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Slovakia: an unstable public support for Ukraine and the West

Survey research from July 2022 "How are you Slovakia?", conducted by researchers from the research agencies MNFORCE, Seesame and the Slovak Academy of Sciences, shows that the majority of Slovaks support a victory for Russia rather than Ukraine in the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict. At the same time, an earlier survey, conducted by the think tank Globsec, shows that a large part of the Slovak public still considers Russia a strategic partner, wants Ukraine to be neutral after the war, and believes in disinformation and conspiracy theories spread by pro-Russian conspiracy media. Some concern may be raised by the growing public support for authoritarian tendencies in Slovakia indicated in the survey.

Slovaks declare support for a Russian victory. In the survey "How are you Slovakia?", respondents answered the question of what kind of end they want to the war in Ukraine. They had a choice of a 10-point scale, where 1 meant a clear victory for Russia, while 10 meant a clear victory for Ukraine. As the results of the survey show, on the one hand, around 20 per cent of respondents want a clear victory for Russia, and more than half of respondents simply support a victory for the Russian side. On the other hand, a third of respondents want Ukraine to be the winner of the war, and a fifth declare clear support for a Ukrainian victory. Interestingly, about 18% of Slovaks say they do not know who should win the war.

Considering the political preferences of respondents, supporters of the currently ruling centre-right party OĽaNO and the opposition liberal parties SaS and Progressive Slovakia want a Ukrainian victory the most. More neutral views are declared by voters of the coalition party Sme rodina and the left-wing Hlas-SD party of former Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini. By contrast, the biggest supporters of the Russian win include those voting for Robert Fico's left-wing Smer-SD and the extreme right (Republika, ĽSNS).

In terms of the geographical distribution of respondents, it can be seen that the residents of Bratislava country want Ukraine's victory the most. This can be explained by the fact that it is the richest region of Slovakia and one of the richest regions in the EU. Liberal parties, which are pro-Ukrainian, also have relatively high support there. In contrast, those living in the Nitra and Prešov regions were more likely to support a Russian victory. It is puzzling that support for Russia is so high in the Nitra region, located in the western part of Slovakia. In contrast, the Prešov region lies in the economically less developed eastern part of the country. In this case, economic issues - high levels of unemployment and the crisis related to the war in Ukraine - may have determined the pro-Russian stance. A sense of insecurity stemming from the proximity of the border with Ukraine cannot also be excluded. In the regions of central Slovakia, neutral attitudes prevail: neither pro-Ukraine nor pro-Russia. At the same time, this is a signal that there was no strong support for the Ukrainian side in the local self-governments of central Slovakia.



The survey shows a correlation of support for Russia or Ukraine with the education of the respondents. The lower the education level, the more people want Russia to win the war. Conversely, the number of supporters of a Ukrainian victory increases with the education of the respondents. However, it should be noted that the less educated, and often less well-off, have been hit harder by the current energy crisis, inflation and overpricing. They may therefore be supporting Russia not because of geopolitical convictions, but rather out of a desire to end the war more quickly, and with it the economic crisis in Slovakia.

There are no significant differences in attitudes towards the war in Ukraine between different age groups of Slovaks. Noteworthy, however, is the most pro-Russian attitude of those in the 30-39 age bracket. An intuitive explanation may be that this is a generation that no longer had experience of communism or the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops. After all, the last Red Army soldier left the country in 1991. This is also a generation that was born in a free country and does not associate Russia with danger. This group of thirty-year-olds is moreover used to stability and a good standard of living.

There is an interesting correlation shown in the survey between attitudes towards the war and attitudes towards vaccination for COVID-19. Respondents who had taken a booster dose of the vaccine were more supportive of Ukraine's victory. Those who were vaccinated but did not take the booster dose had neutral attitudes towards both Russia and Ukraine. Among the unvaccinated, supporters of a victory for the Russian side prevailed. In general, relations between anti-vaccination movements and anti-vaccination propaganda and support for pro-Russian propaganda were evident.

Ambivalent attitudes towards the war, conspiracy theories and authoritarian tendencies.

Interesting results, to some extent explaining the July study, were published in May 2022. Globsec. The 'Globsec Trends 2022' analysis shows an increasing support of Slovaks for NATO since 2018, which now stands at 72% (an increase of 22% between 2018 and 2022). This is partly justified by the ongoing war in Ukraine, the change of government to a more pro-Western one in 2020 and the leadership style of Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad' (OLaNO), who actively promotes the Slovak presence in the Alliance.

At the same time, the survey indicates that 23% of Slovaks would vote to leave NATO if a referendum on the issue was held in the country. Only 27% would approve of sending Alliance troops to Ukraine to fight the Russians. The opposite view was held by 71% of respondents. In addition, 51% of respondents said that geopolitically Slovakia is located 'somewhere between' the East and the West. Although Russia is perceived as a threat by 62% of respondents, as many as 37% of Slovaks still consider this country to be one of Slovakia's most important strategic partners (this perception of the USA was declared by only 29% of respondents).

51% of respondents felt that Russia had invaded Slovakia. At the same time, as many as 28% of respondents said that it was the West that provoked Russia into war. When asked about the political future of Ukraine, 61% of Slovaks answered that the country should be independent, 23% that it would be a puppet of the West and 13% that it would become part of Russia. Ukraine's membership



of the EU and NATO is wanted by 40% of those surveyed. At the same time, 47% believe that the country should remain neutral. The outbreak of war in Ukraine has caused a drastic drop in the positive perception of Russian President Vladimir Putin in Slovakia - from 55% in 2021 to 24% today. 41% of Slovaks believe that Russia will not stop at Ukraine and will also want to conquer other European countries. In contrast, 55% of respondents hold the opposite view.

According to the survey, Slovakia remains among the countries in the region most vulnerable to disinformation spread by the Internet and conspiracy media. Currently, as many as 54% of those surveyed believe in various types of conspiracy theories. The majority of Slovaks believe that democracy does not exist, as the world is in fact run by secret elites. Nearly half of those surveyed (48%) say that the biggest threats to Slovakia's security and values and identity are: USA, Western European societies, liberal democracy and migrants. Traditional media in Slovakia are believed by only 37% of respondents, while 61% of respondents hold the opposite view. Globsec research also shows a growing authoritarian tendency in the country. When asked about the desire to have a strong leader who does not care about elections or parliament, up to 49% of Slovaks responded positively (this is an increase of 11% from the 2021 survey).

Conclusions

- The survey results indicating ambivalent attitudes towards the conflict in Ukraine and Russia and the West are not surprising. Slovakia still remains a significant area of penetration by Russian diplomatic institutions and special services. This is due to several conditions: the country's strategic geopolitical position, the popularity of the ideology of Panslavism among the elite and in Slovak society, the relatively high dependence on Russian hydrocarbons, and the pro-Russian stance of a significant part of the opposition.
- Since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the Slovak authorities have taken a number of measures to strengthen Slovakia's security and combat disinformation. At the dawn of the war, a decision was made to be able to close down internet portals spreading a pro-Kremlin narrative. Eventually, some of them were administratively closed down. The Slovak special services took measures to combat Russian espionage, resulting in the detention of several GRU collaborators and the expulsion of a large group of Russian diplomats. Humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine was already launched in the first days of the conflict.
- Slovakia currently has a centre-right minority government. Due to intra-coalition disputes and the country's difficult economic situation, early elections cannot be ruled out (the constitutional deadline is spring 2024). Given the current polls, it can be assumed with high probability that the pro-Russian left would then return to power. It can be assumed that an exotic coalition of the left (Smer-SD, Hlas-SD) and the extreme right (Republika) could then form in the new parliament. It must also be assumed that in defence policy this would mean a reduction in military cooperation with the US and NATO. In contrast, a policy of neutrality would be pursued towards Ukraine, limited mainly to humanitarian support. In this context, the authoritarian tendencies indicated in the second survey and the aversion of Slovak society towards the West may be worrying.