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New Foreign Policy of Slovakia: Strengthening Transatlantic Orientation and Active Regional Cooperation

On April 19 Slovakian Prime Minister Igor Matovič presented the government's program for 2020-2024, which was subsequently adopted by the National Council of the Slovak Republic on April 30. The anti-corruption activities, the reform of the justice system, and the pro-social policy constitute the central pillars of the new document. In the field of foreign policy, a clear Euro-Atlantic orientation of Slovakia was emphasised along with the active participation of this state in the activities of the Visegrad Group (V4). The United States (US) was indicated as a key security ally. A continuation of the pro-European policy of the predecessors is planned. In the region, the relations with the Czech Republic as well as with Austria, Poland and Hungary are mentioned as a priority. Ukraine, which remains outside the European Union (EU), is also to be supported by Slovakia. Russia is not acknowledged in the document, which demonstrates a desire to break with the pro-Russian actions of some of the previous government's politicians.

The transatlantic anchor of Slovakia. Unquestioned pillars of Slovakia's security and defence policy referred to in the program include NATO membership and strong transatlantic ties. Slovakia strives to actively promote strategic and mutually beneficial relations between the EU and the US. The Slovak authorities declare to support the development of military capabilities under the EU's common security and defence policy. According to the Slovaks, the Union cannot fulfil its ambitions to become a major player in the international arena without its own armed forces. Attention is also paid to the growing hybrid threats, which manifest themselves as a need to strengthen the prevention capabilities of states at the national and international levels.

The US is recognised in the program as one of Slovakia's "key ally" due to its unique military capabilities that are crucial in terms of collective defence and which the European allies do not possess. Slovakia declares the participation of its armed forces in foreign military missions and operations, provided that it is in accordance with international law and its security policy. The government assumes to have stable and predictable defence spending, striving to reach 2% of the GDP by 2024. Within the planned military expenses at least 20% is to be allocated to armaments and research, that will be in line with NATO and EU criteria. It is also assumed that the expenditure on defence research will gradually increase to 1% of the defence budget.

Objectives of the European policy of Slovakia. The document shows some pessimism regarding the state of European integration. According to the authors of the program, the EU is currently undergoing the most difficult period since its creation. They draw attention to the crisis that has been going on for a decade, as well as to Brexit and the lack of necessary reforms. It results in mistrust of the EU institutions, reduced impact of the EU in the world as well as in the increase of internal tensions. It is emphasised that the EU is facing the need to complete projects underpinning European integration, in particular the single market, economic and monetary union, and a parallel response to climate change, digitisation, automation, migration pressures, and demographic change. The current situation triggered by the global COVID-19 pandemic is another test for the EU.

The program shows a willingness to reform the EU. In European policy, the Slovak government sets itself the following objectives: strengthening the perception of the European agenda as part of the national policies; the development of the EU internal market; emphasis on creating high-quality European legislation; strict compliance with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality; compliance with EU law by the European institutions and the Member States; avoiding administrative and regulatory burdens for Slovak companies; more

efficient work of the European institutions (e.g. one seat of the European Parliament); and, maintaining an institutional balance between the Member States, the European Parliament and the European Commission (for instance by rejecting the concept of *Spitzenkandidat* as the chairman of the Commission). In addition, Slovakia wants to increase the weight of its voice in the EU by creating the so-called thematic coalitions on specific European policy issues and strives to uphold the functioning of the rule of law at the national and EU levels.

The implementation of Slovakia's Euro-Atlantic orientation is facilitated by the experience of the new Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok. During 28 years of work in diplomacy, he served as, among others, the Permanent Representative to the EU and as an Ambassador to the US. In addition, during 2016-2017 he was the government's representative for the Slovak presidency of the Council of the European Union. In 2003, however, he was appointed as the head of the Slovak delegation for accession talks with NATO.

Revival of regional cooperation. The new program shows great interest in the development of cooperation in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, both on a bilateral and multilateral level. The further development of relations with neighbours is to be the priority of Slovakia's foreign policy. The document highlights the "above-standard" relations with the Czech Republic and the "proven cooperation" with Poland, Hungary, and Austria. The Slovak authorities declare that they will continue to support Ukraine's transformation and its aspirations for European integration. In addition, the Slovak authorities do not accept violations of the territorial integrity of their state. However, the program does not specify who the aggressor is.

In the program, V4 is considered to be the most important format of regional cooperation, which is why Slovakia is willing to remain an active member of this organisation. However, the main condition to belong to the Group is to have an effective pursuit of Slovakia's interests and to increase Slovakia's role in shaping EU policy. The document lacks reference to other regional cooperation formats in which Slovakia is more or less actively involved. There is no mention of the Initiative of the Three Seas (TSI), the Slavkovsky Triangle, or the Bucharest Nine. The document only contains an enigmatic record about the development of "partnership with other regional groups".

Slovakia wants to participate in the development of EU cooperation with the Eastern Partnership states after 2020. Cooperation with the Western Balkan states is also to remain an important area of Slovakia's foreign policy. Slovakia declares its support to the efforts to meet the agreed criteria for EU membership. According to the Slovaks, the enlargement of the Union is an important tool for maintaining stability and promoting the region's interests. In this matter, there is also room for cooperation between the current government and former Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák, who is now the EU's special representative for the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo. At the same time, the European Parliament has appointed expert and politician Vladimír Bilčík as the new rapporteur for Serbia.

Noteworthy are the plans for the development of cross-border infrastructure included in the program. For nearly three decades, underdeveloped communication routes have formed an important barrier to the evolution of Polish-Slovak relations. Therefore, the new government program envisages continuing the construction of the D3 highway in the Kysúce region towards the Polish border. In addition, it is planned to prepare the construction of the R4 express road from Prešov to Poland, which is part of the Via Carpatia transport corridor. In this project, the northern Prešov beltway is a priority for the Slovak authorities. Depending on the number of financial resources available, the expansion of the R4 route northwards to the Slovak-Polish border will also be continued. Over the border of the Orava River, the authorities are to focus on building the R3 expressway.

Conclusions for Poland. An analysis of the new government program indicates that Slovakia's key foreign policy priorities remain unchanged. Like the previous government, the current Slovak authorities declare an active strategic membership of the EU and NATO, as well as cooperation with neighbouring states, as their strategic goals. A novelty in the document is that the security of the state is based on Slovak-American relations. Regional cooperation under V4 has been appreciated. However, it must constitute a part of Slovakia's European policy. Unlike the preceding program of 2016, the current document does not mention Germany, which the previous government had identified as a key EU Member State and as Slovakia's strategic political and



economic partner. It provokes consideration that, at present, Germany remains the most important trade partner of Slovakia and the promoter of the principles of multilateralism in international politics that are so crucial for the current government. Russia is also not mentioned in the document as Slovakia's potential partner. Russia's aggression against Ukraine was criticised only in a rather enigmatic way, which is undoubtedly a nod at the US. The problem of economic diplomacy has been practically disregarded. Poland was referred to twice in the program, which indicates a possible new opening in mutual relations, especially in the area of development of the cross-border infrastructure. The challenge is the lack of information on how Slovakia is involved in the TSI, which is a strategic project of Polish foreign policy. The new TSI summit in Tallinn, which will probably take place this autumn, will test the new government's policy in this respect. The document also lacks information on plans for diversification of oil and natural gas supplies to Slovakia.