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Foreign policy of the Slovak Republic towards challenges in the eastern policy of the European Union

Abstract

The article is about the selected and current problems of the Central and Eastern European foreign policy of the Slovak Republic. This state, like other small in terms of territory Central European countries, due to the actual position held as a player in international relations, it cannot influence the decisions of the other states, i.e. more powerful participants. In this respect, it seems interesting which analysed activities of the Slovak foreign policy are now a priority. The content analysis of the source documents and the results of operations of the Slovak government allows us to make a distinction between 'declared priorities "and" real priorities'. The first shall be adopted officially, among others, by virtue of the Slovak Republic's membership in the Euro-Atlantic structures, and the latter are the result of an independent assessment of international affairs and strive to highlight the important role of the Slovak Republic in this area. In the case of the first group of priorities a very clear duality of attitudes can also be seen, which makes you think about the real objectives, especially in the Eastern European dimension of the foreign policy that the current government of the Slovak Republic aims to meet.

Keywords: foreign policy, Slovak Republic, European Union, Ukraine, Russia, Visegrad Group, Western Balkans.

Polityka zagraniczna Republiki Słowackiej wobec wyzwań w polityce wschodniej Unii Europejskiej

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy wybranych i aktualnych problemów z zakresu środkowo- i wschodnio-europejskiego wymiaru polityki zagranicznej Republiki Słowackiej. Państwo to, podobnie jak inne niewielkie pod względem terytorialnym państwa środkowoeuropejskie, z racji rzeczywistej pozycji jaką zajmuje, jako podmiot stosunków międzynarodowych nie ma

praktycznych możliwości wpływania na decyzje innych, tj. bardziej znaczących od siebie podmiotów. Z racji takiego stanu rzeczy interesującą wydaje się kwestia, które z badanych kierunków aktywności słowackiej polityki zagranicznej mają obecnie znaczenie priorytetowe. Analiza treści dokumentów źródłowych oraz efektów działalności słowackiego rządu pozwala na dokonanie podziału na priorytety deklarowane oraz priorytety faktyczne. Te pierwsze przyjmowane są oficjalnie, m.in. z racji członkostwa Republiki Słowackiej w strukturach euroatlantyckich, te drugie wynikają zaś z samodzielnej oceny stanu stosunków międzynarodowych oraz dążenia do zaznaczenia istotnej roli Republiki Słowackiej w tej dziedzinie. W wypadku pierwszej grupy priorytetów daje się też zaobserwować bardzo wyraźna dwoistość postaw, skłaniająca do refleksji na temat rzeczywistych celów, jakie stawia przed sobą, zwłaszcza w zakresie wschodnioeuropejskiego wymiaru polityki zagranicznej, obecny rząd Republiki Słowackiej.

Słowa kluczowe: polityka zagraniczna, Republika Słowacka, Unia Europejska, Ukraina, Federacja Rosyjska, Grupa Wyszehradzka, Bałkany Zachodnie.

For the first time in the political history of the Slovak Republic, the results of the early parliamentary elections held on 10 March 2012, allowed the formation of a single-party majority government. Its Prime Minister is Mr Fico¹, the leader of the political party named “Direction – Social Democracy” (SMER-SD), which thanks to the mentioned elections, won 83 seats in the National Council of the Slovak Republic counting 150 seats. It should legitimately be claimed that a stable parliamentary majority ensured then comfortable conditions for the exercise of power to the newly-formed government. Assuming that the most important challenges faced by the established on April 4, 2012 government, included, among others, the problem of the slow pace of economic development, which was announced in the election campaign, increasing the welfare state and the level of public debt², we should not forget about the main directions and outcomes of the Slovak foreign policy. From this point of view, the Slovak Republic’s active role in the European Union’s eastern policy has a greater importance.

On 3 May 2012 the Prime Minister of the government presented to the National Council of the Slovak Republic the government’s programme of action for the coming

¹ R. Fico became the Prime Minister of the Slovak government for the first time on 4 July 2006. Since that day till 8 July 2010 a majority government coalition was formed by the SMER-SD, the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the People’s Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (LS-HZDS). More on this topic: B. Pytlik, *Parliament and the government in the Slovak Republic*, Warszawa 2013, pp. 128 et seq.

² More on this topic: B. Pytlik, *Public debt in selected countries of Central Europe in crisis conditions, in modern state and public debt. Dilemmas and myths*, ed. I. Zawislińska, Warsaw 2014, pp. 151–155 and 162–168.

³ See: Programování vyhlásenie Vlády Parlamentná tlač republiky č. 37 or http://www.vlada.gov.sk/data/files/2008_programove-vyhlasenie-vlady.pdf, access 6.05.2015.

four years. In the second part of the so-called programme declaration, entitled "Strengthening the status of the Slovak Republic in the European Union and in the world", R. Fico stressed the importance of the membership in the Euro-Atlantic structures to ensure safety in the political, economic and social dimension. He declared "specific support and active participation in the common foreign and security policy, and thus also in the process of extending the zone of democracy stability and cooperation, including the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership. What is important, good relations with the latter countries have been recognized as vital to the interests of the Slovak Republic. Considering the issue of regional cooperation and bilateral relations, the need for active participation in activities within the Visegrad Group and to maintain good neighbourly relations with the Czech Republic, the Republic of Poland, Hungary, the Republic of Austria and Ukraine was also stressed. Having in mind the other states, R. Fico emphasized that the relations of the Slovak Republic with the Russian Federation and other countries of the BRICS group would be significant. Raising the issue of strengthening security of the state, the Prime Minister of the government assured the readiness to take active measures to keep peace and stability in Europe and around the world. Comparing the mentioned programme declaration in its entirety with the presented in the past programmes, i.e. since the establishment of the Slovak Republic on 1 January 1993, it should be emphasized that it was characterized by exceptional vagueness, as indeed was the main objection raised during the parliamentary debate by the opposition MPs. Secondly, it was difficult then to admit that the current issues of the foreign policy were to be problems for the government under the leadership of R. Fico, which he would like to dedicate his attention in the first place in the spring of 2012. As such urgent problems should be considered the main issues that make up the content of the economic programme, which inter alia persuaded to SMER-SD such a large number of voters while in the opinion of the opposition deserved only to be called populist.

The Slovak foreign policy towards the events in Ukraine and the Russian Federation

The consequences of the events that took place after the association agreement between Ukraine and the European Union was not signed in November 2013, forced the Slovak government to determine exactly some of the objectives of the foreign policy. The incorporation of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the conflict in eastern Ukraine were officially recognized as one of the most important events that „have made the foreign policy of the Slovak Republic

face new challenges, which in the last twenty years it has not been forced to face". Violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a neighbouring state, in the opinion of the Slovak government, "disturbed the European geopolitical balance and the principles of international law as well as hindered the Ukrainian authorities from controlling the entire territory. The situation, therefore, requires special attention to security issues. Hence, the Slovak Republic in the coming period must be ready to respond to changes that may occur in Europe, including those caused by the crisis in Ukraine"³.

Basing on the information contained in the source documents, an interesting and quite far-reaching true statement should be stressed that the events that took place in Ukraine, contributed in the opinion of the government to break, already existing for a long time between the main parties and political movements, consensus on the foreign policy objectives. However, regardless of the disclosed differences, the Slovak government has decided to continue to call for respect for the principles of international law and support peaceful efforts to resolve the crisis, while preserving the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.

Presenting a quite generally outlined stance of the government of the Slovak Republic on the situation in Ukraine, it is impossible not to notice the official attitude of the authorities to the activities undertaken by the European Union towards the Russian Federation. Thus, the placed restrictions were seen as tools, not the EU's policy objectives. In the event of a trend leading to the adoption of a commonly acceptable solution to the crisis, the Slovak authorities have declared their readiness to gradually withdraw from the imposed sanctions. Slovakia also stressed the need to conduct a political dialogue with the authorities of the Russian Federation in order to jointly find a way out of the situation. Moreover, the Slovak government has proposed to strengthen the position of the OSCE, whose actions can play a very important role in the conflict resolution, de-escalation of political tensions and the creation of a special observation mission in Ukraine⁴.

Before mentioning the actions actually carried out by the Slovak government in connection with the situation in Ukraine, it should be acknowledged that the authorities of the Slovak Republic since the date of its creation (especially in 1993–1998 and 2006–2010) have been in favour of maintaining the best possible relations with the Russian Federation⁵. It should be emphasised at this point that the pro-Russian

³ See: *Zameranie zahraničnej and Európskej politiky republiky 2015*, p. 2, https://www.mzv.sk/sk/zahranicna_politika/dokumenty_k_zahranicnej_politike, – access 6.05.2015.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 4.

⁵ More on this topic inter alia: R. Moose, *Slovak Foreign Policy*, Łódź 2007; B. Pytlik, *Foreign Policy of the Slovak Republic in 1993–1998, in public administration. Between politics, law and economics*, ed.

sympathies are characteristic not only for a part of the Slovak political elites – i.e. the views of nationalists, Christian democrats and social democrats or socialists – but also for a large part of Slovak society. This state of affairs is deeply rooted in the history and its genesis is closely associated with the nineteenth-century idea of Panslavism, which Slovaks pinned their hopes on to gain independence in the past. According to A. Dulęba, chairing the think tank called SFPA (Slovak Foreign Policy Association), which deals with the issues of the foreign policy, Slovaks created themselves the myth of Russia, which they would like to see. This vision lasted another century. “This positive image was reinforced by the Red Army, which in 1944 supported the Slovak national uprising. Even the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 meant a kind of tribute to the Slovaks, because only then a model of federation was accepted, in which the Slovaks and Czechs have become politically equal partners (...)”⁶. What is important, the pro-Russian sympathies are accompanied by quite common among Slovaks anti-Ukrainian stereotypes. According to them, the Ukrainians since the first half of the 90s have been still associated primarily with conducting an organized criminal activity. But we must not forget that not all Slovaks should be identified with the presented views. Mostly well-educated residents of large cities, being to a large extent the electorate of political parties and movements, which in 1998–2006 and 2010–2012 formed pro-reform government coalitions⁷, should be included to a pro-Ukrainian and sceptical towards the policy of the Russian authorities group. It is worth mentioning that the undoubted success of two governments, chaired by M. Dzurinda, was among others obtaining membership in the European Union and NATO by the Slovak Republic. Currently the incumbent President of the Slovak Republic, A. Kiska, follows consistently a pro-Ukrainian policy which is relevant to the current political situation and the actual relations between the entities of the executive.

Apart from the contents of official declarations presented by the government of the Slovak Republic, it must be stressed that the foreign policy of this country towards the conflict in eastern Ukraine and thus towards the Russian Federation is characterized by a peculiar duality of attitudes. Whenever the members of the European Union made a decision to impose or tighten the sanctions against the Russian Federation, the Slovak authorities always supported these decisions eventually. As it turns out, this policy did not constitute the slightest obstacle to the Prime Minister of the government and other politicians of SMER-SD, to criticize at every possible opportunity the sanctions imposed on the Russian Federation by the European Union.

J. Osiński, Warsaw 2009, pp. 227–261.

⁶ See: http://m.wyborcza.pl/wyborcza/1,105405,17842435,Adam_Michnik_poleca_Jak_poko-chac_stacje_benzynowa.html, access 6.05.2015.

⁷ See: B. Pytlik, *Parliament and the government...*, op.cit., pp. 105–141.

Maintaining the existing and imposing new sanctions is seen as a potential source of tension escalation, which ultimately may make finding the effective solutions through diplomatic efforts difficult. What is important, in the opinion of R. Fico, the current authorities of that country which “cannot control it and organize its internal affairs” as well as the US authorities that have deliberately led to the “geopolitical conflict between them and Russia”⁸ are the culprits of the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

R. Fico and the Foreign Minister, M. Lajčák, go to extraordinary lengths not to make the policy the Slovak government pursues towards the crisis in Ukraine be seen as only pro-Russian. As the main argument in this regard is the aid that the Slovak government is to provide Ukraine by giving the so-called small reverse of natural gas supplied by the pipeline “Vojany-Uzhgorod”. This aid, which would not have occurred if not for the European Commission’s procedures, it should be stressed that the Slovak government has consistently failed to agree on the launch of the so-called large reverse, by the main gas bus, i.e. the “Brotherhood” pipeline which is quite in line with the expectations of the authorities of the Russian Federation and matches the mentioned duality of attitudes.

The Slovak government conciliatory attitude towards the activities carried out by the authorities of the Russian Federation does not stem from historical events and the pro-Russian sympathies of the governing politicians or the fact that the ruling party is of the left-wing provenance. It should be acknowledged that the dual and conflicting actions characteristic for the Slovak foreign policy towards Ukraine, are primarily aimed at promoting its own interests. Criticism and the government’s distancing from the views of the President, A. Kiski, who is an advocate of tightening sanctions against the Russian Federation, the failure of the Slovak parliament to approve the resolution calling on the Russian authorities to stop supporting separatists in the Donbas and start respecting the territorial integrity of Ukraine, for now on bring real benefits. The Slovak Republic, whose economy is dependent on the supplies of Russian oil and natural gas, can rely on the cheapest supplies of both raw materials from all European Union members. In addition, it also benefits financially from the reverse of natural gas to Ukraine.

This way of implementing the presented Slovak foreign policy may also have an important political significance internally. It is impossible not to notice that as a result of successive economic scandals, the political position of R. Fico and SMER-SD⁹ ruling party is currently weakening. As a result, in the coming parliamentary term

⁸ Cf. *Visegrad cacophony against Russian-Ukrainian conflict*, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2014-09-10/wyszehradzka-kakofonia-wobec-konfliktu-rosyjsko-ukrainskiego>, access 5.07.2015.

⁹ J. Groszkowski, *Slovakia: the position of Prime Minister, Fico, is weakening*, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2015-04-29/slowacja-slabnie-pozycja-premiera-ficy>, access 5.07.2015.

they may lose not only the ability to govern on their own, but also it will significantly reduce their chances of SMER-SD coalition. Having in mind the planned for the spring of 2016 parliamentary elections, it can be assumed that the pro-Russian strategy, consistently implemented by the Prime Minister and the other members of the government is to lead primarily to maintain the support of their electorate. According to the research conducted by SFPA in 2014, these voters can mostly be seen in the groups such as: 33% of respondents who disagree that the authorities of the Slovak Republic support Ukraine's aspirations for integration with the European Union (22% undecided); 54% claiming that the Slovak-Russian relations should not be antagonized (22% undecided); 49% opting for maintaining active relations with the authorities of the Russian Federation (28% undecided); 49% of opponents of the use of sanctions against the Russian Federation (23% undecided) and 71% of those who would reduce the level of dependence on supplies of natural gas and crude oil from the Russian Federation (12% undecided)¹⁰.

Taking into account the latest of the mentioned issues, as well as the fact that the role of the Slovak Republic as a transit country will be reduced if the planned gas pipeline "Turkish Stream" is launched, the Slovak government is taking significant measures to maintain their current position and at the same time to reduce its energy dependence from the Russian Federation. The construction of "Eastring" gas pipeline and new connections with the Republic of Poland and Hungary, as well as the intensified cooperation with the Republic of Austria, which is to encourage the accession of the Slovak Republic in January 2015 to the so-called Slavkov Triangle, will contribute to meet these objectives. It is difficult to acknowledge that the mentioned actions of the Slovak government were directly connected with the current situation in Ukraine, but it is certain that the circumstances created favourable conditions for the acceleration of diversification work.

Basing on the analysis of the current actions, it should be assumed that in the near future we will not witness a radical change of the Slovak foreign policy towards Ukraine, and especially towards the Russian Federation. Thus, criticism of the sanctions will go together with the objection to launch natural gas supplies to Ukraine¹¹ by "Brotherhood" pipeline as well as with the lack of protests against the potential actions of the European Union aimed at resolving the Ukrainian crisis.

¹⁰ See: A. Dulęba, *RCE towards Ukraine ako Impulz pre východnú SR politiku and EÚ. Analýza postojov slovenskej verejnosti and odporúčania pre zahraničnú politiku SR*, Bratislava 2014, pp. 11–14.

¹¹ They result from the work undertaken after the so-called the Russian-Ukrainian gas conflict in 2009.

The activity of the Slovak Republic within the Visegrad Group

Focusing on the regional dimension of the Slovak foreign policy pursued together with some neighbouring countries, it should be first emphasised that since 1 July 2014 until 30 June 2015 the Slovak Republic has held the presidency of the Visegrad Group. In connection with this event the government under the leadership of R. Fico set the objectives which were presented in the document “Programme of the Slovak Republic Presidency of the Visegrad Group, July 2014 – June 2015. Dynamic Visegrád for Europe and the world”¹².

The analysis of the content of the programme shows that the major challenges have been determined such as ensuring energy security – for this propose the establishment of a common market of natural gas and the construction of regional connections and pumping stations are suggested; development of transport infrastructure; cooperation in the field of defence – including in particular the creation of a so-called Visegrad Battle Group, which is expected to reach full capacity of fighting in the first half of 2016; continued efforts to identify the policy priorities of innovation and the further development of cooperation. Another key goal which will be realized in the second half of the Slovak presidency, is the development of so-called V4 + format, i.e. development of a dialogue between Visegrad Group countries and external partners, in particular the Federal Republic of Germany, the UK, the Benelux countries, Scandinavia, the Baltic states and Eastern Partnership as well as South Korea and the United States. From the point of view of the official policy of the Slovak government, the effective coordination of the positions of the Visegrad Group states at a European level and the efforts to introduce new areas of cooperation, among others, in terms of competitiveness of enterprises, public finance, research and innovation¹³.

The Slovak Republic is in favour of conducting joint operations with other countries of the Visegrad Group to support the modernization of socio-economic and political Ukraine, as well as assisting Georgia and the Republic of Moldova in their efforts to be associated with the European Union. Those activities that will contribute to the strengthening of pro-European political elites of the countries being Eastern partners of the Slovak Republic are regarded as extremely important. The transfer of the experience gained in the transition period, the implementation of Association

¹² The programme was adopted by the government of the Slovak Republic by the resolution of 4 June 2014.

¹³ See: *Program Slovenského predsedníctva vo Vyšehradská skupine jul 2014 – jun 2015 Dynamický Vyšehrad pre europium and svet*, Bratislava 2014, pp. 11–23.

Agreements, developing relevant institutions or adapting national law to the EU law will help to achieve this goal. Efforts to support other countries aspiring to membership in the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty, and in particular promoting the policy of “NATO open-door” are also crucial. The Slovak Republic on behalf of all member states of the Visegrad Group stands ready to share experience with the countries concerned with implementing the various sectoral policies for integration with the Euro-Atlantic structures. It is worth mentioning that from the perspective of the foreign policy of the Slovak government, the Visegrad Group countries should primarily promote integration aspirations of Western Balkan countries¹⁴.

Past results of the Slovak Republic Presidency of the Visegrad Group only slightly correspond to the presented, ambitious targets. Observing the activity of the foreign minister and other members of the Slovak government, it can be reasonably concluded that it is rather unlikely that by the end of June 2015 this situation could be improved. Also in terms of the current challenges of the European Union's eastern policy, the effects of the Slovak presidency can hardly be considered as sufficiently strengthening the unity of the Central European countries. First of all, we should realise that numerous declarations do not go together with numerous joint ventures what in a way is quite characteristic of the Visegrad Group. Creating a common market for natural gas or launching the Visegrad Battle Group¹⁵ are initiatives already undertaken during the Polish Presidency, which took place since 1 July 2012 until 30 June 2013. It should be added that in that period not only a proposal appeared, but there was the first meeting of foreign ministers of the countries such as the Visegrad Group, the Nordic and Baltic states, on the economic and political problems¹⁶.

In the framework of the Slovak Presidency, i.e. since July 2014 several meetings have been held (often at the level of deputy ministers) of a thematic or information nature. On behalf of the Visegrad 9 official statements were issued until 13 March 2015. Considering the activity connected with the planned development of the so-called V4 + format, the meeting of foreign ministers of the Visegrad Group and South Korea (17 July 2014) should be mentioned. Another important meeting was attended by the Prime Ministers of the governments of the mentioned states of Central Europe and the President of the Swiss Confederation (9 November 2014)¹⁷. In connection with the events taking place in Ukraine, the foreign ministers of the

¹⁴ Ibidem, pp. 28–30.

¹⁵ The agreement on the formation of the Visegrad Battle Group was signed during the Polish Presidency, on 14 March 2014 by the defense ministers of the Visegrad Group.

¹⁶ See: *The report of the Polish presidency in the Visegrad Group, July 2012 – June 2013*, Warsaw 2013, p. 28.

¹⁷ During the meeting of prime ministers of governments, the declaration on deepening defense cooperation of the Visegrad Group was adopted.

Visegrad Group countries appreciatively accepted the results of the Ukrainian parliamentary elections held on 26 October 2014, and soon after the elections, i.e. on November 16, 2014, after a meeting with Foreign Minister of Ukraine, they called for the unconditional implementation of the provisions contained in the minutes of the armistice, signed on 4 September 2014 in Minsk. During the Slovak Presidency meetings on the development of cooperation with the countries of the Western Balkans (31 October 2014) as well as with the foreign ministers of the Nordic countries and the Baltic States (12–13 March 2015) were continued. The initiative, taken by the State currently holding the presidency of the Visegrad Group, to extend the cooperation in the framework of the “V4 +” to China is also worth mentioning and gives a plus to its initiator. According to the statement issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic on 19 May 2015, the cooperation is to include political consultations and joint actions, among others, in the fields of innovation and research as well as to be part of a programme of strategic partnership called “European Union – People’s Republic of China”.

It might be reasonably assumed that the current activity of the Slovak Republic within the Visegrad Group should be assessed on the basis of the already achieved results, or even through the prism of the proposed new initiatives. As it has already been suggested, such a viewpoint would not certainly be sufficient for making a positive assessment of the Slovak Presidency. On the other hand, it should be remembered that such a “quantitative” approach to this issue is absolutely unjustified. The major problem in this area is, in fact, more fundamental and not about the activities of the individual states but it comes down to the question whether all countries of the Visegrad Group, apart from jointly signing political declarations, are also able to operate effectively? Regarding the former, it should be stressed that the submission of joint declarations for the representatives of the governments of the Visegrad Group has never been a problem. However, the problem of quality of the joint activities looks completely different. In the opinion of numerous observers of political life in Central Europe, the minimum current effectiveness of the Visegrad Group, as a kind of foreign policy tool, is due to the lack of unity among the “Visegrad countries”. At present, an invariably critical attitude of the Polish authorities to the policy pursued by the Russian authorities towards Ukraine and the lack of understanding for the behaviour of the pro-Russian authorities of the other Visegrad Group countries, largely dependent on energy supplies from the Russian Federation, are primarily considered as its causes.

Although the problem of the effectiveness of joint actions of the Visegrad Group is not the principal focus of this study, however, it is impossible not to emphasize that differences of “Visegrad countries” interests which have been observed almost since the dawn of this initiative. Hence, the fact of their occurrence is not the result

of intentional, disintegration actions of the authorities of other countries, which for example Western European journalists sometimes suggest. Focusing only on the period after 1 May 2004, when the Visegrad Group countries met their primary aim of integrating with the Euro-Atlantic structures, it needs to be recalled that they had competed several times with each other for foreign direct investment, instead of undertaking cooperation in this regard. In the past, the differences in the views were also visible and they concerned: the functioning of the European Union or the EU budget perspective for 2014–2020, the deployment on the Polish and the Czech Republic territory the parts of the so-called missile shield or recognition of the independence of the Republic of Kosovo. What is very significant is the fact that Visegrad Group countries have never developed a long-term strategy for regional development, the implementation of which would be independent of the political situation. They have also never taken an attempt to analyse the potential need to support regional cooperation by a legislative dimension.

To sum up, it can be concluded that it is justifiable to claim that the appearance of the next significant differences of interests – which seems inevitable, because it is impossible to find out the reasons why the “Visegrad countries” should not seek to increase their own benefits – may lead to decision-making by a smaller number of countries or to creation of alternative forms of regional cooperation, as exemplified by the initiative, which results in the “Declaration of Sławkowska” from January 2015. You can also assume that the interests of the Visegrad Group countries will be more contradictory to the aspirations of the other countries, thus all the questions about the actual need for the continued existence of the Central European Initiative, whose not only political, but also social role is very far from success, will be legitimate.

Western Balkan countries in the Slovak foreign policy

Practically since the very beginning Western Balkans region has been very important for the European Union. Undoubtedly, the organization's commitment to addressing the next local crises, and to the process of rebuilding and stabilizing the situation in the region proves that statement. Drawing up the major parts of the EU strategy for the Western Balkan countries in 1999, included in the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Process (Stabilisation and Association Process – SAP), created a chance to make the countries in the region join the European Union, which was officially confirmed on 19 and 20 June 2000 at the European Council summit in Santa Maria de Feira and in the conclusions of the EU – Western Balkans summit, held on 21 June 2003 in Thessaloniki.

It is acknowledged that among the member states of the European Union there is officially a consensus about regarding its expansion policy as the most important factor stabilizing the political situation in the Western Balkans. We cannot forget that due to “different geographical, political, economic and historical conditions, the views of the member states on the European perspective of the Balkan countries are somewhat diverse”. This fact has a significant impact on the pace of the accession process. The European Union countries neighbouring the Western Balkan countries such as the Republic of Slovenia, Hungary, Romania, the Republic of Bulgaria, the Greek Republic, and even the Italian Republic because of its geographical location and business relations with neighbouring countries strive for the soonest possible integration of the countries of the mentioned region with the European Union¹⁸. What is important is the fact that this issue has been given top priority in the foreign policy of the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic¹⁹. Therefore, both states shall endeavour, if possible especially financially, to clearly mark their presence in the region and their role in the integration of the Western Balkan countries with the European Union. It should also be emphasized that in accordance with the official stance of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “expanding the Euro-Atlantic structures by the Western Balkan countries helps to improve the stability, democracy and development of not only the region but also the entire European continent”²⁰.

Taking into account primarily the effects of actions undertaken and implemented in recent years on behalf of the government by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, it should be stressed that getting membership in the European Union by the Republic of Croatia in 2013 was seen as a success and the participation of the Slovak Republic as significant. The personal commitment of successive ministers of foreign affairs (especially of the last two, i.e. M. Dzurinda and M. Lajčák), so as soon as possible to start and support the representatives of the Republic of Croatia during the final stages of the accession process²¹ as well as the fact that the Slovak Republic was the first among the EU member states to ratify the accession treaty being the basis of accession of the Republic of Croatia to the European Union²², are highlighted here.

¹⁸ Cf. J. Muš, *The Western Balkans in the European Union policy and Member States*, in: *The Western Balkans and European integration. Prospects and Implications*, ed. R. Sadowski, J. Muš, Warsaw 2008, p. 17.

¹⁹ See: J. Lörincz, *Zapadny Balkán – úspechy and stagnácia*, “Yearbook of Foreign Policy of the Slovak Republic” 2011, no. 1, p. 135.

²⁰ See e.g. *Správa o plnenie úloh zahraničnej and Európskej politiky republiky v 2014*, p. 15, [https://www.mzv.sk/App/wcm/media.nsf/vw_ByID/ID_CB51EF39413099BEC1257E1B00367F29_SK/\\$File/150402_sprava_ZP_2014.pdf](https://www.mzv.sk/App/wcm/media.nsf/vw_ByID/ID_CB51EF39413099BEC1257E1B00367F29_SK/$File/150402_sprava_ZP_2014.pdf), access 5.10.2015.

²¹ J. Lörincz, *Zapadny Balkán – pokrok and stagnácia*, in: *Ročenka zahraničnej politiky Slovenskej Republiky 2012*, Bratislava 2013, p. 119.

²² The event took place on 17 February 2012.

The analysis of the content of the source documents provided by the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs²³ shows that a wide ranging assistance provided by the Slovak government was important for starting negotiations and later signing the stabilisation and association agreement by the European Union and the Republic of Montenegro, and later by the Republic of Serbia as well as for starting the accession negotiations with these countries (Republic of Montenegro since June 2012, Republic of Serbia since January 2014). In the case of both countries, the Slovak Republic played an active role to help them obtain the status of candidate countries, and now the Slovak diplomats are trying to have a stimulating influence on accelerating the pace of negotiations conducted by the representatives of the Republic of Montenegro and are of the opinion that the authorities of the Republic of Serbia are ready to open the first chapters in the accession negotiations. With regard to that country, the Slovak authorities stress that they are actively involved to support reforms and integration by implementing measures to strengthen the institution of “rule of law” and streamline the process of informing the public about certain aspects of membership in the Euro-Atlantic structures. In the context of efforts to further develop cooperation between NATO and the Balkan states the fact that the embassy of the Slovak Republic in Belgrade between 2015 and 2016 will serve as the so-called a contact embassy of the North Atlantic Treaty is stressed.

The next major challenge in western Balkan aspect of the Slovak foreign policy is to provide assistance to the authorities of the Republic of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Macedonia in the activities of a reformist nature which lead to the development of good neighbourly relations and ultimately to achieve membership of the European Union. It is worth mentioning that the Republic of Albania since June 2014 has had the status of an official candidate to join the European Union. This fact has met with full approval from the Slovak government, highlighting the progress made by the Albanian authorities, especially in the fight against corruption and organized crime. Bosnia and Herzegovina still expect to be granted a candidate status, which will be possible after a positive assessment of its internal stability and the progress of reform efforts. For this reason, the representatives of the Slovak government publicly emphasize the need for an effective mechanism to coordinate functioning of all institutions responsible for reforms of the socio-economic development. It should be stressed that the current Foreign Minister, M. Lajčák, in 2007–2009 held the position of a High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Republic of Macedonia has been an official candidate since 2004.

²³ See: https://www.mzv.sk/sk/zahranicna__politika/dokumenty_k_zahranicnej_politike, access 5.10.2015.

However, the severity of internal reforms, and above all still continuing dispute with the Republic of Greece on the name of the Macedonian state²⁴ prevent further progress of integration. Not without significance in this regard are also territorial claims put forward by the Greek Republic and the Republic of Bulgaria. It should also be pointed out that the government of the Slovak Republic is active in favour of intensifying Slovak-Macedonian economic cooperation.

The problem of the Republic of Kosovo should be acknowledged as a separate, yet very important issue for western Balkan aspect of the Slovak foreign policy. This state has not been recognized by the Slovak Republic as independent²⁵ since the announcement of its independence to this day. However, this fact does not mean that the Republic of Kosovo is not in the range of interests of the Slovak foreign policy. The creation of appropriate conditions for establishing a dialogue leading to an agreement between the authorities of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Kosovo is the main goal set by the Slovak diplomats. At the same time, the main activity of the last two Slovakian foreign ministers in this matter was limited primarily to making Serbian authorities more active in order to find solutions more intensively to improve the existing situation. From the point of view of the foreign policy of the Slovak government, much more important than the official recognition of the Republic of Kosovo by the Serbian authorities are the efforts to improve regional cooperation, which *de facto* means accepting the existence of the Republic of Kosovo by the Serbian authorities and establishing cooperation with the authorities, even if this is only because of concern for the interests of the Serb minority, and above all to care about the security of the Western Balkans. The firm position of the Slovak government to refuse to recognize the Republic of Kosovo is another issue highlighting the difference in the views of the current Prime Minister of the government, R. Fico and the President, A. Kiska.

Because of the international activity of the Slovak government the activity not only for the “expansion of the European Union”, but the so-called policy of NATO’s open door is crucial. In both cases, the actions taken were focused on assisting the countries aspiring to participate in the Euro-Atlantic by meeting the membership criteria. At this point it is worth mentioning the significant initiative of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs, thanks to which in 2011 the institution called the “Centre for Experience Transfer of Integration and Reforms” was founded and was integrally connected with the programme of ODA (Official Development Assistance – ODA). The actions taken by the Centre are to promote the development and sharing experience

²⁴ It is officially the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

²⁵ The independence of the Republic of Kosovo is not also approved by other European Union countries, i.e. the Republic of Cyprus, the Hellenic Republic, Romania and the Kingdom of Spain.

gained in the process of political and economic transition with the authorities of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership. In particular, the activity of Slovak experts representing the government, NGOs and businesses aims to provide financial²⁶ and substantive support in the following areas: reforms and public finance management, security (including energy and food), support of the development of small and medium-sized enterprises, environmental protection natural, reforms and decentralization of public administration and civil society development, as well as to improve cooperation between governmental and nongovernmental organizations²⁷.

Moreover, other actions with a different scope of help were initiated by the Slovak government, for example Judicial Academy of the Slovak Republic, organizing expert meetings with the representatives of the Ministries of Justice of the Western Balkan countries on the exchange of experiences in the field of rule of law, should also be mentioned. In addition, in Bratislava meetings of foreign ministers of the Visegrad Group countries with their Western Balkan counterparts are regularly held. The fact of establishing the Western Balkans Fund, modelled on Visegrad Fund, is the effect of the efficient operation of the Slovak Republic and the other "Visegrad" states.

Knowing the reality of international political relations and the analysis of actions taken and implemented in the field of foreign policy by the Slovak government may lead to a reasonable conclusion that a real possibility of the Slovak Republic to influence the others' decisions, especially of those more powerful states, subjects of international relations in key areas, are very clearly limited. The natural consequence of the adoption of this perspective should be narrowing of the actual state activity in international politics only to a few priorities. The question should be, therefore, raised: which of the directions of the Slovak Republic activity in the field of foreign policy can be considered as those with greater importance?

Certainly, the actions taken towards Ukraine are not essential. You can also understand the issue differently, stating that the importance of Ukraine in the Slovak foreign policy is only connected with the official statements. We cannot forget that this state of affairs was not fixed in the past. Especially after the events that were known in history as the "Orange Revolution". For Ukrainian reformers changes that occurred in the Slovak Republic after 1998, were an excellent model to follow. In 2005–2006

²⁶ Financial aid includes inter alia supporting projects to provide a financial contribution for the so-called microgrants, funding for study visits, technical assistance, scholarships and supporting volunteers.

²⁷ SVN. *Centrum na odovzdávanie skúseností z integrácie and a reforiem*, eng. Centre for Experience Transfer from Integration and Reforms – CETIR. See: <http://slovakaid.sk/sk/ako-pomahame/cetir>, access 10.05.2015.

Slovak-Ukrainian relations became much more intense, and the primary objective of numerous meetings and work of, among others, departmental working groups was to transfer the Slovak experience gained in the period of the pro-reform governments, chaired by M. Dzurinda. Increased cooperation between the two countries ended after parliamentary elections in the Slovak Republic on 17 June 2006. As a result of the elections a national-populist government coalition was formed by the SMER-SD, the People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (LS-HZDS) and the Slovak National Party (SNS). With the rise of the new Slovak government again a pro-Russian dimension of Slovak foreign policy became more significant. The fact that in Ukraine as early as in 2006 the issue of reforming the state has become far less important than the political conflicts between W. Yanukovych, Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and President V. Yushchenko should be also acknowledged.

Considering the current situation in Ukraine, it is obvious that all the mainstream ideas and initiatives on how to resolve the current problems are primarily the most important actors in international relations. The government of the Slovak Republic does not have any influence on them, although some of these decisions could show to coincide with the current assumptions and orientations of the Slovak foreign policy. The appropriate example could be the decisions which were presented on 21 and 22 May 2015 during the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga, and which were often only about the declaration of the “recognition of the European aspirations” and “respect for the European choice” e.g. Ukraine.

The foreign policy of the Slovak Republic (as well as the Czech Republic and Hungary) towards the events in Ukraine, especially towards the Russian Federation can have a significant impact, among others, on the quality of further cooperation of the Visegrad Group. A different way of looking at the potential threat to Central Europe which could be the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, and for this reason, the different expectations of cooperation with NATO can significantly hinder further cooperation. Ambiguous or different evaluation of the actions of the authorities of the Russian Federation represented by, among others, Slovak government may be used by the Russian authorities as confirmation of the lack of unity among the countries of the European Union and NATO. Regardless of further developments in Ukraine-Russia relations it should be stressed that constantly visible and significant differences of interests of “Visegrad countries” are a very obvious reason why the Slovak government cannot, and above all, do not intend to see this activity under this initiative as a priority of its foreign policy.

The problem of Western Balkan countries looks completely different. Considering all mentioned in this report areas of activity of the Slovak government in the field of foreign policy, it can be reasonably concluded that its involvement in the Western

Balkans is the most commendable. The Slovak international forum activity certainly can contribute to the perception of the state as one of the most important and active advocates of integration of the Western Balkan countries with the European Union and NATO. In addition to the already recorded successes, the Slovak Republic has its own tangible contribution i.e., among others, the progress, although slow, in improving Serbian-Kosovan relations in 2015 and in the advancement of the negotiation process between the European Union and the Republic of Montenegro, which is currently in its middle, as well as the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina now has a real chance in 2017 to get a candidate status for membership in the European Union.

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