

Slovakia: strategic dilemmas after the Russian invasion of Ukraine

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The centre-right government in Bratislava decided to discontinue its long-standing policy of avoiding antagonising Russia. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Slovakia has found itself in the vanguard of the countries most involved in providing military and humanitarian aid to Kyiv. Bratislava has expelled 35 Russian diplomats, has closed several pro-Russian websites and intensified the activity of the secret services targeting collaborators of Russian intelligence. Nevertheless, these unprecedented attempts to rid the country of Russian influence are encountering increasing resistance in Slovakia. The opposition, which leads in the polls, is calling for Slovakia to return to the policy of avoiding 'superpower conflicts' and is taking increasingly open pro-Russian positions. This way it meets the mood of a large section of the Slovak public who are distrustful of the US. Inside the government, there are concerns about how a rapid end of the reliance on supplies of Russian raw materials will affect the domestic economy and this is making it difficult to reach a consensus on how quickly this should proceed. Halfway through its term in power, the centre-right parties are facing strategic decisions that will also determine their chances of re-election. If the current approach towards Kyiv and the Kremlin is maintained, Slovakia's position in the EU will strengthen and Russia's influence in this country may also weaken in the long run. The government, which is not very popular, will have to face the challenge of continuing the effort to become independent of Russian raw material supplies amid an economic downturn and the strong polarisation of public sentiments at home. An alternative may be the continuation of military and humanitarian support for Kyiv, while only simulating activities aimed at energy diversification.

The left-wing Smer party dominated Slovakia's political scene for many years. When the centre-right took power in spring 2020, Slovakia began to express itself in a more clearly pro-Western and pro-Atlantic spirit. It was a big change after left-wing governments which combined moderately pro-Russian rhetoric (including criticism of the effectiveness of sanctions) and avoiding confrontational actions against the Kremlin (e.g. it was one of the few EU countries that did not expel Russian diplomats after the poisoning of Sergey Skripal) with maintaining a uniform front inside the EU regarding sanctions and the purchase of American weapons. Since taking power, the centre-right government has expelled Russian diplomats on two occasions (three in 2020 and three in 2021). This was its response to a Slovak consulate being used to obtain a visa for a person involved in the Russian intelligence services murdering a Georgian citizen in Berlin, and latterly it expressed solidarity with the Czech Republic following findings about Russians' participation in blowing up an ammunition depot in Vrbové.



Russia's invasion of Ukraine has seen the Slovak government's stance on Russia become significantly tougher. In mid-March, Bratislava expelled another three employees of the Russian embassy on charges of corrupting Slovak citizens and spying. On 30 March, the government decided to take an unprecedented step, ordering 35 Russian diplomats to leave the country (only Poland and Germany expelled more at one time, and France expelled the same number). Prime Minister Eduard Heger stated that his cabinet "will not tolerate" the fact that the Russians, under the guise of performing diplomatic activities, "blackmail" and "corrupt" Slovaks and "spread disinformation and polarise the public". The Defence Minister Jaroslav Nad' announced that more agents would be exposed after the Slovak services stepped up efforts to break up Russian spy networks. Four Slovaks suspected of collaborating with Russian intelligence were detained in mid-March, but two of them were quickly released, and the most prominent of the four, Pavel Bučka, a lecturer at the Armed Forces Academy, was released from detention at the end of March by the Supreme Court pending trial. He testified that he had collaborated with Russian intelligence since 2013.

The clear anti-Russian actions are coupled with building closer ties with the USA and offering significant military and humanitarian support to Ukraine. The US Secretary of

” After the centre-right took power, Bratislava began to express itself in a clearer pro-Atlantic spirit. This is a major change from the moderately pro-Russian rhetoric of previous governments.

Defence visited Bratislava for the first time in 20 years on 17 March. The context for the visit was the talks on the transfer to Ukraine of the S-300 air defence system in the possession of the Slovak army. Ultimately, Prime Minister Heger announced on the occasion of his visit to Kyiv on 8 April that the battery had been handed over to the Ukrainian army. In exchange for that, the security of Slovak air space would be guarded free of charge by an additional (fourth) Patriot missile system battery operated by the Americans (three batteries operated by the Germans and the Dutch had been deployed in Slovakia for several weeks). Bratislava hopes that the four Patriot batteries will remain in the country for at least a few years, and some government members have suggested that one of them may be bought or even acquired for free.

The Patriots and the Sentinel radars (sent by the US) form part of the NATO Multinational Battlegroup in Slovakia (operating as part of strengthening NATO's eastern flank) whose establishment Bratislava successfully lobbied for. The new unit, commanded by Czechs, currently comprises 800 foreign soldiers, and its final strength is planned to be 3,000 soldiers (originating from six NATO countries, including Poland). In addition to the S-300 systems, Slovak assistance to Ukraine includes the transfer of arms and military equipment for EUR 42.2 million, and 8,400 tonnes of oil and 1,900 tonnes of aviation fuel. Talks are also underway regarding selling Zuzana self-propelled howitzers to Kyiv. Their manufacturer, the Slovak state-owned company Konštrukta-Defence, confirmed that a contract concerning the repair of military equipment had been concluded with Ukraine on 3 May (initially it will repair BRDM-2 amphibious armoured scout cars). Although the Minister of Defence denied reports about the possible transfer of MiG-29 fighter jets, he did confirm Bratislava's efforts to provide allied assistance in patrolling the airspace until the arrival of new F-16 aircraft in 2024 (the preliminary agreement on air-policing was finally concluded with Warsaw). Once all the legal and technical terms of the contract with Poland have been agreed, he does not exclude the transfer of the MiG-29 aircraft to Ukraine. He also points out that "personally he has no problem with this" and "Ukraine needs our help to defend itself against Russian aggression".

The distrustful and divided public

Traditionally, from among the EU's nations the Slovaks have one of the friendliest attitudes towards both Russia and the Kremlin's policy. A large section of them are sceptical about NATO and the US. This Russophilia is partly an effect of the attachment of a large part of the Slovak elite and public

to Slavophile slogans rooted in the 19th-century Slovak national revival, when Russia was viewed as a supporter of Slovaks' efforts to defend themselves against Magyarisation. Hence, in the Slovak version, the sentiment of 'Slavic reciprocity' includes, above all, openness to cooperation with Russia. The cultivated memory of Slovakia's liberation by the Soviet army plays an important role in maintaining sympathy for Russia among the left-leaning part of Slovak society and politics. In turn, Putin's alleged attachment to conservatism and the perception of his regime (especially before the invasion) as one engaged in an ideological dispute with Western liberalism are among the key reasons for the pro-Russian sentiments held by some conservative circles.

Even after the Russian attack, a large number of Slovaks believe in the theses presented in the Kremlin's propaganda, promoted in the anti-establishment media (the Internet, radio), and in recent years these have gained additional popularity due to criticism of the measures taken by the government to deal with the pandemic. According to a poll conducted by the Slovak Academy of Sciences between 22 and 24 March, 34% of the country's residents believe that the Russian attack was a response to Western aggressive provocation, 28% believe that the goal of the invasion was the demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine, and 27% believe that a genocide of the Russian minority took place in the eastern part of Ukraine. Immediately after the aggression, 62% of Slovaks viewed Russia as responsible for the war, but every fourth respondent still put the blame for it on the USA, 9% on NATO, 8% on Ukraine, and 5% on the EU (it was possible to indicate several answers; survey by the AKO agency). The government's efforts to increase NATO's presence in Slovakia are not very popular among Slovaks. According to a survey by the Focus agency for TV Markíza published on 6 March, 45% of Slovaks are opposed to the deployment of NATO troops in their country, and 67% are opposed to the deployment of American soldiers in particular. In January and February, the opposition organised protests against the signing of a defence cooperation agreement with the US (finally ratified on 9 February), which allows the US military to use Slovak military airports.

Traditionally, Slovaks are one of the most pro-Russian nations in the EU. Despite the Russian attack of Ukraine, many of them still believe the Kremlin's propaganda.

Although the sentiment shared by a large part of the Slovak public differs from the one prevalent among the more unequivocally pro-Ukrainian Czechs or Poles, their attitude is evolving. In January, 44% of Slovaks blamed the US and NATO for the rise in tensions between Russia and Ukraine, and only 35% blamed Russia (a survey by Focus for TV Markíza). Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, support for NATO membership rose to 61%, this being the highest figure since 2009 (Focus). The government responded to the popularity of Russian propaganda in early March by suspending some of the websites engaged in disinformation (politicians from the ruling camp suggested in the media that these websites were directly financed by the Kremlin or "promoted the interests of other powers"). The opposition criticised these moves as illegal activity and an attempt to limit the public debate.

Heavy reliance on raw material supplies and timid attempts of diversification

Prime Minister Eduard Heger, who represents the largest party of the coalition, OĽaNO, unequivocally supports the idea that the EU should "completely and as quickly as possible disconnect" from Russian energy, including nuclear fuel. This does not mean, however, that a consensus has been reached in the country. Economy Minister Richard Sulík from the coalition party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) stated on 3 April that Slovakia might have to comply with Moscow's demand to pay for gas in roubles and would not be able to quickly withdraw from Russian supplies, partly out of fear that "after recovery from one addiction it might immediately fall into another". Later that day, responding to a wave of criticism (including from members of the government), Sulík softened his statement and emphasised

that Bratislava did not even have roubles to pay the bills. However, he also stressed that a sudden suspension of Russian gas supplies would be a major challenge, especially for the refining, chemical and processing industries. Two days later, he added that Slovakia “will not help the victims of the war by destroying its own industry”. In turn, the head of the coalition party We Are Family, Boris Kollár, decided that the sanctions should not “lower the living standards” of Slovaks. The representatives of the opposition are speaking even more strongly about the possible embargo on the import of Russian hydrocarbons. The head of Smer, Robert Fico, has accused the government of trying to commit “economic treason”, and the left-wing Hlas party leader Peter Pellegrini warns that cutting off Russian supplies would have a “devastating effect” on the Slovak economy and labour market.

Slovakia’s reliance on Russian hydrocarbons is one of the highest in the EU: in 2020, the share of Russian supplies in crude oil imports was 100% (the only such case in the EU), and in the case of natural

gas it was 85% (fourth place in the EU). In total, as much as 57% of Slovakia’s energy demands are met through imports from Russia, which also places it at the forefront of the EU countries most dependent on Russian energy (only Lithuania had a higher rate in 2020). A majority of the country’s population are reluctant to bear the costs of increasing energy security. In a survey by Focus for TV Markíza (30 March – 6 April), 62% of Slovaks were against withdrawing from buying Russian gas and oil if this would result in an increase in prices (the immediate opt-out option is accepted by 7% of respondents, and a gradual withdrawal is acceptable to every fourth resident of the country). The greatest number of opponents of this solution is among the voters of the extreme right (93%), Smer (81%) and Hlas (69%). They also predominate among the electorate of the coalition party We Are Family (55%). The fewest, though still quite many, are among the voters of the other coalition parties: OĽaNO (33%) and SaS (42%).

” **Concerns about the economic consequences of a rapid break in the dependence on Russian raw materials make it difficult for the government to reach a consensus on the course and pace of this process.**

In recent years, Slovakia has focused on maintaining its position in gas transit, in which it generates revenues of around EUR 300 million annually. Due to this, it opposed the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, and supported the construction of a gas interconnector with Poland (with a capacity of 4.7 billion m³ running to Slovakia and 5.7 billion m³ running to Poland), which has been under construction since 2018. The interconnector will enable gas transit from the LNG terminal in Świnoujście, Poland through the territory of Slovakia, as well as gas supplies for domestic needs. It was only after Russia attacked Ukraine and when the threat that supplies might be interrupted that the government and state-controlled energy companies were stimulated to look for alternative sources of gas supply, above all by purchasing LNG from a terminal in Croatia, and eventually also from Poland. In the case of supplies via Croatia, the state-owned company SPP signed two contracts. Due to this over 170 million m³ of LNG reached Slovakia (80 million m³ in March and 93 million m³ in May). Moreover, on 1 April energy companies started to fill gas tanks for the next heating season. Furthermore, after the outbreak of the war, Slovakia secured three air supplies of nuclear fuel from Russia to both of its (Slovakia’s) power plants which account for more than half of its electricity production. While the government is considering switching to US nuclear fuel, it is discouraged from doing so due to the higher costs and possible technical problems linked with changing the supplier.

In turn, during the debates on the embargo on the import of Russian oil, Slovakia applied for a three-year transition period. Its stance, similar to that presented by Hungary (which calls for a permanent exclusion for itself from this sanction), results largely from the fact that the only refinery in Slovakia is controlled by Hungary’s MOL (its Slovak subsidiary Slovnaft also has the largest network of petrol

stations in the country). Slovakia's Economy Minister, who advocates for a slower withdrawal from Russian fuel supplies, has been criticised in the national media for putting the defence of MOL's position over the interests of the state. More than half of the fuels and 90% of the petrochemical products processed at the Bratislava refinery are intended for export. If we take into account that restricting access to Russian oil would mean a decline in Slovnaft's production by one third, the embargo would primarily affect MOL's profits, reducing its high margins achieved by buying cheaper Russian oil.

Outlook

Slovakia's centre-right government is facing numerous challenges that will make it difficult to maintain the current scale of involvement in helping Ukraine, especially in the event of prolonged hostilities there. The pro-Russian and anti-American sentiment seen in part of the Slovak public, the structural dependence of the energy sector on Russian raw materials and the reluctance of citizens to bear the costs of limiting this dependence are all in line with the opposition's growing criticism of the government's policy. In the first days after the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the opposition seemed to be uncertain about its further strategy, but ultimately it chose isolationist slogans (protesting against the presence of 'foreign' troops from NATO countries), stoking fears of becoming involved in the war and juxtaposing actions for Ukraine with the government's alleged lack of engagement in solving the problems of Slovak citizens, and even a readiness to sacrifice them for this purpose. After the invasion, there were no major changes in the support levels for political parties, and the left-wing parties are still the most popular (the total support level for Hlas and Smer is around 35%). The actions of law enforcement agencies against the leaders of Smer have only sharpened their pro-Russian rhetoric (former Prime Minister Fico is protected by parliamentary immunity, but the former minister of internal affairs from his party spent 23 days in custody).

The government needs to address strategic dilemmas regarding the long-term maintenance of support for Ukraine and its policy against Moscow, including gaining support for measures to limit the import of Russian raw materials. The relatively low poll results of the four parties of the centre-right coalition (below 30% in total) and fierce competition for voters in this part of the political scene put pressure on its leaders to emphasise their separateness. Therefore, it will be increasingly difficult for the government to take coherent actions and further bold decisions, especially in the energy sector, that are connected to the perspective of the country's deteriorating economic situation, e.g. due to accelerating price rises (y/y inflation reached double digits in March, for the first time in 22 years). A good solution for the centre-right may be to further emphasise the moral aspect of condemning the Russian invasion and the aid initiatives undertaken for Ukraine (and at the same time emphasising the opposition's critical stance on this issue) combined with efforts to exclude Slovakia from some of the EU's initiatives to quickly cut off energy supplies from Russia (this is already happening in the case of the embargo on oil imports under consideration) and to gain beneficial solidarity mechanisms during the transition period. The government may hope that this will weaken the negative effects that anti-Russian sanctions will have on Slovak households. In turn, the accusations against Fico will compromise his geopolitical vision in the eyes of some voters. Such cognitive simplifications will be fostered by the sharp internal polarisation, which is deepened both by the ever harsher rhetoric employed by opposition parties and by analogous actions from the government.