



“Slovakia First”: Fico’s Fourth Government Changes Foreign Policy Course

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The first 100 days of Robert Fico’s government confirmed the changes in Slovak foreign policy announced during the election campaign. The most important are the weakening of transatlantic relations and the strengthening of criticism of the EU, a reduction of support for Ukraine, and the signalling of Slovakia’s willingness to rebuild relations with Russia while strengthening relations with Hungary. This reorientation of policy, which is contrary to the interests of Poland, is reinforcing divisions in Central Europe.

Weakening of European Policy and Transatlantic Ties. In just its first 100 days, the Fico government, formed by the left-populist Smer-SSD, the social-democratic Hlas-SD, and the nationalist Slovak National Party, SNS, came under criticism from EU institutions. The European Parliament and the European Public Prosecutor’s Office have expressed reservations about the government’s forced reform of the judicial system, while the European Commission suspended the assessment of payments from the National Recovery Plan, also criticising budget spending. Modifications to criminal law that the Slovak parliament voted in favour of on 8 February, provide for the liquidation of the Special Prosecutor’s Office, which investigates abuses of government, including under Fico’s previous administration, as well as reduced certain penalties for corruption. This serves to consolidate Fico’s power and protect those associated with him from the justice system. The changes have been accompanied by protests, the largest in Slovakia since March 2018 when they forced [Fico to resign as prime minister](#) in connection with the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak, who had exposed, among other things, corruption in the government.

In EU policy, Fico is moving away from closer cooperation seen in the approach of his previous cabinets. Then, he proclaimed the need to join the “core of the EU” and coordinated Slovakia’s entry into the Eurozone in 2009. At present, the government opposes treaty change, as well as abandonment of the unanimity rule and the transfer of competences of the

Member States to the EU level, pointing to “Slovakia First” as the slogan of the government’s programme. However, the coalition agreement emphasises the indisputability of Slovakia’s membership in the EU and NATO. These formulations were intended to reassure foreign partners in connection with the demands of SNS politicians that Slovakia withdraw from both organisations. In response to the SNS’s entry into the government, Smer-SSD was suspended from membership of the EU’s Party of European Socialists.

The actions of the Fico government have led to a deterioration in Slovakia’s transatlantic relations. This is related both to the U.S. administration’s negative assessment of the judicial reforms and to the Slovak government’s announcement that it will revise the 2022 bilateral defence agreement. Smer-SSD presents it as limiting Slovakia’s sovereignty, for example by allowing U.S. forces to use Slovak air bases. The changes in transatlantic relations are in parallel to a reduction in Slovak military aid to Ukraine, which the U.S. supported by granting Slovakia financial and equipment compensation for, among other things, the transfer of 13 MiG-29 fighter jets.

A New Eastern Policy. The government’s re-evaluation of Eastern policy is the result of the attitudes of Smer-SSD and SNS, which used populist slogans during the [election campaign](#). On the one hand, they were just incorporating the generally [pro-Russian sentiments of Slovaks](#), and on the other, they are undermining the legitimacy of supporting

Ukraine. Thanks to the prevalence of such views—as much as 60% of the population is against providing military aid to Ukraine (the second-highest percentage in the EU after Cyprus)—these parties achieved electoral success.

Fico's cabinet is changing Slovakia's Eastern policy to one more favourable towards Russia. The government's programme, contrary to the declarations of previous cabinets, does not envisage a reduction in energy dependence on Russia. Moreover, Fico has announced the continuation of Russian gas supplies via Ukraine (despite the expiry of the gas transit agreement between Ukraine and Russia at the end of 2024). Very restrained criticism of the aggressor is mainly limited to emphasising the illegality of its actions.

The government has reduced military aid to Ukraine (by GDP, Slovakia was fourth in the EU last year). However, the reduction does not apply to the repair of Ukrainian military equipment or consent to transfer weapons through Slovak territory. Slovakia will also continue to help demine Ukraine, for example by supplying it with Božena minesweepers. This is guaranteed by the agreement signed by Prime Ministers Fico and Denys Shmyhal in January this year in Uzhhorod. Although Slovakia has halted the supply of equipment from its army's reserves (so far, it had provided 13 aid packages worth €671 million), it still agrees to the export of weapons by domestic companies. Moreover, a law adopted in January restricts the issuance of permits for arms exports to the Ministry of Defence, narrowing the potential supplies (e.g., ammunition) from holdings such as the semi-state owned company ZVS, easier. Fico is also not opposed to directing support for Ukraine from the European Peace Facility, which has exposed him to criticism from the SNS.

In supporting Ukraine's political aspirations, Fico's message is nuanced. On the one hand, he opposes its accession to NATO, seeing it as "a scenario leading to a third world war". On the other hand, he supports its accession to the EU once it has met the Copenhagen criteria.

Regional Relations. Fico's cabinet wants to compensate for the weakening of ties with its Western partners with cooperation in the Visegrad Group. Despite the [political stagnation of the V4](#) since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Slovak government sees the forum as an important tool for pursuing its national interests. That is why Fico appealed to the Czech authorities, [which are leading the V4 until July this year](#), to re-animate this format. On the other hand, since the change of power in both Poland and Slovakia, there has been no significant activity in relations between them, including high-level visits.

The change of power in Slovakia is associated with an improvement in relations with Hungary. Fico's visit to Budapest in January this year, his second visit abroad after the traditional first visit to Czechia, served this purpose. The Slovak government's stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine is very much in line with the [Hungarian perspective on the war](#). This is evidenced by a similar narrative, including statements about the supposed ineffectiveness of military aid to Ukraine, the alleged limited sovereignty of this

country, and the need for urgent peace solutions. Slovakia and Hungary are the only EU members that did not join a statement in January issued by 49 countries condemning the [transfer of ballistic missiles from North Korea to Russia](#) and their use against Ukraine.

The partial convergence of Slovakia's and Hungary's Eastern policies so far has not translated into blocking actions by the Fico government within the EU. Although during the European Council summit at the beginning of February this year the prime minister expressed understanding of the Hungarian blockade on aid to Ukraine worth €50 billion, he himself did not take this position. Unlike Hungary, Slovakia was not opposing the adoption of the EU's 13th package of sanctions, which was aimed not only at Russia but also at foreign companies, including Chinese firms, that materially support it.

Conclusions and Perspectives. The changes in the judicial system expose Fico's government to further criticism from EU institutions. This may deepen the weakening of Slovakia's ties with its Western partners. Improving relations with Hungary will not compensate for this, but it is crucial for Fico to gain an ally in connection with the reaction of EU institutions to the threat to the rule of law in Slovakia. Pushing through disputed reforms and Fico keeping up confrontational rhetoric towards the EU comes amidst campaigns in Slovakia for two key elections—the presidential one in March and the European Parliament elections in June.

Slovakia's policy more favourable to Russia has been accompanied by a withdrawal from comprehensive support for Ukraine. However, the new government's actions on Eastern policy do not go as far as Hungary's, despite the proximity of the rhetoric and the improvement in relations between the two countries. At the EU level, Fico has so far avoided breaking away from the pack when voting, and it is not in his interest to ignite further disputes with the EU. Blocking EU aid to Ukraine is therefore unlikely. At the regional level, however, the changes in Slovak policy have contributed to the deeper divisions and a further weakening of Central Europe's voice in Eastern affairs, as well as undermined the image of the region, which—with the exception of Hungary—has provided comprehensive assistance to Ukraine. At the NATO level, it will be more difficult to use the argument that the involvement of its neighbours (except, of course, for Hungary) is a reason for partners like the U.S. to continue to support Ukraine, as well as to promote its membership in the Alliance.

The change in Slovakia's policy is a challenge for Poland. In addition to difficulties in regional and allied cooperation for Ukraine, the reproduction of Russian narratives by another EU country lends credibility to it and forces countries such as Poland to combat the message more intensively. To avoid further deepening regional divisions, the Polish authorities should point out the negative consequences of Slovakia's changes in its foreign policy for security in Europe in their contacts with their Slovak partners. Bilateral intergovernmental consultations, renewed in 2022 (suspended in 2018-2021), may be useful in this regard.