Kingdom of Cambodia	–	Benjamin-Vogelsdorf Str. 2 D-13187 Berlin Germany	Savny Phen Ambassador Designated

Country	Start of diplomatic relations	Address of embassy	In charge of embassy (LoC)
The Republic of Cameroon	–	Ulmenallee 32 D-14050 Berlin Germany	
Canada	1. 1. 1993	Laurenzerberg 2 A-1010 Vienna Austria	Cheryl Cruz Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The State of Qatar	–	Carlton Savoy Building Mostová 2 811 02 Bratislava	
The State of Qatar	–	Schottenring 10 1010 Vienna Austria	Jamal A. Rahman M.S. Al-Jaber Chargé d'affaires
The Republic of Kazakhstan	1. 1. 1993	Kancelária v Bratislave Červeňova 14 811 03 Bratislava Slovenská republika	Tolezhan Barlybayev Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Kenya	1. 1. 1993	Andromeda Tower Donau-City Str. 6 1220 Vienna Austria	Stella Mokaya Orina Chargé d'affaires
The Kyrgyz Republic	1. 1. 1993	Invalidenstrasse 3/8 1030 Vienna Austria	Tolendy Makeyev Ambassador Designated
The Republic of Colombia	1. 1. 1993	Stadiongasse 6–8/15 A-1010 Vienna Austria	Diana Kecán Cervantes Chargé d'affaires
The Republic of the Congo	30. 6. 1998	Wallstrasse 69 D—10179 Berlin Germany	Serge Michel Odzocki Ambassador Designated
The Democratic Republic of the Congo	18. 2. 1993	Soukenická 34/1765 110 00 Prague Czech Republic	Mibanga Ngala-Mulumr Wa Badidike Benoit-Labre Chargé d'affaires
The Republic of Korea	1. 1. 1993	Štúrova 16 811 02 Bratislava	Byeongdo Lee Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Democratic People's Republic of Korea	1. 1. 1993	Na Větru 395/18 162 00 Prague Czech Republic	Ju Won Chol Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Costa Rica	6. 10. 1993	Flussgasse 7 A-1020 Vienna Austria	Herbert Daniel Espinoza Solano Consul General, Chargé d'affaires
The Republic of Cuba	1. 1. 1993	Somolického 1/A 811 05 Bratislava	Rafael Paulino Pino Bécquer Ambassador Designated
The State of Kuwait	1. 1. 1993	Lodná 2 811 02 Bratislava	Essa Y. K. E. Alshamali Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Lao People's Democratic Republic	–	Sommerhaidenweg 43 A-1180 Vienna Austria	
The Kingdom of Lesotho	8. 5. 1995	Via Serchio 8 001 98 Rome Italy	Malikopo Patricia Rakootje First Secretary

Country	Start of diplomatic relations	Address of embassy	In charge of embassy (LoC)
The Lebanese Republic	1. 1. 1993	Oppolzergasse 6/3 A-1010 Vienna Austria	Ibrahim Assaf Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Libya	1. 1. 1993	Révova 45 811 02 Bratislava	Khaled Salem Shaban Ambassador Designated
The Republic of Lithuania	1. 1. 1993	Löwengasse 47/4 A-1030 Vienna Austria	Lina Rukštelienė Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Latvia	1. 1. 1993	Stefan Esders Platz 4 A-1190 Vienna Austria	Guna Japiņa Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg	1. 1. 1993	Sternwartestrasse 81 A-1180 Vienna Austria	Jean Graff Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of North Macedonia	1. 1. 1993	Michalská 387/14, 811 01 Bratislava	Evgenija Ilieva Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Madagascar	16. 2. 1996	Seempromenade 14612 Falkensee-Berlin Germany	Hantavololona Ramahazosa Chargé d'affaires
Hungary	1. 1. 1993	Štefánikova 1 811 05 Bratislava	Csaba Balogh Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Malaysia	1. 1. 1993	Floridsdorfer Hauptstrasse 1–7 A-1210 Vienna Austria	Mohd Ibrahim Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Malawi	–	Westfälische Strasse 86 D-10709 Berlin Germany	Joseph John Mpiganjira Ambassador Designated
The Republic of Mali	–	Ambasciata del Mali Via Antonio Bosio 2 00161 Roma Italia	Aly Coulibaly Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Malta	1. 1. 1993	Opernring 5 11010 Vienna Austria	Simon Cachia Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Kingdom of Morocco	1. 1. 1993	Hasenauerstrasse 57 A-1180 Vienna Austria	Azzeddin Farhane Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Islamic Republic of Mauritania	–	Königin Luise Str. 9 Englerallee 42 D 14195 Berlin	Mohamed Mahomud Ould Brahim Khilil Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Republic of the Union of Myanmar	–	Kneza Miloša 72 11000 Belgrade Serbia	Zarni Aung Chargé d'affaires
The Republic of Moldova	1. 1. 1993	Löwengasse 47/10 A-1030 Vienna Austria	Mihaela Mocanu Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Mongolia	1. 1. 1993	Na Marně 5 160 00 Prague Czech Republic	Damdin Gansukh Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary

Country	Start of diplomatic relations	Address of embassy	In charge of embassy (LoC)
The Republic of Namibia	9. 12. 1997	Zuckerandlgasse 2 A-1190 Vienna Austria	Elise Pomwenepawa Shaduka Chargé d'affaires
The Federal Republic of Germany	1. 1. 1993	Hviezdoslavovo nám. 10 813 03 Bratislava	Barbara Wolf Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Nepal	4. 3. 1994	Guerickestrasse 27 D-10587 Berlin Germany	Ram Kaji Khadka Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Federal Republic of Nigeria	1. 1. 1993	Rennweg 25 A-1030 Vienna Austria	Suleiman Dauda Umar Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Republic of the Niger	–	Machnowerstraße 24 D-14165 Berlin Germany	
The Republic of Nicaragua	5. 1. 1993	Saatwinkler Damm 11-12 13627 Berlin German	Tatiana Daniela García Silva Ambassador Designated
The Kingdom of Norway	1. 1. 1993	The ICON Vienna, Tower 24 1100 Vienna Austria	Susan Eckey Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
New Zealand	1. 1. 1993	Mattliellstrasse 2–4/3 A-1040 Vienna Austria	Brian Hewson Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Sultanate of Oman	3. 1. 1993	Wahringer Strasse 2–4/24–25 A-1090 Vienna Austria	Yousuf Ahmed Hamed Aljabri Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Islamic Republic of Pakistan	1. 1. 1993	Hofzeile 13 A-1190 Vienna Austria	Aftab Ahmad Khokher Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The State of Palestine	1. 1. 1993	Gorkého 3 811 01 Bratislava	Safa A.M. Khaldi Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Panama	–	Goldschmiedgasse 10/403 1010 Vienna Austria	Darío Ernesto Chirú Ochoa Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Paraguay	8. 1. 1993	Prinz Eugen Strasse 18/1/7 A-1040 Vienna Austria	Juan Francisco Facetti Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Peru	1. 1. 1993	Mahlerstrasse 7/22 A-1010 Vienna Austria	Luis Alberto Campana Boluarte Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Poland	1. 1. 1993	Paulínyho 7 814 91 Bratislava	Maciej Ruczaj Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Portugal	1. 1. 1993	Ventúrska 16 811 01 Bratislava	Maria João Lopes Cardoso Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Austria	1. 1. 1993	Astoria Palace Hodžovo námestie 1/A 811 06 Bratislava	Johannes Wimpe Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary

Country	Start of diplomatic relations	Adress of embassy	In charge of embassy (LoC)
Romania	1. 1. 1993	Fraňa Kráľa 11 811 05 Bratislava	Călin Fabian Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Russian Federation	1. 1. 1993	Ulica Borisa Nemcova 4 811 06 Bratislava 1	Igor Borisovič Bratčikov Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Rwandese Republic	–	Jägerstrasse 67–69 D-10117 Berlin Germany	Igor Cesar Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of El Salvador	1. 1. 1993	Prinz Eugen Strasse 72/2/1 A-1040 Vienna Austria	Ramiro Recinos Trejo Chargé d'affaires
The Republic of San Marino	1. 1. 1993	Palazzo Begni Contrada Omerelli 31 47890 San Marino Italy	Dario Galassi Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	16. 6. 1995	Formanekgasse 38 A-1190 Vienna Austria	Abdullah bin Khaled Tawlah Ambassador Designated
The Republic of Senegal	–	Biedronki 63 02-959 Warsaw Poland	
The Republic of Seychelles	–	51, Avenue Mozart 75016 Paris France	
The Republic of Sierra Leone	–	Rublevskoe šosse 26/1 121615 Moscov Russian Federation	John Bobor Laggah Advisor
The Republic of Singapore	12. 2. 1993	MFA, Tanglin 2 48163 Singapore	Chay Wai Chuen Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Slovenia	1. 1. 1993	Ventúrska 5 813 15 Bratislava 1	Stanislav Raščan Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Federal Republic of Somalia	–	Simferopolsky Bulvar 7a-145 117 556 Moscov Russian Federation	Mohamed Mahmoud Handule Ambassador Designated
The United Arab Emirates	3. 1. 1993	Chimanistrasse 36 A-1190 Vienna Austria	Hamad Ali Mohammed Subaih Al Kaabi Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	1. 1. 1993	Panská 16 811 01 Bratislava 1	Nigel Marcus Baker Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The United States of America	1. 1. 1993	Hviezdoslavovo námestie 4 811 02 Bratislava 1	Gautam A. Rana Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The United Mexican States	1. 10. 1993	Rennngasse 5 A-1010 Vienna Austria	Luis Javier Campuzano Piña Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Serbia	1. 1. 1993	Búdkova 38 811 04 Bratislava 1	Marija Barlović Chargé d'affaires

Country	Start of diplomatic relations	Adress of embassy	In charge of embassy (LoC)
The Democratic Socialist republic of Sri Lanka	15. 2. 1993	Weyringergasse 33–35 A-1040 Vienna Austria	Charitha Weerasinghe Chargé d'affaires
The Republic of the Sudan	27. 7. 1993	Reisnerstrasse 29/5 A-1030 Vienna Austria	Elsadig Mohamed A. E. M. Ahmed Chargé d'affaires
The Holy See	1. 1. 1993	Nekrasovova 17 811 04 Bratislava 1	Nicola Girasoli Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Kingdom of Eswatini	–	Avenue Winston Churchill 188 1180 Brussels Belgium	
The Syrian Arab Republic	1. 1. 1993	Daffingerstrasse 4 A-1030 Vienna Austria	Hasan Khaddou Chargé d'affaires
The Kingdom of Spain	1. 1. 1993	Prepoštská 10 811 01 Bratislava 1	Lorea Arribalzaga Ceballos Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Switzerland	1. 1. 1993	Michalská 12 811 06 Bratislava 1	Peter Nelson Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Kingdom of Sweden	1. 1. 1993	Liechtensteinstrasse 51 A-1090 Vienna Austria	Annika Markovic Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Tajikistan	–	Hutweidengasse 47 1190 Vienna Austria	Idibek Kalendar Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Italy	1. 1. 1993	Palisády 49 811 06 Bratislava	Catherine Flumiani Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The United Republic of Tanzania	1. 1. 1993	Eschenallee 11 D-14050 Berlin Germany	Angela Michael Ngaillo Chargé d'affaires
The Republic of Togo	–	Grabbeallee 43 13156 Berlin Germany	Komi Bayedze Dagoh Ambassador Designated
The Kingdom of Thailand	1. 1. 1993	Cottagegasse 48 A-1180 Vienna Austria	Vilawan Mangklatankul Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Tunisia	1. 1. 1993	Nárcisz Utca 36 Budapest Hungary	Abdelkarim Hermi Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Turkey	1. 1. 1993	Holubyho 11 811 03 Bratislava 1	Tufan Höbek Chargé d'affaires
Turkmenistan	1. 1. 1993	Argentinerstrasse 22/II/EG A-1040 Vienna Austria	Hemra Amannazarov Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Ukraine	1. 1. 1993	Radvanská 35 811 01 Bratislava 1	Myroslav Myronovych Kastran Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Uganda	–	Axel-Springer Str. 54 ^o C-10117 Berlin Germany	Stephen Mubiru Ambassador Designated

■ Country	■ Start of diplomatic relations	■ Adress of embassy	■ In charge of embassy (LoC)
The Eastern Republic of Uruguay	–	Mahlerstrasse 11/2/2 A-1010 Vienna Austria	Juan Carlos Ojeda Viglione Ambassador Designated
The Republic of Uzbekistan	20. 1. 1993	Pötzleinsdorfer Strasse 49 A-1180 Vienna Austria	Rustamdjan Khakimov Chargé d'affaires
The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela	1. 1. 1993	Prinz Eugen Strasse 72/1/1.1 A-1040 Vienna Austria	Dulfa Dalila Hernández Medina Chargé d'affaires
The Socialist Republic of Vietnam	1. 1. 1993	Dunajská 15 811 08 Bratislava	Tuan Nguyen Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Republic of Zambia	5. 1. 1993	Axel-Springer Str. 54 A D-10117 Berlin Germany	Dorcas Ilunga Chileshe Chargé d'affaires
The Republic of Zimbabwe	3. 3. 1993	Chemin William Barbery 271292 Chambésy Geneva Switzerland	Taonga Mushayavanhu Ambassador Designated
Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta	1. 1. 1993	Kapitulská 9 811 01 Bratislava	Alfred Prinz von Schönburg-Hartenstein Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary



List of consulates in the Slovak Republic

as of January 2024

▪ State	▪ Address of the consulate in the SR	▪ Consul
The Republic of Azerbaijan	Klobučnícka 4 811 01 Bratislava	Džalal Gasymov Honorary Consul
The Republic of Armenia	Ventúrska 1 811 01 Bratislava	Bagrat Hakobyan Honorary Consul
The Commonwealth of the Bahamas	Ventúrska 10 811 01 Bratislava	Michal Lazar Honorary Consul
The Kingdom of Belgium	Moskovská 13 811 08 Bratislava	Bart Waterloos Honorary Consul
Belize	Krajná ulica 56C 821 04 Bratislava	Miroslav Strečanský Honorary Consul
The Republic of Belarus	Osadská 679/15 028 01 Trstená	Marián Murín Honorary Consul
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Tureň 385 903 01 Tureň	Munir Pašagić Honorary Consul
Montenegro	Zelená 2 811 01 Bratislava	Rudolf Autner Honorary Consul
The Republic of Chile	Kĺzavá 31/C 831 01 Bratislava	Jaroslav Šoltys Honorary Consul
The Kingdom of Denmark	Staromestská 3 811 03 Bratislava	Katarína Čechová Honorary Consul
Dominican Republic	Einsteinova 9 851 01 Bratislava	Dušan Dvorecký Honorary Consul
The Republic of Estonia	Rybničná 40/F, 1st Fl 831 07 Bratislava	Peter Pochaba Honorary Consul
The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia	Bojnická 3 831 04 Bratislava	Girma Belay Honorary Consul
The Republic of Philippines	Cesta na Senec 15725/24 830 06 Bratislava	Pavol Konštiak Honorary General Consul
French Republic	Hlavná 104, 040 01 Košice	David Mortreux Honorary Consul
French Republic	M. R. Štefánika 52 036 01 Martin	Grégory Delton Honorary Consul

Prepared by Roland Fleischhacker, intern, Slovak Foreign Policy Association
Source: Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic

■ State	■ Address of the consulate in the SR	■ Consul
The Republic of Finland	Moyzsova 5 811 05 Bratislava	Karol Kállay Honorary General Consul
The Republic of Finland	Žriedlová 12–14, 040 01 Košice	Rastislav Puchala Honorary Consul
Georgia	Orlové 116 017 01 Považská Bystrica	Nodari Giorgadze Honorary Consul
Georgia	Másiarska 57/A 040 01 Košice	Franco Pigozzi Honorary Consul
The Republic of Ghana	Palisády 31 811 06 Bratislava	James Arthur Honorary Consul
Hellenic Republic	Hlavná 20 040 01 Košice	Liberios Vokorokos Honorary Consul
Hungary	949 01 Nitra, Kupecká 9	Jozef Gál Honorary Consule
The Kingdom of The Netherlands	Košická 44 P. O. Box 21080 01 Prešov	Matúš Murajda Honorary Consul
The Republic of Iceland	Ilkovičova 8 841 04 Bratislava	Pavol Čekan Honorary Consul
The Republic of Iceland	M.R. Štefánika 66 036 01 Martin	Erika Halašová Honorary Consul
The State of Israel	Garbiarska 5 040 01 Košice	Peter Frajt Honorary Consul
Jamaica	Porubského 2 811 06 Bratislava	Marián Valko Honorary Consul
The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan	Račianska 96 831 02 Bratislava	Jaroslav Rebej Honorary Consul
The Republic of Cabo Verde	Dvořákovo nábrežie 8/A 81102 Bratislava	Štefan Czucz Honorary Consul
The Republic of South Africa	Révoval 27 811 02 Bratislava	Milan Lopašovský Honorary Consul
The Republic of Korea	Dolný val 5 010 01 Žilina	Oldřich Kovář Honorary Consul
The Kyrgyz Republic	Miletičova 1 821 08 Bratislava	Tibor Podoba Honorary Consul
The Republic of Colombia	AC Diplomat Palisády 29/ A 811 06 Bratislava	Anton Siekel Honorary Consul
The Republic of Costa Rica	Palisády 56 811 06 Bratislava	Tomáš Chrenek Honorary Consul
The Lao People's Democratic Republic	Panská ulica 27 811 01 Bratislava	Bounthong Bounthong Honorary Consul
The Republic of Lithuania	Cukrová 14 813 39 Bratislava	Marián Meško Honorary Consul
The Republic of Latvia	Krmanova 1 040 01 Košice	Miroslav Repka Honorary Consul
The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg	Prievozská 4/A 821 09 Bratislava	Peter Kriško Honorary Consul
Malaysia	Jašíkova 2 821 03 Bratislava	Igor Junas Honorary Consul
The Republic of Madagascar	V záhradách 4 811 02 Bratislava	Peter Brudňák Honorary Consul

■ State	■ Address of the consulate in the SR	■ Consul
The Republic of Maldives	Lazaretská 29 811 09 Bratislava	Andrej Matko Honorary Consul
The Republic of Mali	Mikulášska 3—5 811 02 Bratislava	Eugen Horváth Honorary Consul
The Kingdom of Morocco	Krajná 86 821 04 Bratislava	Ľubomír Šidala Honorary Consul
The Republic of Moldova	Zámocká 16 811 01 Bratislava	Antonio Parziale Honorary Consul
The Republic of Moldova	Strojárska 2966 040 11 Košice	Ján Varga Honorary Consul
Mongolia	Národná trieda 56 040 01 Košice	Peter Slávik Honorary Consul
The Republic of Namibia	Zadunajská cesta 8 851 01 Bratislava	Karol Biermann Honorary Consul
The Federal Republic of Germany	Priemyselná 14 010 01 Žilina	Peter Lazar Honorary Consul
New Zealand	Dvořákovo nábrežie 10 811 02 Bratislava	Peter Korbačka Honorary Consul
The Sultanate of Oman	Sasinkova 12 811 08 Bratislava	Oszkár Világi Honorary Consul
The Republic of Paraguay	Prepoštská 8 811 02 Bratislava	Martin Šamaj Honorary Consul
The Republic of Peru	Tuhovská 5 831 07 Bratislava	Andrej Glatz Honorary Consul
The Republic of Côte d'Ivoire	Svätoplukova 28 812 08 Bratislava	Milan Majtán Honorary Consul
The Republic of Poland	Nám. osloboditeľov 1 031 01 Liptovský Mikuláš	Tadeusz Frackowiak Honorary Consul
The Republic of Poland	ul. Hlavná 139 080 01 Prešov	Ján Hudacký Honorary Consul
The Republic of Poland	ul. Puškinova 1 040 01 Košice	Konrad Schönfeld Honorary Consul
The Republic of El Salvador	Záhradnícka 62 82108 Bratislava	Igor Moravčík Honorary Consul
The Republic of Senegal	Kálov 655/10 010 01 Žilina	Souleymane Seck Honorary Consul
The Republic of Seychelles	Beblavého 4 811 01 Bratislava	Wanda Adamík Hrycová Honorary Consu
The Republic of Sierra Leone	Partizánska 16 811 03 Bratislava	Václav Mika Honorary Consul
The United Mexican States	Rigeleho 1 811 02 Bratislava	Václav Mika Honorary Consul
The Republic of Serbia	Jesenského 12 040 01 Košice	Eva Dekanovská Honorary Consul
The Republic of Serbia	Pavla Mudroňa 12 036 01 Martin	Mojmír Vrlík Honorary Consul
The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka	Drotárska cesta 54 811 02 Bratislava	Peter Gabalec Honorary Consul
The Kingdom of Spain	Hutnícka 1 040 01 Košice	Daniel Lučkanič Honorary Consul

State	Address of the consulate in the SR	Consul
Switzerland	Vajanského 10 080 01 Prešov	Helena Virčíková Honorary Consul
The Kingdom of Sweden	Tomášikova 30 821 01 Bratislava	Vladimír Kestler Honorary General Consul
The Kingdom of Thailand	Viedenská cesta 3–7 851 01 Bratislava	Alexander Rozin Honorary General Consul
The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago	Prievozká 4/A 831 02 Bratislava	Roman Danda Honorary Consul
The Republic of Tunisia	P. Mudroňa 5 010 01 Žilina	Patrik Rapšík Honorary Consul
The Republic of Uganda	Ružová dolina 25 821 09 Bratislava	Andrej Brna Honorary Consul
Ukraine	Budovateľská 29 093 01 Vranov nad Topľou	Stanislav Obický Honorary Consul
Ukraine	P. O. Hviezdoslava 22 052 01 Žilina	Jaroslav Šutarík Honorary Consul
The Eastern Republic of Uruguay	Trnkova 46 851 10 Bratislava	Milan Beniak Honorary Consul
The Republic of Uzbekistan	Hotel Park Inn by Radisson Danube Rybné námestie 1811 02 Bratislava	Ľudovít Černák Honorary Consul
The Socialist Republic of Vietnam	Hlavná 70 040 01 Košice	Rastislav Sedmák Honorary Consul



List of the embassies of the Slovak Republic, permanent missions, consulates general, Slovak institutes abroad

as of January 2024

Embassy	Accredited	Address	Head of the Embassy
Abuja	Nigeria, Niger, Benin, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Equatorial Guinea, Senegal, Gambia, Cameroon, Gabon, Cape Verde, Burkina Faso, Mali, Liberia, Togo, São Tomé and Príncipe, Côte d'Ivoire	21st Crescent Off Constitution Avenue Abuja Nigeria	Tomáš Felix Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Abu Dhabi	The United Arab Emirates	Capital Plaza, Office Tower Khalifa Bin Zayed Street Office 14-01, Abu Dhabi The United Arab Emirates	Michal Kováč Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Ankara	Turkey	Atatürk Bulvarı 245 06692 Ankara Turkey	Ján Pšenica Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Athens	The Hellenic Republic (Greece)	Georgiou Saferi 4 Paláio Psychiko 154 52 Athens Greece	Marcela Hanusová Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Baku	Azerbaijan	Azerbaijan 90 A Nizami Landmark III 1010 Baku Azerbaijan	Milan Lajčiak Chargé d'affaires a. p. Ambassador
Bangkok	Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar	South Sathorn Road 25 10 120 Bangkok The Kingdom of Thailand	Jaroslav Auxt Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Beijing	China, Mongolia	Ritan Lu, Jianguomen Wai 100 600 Beijing People's Republic of China	Peter Lizák Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Beirut	Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Syria	Weavers Center, 14th fl. Clemenseau Street Beirut Lebanon	Marek Varga Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Belgrade	Serbia	Bulevar umetnosti 18 110 70 Novi Beograd Serbia	Fedor Rosocha Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Berlin	Germany	Hildebrandstraße 25 10785 Berlin Germany	Maroš Jakubócy Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary

Prepared by Roland Fleischhacker, intern, Slovak Foreign Policy Association
Source: Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic

Embassy	Accredited	Address	Head of the Embassy
Bern	Switzerland, Liechtenstein	Thunstrasse 63 3074 Muri Bern Switzerland	Alexander Micovčín Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Brasília	Brazil, Ecuador, Columbia, Venezuela, Surinam, Guyana	SES, Avenida das Nações, Qd. 805, Lote 21 B CEP 70 200-902 Brasília, Brazil	Viliam Rosenberg Chargé d'affaires
Budapest	Hungary	Stefánia út 22—24. 1143 Budapest XIV Hungary	Pavol Hamžík Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Buenos Aires	Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay	Figuerola Alcorta 3240 Buenos Aires Argentina	Rastislav Hindický Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Bucharest	Romania	Strada Otetari 020 977 Bucharest Romania	Peter Hatiar Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Cairo	Egypt, Chad, Yemen, Lybia, Mauritania, Oman, Sudan, Tunisia	3 Adel Hosein Rostom Cairo Egypt	Lenka Miháliková Ambassador
Chisinau	Moldova	A. Sciuzeva 101 Chisinau Moldova	Pavol Ivan Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Copenhagen	Denmark	Vesterled 26—28 2100 Copenhagen Denmark	Igor Slobodník Ambassador
Delhi	India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan	50-M, Niti Marg, Chanakyapuri 110 021 New Delhi India	Róbert Maxián Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Dublin	Ireland	80 Merrion Square South Dublin 2 Ireland	Andrej Droba Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
The Hague	Netherlands	Parkweg 1 2585 Den Haag Netherlands	Juraj Podhorský Ambassador
Hanoi	Vietnam	12 Ba Huyen Thanh Quan Ba Dinh District Hanoi Vietnam	Pavol Svetík Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Havana	Antigua a Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, Cuba, Saint Lucia, Saint Christopher and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago	Calle 66, No. 521 Entre 5 B y 7, Miramar, Playa Havana Cuba	Milan Zachar Ambassador
Helsinki	Finland, Estonia	Vähäniityntie 5 00570 Helsinki Finland	Dušan Krištofík Ambassador
Jakarta	Brunei, East Timor, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore	alan Profesor Mohammad Yamin 29 103 10 Jakarta Indonesia	Tomáš Ferko Ambassador

Embassy	Accredited	Address	Head of the Embassy
Kyiv	Ukraine	Jaroslavov val 34 019 01 Kyiv Ukraine	Marek Šafin Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Lisbon	Portugal	Avenida da Liberdade 200 1250-147 Lisbon Portugal	Tibor Králik Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
London	The United Kingdom	25, Kensington Palace Gardens W8 4QY London The United Kingdom	Róbert Ondrejcsák Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Ljubljana	Slovenia	Bleiweisova 4 1000 Ljubljana Slovenia	Peter Zeleňák Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Madrid	Spain, Andorra, Morocco	C/Pinar, 20 28006 Madrid Spain	Juraj Tomaga Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Mexico City	Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Salvador, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, Belize	Julio Verne 35 11560 Mexico City Mexico	Terézia Šajgalíková Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Minsk	Belarus	Volodarskogo 6 220 030 Minsk Belarus	Katarína Žáková Chargé d'affaires a.i.
Moscow	Russian Federation	J. Fučíka 17/19 115 127 Moscow Russian Federation	Ľubomír Rehák Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Nairobi	Kenya, Comoros, Burundi, Congo, Seychelles, Rwanda, Somalia, Uganda, Tansania, Eritrea, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo	Jakaya Kikwete Rd., 00100 Nairobi Kenya	Katarína Žuffa Leligdonová Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Nicosia	Cyprus	Kalamatas Street No. 4 2002 Nicosia Cyprus	Martin Bezák Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Astana	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan	Samal 12, Z10F1M5, Astana Kazakhstan	Robert Kírnág Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Oslo	Norway, Iceland	Thomas Heftyes gate 24 N-0244 Oslo Norway	Roman Bužek Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Ottawa	Canada	50 Rideau Terrace K1M 2A1 Ottawa, Ontario Canada	Viera Grigová Ambassador
Paris	France, Monaco, Algeria	125 rue du Ranelagh 75016 Paris France	Ján Šoňh Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Podgorica	Montenegro	Crnogorskih Serdara 5 81000 Podgorica Montenegro	Boris Gandel Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Prague	Czech Republic	Pelléova 12 160 00 Prague Czech Republic	Ingrid Brocková Ambassador

Embassy	Accredited	Address	Head of the Embassy
Pretoria	South Africa, Angola, Botswana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mauritius, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe	930 Arcadia Street Arcadia 0083 Pretoria South Africa	Vladimír Gráčz Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Prishtina	Serbia (Kosovo)	Selim Berisha 11, Dragodan, 10000 Prishtina Kosovo Serbia	Rastislav Kostilník Head of the Liaison Office
Riga	Latvia, Lithuania	Smilšu iela 8 1050 Riga Latvia	Branislav Pavlovič Ambassador
Riyadh	Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the State of Kuwait and the State of Qatar		Rudolf Michalka Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador
Rome	Italy, Malta, San Marino	Via dei Colli della Farnesina 144VI/A00194 Rome Italy	Karla Wursterová Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Sarajevo	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Trnovska 6 710 00 Sarajevo Bosnia and Herzegovina	Roman Hlobeň Ambassador
Skopje	FYROM (Macedonia)	Budimpeštanska 39 1000 Skopje North Macedonia	Henrik Markuš Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Sofia	Bulgaria	Blv. Janko Sakazov 9 1504 Sofia Bulgaria	Vasil Grivna Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Seoul	South Korea, North Korea	28, 10gil Hannamdae-ro Yongsan-gu Seoul South Korea	Ján Kuderjavý Ambassador
Stockholm	Sweden	Arsenalsgatan 2/3 TR 10 388 Stockholm Sweden	Ľubomír Čaňo Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Tashkent	Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan	Kichik Beshjogoch 38 100070 Tashkent Uzbekistan	Viktor Borecký Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Tehran	Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan	72 Moghadassi St., Niavaran St., 1971836199 Tehran Iran	Ladislav Ballek Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Tel Aviv	Israel, Palestine	Jabotinsky 37 6459 Tel Aviv Israel	Igor Maukš Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Tirana	Albania	Rruga Skenderbej 8 Tirana Albania	Albín Otruba Ambassador
Tbilisi	Georgia	13 Mtskheta Str., Apt. 23, 0179 Tbilisi Georgia	Pavel Vízdal Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Tokyo	Japan, Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Palau	2-11-33, Moto-Azabu Minato-ku 106-0046 Tokyo Japan	Marián Tomášik Head of the Mission

Embassy	Accredited	Address	Head of the Embassy
Vatican (The Holy See)	Vatican (The Holy See), Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta	Via dei Colli della Farnesina 144 00135 Rome Vatican	Marek Lisánsky Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Vienna	Austria	Armbrustergasse 24 A-1190 Vienna Austria	Jozef Polakovič Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Warsaw	Poland	Litewska 6 00-581 Warsaw Poland	Andrea Elscheková Matisová Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Washington	USA	3523 International Court NW 20008 Washington D. C. USA	Radovan Javorčík Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary
Zagreb	Croatia	Prilaz Gjure Deželica 10 10000 Zagreb Croatia	Hana Kováčová Ambassador
Yerevan	Armenia	Ul. 36 Sayat Nova Ave 0025 Yerevan Armenia	Miroslav Hacek Chargé d'affaires a. p. Head of the Mission

■ Permanent Missions

■ Permanent mission	■ Address	■ Head of the Mission
PM International Organizations Vienna	Blaastraße 34 A-1190 Vienna Austria	Peter Burian
PM EU Brussels	Avenue de Cortenbergh 107 1000 Brussels Belgium	Petra Vargová
PM NATO Brussels	Boulevard Leopold III NATO HQ 1110 Brussels Belgium	Peter Bátor
PM OECD Paris	28, Avenue d'Eylau 750 16 Paris France	František Ružička
PM UN New York	801 Second Avenue 10017 New York USA	Richard Galbavý
PM UN Geneva	9, Chemin de l'Ancienne Route 1218 Grand Saconnex Switzerland	Dušan Matulay
PM Council of Europe Strasbourg	1 Rue Ehrmann 67000 Strasbourg France	Oksana Tomová
PM UNESCO Paris	1, rue Miollis 757 32, Paris France	Anna Plassat Muriňová

■ Consulates General

■ State	■ Address	■ Consul Genral
The People's Republic of China	1375 Huaihai Central Road 2 00031 Shanghai	Kamila Kuková
Hungary	Derkovits sor 7 5600 Békéscsaba	
Poland	Św. Tomasza 34 31027 Cracow	Zlata Šipošová
Russian Federation	Orbeli č. 21/2 194 223 Saint Petersburg	Juraj Siváček
USA	801 Second Avenue, 12th Floor New York, N.Y. 10017	Milan Vrbovský
Germany	Vollmannstrasse 25d 819 25 Munich	Jozef Korček
Turkey	3. Levent Bambu Sokak No: 6343 30 Istanbul	Soňa Budayová
Ukraine	Lokoty 4 880 00 Uzhhorod	Pavol Pánis

■ Slovak Institutes

■ Name	■ Address	■ Head
Slovak Institute Berlin	Hildebrandstr. 25 10785 Berlin Germany	Zuzana Megová
Slovak Institute Budapest	Rákóczi út. 15 H-1088 Budapest Hungary	Michaela Pánisová Ležáková
Slovak Institute Jerusalem	19 King David St, 9410143, Jerusalem, Izrael	Jakub Urik
Slovak Institute Moscow	Ul. 2 Brestská 27 125-056 Moscow Russia	
Slovak Institute Paris	125 Rue de Ranelagh F-75016 Paris France	Jana Kňážková
Slovak Institute Prague	Nám. Republiky 1037/3 110 00 Praha 1 Czech Republic	Ľubica Krénová
Slovak Institute Rome	Via dei Colli della Farnesina 144 00135 Rome Italy	Peter Ferenc
Slovak Institute Warsaw	Krzywe Kolo 12/14a PL-00 270 Warsaw Poland	Milan Novotný
Slovak Institute Vienna	Wipplingerstrasse 24–26 A-1010 Vienna Austria	Jana Tomková



List of consulates of the Slovak Republic headed by the honorary consuls

as of January 2024

▪ State	▪ Consulate	▪ Consul
Albania	Tirana	Faik Dizdarii Honorary Consul
Argentina	La Plata	Eduardo Kabát Honorary General Consul
Armenia	Yerevan	Gagik Vladimirovič Martirosian Honorary Consul
Australia	Brisbane	Michal Horvath Honorary Consul
Australia	Melbourne	Eugénia Mocnay Honorary Consul
Australia	Perth	Pavol Faix Honorary Consul
Austria	St. Pölten	Veit Schmid-Schmidfelden Honorary Consul
Austria	Linz	Harald Papesch Honorary Consul
Austria	Salzburg	Gerald Hubner Honorary Consul
Austria	Eisenstadt	Alfred Tombor Honorary Consul
Austria	Graz	Friedrich Wolfgang Sperl Honorary Consul
Bahames	Nassau	Isacc Chester Cooper Honorary Consul
Bangladesh	Dhaka	Miran Ali Honorary Consul
Belarus	Brest	Ivan Michailovič Kozič Honorary Consul
Belgium	Antwerp	Gunnar Riebs Honorary Consul General
Belgium	Gent	Arnold Vanhaecke Honorary Consul
Belgium	Mons	Peter De Nil Honorary Consul

Prepared by Roland Fleischhacker, intern, Slovak Foreign Policy Association
Source: Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic

State	Consulate	Consul
Belize	Belize	Carlo Arguelles Honorary Consul
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Medjugorje	Rajko Zelenika Honorary Consul
Brazil	Belo Horizonte	Renato Werner Victor de Queiroz Honorary Consul
Brazil	Joinville	Ernesto Heinzelmann Honorary Consul
Brazil	Rio de Janeiro	Mohamad Façal Mohamad Said Hammoud Honorary Consul
Brazil	São Paulo	Luciano Meschini Giugliano Honorary Consul
Bulgaria	Varna	Edita Blagoevova Honorary Consul
Canada	Calgary	Eva Hadzima Honorary Consul
Canada	Montreal	Dezider Michaletz Honorary Consul
Canada	Vancouver	Pavol Hollosy Honorary Consul
Canada	Toronto	Michael Martinček Honorary Consul
Comoros	Moroni	Mohamed Zamine Sondarjee Honorary Consul
Czech Republic	Brno	Jaroslav Weigl Honorary Consul
Croatia	Split	Goran Morović Honorary Consul
Chile	Santiago	Paul Nador Honorary Consul
China	Hong Kong	Willy Lin Honorary Consul
Cyprus	Limassol	Angelos Gregoriades Honorary Consul
Denmark	Aarhus	Claus Jørgen Søgaard Poulsen Honorary Consul
Ecuador	Quito	Esteban Casares Benítez Honorary Consul
Egypt	Alexandria	Mohamed Moustafa el Naggar Honorary Consul
Estonia	Tallinn	Even Tudeberg Honorary Consul
Ethiopia	Addis Abeba	Feleke Bekele Safo Honorary Consul
Finland	Teerijärvi	Mikael Ahlbäck Honorary Consul
France	Grenoble	Menyhért Kocsis Honorary Consul
France	Marseille	Marc-André Distanti Honorary Consul
Greece	Chania	Stavros Paterakis Honorary Consul

State	Consulate	Consul
Greece	Thessaloniki	Konstatinos Mavridis Honorary Consul
Greece	Patras	Phaedon Couniotis Honorary Consul
Greece	Pireus	Michael Bodouroglou Honorary Consul
Georgia	Tbilisi	Besarion Kvartskhava Honorary Consul
Germany	Leipzig	Albrecht Heinz Tintelnot Honorary Consul
Germany	Bad Homburg	Imrich Donath Honorary Consul
Germany	Hamburg	Michael Stein Honorary Consul
Germany	Hildesheim	Dirk Bettels Honorary Consul
Germany	Stuttgart	Hartmut Stützer Honorary Consul
Guatemala	Guatemala	Mario Fernando Montúfara Rodrigues Honorary Consul
Guinea	Conakry	Boubakar Lombonna Diallo Honorary Consul
Iceland	Reykjavík	Runólfur Oddsson Honorary Consul
India	Bangalore	Chirankandath Joseph Roy Honorary Consul
India	Mumbai	Amit Choksey Honorary Consul
Iraq	Erbil	Sherin Jawdat Ibrahim Barzanji Honorary Consul
Ireland	Galway	Lorraine Higgins Honorary Consul
Israel	Haifa	Josef Pickel Honorary Consul
Italy	Forli	Alvaro Ravaglioli Honorary Consul
Italy	Milan	Luigi Cuzzolin Honorary Consul
Italy	Terst	Luca Davide Farina Honorary Consul
Jamaica	Kingston	Christopher Richard Issa Honorary Consul
Japan	Osaka	Shiro Murai Honorary Consul
Japan	Kirishima	Masahiro Yamamoto Honorary Consul
Japan	Utsunomiya	Eichii Ishikawa Honorary Consul
Jordan	Amman	Khalidun A. Abuhassan Honorary General Consul
Kazakhstan	Karaganda	Alexej Petrovič Nefjodov Honorary Consul

■ State	■ Consulate	■ Consul
Kazakhstan	Öskemen	Ajdar Jerežerpovič Mambetkazijev Honorary Consul
Kenya	Mombasa	Christoph Modigell Honorary Consul
Kyrgyzstan	Bishkek	Igor Konstantinovič Gusarov Honorary Consul
South Korea	Soul	Nan Se Gum Honorary Consul
Laos	Vientiane	Vongnam Vongvilay Honorary Consul
Lebanon	Beirut	Samir Doumet Honorary Consul
Lithuania	Vilnius	Ramūnas Petravičius Honorary Consul
Luxembourg	Luxembourg	Giancarlo d'Elia Honorary Consul
North Macedonia	Skopje	Vlade Stojanovski Honorary Consul
Madagaskar	Antananarivo	Ismael Danilhoussen Honorary Consul
Malaysia	Kota Kinabalu	Khen Thau Wong Honorary Consul
Malaysia	Kuala Lumpur	Tan Sri Tee Keat Ong Honorary Consul
Malta	Valletta	Godwin Edvard Bencini Honorary Consul General
Morocco	Casablanca	Kamil Ouzzani Touhamy Honorary Consul
Mauritius	Port Louis	Yatemani Gujadhur Honorary Consul
Mexico	Cancún	Francisco Edmundo Lechón Rosas Honorary Consul
Mexico	Monterrey	Jorge García Segovia Honorary Consul
Moldova	Chisinau	Iurie Grigore Popovici Honorary Consul
Nepal	Kathmandu	Pasang Dawa Sherpa Honorary Consul
Netherlands	Eindhoven	Gerardus Hendrik Meulesteen Honorary Consul
Netherlands	Groningen	Denisa Kasová Honorary Consul
Nigeria	Lagos	Ramesh Hathiramani Honorary Consul
Nicaragua	Managua	Bergman Castillo Honorary Consul
Norway	Drammen	Zuzana Opavská Wahl Honorary Consul

■ State	■ Consulate	■ Consul
Norway	Bergen	Torbjørn Haaland Honorary Consul
New Zealand	Auckland	Peter T. Kiely Honorary Consul
Oman	Muscat	Mohammed S. Al-Harthy Honorary Consul
Pakistan	Lahore	Muhammad Malik Asif Honorary Consul
Palau	Koror	Danka Ledgerwood Honorary Consul
Palestine	Betlehem	George Suliman Malki Jabra Honorary Consul
Panama	Panama	Julio César Benedetti Honorary Consul
Paraguay	Cuidad del Este	Charif Hammoud Honorary Consul
Paraguay	Asunción	Alex Hammoud Honorary Consul
Peru	Lima	Víctor Andrés Belaunde Gutiérrez Honorary Consul
Philippines	Cebu City	Antonio N. Chiu Honorary Consul
Poland	Bydhost	Wiesław Cezary Olszewski Honorary Consul
Poland	Gliwice	Marian Czerny Honorary Consul
Poland	Rzeszow	Adam Góral Honorary Consul
Poland	Sopot	Jerzy Leśniak Honorary Consul
Poland	Wroclaw	Maciej Kaczmarek Honorary Consul
Poland	Zakopané	Wiesław Tadeusz Wojas Honorary Consul
Portugal	Faro	Rui Marques Dias Gomes Honorary Consul
Portugal	Funchal	Roberto Rodrigo Vieira Henriques Honorary Consul
Portugal	Riberia Grande	Zuzana Pinčáková da Silva Vieira Honorary Consul General
Romania	Salonta	Miroslav Iablonsik Honorary Consul General
Saudi Arabia	Jeddah	Saeed Omar H. Balubaid Honorary Consul
Seychelles	Victoria	Joseph France Albert Honorary Consul

■ State	■ Consulate	■ Consul
Serbia	Niš	Stela Jovanović Honorary Consul
South Africa	Cape Town	Geoffrey Leighton Ashmead Honorary Consul
South Africa	Johannesburg	Juraj Michlo Honorary Consul
Sri Lanka	Colombo	Mahen Roshan Andrew Kariyawan Honorary Consul
Sudan	Khartoum	Nasreldin Ibrahim Shulgami Honorary Consul General
Syria	Latakia	Anas Dib Joud Honorary Consul
Spain	Santa Cruz de Tenerife	Francisco José Perera Molinero Honorary Consul
Spain	Malaga	Jesús García Urbano Honorary Consul
Spain	Zaragoza	José Javier Parra Campos Honorary Consul
Sweden	Göteborg	Carl Magnus Richard Kindal Honorary Consul
Sweden	Luleå	Jonas Lundström Honorary Consul
Switzerland	Basel	Ruben Masar Honorary Consul
Switzerland	Zürich	Leonz Meyer Honorary Consul
Tanzania	Dar es Salaam	Moustafa Hassanali Khataw Honorary Consul
Togo	Lomé	Viwoto James Victor Sossou Honorary Consul
Turkey	Bursa	Hüseyin Özdilek Honorary Consul
Turkey	Izmir	Selçuk Borovali Honorary Consul
Turkey	Trabzon	Suat Gürkök Honorary Consul
Turkey	Kayseri	Osman Güldüoğlu Honorary Consul
Turkey	Manavgat	Dr. Şükrü Vural Honorary Consul
Turkey	Mersin	Emir Bozkaya Honorary Consul
Turkey	Tekirdağ	Levent Erdoğan Honorary Consul
Turkey	Kusadasi	Tevfik Bağcı Honorary Consul
Turkey	Izmit	Onur Sümer Honorary Consul

■ State	■ Consulate	■ Consul
Uganda	Kampala	Abel M. S. Katahoire Honorary Consul
Ukraine	Kharkov	Viktor Vasiljevič Popov Honorary Consul
Ukraine	Odesa	Mykhaylo Viktorovič Muzalev Honorary Consul
Ukraine	Velikyj Bereznyj	Oleg Ivanovič Adamčuk Honorary Consul
United Kingdom	Glasgow	Craig Murray Honorary Consul
United Kingdom	Belfast	Thomas Sullivan Honorary Consul
United Kingdom	Cardiff	Nigel Bruce Harold Payne Honorary Consul
Uruguay	Montevideo	Matias Balparda Honorary Consul
USA	Atlanta	John W. Woodward Honorary Consul
USA	Detroit	Edward Zelenak Honorary Consul
USA	Indianapolis	Steve Zlatos Honorary Consul
USA	Dallas	Martin Valko Honorary Consul
USA	Los Angeles	Ben H. Lyon Honorary Consul
USA	North Miami	Cecilia F. Rokusek Honorary Consul
USA	Pittsburgh	Joseph T. Senko Honorary Consul
USA	San Francisco	Barbara M. Pivnicka Honorary Consul
USA	Naperville	Rosemary Macko Wisnosky Honorary Consul
USA	Boston	Peter Mužila Honorary Consul
USA	Denver	Gregor James Fasing Honorary Consul
USA	Lafayette	Zoltán Gombos Honorary Consul
Uzbekistan	Taskhent	Vasily Shimko Honorary Consul
Venezuela	Caracas	Manuel Antonio Polanco Fernandéz Honorary Consul
Vietnam	Ho Chi Minh City	Huy Ho Honorary Consul General
Yemen	Sana'a	Adel Mohamed Al Huraibi Honorary Consul



List of non-governmental organizations working in the field of foreign and security policy, development cooperation and humanitarian assistance and international law

as of January 2024

■ Name	■ Field	■ Address	■ Webpage
Adapt Institute	defence and security policy, strategic adaptations, changes in security environment	Na vršku 8 811 01 Bratislava	www.adaptinstitute.org
ADRA	development cooperation	Cablkova 3 821 04 Bratislava	https://www.adra.sk/
Africké kultúrne, informačné a integračné centrum (African Cultural, Information and Integration Center)	cultural cooperation and integration	Ružinovská 1 821 02 Bratislava	http://www.akiic.sk/
AI Nova	cultural heritage and active citizenship	Prostredná 64 900 21 Svätý Jur	https://ainova.sk/
Amazi	development cooperation and humanitarian assistance	Sološnická 20 841 04 Bratislava	https://amazi.sk/
Ambrela	development cooperation	Miletičova 7 821 08 Bratislava	https://ambrela.org/
Amnesty International Slovakia	human rights	Štefánikova 16 811 04 Bratislava	https://www.amnesty.sk/
Bratislava Policy Institute	liberal democracy and European integration	Klariská 14 811 03 Bratislava	https://www.bpi.sk/
CARDO — Národné dobrovoľnícke centrum	development cooperation and volunteering	Tomášikova 3 821 01 Bratislava	https://www.dobrovolnictvo.sk/
Centrum národov Slovensko	the ideas of UN Charter	Kuzmányho 3 974 01 Banská Bystrica	https://cnsos.eu/
Centrum pre európsku politiku (Center for European Policy)	active citizenship and the youth	Panenská 30 811 03 Bratislava	https://www.cep.sk/
Centrum pre filantropiu (Center for Philanthropy)	charity and development cooperation	Baštová 343 811 03 Bratislava	https://cpf.sk/
Človek v ohrození (People in Need)	development cooperation and humanitarian aid	Baštová 5 811 03 Bratislava	https://clovekvohrozeni.sk/
Evanjelická diakonia ECAV na Slovensku	development cooperation and humanitarian aid	Palisády 46 811 06 Bratislava	https://www.diakonia.sk/

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■ Name	■ Field	■ Adress	■ Webpage
Evanjelická diakonia ECAV na Slovensku	development cooperation and humanitarian aid	Palisády 46 811 06 Bratislava	https://www.diakonia.sk/
eRko	development cooperation	Miletičova 7 821 08 Bratislava	https://erko.sk/
EUROIURIS — Európske právne centrum (European Legal Center)	European law	Na Vřšku 6 811 02 Bratislava	https://ja-sr.sk/euroiuris-europske-pravne-centrum
EuroPolicy	European Union and its policies	Maróthyho 6 811 06 Bratislava	https://www.europolicy.sk/
Fórum pre medzinárodnú politiku (International Politics Forum)	foreign politics	L. Fullu 23 841 05 Bratislava	http://mepoforum.sk/
Globsec	international security and sustainability	Vajnorská 100/B 831 04 Bratislava	https://www.globsec.org/
Habitat for Humanity	development cooperation and humanitarian assistance	Zochova 6 811 03 Bratislava	https://www.habitat.org/
Hekima	fighting poverty	Donnerova 35 841 04 Bratislava	https://www.hekima.sk/
Inštitút pre kultúrnu politiku (Institute for Cultural Policies)	cultural policy	Štefánikova 25 811 05 Bratislava	http://ikp.sk/en
Inštitút pre strednú Európu (Institute for Central Europe)	Slovakia and Europe	Banskobystrická 7403811 06 Bratislava	https://iceoz.sk/
Integra	development cooperation and humanitarian assistance	Dobšinského 14 811 05 Bratislava	https://integra.sk/
Karpatská nadácia (The Carpathian Foundation)	education, cross-border cooperation, especially with Ukraine	Letná 27 040 01 Košice	https://karpatskanadacia.sk
Liga za ľudské práva (Human Rights League)	assistance to refugees and development cooperation	Račianska 80 831 02 Bratislava	https://www.hrl.sk/
Live AID International	volunteering and development cooperation	Lachova 7 851 03 Bratislava	http://www.live-aid.org/
Magna	development cooperation and humanitarian assistance	Štefánikova 19 811 05 Bratislava	https://www.magna.com/
Medzinárodný republikánsky inštitút (International Republican Institute)	freedom and democracy	Tallerova 2 811 02 Bratislava	https://www.iri.org/
Nebo nad Afrikou	humanitarian aid in Africa	Hokovce 145 935 84 Hokovce	https://www.facebook.com/Nebo-nad-Afrikou-101546895446360/
PDCS	conflict resolution and education	Štúrova 13 811 02 Bratislava	https://www.pdcs.sk/

■ Name	■ Field	■ Adress	■ Webpage
Savio	development cooperation	Miletičova 7 821 08 Bratislava	https://savio.sk/
Slovenská akademická asociácia pre medzinárodnú spoluprácu (Slovak Academic Association for International Cooperation)	international cooperation	Križkova 9 811 04 Bratislava	http://www.saac.sk/
Slovenská humanitná rada (Slovak Humanitarian Council)	humanitarian aid	Budyšínska 1 831 03 Bratislava	https://www.shr.sk/
Slovenská katolícka charita (Caritas Slovakia)	development cooperation and humanitarian assistance	Kapitulská 18 814 15 Bratislava	https://www.charita.sk/
Slovenská spoločnosť pre medzinárodné právo SAV (Slovak Society of International Law)	international law	Klemensova 19 813 64 Bratislava	https://www.ssmpp-ssil.org/kontakt/
Slovenská spoločnosť pre zahraničnú politiku (Slovak Foreign Policy Association)	foreign and European policy, security policy, development cooperation	Staromestská 6 811 03 Bratislava	https://www.sfpa.sk/
Slovenské centrum pre komunikáciu a rozvoj (Slovak Centre for Communication and Development)	development cooperation and education	Pražská 11 811 04 Bratislava	https://sccd-sk.org/
Slovenský červený kríž (Slovak Red Cross)	development cooperation and humanitarian assistance	Grösslingová 24 814 46 Bratislava	https://redcross.sk/
Strategic Analysis	Western Balkans and South Caucasus	Tolstého 5 811 06 Bratislava	https://www.strategicanalysis.sk/
Stredoeurópska nadácia (Central European Foundation)	cultural heritage	Sasinkova 12 811 08 Bratislava	http://www.cef.sk/
Stredoeurópsky inštitút ázijských štúdií (Central European Institute of Asian Studies)	Central European engagements with Asia	Murgašova 2 811 04 Bratislava	https://ceias.eu/
Unicef	development cooperation and humanitarian assistance	Michalská 7 811 01 Bratislava	https://www.unicef.sk/
Živica	development cooperation and humanitarian assistance	Račianska 78 831 02 Bratislava	https://zivica.sk/



List of publications and online sources on foreign and European policy, security policy and international law

as of January 2024

■ Online Publication	■ Publisher
CEIAS Considers	CEIAS
Euractiv	EURACTIV Slovakia
MepoForum	Fórum pre medzinárodnú politiku
Zahraničná politika	SFPA

■ Publication	■ Publisher
Almanach	Faculty of International Relations, University of Economics in Bratislava
Asian and African Studies	Institute of Oriental Studies of the Slovak Academy of Sciences
Euro–Atlantic quarterly	Slovenská atlantická komisia
Fórum cudzích jazykov, politológie a medzinárodných vzťahov	College Danubius
Medzinárodné vzťahy	Faculty of International Relations, University of Economics in Bratislava
Obrana	Ministry of Defence
Studia Politica Slovakia	Institute of Political Science of the Slovak Academy of Sciences
Svet a my	The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs
Political Sciences	Faculty of Political Science and International Relations of Matej Bel University

Prepared by Roland Fleischhacker, intern, Slovak Foreign Policy Association



Slovakia's participation in foreign military operations and observer missions in 2023

as of January 2024

▪ Mission	▪ Country	▪ Armed forces members	▪ Police force members	▪ Civilian experts
▪ UN				
UNFICYP (United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus)	Cyprus	240	6	
UNTSO (United Nations Truce Supervision Organization)	Syria, Israel	2		
▪ NATO				
NMI (NATO Mission Iraq)	Iraq	5		
eFP (Enhanced Forward Presence)	Latvia	135		
NATO Headquarters	Sarajevo	1		
▪ EU				
EUFOR Althea (European Union Force Althea)	Bosnia and Herzegovina	51		
EUMAM (European Union Military Assistance Mission Ukraine)	Poland	1		
EUMAM (European Union Military Assistance Mission Ukraine)	Belgium	1		
EUMM (European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia)	Georgia	0	6	
EUBAM (EU Border Assistance Mission in Moldova)	Ukraine/Moldova		1	
EUTM (European Union Training Mission in Mali)	Mali	5		
EUNAVFOR MED Irini	Central Mediterranean	3		
▪ OSCE				
OSCE Mission in Serbia	Serbia			1
OSCE Mission in North Macedonia	North Macedonia			1
OSCE Mission in Kosovo	Kosovo			1

Source: Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic





About authors

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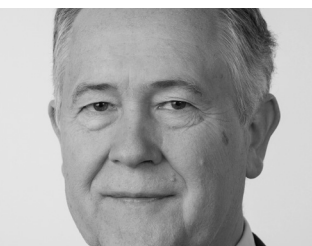
■ Pavol Baboš

is a researcher at the Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava. His main research area is Euroscepticism and voting behavior. He regularly publishes in international academic journals and helps popularize science in the Slovak media. He has substantial experience of working with multinational European research consortia, and has taught social science methodology at Comenius University in Bratislava and Bologna University, Italy.



■ Ján Cingel

is the founder and President of Strategic Analysis, a foreign affairs and security think tank established in Slovakia in 2020 that focuses mainly on the EU's close neighborhood—the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries. A former research fellow and head of the European Neighbourhood Program at the GLOBSEC Policy Institute, Ján's areas of expertise are the Western Balkans, South Caucasus, radicalization, violent extremism and NATO and EU integration processes. Before joining the Slovak NGO sector, he worked at the bilateral relations office of the Defense Policy, International Relations and Legislation Department at the Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic. He co-founded the Bratislava Global Security Forum—GLOBSEC (in 2005). He graduated from the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, with an MA in International Relations and Diplomacy. (jan.cingel@strategicanalysis.sk)



■ Pavol Demeš

is an independent foreign policy analyst, civil society expert and TV anchor based in Bratislava. He is a visiting distinguished fellow with GMF US and serves as a board member of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association as well as European Endowment for Democracy. He has his own internet TV program on international relations and diplomacy. He has published numerous articles and books on international relations and civil society and had many photographic exhibitions in multiple countries. Before, in 1989, he served as the Executive Director of the Slovak Academic Information Agency-Service Centre for the Third Sector. From 1991–1992 he was the Slovak Minister of International Relations and he also served as Foreign Policy Advisor to the President of the Slovak Republic (1993–1997). From 2000 until September 2010, he was the Director for Central and Eastern Europe of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF US).



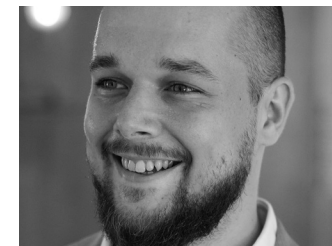
■ Daniel Kaba

studied international public law at the University of Vienna, specializing in human rights and law at the University of Comenius in Bratislava. In the past ten years he has been active in development cooperation and humanitarian aid, working as a project manager,

trainer, director of ADRA Slovakia and led a team implementing projects in Kenya, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Lebanon among others. Currently he works as an executive secretary for the Ambrela Platform for Development Organizations. His main focus is policy & advocacy and partnerships. He has also provided inputs for strategic documents such as the Act on Official Development Cooperation and Medium Term Strategy for Development Cooperation 2019–2023. (daniel.kaba@ambrela.org)

■ Matej Kandrík

is co-founder of Adapt Institute and is pursuing a PhD in Political Science, focusing on Security and Strategic Studies, at Masaryk University in Brno, Czechia. He has worked as an external analyst for Visegrad Insight and as a research fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. His professional experience includes a significant tenure at STRATPOL—Strategic Policy Institute, where he served as executive director from 2019 to 2022. His research delves into comprehensive defence, paramilitarism, information warfare and strategic thinking. (kandrik@adaptinstitute.org)



■ Juraj Marušiak

is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Political Science, Slovak Academy of Sciences. Since 2022 he is a director of the Institute. His research focuses on the twentieth-century history of Slovakia and issues in international relations in the Central and Eastern European region since 1989. His main research areas are the V4 countries, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. He is the author of *Slovak Literature and Power in the Second Half of the 1950s* (Brno 2001), *An Early Spring That Came Prematurely... Slovak Students in 1956* (Bratislava 2020), and co-author of *The (Dis)integration Power of Central European Nationalism: A Study of the Visegrad Group Countries* (Bratislava 2015). In 2013–2021 he was a member of the Presidium of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. (juraj.marusiak@savba.sk)



■ Veronika Oravcová

is a research fellow at the Slovak Foreign Policy Association and a research assistant at the Department of Political Science at Comenius University in Bratislava. Her research interests are centered on energy transition and energy security in Central and Eastern Europe. She is co author of a book on the 2016 parliamentary elections in Slovakia: *Problems of society and political (non)solutions* and co editor of *From Economic to Energy Transition: Three Decades of Transitions in Central and Eastern Europe* (2021), several chapters on energy transition and papers on Slovak energy policy. She published in several journals, such as *Energy Policy*, *Energy Efficiency*, *Higher Education*. In the past her research has focused on intra executive relations and the role of the president in Central and Eastern Europe. (oravcova@sfpa.sk)





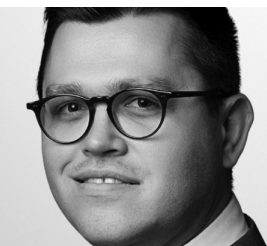
■ Miroslava Pisklová

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