

The Slovakian-Ukrainian gas reversal: What is Bratislava up to?

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On 10 April, Prime Minister Robert Fico announced that Slovakia was ready to make steps needed to launch the gas reversal from Western Europe to Ukraine via its territory. However, fearing that the reversal could breach the recently renegotiated Slovakian-Russian gas contract, Fico suggested that Russia should join the talks on the reversal between Slovakia, Ukraine and the European Commission. Fico rejected the allegations that Slovakia had been delaying the launch of the reversal on purpose. He in turn emphasised that Bratislava expected guarantees of a return on the money invested by the Slovakian transmission system operator Eustream in the reversal (around 20 million euros). One day later, the Slovakian minister of foreign affairs, Miroslav Lajcak, announced that Slovakia had embarked upon the necessary technical work to launch the Slovakian-Ukrainian gas reversal although the legal and technical conditions had not been drawn up. However, Lajcak made it clear that Bratislava insists on signing a standard gas transport contract before the project commences. The transport route is a subject of disagreement in the Slovakian-Ukrainian negotiations. Slovaks want the reversal to be launched in October using the Vojany–Uzhhorod gas pipeline, whose capacity is set to increase from 3.2 to 10 billion m³ next year. Ukrainians have not approved this variant, and want the reversal to operate on the main transit route which supplies Russian gas to Europe. Its transport capacity from Slovakia to Ukraine exceeds 30 billion m³.

Commentary

- Slovakia's good relations with Gazprom have a decisive impact on Bratislava's stance on the reversal issue. Slovakia is totally dependent on Russian gas supplies and generates profits from gas transit to Western Europe. Furthermore, Slovaks succeeded at renegotiating the gas contract in effect until 2028, and were thus offered lower gas prices. In its desire to maintain favourable conditions of co-operation with Gazprom, Bratislava has been pushing through the variant of reversal which minimises the risk of conflict with Russia. Fico's government fears that if they consent to the launch of the reversal on the transit gas pipeline (Eustream), this might result in sanctions from Russia, including cuts in gas supplies to Slovakia. However, it is technically possible for Slovakia to receive gas supplies from the West. This solution would, though, cost Bratislava much more.

- The gas reversal on the Slovakian-Ukrainian border has become an important issue over the past few months, as it is being considered in the EU and the USA as an option to help Ukraine in its dealings with Russia. In this context, Slovakia has begun to be viewed as a representative of Moscow's interests. Therefore, the European Commission and the USA have been pressing Bratislava to unblock the negotiations concerning the reversal. As a consequence of this pressure Lajcak declared that "technical work has commenced". However, since the route of the reversal has not been agreed, the scope of this work will be very limited, which is probably in line with Slovakia's preferences.
- The negotiations concerning the Slovakian-Ukrainian reversal have been additionally impeded by the distrust between the governments of these two countries. Both parties have been regularly accusing each other of ill will and of sabotaging the reversal deal. This is partly an effect of Slovakia's negative experiences during the talks with Ukrainians at the time of the gas crisis provoked by Gazprom in 2009, when Slovaks complained several times that they had been misled by the government in Kyiv.