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Slovakia's Eastern policy – from the Trojan horse of Russia to “Eastern multivectoralism”

Abstract: Slovakia's relations with the states of Eastern Europe not only have a bilateral impact, but contain geopolitical, security and economic dimensions as well. This article analyzes the domestic, bilateral and multilateral aspects of relations between Slovakia and Russia before and after the parliamentary elections of 1998, when Slovakia adopted a pro-Western course aimed at EU and NATO membership. The article also focuses on bilateral relations with Ukraine, where Slovakia is among the most active supporters of Ukraine's future EU membership. The final sections analyze the Eastern policy of Slovakia – particularly within the framework of the EU's Eastern Partnership and the Visegrad Group – as well as Slovakia's relations with the new Eastern European partners, such as Belarus, Moldova and Georgia, as target countries of Slovakia's “soft power.”

The Eastern policy of Slovakia – in particular Slovak–Russian relations – is a multilayer phenomenon, which not only has a bilateral and interstate impact, but contains geopolitical, security and economic dimensions as well. At least in the 1990s, the Russian factor played an important role in the shaping of Slovakia's civilization identity, being present directly (in the conflict over the foreign policy orientation of the country) and indirectly (in the conflict related to the character of the regime) in the domestic political discourse, as well as becoming a component of the political cleavages within

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Slovak society. As with Slovak–Hungarian or Slovak–Czech relations, Slovak–Russian relations contain a considerable historical dimension which cannot be ignored. Unlike the political experience of Slovakia's other Visegrad neighbors, the civilizational and geopolitical dilemma in Slovakia became – during the first years of independence – the political cleavage which was interconnected with its one other important political dividing line: the conflict over the character of the regime.¹ On the other hand, Slovakia's relations with Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova have not only bilateral implications, but sub-regional, European, and geopolitical impacts as well. Since the establishment of an independent Slovakia in 1993, therefore, its Eastern policy has gone through several phases, which were generally connected with domestic political changes.

First years of independence

During the early years of independence, there was lack of consensus among political elites regarding the content and priorities of Slovakia's Eastern policy. There were two conceptions current. The first, shared by national populist-oriented political parties in power from 1993 to 1998 (with a short break from March to December 1994) – as well as by a certain part of the conservative opposition (in particular the leader of the Christian Democratic Movement, KDH – Ján Čarnogurský) – promoted a vision of Slovakia as a bridge between the East and West. These parties focused their attention in the East mainly on Russia. Although an overwhelming majority of the opposition did not dispute the importance of good relations with Russia, they advocated instead the primacy of Slovakia's accession to the EU and NATO.

The Western choice finally outweighed the alternative geopolitical conceptions only after the parliamentary elections of September 1998. Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar (Movement for Democratic Slovakia, HZDS) and other ruling politicians had already suggested a balanced foreign policy orientation between the West and the East in July 1992, after the adoption of the Declaration of the Sovereignty of Slovakia: "If they don't want us in the West, then we'll turn to the East."² Pan-Slavism became one of the

¹ V. Hloušek, L. Kopeček, "Cleavages in contemporary Czech and Slovak politics: between persistence and change," *ISPO Working Paper* 2005-01. Available online: <http://ispo.fss.muni.cz/ispo-wp-2005-1> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

² E. Ademi, *Opposing Europe: Euroscepticism in Macedonia, a real threat or a bluff?*, Bratislava: Pontis Foundation, 2012, p. 10. Available online: http://www.nadaciapontis.sk/tmp/asset_cache/link/0000034671/Opposing%20Europe.pdf [accessed on July 13, 2013].

sources of inspiration for the foreign policy of the ruling parties HZDS and SNS. According to the intellectual representatives of this anti-Western option – such as Vladimír Mináč (writer, publicist and former parliamentarian from Democratic Left Party, SDĽ) – the romantic aspects of the Slovak national character orient Slovakia toward the East rather than the West.³ The idea of Pan-Slavism, or (more precisely) close relations with Russia, had drawn

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its inspiration also from the historical traditions of Slovak foreign policy thinking – for example from the ideas of Ľudovít Štúr⁴ or Svetozár Hurban Vajanský, who regarded Russia as a protector of the interests of the oppressed Slavic nations in Central and Southeastern Europe.

Former Prime Minister Ján Čarnogurský (1991–1992) brought a different vision of Slovak relations with Eastern Europe. Čarnogurský promoted Slovakia's EU membership and integration into European security structures; he expressed

reservations, however, concerning Slovakia's accession to NATO. On the other hand, it was his view that the Slavic areas of a united Europe should hold a distinctive position in Europe with its center in Moscow. Nevertheless, he did not perceive relations between Western Europe and Russia as adversarial, and he promoted their close cooperation.⁵ Čarnogurský openly stressed Slovakia's Slavic identity, its cultural ties with Russia, and its potential to become a bridge between East and West in order to overcome the mutual suspicions between Russia and Western Europe.⁶

In fact, the other Slovak political parties did not approve of the vision presented by Čarnogurský. The opposition – including within his own party, KDH – supported NATO membership as a guarantee of Slovakia's security,

³ V. Mináč, "Tu žije národ," in V. Mináč, *Súvislosti*, Bratislava: Slovenský spisovateľ, 1976, p. 88.

⁴ Ľ. Štúr, *Slovanstvo a svet budúcnosti*, Bratislava: Slovak Institute for International Studies, 1993.

⁵ J. Čarnogurský, "Odpovede na otázky ruského spisovateľa Sergeja Chelemendika," in J. Čarnogurský, *Videné od Dunaja*, Bratislava: Kalligram, 1997, p. 291.

⁶ J. Čarnogurský, "Európske kultúrne tradície a nové geopolitické usporiadanie," in J. Čarnogurský, *Videné od Dunaja*, op. cit., p. 360; M. Žiak, *Slovensko: Od komunizmu kam?*, Bratislava: Archa, 1996, pp. 167–8.

and did not perceive relations with Russia as a real alternative to the Euro-Atlantic option.

Both governments of Vladimír Mečiar (1992–1994 and 1994–1998) stressed Slovakia's integration into the EU and NATO as a key foreign policy priority.⁷ The main factor in bilateral Slovak–Russian relations was the high level of Slovak economic dependence. In fact, before 1990, more than 30 per cent – and possibly even 40 per cent – of Slovakia's industrial capacity was oriented towards the Soviet market, including the military industry, i.e. the branch of most strategic importance.⁸ The first bilateral agreements between Slovakia and Russia contained the assumption of a future “special relationship” between the two countries. The basic treaty (on friendship and cooperation) – signed on August 26, 1993 during the visit of Russian President Boris Yeltsin in Bratislava – associated European security exclusively with the OSCE and refused a “new division of Europe.” The treaty on military cooperation signed on the same day assumed this standard level of cooperation as well.⁹ Due to the growing tension at the time between the Slovak government and representatives of the EU and NATO – who criticized Slovakia for its growing authoritarianism and failure to meet the political criteria for membership in both structures – the importance of bilateral relations with Russia gradually increased during the second half of the 1990s. For the ruling elite, the Russian model of transformation – with its non-transparent privatization, strong influence of oligarchs, state control of the public media,

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⁷ “Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky,” Bratislava: Government office of the Slovak Republic, 1994.

⁸ A. Duleba, “Slovakia's relations with Russia and Eastern neighbours,” in G. Fóti, Zs. Ludvig, eds, *EU–Russian relations and the Eastern Partnership – Central-East European member state interests and positions, East European Studies, 1. szám*, Budapest: MTA Világgazdasági Kutatóintézet, 2009, p. 14.

⁹ I. Samson, “Der widerspruchsvolle Weg der Slowakei in die EU. Die Slowakei vor der Marginalisierung in Zentraleuropa?” *ZEI Discussion Paper, C 31*, Zentrum für Europäische Integrationsforschung./Center for European Integration Studies, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 1999, p. 26.

and politicization of power structures – became an attractive and inspiring model.¹⁰

Subsequently, Slovakia assumed a “Russian view of the security architecture of Europe,”¹¹ while official representatives of the country openly expressed their remoteness from the EU. Mečiar, for example, during his visit to Moscow in October 1996, said:

The Slovak Republic is aware of its geopolitical value. Indeed, we do want to integrate with Europe; this doesn't mean, however, that we have to agree with the West in everything. In international politics we strive for a balance between the East and the West.¹²

Slovakia supported the position of Russia, for example, in issues related to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Belarus, as well as in the context of bilateral relations with Ukraine, where Slovakia had given weight to Russian interests.¹³

However, unlike the minor coalition partners – the Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Union of Workers of Slovakia (ZRS) – HZDS had never conceptualized the Russian vector of its foreign policy. Mečiar's political rapprochement with Russia was understood as a compensation for deteriorating relations with the West. However, SNS and ZRS – and even some representatives of the business and intellectuals associated with the HZDS – promoted the idea of the neutrality of Slovakia, backed by Russia.¹⁴ They highlighted the negative aspects of European integration,¹⁵ for example

¹⁰ See for example: A. Duleba, “Democratic consolidation and the conflict over Slovakian international alignment,” in S. Szomolányi, J.A. Gould, eds, *Slovakia: problems of democratic consolidation*, Bratislava: Slovak Political Science Association, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 1997, pp. 209–30.

¹¹ A. Duleba, *The blind pragmatism of Slovak eastern policy. The actual agenda of Slovak-Russian bilateral relations*, Bratislava: Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, 1996, pp. 28–9.

¹² I. Samson, “Der widerspruchsvolle Weg der Slowakei in die EU,” op. cit., p. 24.

¹³ A. Duleba, *Koniec súčasnej strednej Európy? Ukrajina a Slovensko po prvej vlne rozšírenia NATO*, Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs, 1998, p. 68.

¹⁴ K. Wolf, “Žiadne NATO, žiadna druhá vlna. Slovensko vyradené z procesu integrácie do civilizovaného sveta,” *Domino Fórum*, May 2–8, 1997, p. 2.

¹⁵ I. Rojková, “Správa zo seminára Integračný šok,” in *Národný rozmer a európska integrácia. Zborník príspevkov z 5. zasadnutia Stálej konferencie slovenskej inteligencie, konaného v dňoch 27. – 29. novembra 1996 v Častej-Papierničke 5*, Bratislava: Stála konferencia slovenskej inteligencie Slovakia Plus, 1997, pp. 91–2.

threats to the country's independence in consequence of EU membership, but they also stressed the importance of development of trade with Russia in order to increase the amount of Slovak export: "A unilateral political and economic orientation towards the EU cannot help us in the foreseeable future."¹⁶ The idea of a close alliance with Russia as the alternative to European integration was openly supported only by SNS, which maintained close relations with the radical right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. Representatives of SNS participated in the Congress of Slavic and Orthodox nations organized by LDPR. The congress presumed the establishment of Pan-Slavic military forces.¹⁷

As mentioned above, the character of bilateral relations between Slovakia and Ukraine was determined by relations with Russia. Although Ukraine is the only ex-Soviet state which shares a 98 km-long border with Slovakia, the Mečiar Government perceived this nation mainly as a transit country, a "gate to the Russian market."¹⁸ At the same time, in the first half of the 1990s Ukraine was interested in being more actively involved in Central European regional cooperation – for example, joining the V4 Group and CEFTA.¹⁹ What prevailed in Slovakia, however, was a rather negative perception of Ukraine that was associated with organized crime, a cheap labor force, political instability, and an unreliable business environment.²⁰ The different dynamics of Slovak–Ukrainian relations, as compared to those with Russia, was confirmed by the fact that the first contact between the countries at the level of prime ministers took place only in June 1995, during Mečiar's visit to Kiev.²¹ However, as Alexander Duleba has stressed, Mečiar's increased attention to Ukraine and his attempts to revitalize bilateral relations in

¹⁶ A. Bonko, "Medzinárodné aspekty oživenia slovenskej ekonomiky", in *Napĺňanie suverenity a upevňovanie štátnosti Slovenskej republiky. Zborník príspevkov z 3. zasadnutia Stálej konferencie slovenskej inteligencie, konaného v dňoch 5. - 7. decembra 1994 v Častej Papierničke 3*, p. 72.

¹⁷ K. Wolf, "Od Žirinovského k Le Penovi," *Domino Fórum*, August 15–21, 1997, p. 2.

¹⁸ A. Duleba, "Slovakia's relations with Russia and Eastern neighbours," op. cit., p. 35.

¹⁹ M. Menkiszak, M.A. Piotrowski, "Polska Polityka Wschodnia," in R. Kuźniak, K. Szczepanik, eds, *Polityka zagraniczna RP 1989 – 2002*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo ASKON, Fundacja Studiów Międzynarodowych, 2002, pp. 223, 227.

²⁰ V. Hudak, "Relations between Ukraine and Slovakia: recent history and future opportunities," in J. Clem, N. Popson, eds, *Ukraine and its Western Neighbors*, Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars 2000. Available online: <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ots591=0c54e3b3-1e9c-be1e-2c24-a6a8c7060233&lng=en&id=90427> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

²¹ Ibid.

1995–1996 were connected with a general “turning to the East,”²² rather than with the perception of Ukraine as a potential autonomous actor in the post-Soviet area.

The Eastern policy of Slovakia in its first years of independence up until 1998 may be characterized as both Russo-centric and full of contradictions between its officially proclaimed foreign policy priorities and its concrete acts. The intensification of relations with Russia were perceived not only as a compensation for deteriorating relations with the West – which in the end was the cause of Slovakia’s disqualification from pre-accession negotiations with both NATO and the EU – but also as the potential alternative to the Euro-Atlantic foreign policy course. The growing distance from the EU and the increasingly closer ties with Russia – including Yeltsin’s openly declared political support for Mečiar²³ – contributed to the consolidation of the pro-Western and pro-democratic political forces. Russia’s growing political and security influence in Slovakia raised concerns with the latter’s neighbors as well. In regard to Slovak–Russian relations and to Slovakia’s indifferent and even negative perception of regional cooperation with Hungary and the Czech Republic, the ambassador of Poland to Slovakia, Jerzy Korolec, stated in 1997 that “Polish and Slovak interests in the area of security are not identical.”²⁴ The fear of the consolidation of Russia’s influence in Slovakia was one of the important reasons for the support of the Visegrad Group countries – and particularly Poland – for Slovakia’s NATO accession.²⁵

“Blind pragmatism” abandoned

The foreign policy of Slovakia changed. The new ruling centrist coalition (a block of center-left and center-right political parties), led by Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda, declared its preparedness to meet the criteria for EU and NATO membership. After the deep conflict within Slovak society caused

²² A. Duleba, “Democratic consolidation and the conflict over Slovakian international alignment,” op. cit., pp. 209–30.

²³ “Jeľcin Mečiarovi: Chceme, veľmi-veľmi chceme, aby ste vyhrali voľby,” *Sme*, May 29, 1998, pp. 1, 2, 5, 7.

²⁴ J. Korolec, “Stosunki ze Słowacją,” in *Rocznik polskiej polityki zagranicznej 1997*, Warszawa: MSZ RP 1997, p. 166.

²⁵ J. Komornicki, “Úvodné slovo veľvyslanca Poľskej republiky v SR,” in I. Samson, T. Strážay, eds, *Európska bezpečnosť a proces rozširovania NATO*, Bratislava: Slovak Foreign Policy Association, 2000, p. 6.

by the decision of the Slovak government to allow flights of NATO air forces over the territory of Slovakia during the Kosovo crisis in 1999, EU and NATO membership became (beginning in 2000) the consensual priority of Slovak political parties. The only exceptions were the right-wing SNS and radical left KSS (Communist Party of Slovakia).

The aim of the new government was to build balanced, mutually advantageous relations with Russia, which was still considered the de facto monopoly supplier of strategic energy resources.²⁶ However, after the Slovak government adopted its new foreign policy course, the intensity of bilateral relations decreased. Russia had probably expected the Mečiar Government with its pro-Russian orientation to remain in power, and therefore had not built ties with the former opposition. The new Slovak government abandoned the unrealistic idea of building an economic and geo-strategic bridge between the West and Russia: it refused all projects of neutrality, the idea of a free trade zone with Russia (which had been discussed before 1998), and the idea of Slavic solidarity – all of which were characterized by Duleba as “blind pragmatism,” taking into account the state interests of neither Slovakia nor Russia.²⁷

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On the other hand, from the Kosovo crisis until the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York, Russia opposed the continuation of NATO enlargement. The period of “silence” in mutual relations ended only after the visit of Slovak President Rudolf Schuster to Moscow in November 2001.²⁸ At this time, Russia came to terms with NATO enlargement and cooperated with the US within the framework of the anti-terrorist coalition. Therefore, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated after the meeting with Schuster: “Our relations are not burdened by any problems, and are being developed dynamically on the political, economic and cultural levels.”²⁹

Bilateral economic and military technical cooperation continued even after 1998, and in 2001 the Russian oil giant YUKOS acquired 49 per cent

²⁶ “Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky”, Bratislava: Úrad vlády SR, 1998.

²⁷ A. Duleba, *The blind pragmatism of Slovak eastern policy*, op cit., pp. 44–6.

²⁸ A. Duleba, “Slovakia's relations with Russia and Eastern neighbours,” op. cit., p. 17.

²⁹ Ibid.

of the stock of Transpetrol Company, which controls Slovak oil pipelines. Paradoxically, the first big Russian investment in the Slovak economy took place not under Mečiar's Government, which kept close political ties with Russia, but under the liberal pro-western government of Dzurinda. However, Dzurinda's governments did not consider relations with Russia a particular foreign policy priority, and the political dimension of these relations was perceived as part of the Eastern policy of the EU. The Medium-Term Foreign Policy Strategy of the Slovak Republic until 2015 mentions Russia only in connection with Slovakia's support for efforts at creating four common spaces in the framework of the EU.³⁰ Although the rapprochement between Russia and the US took only a short time, and Slovakia supported the US invasion of Iraq as well as the so called Orange Revolution in Ukraine, bilateral Slovak–Russian relations maintained an appropriate character, which was epitomized by the hosting of the summit of the US and Russian presidents (George Bush and Vladimir Putin), which took place in Bratislava on February 23–25, 2005.

Were the elections of 2006 the pro-Russian turning point?

On the eve of the Bush–Putin summit in Bratislava, Robert Fico – who in 2005 was the leader of the main opposition party, “Smer – Social Democracy” – reached out to the sharp critics of the allegedly one-sided pro-American foreign policy of Dzurinda's government. He called for the shaping of Slovakia's own policy towards Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, China, etc., and for friendly and balanced relations with Russia. After the parliamentary elections of 2006, the new government of Smer–SD, SNS and HZDS – led by Fico – proclaimed as its priority the “activation of relations with Russia.”³¹ One of the first foreign policy steps taken by Fico's new government was the withdrawal of Slovak troops from Iraq, which was considered a pro-Russian step³² even though

³⁰ “Medium-Term Foreign Policy Strategy of the Slovak Republic until 2015,” Bratislava: National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2004.

³¹ “Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky,” Bratislava: Government Office of the Slovak Republic 2006, p. 55. Available online: http://www.vlada.gov.sk/data/files/979_programove-vyhlasenie-vlady-slovenskej-republiky-od-04-07-2006-do-08-07-2010.pdf [accessed on July 13, 2013].

³² “Slovakija: glavnyi soyuznik Rossii v centre Evropy,” [“Словакия: главный союзник России в центре Европы”], *Pravda.ru*, October 6, 2008. Available online: <http://www.pravda.ru/world/europe/european/06-10-2008/286105-slovakia-0/> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

similar decisions were adopted by other EU member states as well. The new Slovak government adopted a critical stance to the placement of US missile shield bases in Poland and the Czech Republic, and during his visit to Moscow in May 2007 Fico repeated his reservations concerning this project.³³ As a NATO member, however, Slovakia accepted the incorporation of the ABM shield into NATO's defense system.³⁴ After the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, Slovak Prime Minister Fico and President Ivan Gašparovič one-sidedly accused Georgia of responsibility for the conflict – although, together with other EU members, Slovakia expressed its critical view towards Russian recognition of the independence of the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.³⁵ Both Slovakia and Russia refused to recognize the independence of Kosovo; this stance of Slovakia, however, could hardly be described as pro-Russian. The resolution adopted by the National Council of the Slovak Republic³⁶ was motivated by support for the principle of the territorial integrity of Serbia, and by fear of the territorial separatist claims of ethnic minorities. Together with the other V4 countries, however, Slovakia declared its support for Poland in relation to the sanctions against Polish agricultural products unilaterally imposed by Russia.³⁷ Thus the declarations that were sometimes in accordance with Russia's political position were not always accompanied by practical steps. Slovakia was taking part in the so called Corfu process – which particularly in the years 2009–2010 was intensive – however, it did not support the initiative of then Russian President

³³ Y. Shcherbakova, "Moskva i Bratislava: otnosheniya v pervom desyatiletii XXI veka," ["Москва и Братислава: отношения в первом десятилетии XXI века"], in L. Shishelina, ed., *Russia nad Central Europe in the new geopolitical realities, VIII International scientific conference*, December 3–4, 2010, Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Europe, 2011, p. 132.

³⁴ J. Marušiak, "Rossiya v slovatskoy politike posle 1989 g." ["Россия в словацкой политике после 1989 г."], in L. Shishelina, ed., *Russia nad Central Europe in the new geopolitical realities*, op. cit., p. 154.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 157–8.

³⁶ "Vyhlásenie Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky k riešeniu budúceho štatútu srbskej provincie Kosovo," approved by the National Council of the Slovak Republic on March 28, 2007, Resolution No. 309. Bratislava: National Council of the Slovak Republic 2007. Available online: http://www.nrsr.sk/web/Static/sk-SK/NRSR/Doc/v_ku-kosovu309-20070328.rtf [accessed on July 13, 2013].

³⁷ "Statement of the 5th meeting of the European Union Affairs Committees of the national parliaments of the Visegrad Group Countries," Visegrad Group, January 15–16, 2007. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2007/statement-of-the-5th> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

Dmitry Medvedev to create a new architecture and institutional framework for European security.³⁸

Slovak–Russian relations at this time became a topic of political dispute within the country. Slovakia's center-right opposition criticized some of the outcomes of President Medvedev's visit to Bratislava in April 2010, particularly the common declaration of the presidents of both countries, according to which Slovakia recognized the "decisive contribution of the nations of the USSR . . . in the liberation of Europe from fascism." The two presidents condemned any attempt to "clear the Nazis and their collaborators of guilt."³⁹ This common declaration was presented as a success of Slovak

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diplomacy, and a declaration of Russia's support for Slovakia in the matter of the so called Beneš Decrees. The center-right opposition raised objections, however, because the declaration did not touch upon an event of such significance to the history of bilateral relations as the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Army in August 1968.⁴⁰ Unlike in Poland, the Czech Republic, or Hungary, issues related to the heritage of the Communist past are seldom raised by Slovak authorities. One

exception was the request of Prime Minister Iveta Radičová (2010–2012) for Russia to return the original of the so called invitation letter of 1968, on the basis of which Warsaw Pact military troops occupied Czechoslovakia and suppressed the Czechoslovak attempt at a liberalization of the communist regime.⁴¹ However, Radičová's declaration and request represent an exception to the bilateral agenda; its main feature is rather the effort to avoid issues of the past. Generally speaking, Slovakia is not very actively

³⁸ M. Peško, "The Corfu process – an opportunity to establish a new security arrangement in Europe or just another stalemate?" in P. Brezáni, ed., *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2009*, Bratislava: Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, 2010, pp. 53–68.

³⁹ "Sovmestnoe zayavleniye Prezidenta Rossii Dmitriya Medvedeva i Prezidenta Slovakii Ivana Gashparovicha," ["Совместное заявление Президента России Дмитрия Медведева и Президента Словакии Ивана Гашпаровича"], April 7, 2010. Available online: http://news.kremlin.ru/ref_notes/509 (accessed on July 13, 2013).

⁴⁰ "Zmienka o okupácii stranám chýbala, prezidentovi a Smeru nie," *Sme*, April 8, 2010.

⁴¹ M. Miháliková, "Radičová chce od Putina pozývaci list z roku 1968," *Sme*, May 13, 2011.

involved in criticizing the state of human rights in Russia. Unlike the center-right parties in Slovakia, Fico has developed a cooperation between his own political party Smer–SD and United Russia, in whose congress he took part, in September 2011.⁴²

Furthermore, Fico's Government has stressed the development of bilateral projects for economic and infrastructural cooperation. Its desire to preserve Gazprom's interest in continuing the transit of Russian natural gas through Slovak territory, and to keep gas prices favorable, were the reasons that Fico "accused Ukraine of responsibility for the disruption of supplies to the Slovak Republic"⁴³ after the gas conflict between Russia and Ukraine in January 2009. Nevertheless, this crisis became an impulse for Slovakia and other V4 countries to develop common projects for alternative routes of gas transport to Central Europe. Slovakia succeeded in recovering control of the Transpetrol Company, after the bankruptcy and liquidation of its former owner, the YUKOS Company, owned by imprisoned Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Another energy project, discussed during Fico's visit to Moscow in November 2009, was a pipeline from Bratislava to the Austrian oil refinery OMV in Schwechat.

The meetings of the Intergovernmental Commission for Economic and Scientific-Technical Cooperation are a very important mechanism of bilateral cooperation between Slovakia and Russia – according to some commentators, they play even the key role.⁴⁴ An important role in bilateral economic relations is played by Slovakia's de facto full dependence on Russian supplies, not only of oil and natural gas,⁴⁵ but also of nuclear fuel for power plants.⁴⁶ The governments of Mečiar and Fico actively supported the modernization of existing nuclear power plants as well as the construction of new facilities with

⁴² M. Miháliková, "Ficovi vyčítajú Putina," *Sme*, September 23, 2011.

⁴³ A. Duleba, "Slovak Foreign Policy after EU and NATO Accession," in: M. Majer, R. Ondrejcsák, V. Tarasovič, T. Valášek, eds, *Panorama of global security environment 2010*, Bratislava: CENAA, 2010, p. 41.

⁴⁴ J. Marušiak, "Rossiya v slovatskoi politike posle 1989 g.," op. cit., p.162.

⁴⁵ About 97 per cent of the total domestic consumption of natural gas in Slovakia (approximately 7 billion m³) is covered by the import from Russia, similarly 98 per cent of the total domestic consumption of oil. See E. Kašťáková, "Spolupráca medzi Slovenskom a Ruskom v oblasti dodávok zemného plynu, ropy a jadrového paliva," in *Vedecké state Obchodnej fakulty 2012*, Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo Ekonóm, 2012, pp. 283, 286.

⁴⁶ Almost 100 per cent of nuclear fuel comes to Slovakia from Russia. Nuclear power plants currently provide more than 55 per cent of the total domestic production of the electricity in Slovakia. See *Ibid*, p. 286.

the help of Russian companies.⁴⁷ This economic dimension was an important part of the agenda of Russian President Medvedev's visit to Bratislava in April 2010. Besides energy issues, the outcome of the negotiations was a memorandum of understanding on the creation of the common research company "Cyclotron Center." However, the construction of the center – which has been dragging on since 1996 when the first supply contract was signed – is still not finished. Since the Slovak parliamentary elections of 2010, Slovakia has not received a confirmation from Russia concerning the possibility of the capital entry of Russian companies into the project through the formation of a joint venture.⁴⁸

The subsequent project, which was a result of Fico's visit to Moscow in 2009 – the project of a broad-gauge railway from the Ukrainian border to Bratislava and Vienna with the participation of Russian Railways and the Ukraine and Austrian company OBB – produced controversial reactions among political elites. This idea was first raised during the third Mečiar Government in the second half of the 1990s. According to the opposition, this broad-gauge railway project is in the interests only of the particular commercial entities involved, not in the national interest of Slovakia.⁴⁹ The Government of Radičová

refused the project, and the European Commission has decided not to co-finance it.⁵⁰ However, the relevant memorandum of understanding was signed in July 2012 by the directors of the railway companies in Russia, Slovakia and Ukraine.⁵¹ The new challenge will be the increasing presence of Russia – and businesses owned by Russians – on the global market. One consequence of this was the acquisition of Volksbank International by Russia's largest semi-state bank, Sberbank. In February 2012, therefore, the Ľudová banka in

⁴⁷ V. Kuzmin, "Energo-slavyanskiy dialog" ["Энерго-славянский диалог"], *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, May 5, 2007. Available online: <http://www.rg.ru/2007/05/05/slovakia.html> (accessed on July 13, 2013).

⁴⁸ "Slovakia puts cyclotron project on hold, waiting for Russia's response," *SITA News Agency*, July 27, 2010. Available online: <http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-233115342/slovakia-puts-cyclotron-project.html> (accessed on July 13, 2013).

⁴⁹ J. Marušiak, "Rossiya v slovatskoi politike posle 1989 g." op. cit., p. 162.

⁵⁰ D. Krajanová, "Brusel na širokorozhodnú trať peniaze nedá," *Sme*, June 6, 2012.

⁵¹ "Širokorozhodná má ísť cez Slovensko, štáty podpísali dohodu," *Pravda*, July 5, 2013.

The new challenge will be the increasing presence of Russia – and businesses owned by Russians – on the global market.

Slovakia – the daughter company of Volksbank – became part of the Sberbank Europe AG group.⁵² The interest of other Russian investors in acquisitions in Slovakia – such as Russian Railways (interested in Cargo Slovakia)⁵³ and Severstal (interested in the US Steel company in Košice)⁵⁴ – shows that the main Russian investments to the Slovak economy in the future will come from state-owned or pro-government businesses. Such businesses are focused mainly on those segments of the economy with strategic importance for the country, which could increase the dependence of Slovakia on the political decisions adopted by Russia's political elite.

The amount of Slovak direct investment in Russia is relatively low, about 37.5 million US dollars.⁵⁵ The most important Slovak investor in Russia is the company Matador Púchov, which founded the tire factory Omskshina in Omsk. The next most active Slovak company in the Russian market is SES Tlmače, which produces energy machinery. The foreign trade between the two countries has had a positive dynamic, especially since Slovakia's accession to the EU. The single exception was the decline in 2009 caused by the global economic and financial crisis. In 2012, Slovakia's total exports to Russia reached the amount of 2.62 billion euros, while total imports reached 5.868 billion euros. More than 90 percent of Slovakia's imports were of energy raw materials. A very high adverse balance of trade with the Russian Federation is a persistent problem, reaching 3,248 billion EUR in 2012.⁵⁶ In the first half of 2012, Russia became the second largest importer to Slovakia (following the Czech Republic), and its share of total Slovak imports was 9.9 per cent, while the Russian share of Slovak exports was only 3.8 per cent, only ninth

⁵² "About Sberbank – Sberbank Europe AG," Sberbank Slovensko, a.s. – official website 2013. Available online: http://www.sberbank.sk/en/about_sberbank/profile-sberbank_europe_ag [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁵³ D. Krajanová, "Do letiska a Carga má vstúpiť investor," *Sme*, June 24, 2010; "Slovenskému Cargu môže pomôcť spojenie s Rusmi, nie zlúčenie s Čechmi," *TASR – Teraz.sk*, February 27, 2013. Available online: <http://www.teraz.sk/ekonomika/slovensko-cesko-cargo-omadej-rusko/38763-clanok.html> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁵⁴ "Vláda presviedčala U. S. Steel," *Pravda*, January 17, 2013.

⁵⁵ "Slovakia. Obzor torgovykh otnosheniy s RF" ["Словакия. Обзор торговых отношений с РФ"], *Integrated Foreign Economic Information Portal*, Moscow: Ministry of Economic Development of the Russian Federation 2013. Available online: http://www.ved.gov.ru/exportcountries/sk/sk_ru_relations/sk_ru_trade/ [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁵⁶ "Ruská federácia – ekonomická informácia o teritóriu," Moscow: Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Russian Federation 2013. Available online: [http://www.mzv.sk/App/wcm/media.nsf/vw_ByID/ID_335EB2FC79DA1EA1C125783B0048DBF5_SK/\\$File/130530_EIT_Rusko.pdf](http://www.mzv.sk/App/wcm/media.nsf/vw_ByID/ID_335EB2FC79DA1EA1C125783B0048DBF5_SK/$File/130530_EIT_Rusko.pdf) [accessed on July 13, 2013].

place among trade partners.⁵⁷ Cooperation in the area of culture, which had only marginal importance in 1990s, has had a positive dynamic in the post-integration period.⁵⁸ An important part of these bilateral trade relations is the cooperation between regions – for example, with the Astrakhan region (Astrakhanskaya oblast), between the Banská Bystrica region and Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, etc.⁵⁹

Slovak–Russian bilateral relations since 1998 have been based first and foremost on the business interests of both countries. Slovakia is interested in keeping close relations with Russia and avoiding open confrontation. Hence it has not been involved in campaigns criticizing the state of human rights and democracy in Russia. The Slovak Republic did not, however, undermine the common EU policy towards Russia – even though Slovakia (especially under Fico) is considered by some of the radical left or nationalistic Russian media as Russia's main ally in Central Europe.⁶⁰ A similar view was shared by the head of the Department of Slovakia and Czech Republic at Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Victor Kolesnikov, at the end of 2008:

Slovakia is interested in keeping close relations with Russia and avoiding open confrontation.

Slovakia is convincingly becoming one of Russia's most reliable partners in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. This country did not allow itself . . . to become engaged in the hostile campaign against Russia. Bratislava has appealed for the taking into account of Russia's

⁵⁷ "Vývoj zahraničného obchodu SR za prvý polrok 2012," Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, 2012.

⁵⁸ "Rusko-slovenská kultúrna a humanitná spolupráca, štúdium ruštiny na Slovensku," Bratislava: Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Slovak Republic, 2013. Available online: <http://rusemb.sk/svk/Rusko-slovenske-vztahy/russian-language/> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁵⁹ "Rusko-slovenské vzťahy – regionálna spolupráca," Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Slovak Republic, 2013. Available online: <http://www.rusemb.sk/svk/Rusko-slovenske-vztahy/66/> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁶⁰ "Slovakija: glavnyi soyuznik Rossii v centre Evropy," ["Словакия: главный союзник России в центре Европы"], *Pravda.ru*, October 6, 2008. Available online: <http://www.pravda.ru/world/europe/european/06-10-2008/286105-slovakia-0/> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

interests in the resolving of all important problems of European and global security.⁶¹

During the post-integration period, however, the view of the Russian elite on Fico changed. Although he is still considered an “old friend of Russia,” they became aware of his commitment to European integration as a key priority of Slovakia's foreign policy.⁶² Therefore we can agree with the characterization of Slovakia offered by Mark Leonard and Nicu Popescu, according to whom Slovakia belongs to the group of so called “friendly pragmatists,” i.e. the mainstream of EU members.⁶³ In spite of certain verbal declarations of representatives of Fico's governments – and disputes related to concrete business or infrastructural bilateral projects – we can identify a high level of continuity in the main trends in bilateral Slovak–Russian relations across particular Slovak governments.

We can identify a high level of continuity in the main trends in bilateral Slovak–Russian relations across particular Slovak governments.

The closeness of these bilateral relations, particularly between Robert Fico and Vladimir Putin, is not an obstacle to their increasing Europeanization. The development of relations particularly with Russia and with other BRICS countries is among the priorities of the second Fico Government, which was formed after the parliamentary elections of March 2012.⁶⁴ At the same time, however, the government supports strengthening the role of the EU in shaping a common policy towards Russia. In December 2012, therefore,

⁶¹ M. Bútora, “Zahraničná politika Slovenska na prahu nového desaťročia,” in M. Bútora, M. Kollár, G. Mesežnikov, Z. Bútorová, eds, *Kde sme? Mentálne mapy Slovenska*, Institute for Public Affairs, Kalligram 2010, p. 144.

⁶² F. Lukyanov, “Slovaki vybrali ES i «starogo druga Moskvu»,” [“Словаки выбрали ЕС и «старого друга Москвы»”], *Ekho planety* No. 11, 2012. Available online: http://www.ekhoplanet.ru/world_500_15267 [accessed on July 13, 2013]; V. Trukhachev, “Vozvrashcheniye Roberta Fico,” [“Возвращение Роберта Фицо”], *WIN.ru*, March 15, 2012. Available online: <http://win.ru/geopolitika/1331756253> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁶³ M. Leonard, N. Popescu, *A power audit of EU-Russia relations*, London: European Council on Foreign Relations 2007, p. 36. Available online: http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR-02_A_POWER_AUDIT_OF_EU-RUSSIA_RELATIONS.pdf [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁶⁴ “Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky,” Bratislava, Government Office of the Slovak Republic, 2012.

Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák addressed his lecture to the Russian Council for International Affairs predominantly as the representative of an EU member state. In regard to bilateral relations, however, he not only reminded his audience of positive moments such as the liberation of Czechoslovakia in 1945, but also mentioned the Soviet intervention and suppression of the Prague Spring in August 1968.⁶⁵

Discovering Ukraine

The Dzurinda Government recognized Ukraine as Slovakia's biggest neighbor and declared it an object of its permanent attention. Improvement in the countries' bilateral relations, however – previously of much lower intensity than those with Russia – did not come immediately with the change of Slovakia's government. The reason for this was the competition between the two states over their position within the United Nations. Slovakia withdrew its candidacy for the chairmanship of the 52nd General Assembly of the UN in 1997, and in exchange expected Ukrainian support for its candidacy for a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council in 1999. Ukraine, however, submitted its own candidacy.⁶⁶ Slovakia supported the project of the gas pipeline Jamal 2, and the construction of the connection between the pipeline systems Jamal and Brotherhood, which would have bypassed the territory of Ukraine. This project was refused both by Poland and Ukraine, according to whom it might damage the interests of Ukraine.⁶⁷ Subsequently, in 2000, Slovakia introduced a visa regime for the citizens of Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. This step was prompted by the need to harmonize its visa policy with the EU, and also by the threat of the introduction of a Schengen type border with the Czech Republic. However, it had a negative impact on bilateral Slovak–Ukrainian relations as well. The resulting problem was Ukraine's unwillingness to revoke the previous readmission treaty.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ "The speech of Minister of Foreign and European Affairs M. Lajčák at the Russian Council for International Affairs," December 12, 2012. Available online: [http://www.foreign.gov.sk/servlet/content?MT=/App/WCM/main.nsf/vw_ByID/ID_COB1D004B5A332B2C1257627003301E7_SK&OpenDocument=Y&LANG=SK&TG=BlankMaster&URL=/App/WCM/Aktualit.nsf/\(vw_ByID\)/ID_44E201536806E89BC1257AD200520027](http://www.foreign.gov.sk/servlet/content?MT=/App/WCM/main.nsf/vw_ByID/ID_COB1D004B5A332B2C1257627003301E7_SK&OpenDocument=Y&LANG=SK&TG=BlankMaster&URL=/App/WCM/Aktualit.nsf/(vw_ByID)/ID_44E201536806E89BC1257AD200520027) [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁶⁶ V. Hudak, *op. cit.*

⁶⁷ V. Hudak, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁶⁸ A. Duleba, "Slovakia's relations with Russia and Eastern neighbours," *op. cit.*, p. 36.

An improvement in relations took place after the visit of the Ukrainian Prime Minister Victor Yushchenko.⁶⁹ The crucial breakthrough, however, took place after the visit of Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski to Bratislava in 2002, who stressed the importance of promoting democracy in Ukraine and its future European perspective, and appealed to Slovakia to follow the Polish policy of advocating Ukrainian interests in the West. Subsequently, in 2003, the Slovak government included Ukraine and Belarus in its framework for the official development assistance of the Slovak Republic.

After the so called Orange Revolution in 2004, the Slovak government supported Ukrainian ambitions to join the EU and NATO, and in October 2005 adopted its Proposal for Assistance to Ukraine, containing more than 40 activities and exceeding the framework of the EU–Ukraine Action Plan adopted in 2005. Slovakia also followed decisions taken by Poland and Hungary and introduced an asymmetric visa regime with Ukraine, under which Ukrainian citizens did not pay fees for Slovak visas until 2007, when Slovakia joined the Schengen area.⁷⁰ The role of Slovakia in supporting the Ukrainian transformation was valued by its partners in NATO; because of this the Slovak Embassy in Kiev held the position of NATO's contact embassy from 2007 to 2010.

However, bilateral Slovak–Ukrainian relations deteriorated during the last years of Victor Yushchenko's presidency for several reasons. The first instance was the gas crisis between Russia and Ukraine. Prime Minister Robert Fico, as the single representative of an EU member state, condemned Ukraine alone as responsible for the crisis. Fico also threatened a reassessment of Slovakia's support for Ukraine's EU integration.⁷¹ The Ukrainian decision to introduce an import levy of 13 per cent on cars and refrigerators in 2009⁷² – which impacted the car industry in Slovakia at the peak of the economic crisis – also contributed to the setback of bilateral Slovak–Ukrainian relations. Signs of improvement came only after Miroslav Lajčák's meeting with Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Petro Poroshenko in Brussels in

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷⁰ O. Sushko, "EU-Ukraine relations and the visa liberalisation process. Ukraine. In-depth research," *NO VISA Program*, Prague: PASOS, November 2011. Available online: http://novisa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/In-depth-research_ukr-fin.pdf [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁷¹ M. Tóda, P. Procházková, "Fico hľadal plyn v Moskve. Zatiaľ ho nemožno čakať," *Sme*, January 14, 2009. Available online: <http://ekonomika.sme.sk/c/4262838/fico-hladal-plyn-v-moskve-zatial-ho-nemozno-cakat.html#ixzz2Z4OpZ9xX> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁷² "SR – Ukrajina: Vláda žiada zrušenie ukrajinskej dovoznej prirážky," *SITA*, July 30, 2009.

December 2009, when Lajčák confirmed Slovakia's commitment to defending Ukraine's interests within the EU.⁷³ Subsequently, in March 2010, Slovakia's government decided to abolish the fees for long-term visas for citizens of Ukraine.⁷⁴

After this period of complicated relations, an improvement in Slovak-Ukrainian relations took place only after the leader of the Party of Regions, Victor Yanukovych, won the presidential election in Ukraine. Although the in-

Along with Poland, Slovakia is among those EU members that have promoted the continuation of political dialogue with Ukraine and its EU integration process, in spite of authoritarian trends within the country.

tensity of bilateral contact has increased,⁷⁵ this has been complicated by domestic political developments in Ukraine. Ukraine officially backed away from its aim of joining NATO after Yanukovych's election victory. Although the Ukrainian government continues to express its commitment to EU integration, its imprisonment of opposition leaders (former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and former Minister of Interior Yuriy Lutsenko⁷⁶), its centralization of power, and its attempts to control the media,⁷⁷ have all caused a slowing-down of cooperation between Ukraine and the EU. The treatment and sentencing of Yulia Tymoshenko

has resulted in Ukraine's EU Association Agreement not yet being signed.

Along with Poland, Slovakia is among those EU members that have promoted the continuation of political dialogue with Ukraine and its EU integration process, in spite of authoritarian trends within the country. One example is the trilateral meeting of the presidents of Ukraine, Slovakia, and

⁷³ "M. Lajčák: Ukrajinu bude Európa posudzovať podľa plynu a volieb," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, December 8, 2009. Available online: <http://www.mzv.sk/App/WCM/Aktualit.nsf/C735CD314BE0E1D6C12571BF0023C7C5/058739C185DBFF6CC1257686004E5B1E> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁷⁴ "Slovensko zruší poplatky pre Ukrajincov za dlhodobé víza," *TASR*, March 3, 2010.

⁷⁵ M. Drach, "Slovachchyna hotova do onovlenniya vidnosyn iz Ukrainoyu," ["Словаччина готова до оновлення відносин із Україною"], *Radiosvoboda.ua*, June 17, 2011. Available online: <http://www.radiosvoboda.org/content/article/24237435.html> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁷⁶ Yuriy Lutsenko was pardoned by the President of Ukraine and released from the prison in April 2013, Yulia Tymoshenko remained in prison.

⁷⁷ J. Marušiak, "'Putinizácia' Ukrajiny," *Pravda*, January 9, 2012.

Poland on May 11 – 12, 2012 in Yalta, after the cancellation of a scheduled meeting of Central European presidents.⁷⁸

Slovakia also actively supports a liberalization of the visa regime between the EU and Ukraine. A practical example of this is the Slovak government's decision to liberalize its visa regime with both Ukraine and Russia in December 2012.⁷⁹ This liberalizing of multiple and long-term visas is aimed at business travel, tourism, and those people having family relations within Slovakia. The decision has significantly improved the prestige of Slovakia in Ukraine. In January 2013 alone, Slovak diplomats issued six thousand visas to Ukrainian citizens, twice as many as in December 2012.⁸⁰

The events at the beginning of 2009, when Slovakia was cut off from gas supplies, demonstrated the importance of Ukraine from the standpoint of Slovakia's energy security. A significant contribution to the strengthening of cooperation between Ukraine and the EU will be the introduction of the capability of the reverse flow of gas through Slovak gas transport systems to Ukraine.⁸¹

In Ukraine, Slovakia is perceived as a successful example of transformation and EU-integration. Hence Ukraine is one of the biggest recipients of Slovakia's transformation aid in the field of political and economic reform know-how.⁸² Slovak NGOs have played an important role in Slovakia's democracy assistance and transformation aid to Ukraine – for example, the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, which (together with the National Institute of Strategic Studies in Kiev) organizes in Ukraine the National Convention on the EU.⁸³

⁷⁸ R. Minarechová, "Gašparovič faces Ukrainian challenge," *Slovak Spectator*, May 14, 2012.

⁷⁹ "Zjednodušujeme vydávanie víz pre východoeurópanov," *TA3 TV – official website*, December 21, 2012. Available online: <http://www.ta3.com/clanok/1011727/zjednodusujeme-vydavanie-viz-pre-vychodoeuropanov.html> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁸⁰ "Slovak multiple entry visas: Beginning of spring of European-Ukrainian relations?," *ForUrn*, February 5, 2013. Available online: <http://en.for-ua.com/comments/2013/02/05/131032.html> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁸¹ "Ukrajina testuje dovoz plynu cez Slovensko," *TASR – Teraz.sk*, May 16, 2013. Available online: <http://www.teraz.sk/ekonomika/ukrajina-testuje-dovoz-plynu-cez-sr/46309-clanok.html> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁸² M. Drach, "Slovachchyna hotova do onovlenniya vidnosyn iz Ukrainoyu," op. cit.

⁸³ National Convention on the EU in Ukraine project – official website. Available online: <http://www.euconvention.org.ua/about-the-project/> [accessed on July 13, 2013]; "V Slovakkii 1 janvaria otmetili Den Respubliki. 'Dogoniyushchaya' modernizatsiya nashikh dobrykh sosedey," *Korzo News*, January 1, 2013. Available online: http://korzonews.info/region/v-slovakkii-1-janvarja-otmetili-den-respubliki-dogonijajucshaja-modernizacija-nashih-dobryh-sosedey__72991#sthash.wS1Bfq12.dpuf [accessed on July 13, 2013].

Multilateral context of Slovakia's Eastern policy

Along with the other V4 countries and the Baltic States, Slovakia was among those EU members which were highly interested in the shaping of a new EU Eastern policy after the 2004 enlargement. According to the Medium-Term Foreign Policy Strategy of the Slovak Republic 2004–2015, the future EU integration of Ukraine and the democratization of Belarus are among the key elements of Slovakia's foreign policy priorities.⁸⁴ The main reasons for this were the immediate proximity of Ukraine, the high intensity of economic

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cooperation between the two countries, and the need for stability on the Eastern borders of the EU in order to avoid the peripherization of the region of Central Europe. These states, therefore, cited the need for a specific approach to the Eastern dimension of the European Neighborhood Policy. Hence Slovakia welcomed the decision of the European Council (June 19–20, 2008) to charge the European Commission to draft the EU Eastern Partnership Program. Although Slovakia stressed mainly the building of a free trade zone and the liberalization of the visa regime

within the framework of the Program, Slovakia's then Foreign Minister Ján Kubiš presented a more ambitious vision of the EaP, stating that it would be "very good preparation for the future unification of all parts of Europe in one European project."⁸⁵

In the first stage of the EaP, Slovakia emphasized that the program should not be understood as an anti-Russian project, and advocated the prospects of the future possible participation of Belarus. During his visit to Moscow in September 2009, Miroslav Lajčák accepted the participation of Russia in some EaP projects.⁸⁶ His statements may have exercised a certain influence

⁸⁴ "Medium-Term Foreign Policy Strategy of the Slovak Republic until 2015," Bratislava: National Council of the Slovak Republic, 2004.

⁸⁵ B. Wojna, M. Gniazdowski, eds, *Eastern Partnership: the opening report*, Warsaw: Polish Institute of International Relations, 2009, pp. 47–9.

⁸⁶ "Vystúpenie M. Lajčáka na Moskovskom štátnom inštitúte medzinárodných vzťahov," Bratislava: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, September 8, 2009.

on the head of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, who – after a meeting with then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus Sergey Martynov – expressed the hope that the EU's endeavor towards the East would not impair Russia's interests. Lavrov did not exclude the possibility of Russia's participation in certain EaP projects.⁸⁷

The establishment and implementation of the EaP has become an important agenda of V4 cooperation. The Visegrad Group countries are among those EU states that are like-minded with the countries of the EaP, and their contribution to the EaP is made mostly in the context of the Visegrad Plus format, when particular “third countries” are taking part in certain meetings or common activities of the V4. During Slovakia's presidency of the Visegrad Group, this framework was used for dialogue not only with Eastern Neighbor countries, but also with other EU members in order to increase their support for the EaP. Present at the V4 summit in Bratislava in February 2011 – the beginning of Hungary's EU presidency – were Prime Minister of Ukraine Mykola Azarov, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and Austrian Chancellor Werner Feymann. The prime ministers of the V4 countries declared their support for the continuation of the Eastern enlargement of the EU,⁸⁸ and along with representatives of Austria and Germany adopted a declaration on Belarus in which required the release of political prisoners and the end of political persecutions.⁸⁹ On March 3, 2011, the Eastern Partnership was the main topic of the meeting of the foreign affairs ministers of the V4 and Germany in Bratislava, who expressed their support for taking gradual steps toward a full visa free regime with individual partners (subject

Available online: http://www.mzv.sk/servlet/zenevasm?MT=/App/WCM/ZU/ZenevaSM/main.nsf/vw_ByID/ID_621F5291AE4A5FD4C125715B004FFE51_SK&OpenDocument=Y&LANG=SK&HM=50-spravv&NCH=Y&OB=1001&PAGE_VSETKYSPRAYVIEWMCEA-6PZDKU=20&DS=Y&TG=BlankMaster&URL=/App/WCM/Aktualit.nsf/vw_ByID/ID_D1EDE6004BA0BEB3C1257677005711CF [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁸⁷ “Rusko sa možno zapojí do Východného partnerstva EU,” *Webnoviny.sk*, November 25, 2009. Available online: <http://www.webnoviny.sk/svet/rusko-sa-mozno-zapoji-do-vychodneho-/25435-clanok.html> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁸⁸ “Communiqué of the Prime Ministers of the Visegrad Group,” Bratislava: Visegrad Group, February 15, 2011. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/communique-of-the-prime> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁸⁹ “Statement by the Heads of Governments of Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia on Belarus,” Bratislava: Visegrad Group, February 15, 2011. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/statement-by-the-heads> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

to certain political and technical criteria being met), as well as the further liberalization of the visa regime with Eastern Neighborhood countries. The joint statement of the V4 prime ministers was focused as well on the sharing of transformation experience. They called for an increase of financing of the EU's policy towards the Eastern Partners in the next financial perspective, and for the implementation of the principle "more for more" – i.e. for specific financial support for the most advanced partners implementing the EU acquis.⁹⁰

One of the outcomes of Slovakia's V4 presidency was the decision to involve the International Visegrad Fund in the support of EaP initiatives. This task was completed, however, during the subsequent Czech presidency of the group, as the Visegrad 4 Eastern Partnership Program was initiated at the summit of V4 prime ministers in June 2011, with the aim of enhancing cooperation between the Visegrad region and the countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP).⁹¹ This program was launched in 2012, and with its current budget of almost 3 million euros (after the contribution of the Netherlands) is now the Fund's biggest grant program.⁹² The result of Slovakia's presidency of the Visegrad Group in 2010–2011 was a significant deepening of the V4's involvement in the EaP Program.

The Eastern Partnership was a priority of Robert Fico's government as well as of Iveta Radičová's. After the parliamentary elections of March 2012, the new government's Manifesto recognized the EaP as one of "the areas of specific interest to Slovakia" along with the Western Balkans, and declared its support in both bilateral and multilateral formats. The new government decided to support the continuation of the "enlargement of the area of stability, democracy and partnership, with particular emphasis on the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership." Robert Fico delivered a strong message in support of the EaP at the security and policy forum Globsec in Bratislava in April 2012, which was considerably different to the threats he pronounced in 2009 to stop support for Ukraine's EU integration ambitions. In his view "the Eastern Partnership was created not to replace,

⁹⁰ "The Visegrad Group and Germany foreign ministers statement on the Eastern Partnership," Bratislava, Visegrad Group, March 3, 2011. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/the-visegrad-group-and> (accessed on July 13, 2013).

⁹¹ "Joint statement on the enhanced Visegrad Group activities in the Eastern Partnership. V4 prime ministers' summit," Bratislava, June 16, 2011. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/joint-statement-on-the> (accessed on July 13, 2013).

⁹² "Visegrad 4 Eastern Partnership Program – information," Visegrad Fund – official website. Available online: <http://visegradfund.org/v4eap/> (accessed on July 13, 2013).

but to promote, European integration.” At the same time, Fico stressed that the condition of success for Eastern Partners is a “strong commitment to carrying out reforms and an adherence to principles and values cherished in the EU.”⁹³ The EaP is among the priorities of Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák as well. From December 2010 until his return to the post of minister, he worked as the EEAS's Managing Director for Russia, the Eastern Neighborhood, and the Western Balkans.

The new East European partners of Slovakia

The challenges resulting from Slovakia's participation in the shaping of the EU's Eastern policy brought about an intensification of bilateral relations with the countries of the region. Significant changes took place in relations with Belarus. Before 1998, Slovakia provided moderate support to the emerging authoritarian regime of Aleksander Lukashenko, disapproving of this country's exclusion from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, in line with the position of Russia. On the other hand, Slovakia never recognized the constitutional changes of 1996 and the introduction of Lukashenko's regime of personal power.⁹⁴ Belarus, which before 2003 was on the margin of the attention of Slovakia's political elite, has become a target country of Slovak development aid focused on the promotion of democracy and economic transformation. Because of the violation of human rights and democratic principles by Belarusian state authorities, and the resulting sanctions imposed by the EU against the highest representatives of state power in 1997, the official contacts with Belarus are limited to low-ranking state officials (state secretaries).⁹⁵ On the other hand, there are active Slovak

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⁹³ “Statement by H.E. Robert Fico Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic at GLOBSEC 2012 – Bratislava Global Security Forum,” Bratislava: Government Office of the Slovak Republic, April 12, 2012. Available online: <http://www.vlada.gov.sk/prejav-predsedu-vlady-sr-roberta-fica-na-fore-globsec-v-anglickom-jazyku/> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁹⁴ M. Gniazdowski, “Białoruś w słowackiej polityce zagranicznej. Implikacje dla współdziałania w Europie Środkowej,” *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny* Vol. 30, No. 2, 2006, p. 40.

⁹⁵ A. Duleba, “Slovakia's relations with Russia and Eastern neighbours,” op. cit., p. 10.

NGOs in Belarus focused on democracy assistance and economic reforms. One of the most active Slovak NGOs in Belarus is the Pontis Foundation.

The importance of Slovakia's political presence in Belarus increased during the Portuguese EU Presidency in the second half of 2007, when the Slovak Embassy assumed the role of the EU Presidency's local representation, as Portugal does not have a diplomatic mission in Minsk.⁹⁶ Moderate changes took place during the short period of political liberalization in the years 2008–2010. During this time, in September 2009, Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák paid a visit to Belarus. After the presidential elections in December 2010, however, following the suppression of a political demonstration of the opposition, communication between Belarus and the EU decreased. The condition set by the EU for a renewal of dialogue is the release of those political prisoners arrested and sentenced after the demonstrations in December 2010. The government of Iveta Radičová (2010–2012) strongly emphasized the protection of human rights, and in January and March 2011 then Minister of Foreign Affairs Mikuláš Dzurinda made sharp statements supporting a policy of personal and economic sanctions against the regime's representative, Aleksander Lukashenko.⁹⁷ His proposals, however, were not approved by the EU's Foreign Affairs Council in April 2011.⁹⁸

Although Robert Fico in June 2003 paid a visit to Belarus with a delegation of businessmen from the Nitra region, and met then Speaker of the House of Representatives (the lower house of the Belarusian parliament) Vladimir Konoplev,⁹⁹ when he became Prime Minister the policy of supporting dialogue at the level of civil society was maintained.

⁹⁶ "Local EU Presidency," The Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Minsk - official website, 2007. Available online: <http://www.mzv.sk/minsk> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁹⁷ "Dzurinda podporuje sankcie," *Pravda.sk*, April 3, 2011. Available online: <http://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/238037-dzurinda-podporuje-sankcie/> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁹⁸ "3082nd Council meeting. Foreign Affairs. Press Release," 8741/1/11 REV 1, PRESSE 96 , PR CO 22 , The Council of European Union, April 12, 2011. Available online: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/121506.pdf [accessed on July 13, 2013].

⁹⁹ "9 iyuniya 2003 goda sostoyalas vstrecha slovakikh parlamentariyev s deputatami Palaty predstaviteley Natsionalnogo sobraniya Respubliki Belarus" ["9 июня 2003 года состоялась встреча словацких парламентариев с депутатами Палаты представителей Национального собрания Республики Беларусь"], National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus - House of Representatives, June 9, 2003. Available online: <http://house.gov.by/index.php/,0,703,,,0,,0.html> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

Relations with Moldova were on the margin of Slovakia's foreign policy both because of the low level of bilateral trade and a certain stagnation in the reform process after the electoral victory of the Communist Party of the Republic of Moldova in 2001. The situation changed only after the parliamentary elections of 2009, the result of which was the establishment of a pro-European coalition. Moldova's Foreign Minister Iurie Leanca paid a visit to Bratislava in February 2010 and expressed Moldova's interest in Slovakia's transformation experience, as well as in an acceleration of the EU integration process. Since 2009, Moldova has been involved in SlovakAid programs as a project country.¹⁰⁰ In June 2011, at the end of the Slovak V4 presidency, a working meeting of Visegrad Group prime ministers with Moldovan Prime Minister Vlad Filat took place.¹⁰¹ As a result of Slovakia's activity in Moldova, an embassy was opened in Chisinau in July 2013.¹⁰²

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Transformation aid is the main component of relations between Slovakia and Georgia as well. Besides this, the most important component of bilateral Slovak-Georgian relations is Slovakia's support for the territorial integrity of the country, as declared by Miroslav Lajčák during his official trip to the Southern Caucasus states in April 2013.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ J. Marušiak "The Czech Republic and Slovakia: partnership with Moldova for transformation and Europeanization," in M. Kosienkowski, W. Schreiber, eds, *Moldova: arena of international influences*, Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2012, p. 45.

¹⁰¹ "Annual implementation report of the programme of the Presidency of the Slovak Republic in the Visegrad Group (1 July 2010 – 30 June 2011)," Bratislava, Government Office 2011. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/annual-reports/v4-annual-report-2010> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

¹⁰² "Minister M. Lajčák navštívi Moldavsko," Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, July 7, 2013. Available online: [http://www.mzv.sk/servlet/content?MT=/App/WCM/main.nsf/vw_ByID/ministerstvo&NCH=Y&OpenDocument=Y&LANG=SK&TG=BlankMaster&URL=/App/WCM/Aktualit.nsf/\[vw_ByID\]/ID_FEE79E670A059D18C1257BA1002E7514](http://www.mzv.sk/servlet/content?MT=/App/WCM/main.nsf/vw_ByID/ministerstvo&NCH=Y&OpenDocument=Y&LANG=SK&TG=BlankMaster&URL=/App/WCM/Aktualit.nsf/[vw_ByID]/ID_FEE79E670A059D18C1257BA1002E7514) [accessed on July 13, 2013].

¹⁰³ "Minister M. Lajčák vyjadril podporu územnej celistvosti Gruzínska," Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, April 8, 2013. Available online: [http://www.mzv.sk/servlet/content?MT=/App/WCM/main.nsf/vw_ByID/ministerstvo&NCH=Y&OpenDocument=Y&LANG=SK&TG=BlankMaster&URL=/App/WCM/Aktualit.nsf/\[vw_ByID\]/ID_A5AB980641DF16BEC1257B47003F3C38](http://www.mzv.sk/servlet/content?MT=/App/WCM/main.nsf/vw_ByID/ministerstvo&NCH=Y&OpenDocument=Y&LANG=SK&TG=BlankMaster&URL=/App/WCM/Aktualit.nsf/[vw_ByID]/ID_A5AB980641DF16BEC1257B47003F3C38) [accessed on July 13, 2013].

Conclusions

Slovak relations with East European countries are among the most important components of Slovakia's foreign policy. They have undergone significant changes as compared to the first years of Slovak independence. The rather unrealistic expectation that Slovakia would become a "bridge between the East and West" was replaced beginning in 1998 by a consistent course towards integration with the EU and NATO. Although at times certain politicians (mainly national-conservative and center-left) declare their sympathy with the idea of Slavic solidarity,¹⁰⁴ such statements generally refer to a common historical and cultural heritage rather than to the present shaping of a geopolitical alternative for Slovakia. On the other hand, given that such statements continue to give rise to conflicts and polemics within Slovak society,¹⁰⁵ we may admit that Slovak–Russian relations are still a dividing factor within Slovakia; although not, of course, to the extent they were in 1994–1998. Whereas the third Government of Vladimír Mečiar (1994–1998) regarded the East European way of transition as a potential alternative to the EU and its Western path of development, such ideas are not supported by the political mainstream in Slovakia today.

The territorial scope of Slovakia's Eastern policy has been changed as well. A Russo-centrist perception of the post-Soviet areas with little attention paid to neighboring Ukraine – typical for the Mečiar era – has been replaced by a more differentiated approach. Not only has an intensification of relations with Ukraine taken place, but other states of the former USSR have become priorities of Slovakia's foreign policy as well, such as Belarus, Moldova and Georgia. Slovak policy towards these latter three states, however, is very specific. They are neither important trade partners of Slovakia nor imminent and direct security challenges. In spite of this, the presence of Slovak transformation aid in these countries is rather high, and is appreciated by the local authorities (or, in the case of Belarus, by local NGOs and the democratic opposition). These countries are target states of Slovakia's soft power, Slovakia being perceived by their political elite as a successful example

¹⁰⁴ "Fico na Slavine pripomenul Kollára," *Sme*, May 9, 2007. Available online: <http://www.sme.sk/c/3285712/fico-na-slavine-pripomenul-kollara.html> [accessed on July 13, 2013]; "We need to maintain Slavic unity with Russia – Slovak president," *Russia Today*, May 11, 2010. Available online: <http://rt.com/politics/slovakia-president-russia-gasparovic/> [accessed on July 13, 2013].

¹⁰⁵ See for example: M. Kusý, "Chorá a prekonaná idea," *Sme*, May 11, 2007.

of transformation and integration into the EU. On the other hand, Slovakia's interest is the establishment of stable, predictable and democratic regimes in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood, in order to prevent the marginalization of the region of Central Europe.

Paradoxically, support for the EU integration of the EU's Eastern neighbors is not an obstacle to good relations with Russia, which are based mostly on economic grounds due to Slovakia's dependence on Russia's energy raw materials. Security reasons, however, and an interest in preserving the outcome of World War II, are also important. The particular interests of certain business circles to develop common infrastructural projects with Russia play an important role as well. Slovakia supports the deepening of EU integration; however it opposes the exclusion of Russia from the dialogue on the future of Europe. This pragmatic, non-ideological approach, avoiding conflicts with Russia, allows Slovakia to develop a "multivectoral" Eastern policy – simultaneously developing a dialogue with Russia and actively supporting the EU Eastern Partnership – although Russia has raised objections to this approach. The other significant feature of Slovakia's Eastern policy is an openness to dialogue. Slovakia opposes such steps or measures as would cause the international isolation

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of the Eastern neighbors and the subsequent enlargement of the gap between them and the EU. Slovakia regards EU integration as an unclosed and unfinished process, and support for the prospective EU-integration of the states of the EU's Eastern Neighborhood remains an agreed upon priority of Slovak governments. From this point of view, the main priority is the future accession and continuing Europeanization of Ukraine and Moldova.

Since 2002, and after Slovakia's EU accession, Slovak political elites realized that the country's particular interests in the areas of the former USSR are not viable purely within the framework of bilateral relations. Therefore Slovakia is among those EU members which favor a strengthening of the common Eastern policy of the EU. The interest of Slovakia in the Europeanization of the policy towards East Europe increased after the gas crisis in early 2009, particularly with regard to energy security issues. Slovakia is included among advocates of the EU's Eastern Partnership. Its activity in this area was

particularly visible during its presidency of the Visegrad Group (2010–2011), when Slovakia presented its own initiative for strengthening V4 engagement in the Program. As the role of the multilateral framework in shaping and implementing the priorities of Slovakia's Eastern policy is increasing, we can now speak of its Europeanization and "Visegradization." On the other hand, the "Visegradization" of relations with Russia is currently possible only in an indirect way – for example through the cooperation of Visegrad countries in the field of energy security, or by their participation in the shaping of the EU's common policy towards Russia – since as of this year (2013), multilateral negotiations or meetings between the V4 and Russia have not taken place.