



SLOVAKIA'S FOREIGN POLICY AFTER THE 2023 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

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On September 30th, the long-awaited parliamentary elections held place in Slovakia drawing particularly strong global attention due to their perceived impact on the nation's democratic trajectory and their significance for the unity of the European Union. As a result, Robert Fico, leader of the opposition Smer-SD party, and a former Prime minister in three governments, emerged victorious once again, while his populist, aggressive, and anti-West rhetoric sparked further concerns among the EU leaders.

In recent years, Slovakia has undergone notable shifts in its foreign policy, grappling with the challenge of defining its international role amid the rise of populism, extremism, and anti-Western propaganda. The country, being relatively young and still in the process of shaping its political culture and historical perspective, is facing internal debates and struggles to reach a consensus.

Fico, a prominent figure in Slovakian public life for three decades, successfully guided Slovakia into the EU's visa-free Schengen area and the Eurozone, actively positioning the country within the core of the European Union. He also advocated for extensive cooperation, including military collaboration, with the United States. While representing Slovakia as a pro-Western country and positioning it among the European “mainstream”, the domestic situation in Slovakia deteriorated as Fico’s party tightened its grip over the country’s ministries and security forces.

Following various corruption scandals, but most importantly the tragic murder of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée, instigated by people close to Fico, the government fell under the pressure of mass citizen protests, leading into Fico’s ousting from office in 2018. Although those events brought Slovakia to a centre-right coalition, led by Igor Matovič, committed to eradicating Fico’s legacy and pledging to implement anti-corruption measures within the judiciary and police, his chaotic rule of Matovič ended up with the motion of no-confidence from

and led to further polarisation of the Slovak society and a renewed political space for Fico's populist party.

From this moment, Fico underwent a notable transformation into a more radical and populist figure. His rhetoric shifted to heavily criticize the United States, Brussels, and George Soros. He portrayed Russia's actions in Ukraine as a confrontation between Moscow and Washington, opposing the West's sanctions on Russia and its support for Ukraine. Fico, after being appointed Slovak Prime Minister for the 4th time, in 2023, has immediately signaled his willingness to challenge the EU's stance on Russia and its support to Ukraine. Fico's evolution over three decades in the public eye, characterized by controversies and changing ideologies, has influenced these outspoken statements.

The Government's November Manifesto formally restates Slovakia's commitment to its foreign policy direction, emphasizing the irreplaceable nature of EU membership and recognizing the EU as a unique project. However, the government links the EU's exceptional position with the right to express a critical perspective on its functioning and activities. Slovakia's declared sovereign approach and global orientation imply that the government may frequently take a critical stance on EU matters.

For instance, the government opposes the idea of eliminating the veto power of individual EU member states and the associated functioning of EU institutions. Notably, the document concentrates solely on the sovereign right of the government to challenge EU decision-making outputs, overlooking the potential for sovereign influence on the formulation of EU policies and legislation—a right inherent to Slovakia, like any other EU member state.

Regarding NATO, The Manifesto prioritizes membership and collaboration with Alliance partners, signaling Slovakia's commitment to its NATO membership in security and defense matters. Although occasional participation in the Alliance

activities may occur, a reliable and continuous proactive stance toward such engagements might be refused by the government. While the Manifesto stresses the need to bolster Slovakia's capabilities and readiness for emerging security challenges, it doesn't strongly highlight the importance of interoperability within the Alliance in its security-oriented section.

Additionally, Fico's Smer party continues to assert that Ukraine's struggle isn't Slovakia's concern, advocating that a swift resolution would save lives, bolster economies, and curb inflation. They argue that Western nations bear full responsibility, accusing them of disregarding Russia's security concerns and constantly provoking Moscow. These statements have a significant influence on the population and therefore the reinforcement of Fico's electorate. Public sentiment in Slovakia, as reflected in surveys like GLOBSEC Trends 2023¹ and Eurobarometer polls², reveals varying views on the Ukraine conflict and Russia's role. Only a fraction view Russia as a security threat, and support for aiding Ukraine or granting it candidate status falls below EU averages.

Thus, Slovakia's stance presents a challenge for the EU in handling the country under Fico's leadership. Fico's vocal opposition to military aid for Ukraine and EU sanctions against Russia, coupled with support for humanitarian aid while expressing concerns about aid mismanagement, places Slovakia in a distinct position within EU dynamics. His alignment with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán hints at a potential departure from EU consensus on issues concerning Ukraine, Russia, and democratic principles. Furthermore, Fico's party's suspension from the Party of European Socialists, , indicates significant ideological differences within the EU framework. Nevertheless, the evolving strategy of the new coalition

¹<https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/GLOBSEC%20Trends%202023.pdf>

²<https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3052>

government might deviate from its pre-election rhetoric as it grapples with political realities both at home and on the international stage.

To conclude, although it is very likely that domestic messaging will remain anti-Ukrainian or critical towards Brussels, which may strain relations between Brussels and Slovakia, the situation is, so far, not as critical as it was assumed and presented before the elections. Yet, the real implications of the recent election are going to unfold in the coming months while the government will deal with current foreign policy issues.