1. The Eastern Neighbours and Russia

Marta Králiková

Sitting on two stools

The prospects of national relations with Russia are strongly defined by Slovak economic interests and almost complete dependence on Russia in the energy sector (oil, gas, and nuclear fuel). In light of the unresolved conflict in Ukraine and EU sanction policy towards Russia, the incumbent government’s approach of balancing support for a unified EU voice and efforts to avoid too hawkish critique towards Russia to secure its national interests is likely to continue. Although Slovakia is clear on condemnation of Russia’s breach of international law and it does not block European consensus on sanction policy, it prefers political dialogue as a solution to the crisis. Prime Minister Robert Fico has in particular been very explicit about the uselessness and harmfulness of the sanctions. This view is, however, in contrast with the position of President Andrej Kiska and the majority of civil society organisations, who promote adopting a stricter attitude towards Russia, which is seen as a source of instability endangering European unity and values. Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák’s view balances somewhere in between – while being a strong supporter of Ukraine, he also advocates maintaining constructive engagement and meaningful dialogue with Moscow.

However, unreliability of Russian gas deliveries, which were cut by 50% after Slovakia launched reverse gas flow to Ukraine and the threat of Russia to bypass Ukraine (and Slovakia) as a transit country have resulted in increasing efforts of the government to diversify gas route supplies and to expand cross-border connections. Together with development of the EU Energy Union, this might bring about a decrease of Russian leverage on policy decision-making in Bratislava and ease future negotiations in Brussels.

The societal perspective on relations to Russia is rather divided; the Ukrainian crisis has uncovered a division in mental affiliation with the West or with the East (meaning Russia). In particular, on-line media and social networks have become fertile ground for Russian propaganda efforts. Despite the fact that a considerable majority (83 percent) agrees that Russia shouldn’t interfere in Ukraine’s future, almost half of the respondents consider support of sanctions against Russia to be wrong (research by IVO, June 2014). Slovak policy of the “friendly pragmatist” towards Russia is therefore likely to prevail and to be backed by popular consent even in times of “cool” relations between the EU and Russia.

Links:
- http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_slovakia_changes_course_on_russia311312
- https://www.academia.edu/6005353/Slovakia_s_Eastern_policy_from_the_Trojan_horse_o f_Russia_to_Eastern_multivectoralism
- http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/pm-fico-moscow-unforced-error

Need for new policy framework

Traditionally, the Eastern Partnership countries have been among the greatest priorities in Slovak foreign and European policy. Slovakia has strongly supported transformation processes and enhanced cooperation with the EU in order to support European values, democracy, and human rights in the eastern neighbourhood. Closer political association and economic integration in the framework of association agreements of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova with the EU should, according to the Slovak government, continue as dynamically as possible despite the difficult conditions in Ukraine. In relation to Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, Slovakia aims at sustaining pragmatic relations and developing political dialogue and good economic relations. However, this approach has been denounced by the expert community, criticising the EU’s “dance with dictators”, which overlooks the situation of human rights in Azerbaijan and Belarus.
The Ukrainian crisis, however, has increased the acknowledgement of the need to reassess the current framework of the Eastern Partnership – geopolitical and security aspects should be taken into consideration and be translated into meaningful dialogue with Russia and into an adjusted approach to partner countries. This should be achieved through a differentiated, individually tailored, and merit-driven policy of the EU towards the partner countries, according to their level of aspirations, commitments and the will to undertake them.

The issue of EU membership for the “integration trio” seems to get more distinct space in political debates about the future of Eastern Partnership countries. However, fulfilment of deep reforms and meeting conditionality criteria is pronounced as urgent and inevitable. Slovakia is prepared to help with reforms of the energy and security sectors, and by sharing its own transformation experience. Civil society plays a crucial role here with its initiative to develop a Joint Assistance Program for Ukraine.

**Links:**

- [http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/Riga_Series_Jana_change.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/Riga_Series_Jana_change.pdf)

**Lack of ambitious approach at Riga Summit**

The expectations of the Riga Summit were not defined by excessive promises. On the political level it was viewed rather as a consolidation summit focusing on taking stock of achievements of partner countries since the Vilnius summit, and as further confirming the mutual commitments of the EU and its eastern partners, while the expert community voiced the need for setting realistic prospects and upgrades of existing policy frameworks.

The results of the summit provoked, however, a dissatisfied reaction: Minister of Foreign Affairs Lajčák advocated for a more ambitious text of the final joint declaration and for setting out clearer prospects for the partner countries. He was especially critical of the EU’s attitude encouraging the free strategic choice of these countries and level of ambition in their relations to the Union, all while denying membership perspective to them at the same time. With special regard to Ukraine, undergoing difficult reforms, he maintained that these countries should be offered a membership perspective should they fulfil the EU’s criteria. A similar position towards the European future of these countries was expressed by President Kiska. However, this position didn’t find agreement from the EU member countries.

**Links:**


**Missing discussion**

Despite the imminence of the conflict in Ukraine and position of Slovakia as a small border state, there hasn’t been significant reconsideration of Slovak defence and security strategy with regards to dramatic changes in Ukraine. Strengthening of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy is instead envisioned through enhanced cooperation of the EU and NATO and with the aim to mainstream cooperation into national defence planning through a pooling and sharing initiative. Slovakia perceives NATO as the main security guarantee, and a sufficient one, for national and European defence. Consequently the idea of a common European army has been met neither with adequate discussion nor with positive appraisal on the political level.

Lacking discussion is a reflection on the wider problem of a lack of attention to strategic thinking and military planning in defence and to its appropriate funding. The expert community is especially critical about deterioration of Slovak military capabilities, which are in urgent need of modernisation
and an increased level of interoperability with allied armies. Moreover, Slovakia still hasn’t fulfilled the commitment to NATO to spend 2 percent of GDP on defence - conversely, it has been decreasing its defence budget constantly from 2009. Although President Kiska pledged to raise the budget on defence to 1.6 percent of GDP by 2020 at the NATO Summit in Wales, this remains a question of the political will of the next government.

Links:

2. EU Enlargement

Oľga Gyárfášová

Between caution and determination

There are no major changes in Slovakia’s views on EU enlargement directly caused by the Ukraine crisis. Slovakia furthermore openly and firmly supports the enlargement process. However, we may observe some rather more implicit shifts, and above all higher awareness of importance having a stable neighbourhood. Also the focus of discourse has shifted more in favour of Slovakia’s eastern neighbours; countries of the Western Balkans have become less relevant than they were 2-3 years ago.

The EU perspective is seen in principle as the driving force for internal reforms. President Kiska said at the Riga Summit that countries that wish to join the European Union, such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, should have the same chance as Slovakia had a few years ago. At the same meeting, Minister of Foreign Affairs Lajčák underlined that in the future the Eastern Partnership will no longer be about big visible steps, but more about solid cooperation in many areas. The role of Slovakia as a neighbour and a country which went through a complicated integration process of its own is seen as important. The ministry even opened a new grant scheme for NGO projects assisting Ukraine with building up democratic institutions. Slovakia should assist Ukraine more with the reforms, since Ukraine lacks strategic vision and drive for unpopular reforms.

The Ukraine crisis - but also other developments like membership of Belarus and Armenia in the Russia-centred Eurasian Union - made the gap between Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia on the one side and Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus on the other more significant and strengthened the quest for a more differentiated approach to countries of the Eastern Partnership.

The general context for the debate is given by the fact that Prime Minister Fico is very sceptical about the EU’s sanctions policy and that the government tries to bridge good relations with Russia and the support for Ukraine’s democratization processes.

Links:
- http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_slovakia_changes_course_on_russia311312

Time to do the homework

Key concerns regarding the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans are internal political instability and lasting ethnic conflicts in the region. The conflicts and ethnic violence which broke out in Macedonia last May justified these concerns. Macedonia was the first country in the region which managed to sign the EU Stabilization and Association Agreement; however, the integration dynamic has been slowed down by ethnic clashes and political scandals. The most urgent problems of the region are huge unemployment, economic hardships, and the related illegal and legal migration. Failure to address the problems of the Balkans and the slowdown of European integration has led to increased dissatisfaction of the public and inclination to solve problems through force.

In the debate about the EU integration of the Western Balkans, one important fact cannot be overseen – Slovakia has not recognized Kosovo, and recently (April 2015) Prime Minister Fico repeatedly confirmed that Slovakia does not intend to do so. On the other hand President Kiska has advocated...
for recognising independent Kosovo. During the state visit of the Serbian Prime Minister, Slovak representation confirmed that the European perspective is the only way to ensure the stability and prosperity of the region and it is Slovakia’s duty to support each country that would like to join the EU. Slovakia’s political representation was used to highlight the country’s competence in transfer of integration process experiences.

There are also more sceptical voices coming from the think tank environment – the support for Serbia’s membership perspective (and that of other Western Balkans countries) has vanished because democracy in these countries is in decline and they are not conducting the necessary reforms. Probably the country which is closest to EU membership is Montenegro. Albania has status of a candidate country; however, it has a lot of work ahead.

All in all, for the Western Balkans countries the EU perspective is slightly losing attractiveness - but no other credible alternative is emerging. Due to the Ukraine crisis, the Western Balkans is not in such a hot focus as it used to be a few years ago. The decline in interest goes hand in hand with slowing down the democratization dynamics.

**Turkey’s EU accession is not a salient issue in the political debate**

In 2004, Slovakia under the centre-right government coalition led by Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda (2002-2006) agreed to start EU accession talks with Turkey with an “open end”. Though the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKU) was supportive of opening negotiations later on, it did not address the issue of Turkey’s EU accession in its programmatic documents. The lukewarm support for Turkey’s EU accession has also been given by the next cabinets led by left-leaning Smer-Social Democracy (2006-2010; and since 2012 on). Prime Minister Fico repeatedly voiced his position that the EU should continue in its enlargement policy, and Turkey, provided it meets the membership criteria, should become an EU member state. Relevant political parties may hold different positions, but Turkey’s EU accession is not a topic that would be discussed politically; it is not an issue contested by the political parties.

The debate about the pros and cons of Turkey’s EU accession - which is heated in, for example, Austria or Germany - is underdeveloped in Slovakia. The centre right parties - above all Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) are clearly against it because of cultural differences; the conservative party follows the idea of the German CDU/CSU and supports the idea of a “privileged partnership”. An MP for a smaller centre-right party, Most-Híd, has mentioned also following arguments for “no” to Turkey in the EU: slow Islamization of the country under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (manifested in the growing impact of religious schools and the growing presence of Muslim practices in everyday life); conflict over Cyprus (the EU cannot accept a new country which does not recognize a member state) and finally the fact that the Turkish government continues to protest against the formal recognition of the genocide of the Armenians in 1915. On the other hand, the arguments of those who support Turkey’s EU membership are backed by a prosperous, huge economy as well as security (buffer zone vis-à-vis the instability in the Middle East and ally in struggle against terrorism). There are also voices (Slovak MEP Eduard Kukan, former Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1998-2006) expressing that Turkey should be treated fairly – it is not fair to invite a country and then to find excuses why it should not be accepted.

Slovakia plays a special role in the Cyprus conflict – the Slovak Ambassador to Nicosia moderates the bi-communal dialogue between Greek and Turkish Cypriots. As for this initiative, Minister Laďák reiterated Slovakia’s readiness to continue providing diplomatic auspices for this dialogue. In bilateral relations Slovakia perceives Turkey as an important partner and an influential player in a region that has not been spared of turbulence and conflicts. As for Turkey’s integration process, Slovakia continues to support EU enlargement policy, which is seen as one of the most successful policies of the EU, thanks to it fostering stabilization and development of aspiring countries.

**Links:**

EU-28 Watch

On the project

This EU-28 Watch is part of the project called Eastern Neighbours and Russia: Close links with EU citizens (ENURC) in collaboration with TEPSA. The project focuses on developing EU citizens’ understanding of the topic of the Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia and aims at encouraging their interest and involvement in this policy which has an impact on their daily lives.

The EU-28 Watch project is mapping out the discourses on these issues in European policies all over Europe. Research institutes from all 28 member states are invited to give overviews on the discourses in their respective countries.

This survey was conducted on the basis of a questionnaire that has been elaborated in March 2015. Most of the reports were delivered in June 2015. This issue and all previous issues are available on the recently relaunched EU-28 Watch website: www.EU-28Watch.org.

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Editorial Team

Publisher: Prof. Dr. Mathias Jopp
Executive Editor: Dr. Katrin Böttger
Managing Editors: Nicholas Gregg, Hunter Hampton, Katherine Hurst, Martin Pötzsch
Layout: Sebastian von Stosch
Contact: info@EU-28watch.org
www.EU-28watch.org