

Fico meets Shmyhal: Slovakia's two-track Ukraine policy

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On 24 January, in the border town of Uzhhorod (Zakarpattia oblast) Slovakia's prime minister Robert Fico met his Ukrainian counterpart Denys Shmyhal; this was the Slovak prime minister's third foreign visit since being re-elected last autumn (on the same day he travelled to Berlin, and previously he visited Prague and Budapest). During the meeting Fico announced his decision to provide Ukraine with humanitarian assistance worth around €220,000, as well as several Božena mine-clearing vehicles. He also pledged to deliver eight used ambulances. The subjects of the talks included the Kyiv-Košice railroad, the Mukachevo-Veľké Kapušany electricity interconnector and the modernisation of the Vyšné Nemecké-Uzhhorod border crossing point. Shmyhal referred to this new stage of the bilateral relations as a policy of "new pragmatism".

Commentary

- Fico has pursued a two-track policy towards Kyiv. Despite using relatively unfriendly rhetoric regarding Ukraine, in many important aspects he supports Slovakia's eastern neighbour, a stance which is different from that of Hungary. The Slovak prime minister has announced that he will vote in favour of adopting the EU's Ukraine Facility initiative at the European Council summit on 1 February; he also reiterated his country's unwavering support for Kyiv's aspirations to join the EU. Previously, he had confirmed that commercial contracts to supply the Ukrainian army with military equipment would continue; a large portion of these contracts are being carried out by state-controlled companies of the DMD holding. Fico has also demonstrated his openness to keep providing humanitarian and civilian assistance to Ukraine and to carry out bilaterally beneficial projects. The fact that the atmosphere of the meeting was friendly, and the Ukrainian prime minister was invited to pay a return visit to Slovakia, indicates that there are good prospects for the development of cooperation on a pragmatic level, which could help Slovakia to remain in the mainstream of EU politics in the face of mounting criticism of its controversial domestic reforms.
- The tone of several parts of Fico's statements before the visit, especially those targeted at the Slovak electorate, was clearly unfavourable towards Kyiv. Bratislava has declared that it would not consent to Ukraine's membership of NATO, and does not intend to provide Ukraine with cost-free military assistance. It also does not intend to withdraw from the import embargo on selected types of Ukrainian agricultural produce, although the prime minister has signalled his readiness to consider Kyiv's proposals in this area. Fico has repeatedly pointed out Ukraine's widespread corruption, emphasised his scepticism as regards its possible victory in the war, and accused the US of allegedly

fully controlling this state. By uttering such statements, he intends to appeal to that portion of the Slovak public which is susceptible to anti-American and pro-Russian slogans and which accounts for a large part of the electorate of the Smer party, which he leads (see '[Slovakia: strategic dilemmas after the Russian invasion of Ukraine](#)'). Fico's domestic strategy also includes emphasising the need to keep Slovakia away from 'conflicts between great powers' (Russia and the US). This is because a country as small as Slovakia could only suffer losses as a result of its involvement in such conflicts. Therefore, the Slovak prime minister did not seek for his meeting with his Ukrainian counterpart to be held in Kyiv, and his visit to a town located near the border helped him to maintain the narrative highlighting Slovakia's neutral stance towards the conflict.

- Kyiv's adoption of different approaches towards Bratislava and Budapest indicates that Ukraine has pragmatically accepted Fico's domestic political constraints. Moreover, it could undermine the cooperation between the prime ministers of Slovakia and Hungary, which could potentially be unfavourable to Ukraine if it flourishes. Fico's actions and declarations indicate that the main axis of the Slovak-Hungarian rapprochement does not have an anti-Ukrainian undertone *per se*, but it is rather based on a readiness to offer each other mutual support in disputes over the rule of law within the EU, although in Slovakia's case these are still hypothetical (see '[The Fico–Orbán meeting: an Article-7 alliance](#)'). The comments to Slovak journalists which Fico made ahead of his visit to Ukraine (for example, regarding the need for a compromise with Russia which would *de facto* equate to Kyiv consenting to losing Crimea and the Donbas) got a great deal of publicity in the Ukrainian media, and sparked a major commotion among the Ukrainian public. The head of the Ukrainian parliament's foreign affairs committee even suggested that the Slovak prime minister's visit should be cancelled. Ultimately, Kyiv and Bratislava decided to refrain from organising a joint press conference; instead a special meeting for media representatives was held during which, in order to defuse tension surrounding the visit, Prime Minister Shmyhal referred to the results of the talks as "very constructive".