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Slovak Foreign Policy Thinking
in the Run-Up to the EU Council Presidency

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Andrej Chovan¹

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¹ Andrej Chovan served as an Acting Head of Central Europe Programme at the Central European Policy Institute. He currently works for the British Embassy in Bratislava, Slovakia.

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Introduction

The “Trends of Visegrad Foreign Policy” project provides a chance to examine the perceptions of Slovak policy makers and researchers and compare them with those of their Czech, Polish and Hungarian counterparts. During the summer of 2015, CEPI and its partners in the V4 countries, approached a total of 1711 foreign-policy stake-holders (diplomats and civil servants, researchers and journalists, politicians and businessmen) in the region with a set of 24 questions to identify their perception of current trends and goals of their country’s foreign policy. It also gave us an insight into to what extent, and in which areas, these national visions and priorities converge and diverge the most in the regional context. In this short commentary, we will focus on several issues in which Slovak responses diverged from the rest of Visegrad.

Out of the 316 stakeholders approached in Slovakia, 124 of them responded making it the highest response rate among the V4 countries (39.2%). Out of those, 62% were civil servants, some 18% identified themselves as experts and researchers, almost 6% as politicians, 5% as journalists, 1% as businessmen and almost 10% did not fit into any of these occupations. In practice, the majority of Slovak respondents in this survey were officials and diplomats from the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs. The presented findings thus can be partly seen as a critical reflection of Slovak practitioners on their own national foreign policy goals, which they have implemented but not always fully approved (or had doubts on).

Successes and Failures of Foreign Policy

To start on a positive note, our data showed a high level of consensus on the biggest success of Slovak foreign policy since the 2004. Two closely related responses – accession to the Eurozone (28.4%) and deeper EU integration (23.5%) – came out on top. In case of other Visegrad countries, a notion of biggest foreign policy success was much more diffuse. As for other achievements, Slovakia’s contribution to improving EU’s relations with the Western Balkans (13.6%) and increasing Slovakia’s credibility and role in Europe and international affairs (12.3%).

When it comes to failures, Slovakia’s Eastern policy has been perceived as ineffective and problematic, whether taken as a whole (10%) or specifically in relations with Ukraine (another 10%). Such views could reflect the ambivalent policy of the Slovakia’s current center-left government, which pursued two contradictory policy lines on the recent Ukrainian crisis: while it supported Ukraine’s pro-EU integration process, Prime Minister Robert Fico was openly pro-Russian, and opposed EU sanctions against Russia in his public statements.



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The positions of the V4 countries on the Ukraine crisis in the course of 2014 were inconsistent and divergent. It also tainted the grouping with a reputation of being divided on key geopolitical issues (such as energy and relations with Russia), and therefore unreliable for times of crises.

The Most Optimistic Assessment of the V4

Even though Slovak respondents did not stand out dramatically compared to their V4 counterparts in most of the areas surveyed, they did present a rather uniquely optimistic view of the V4 grouping as such. The exception points to a possible overestimation of the grouping's importance, likely rooted in the country's realistic view that as a smaller state with a higher degree of EU integration, it relies on regional alliances and stable coalitions within the EU-28 framework more than other Visegrad countries. The V4 is perceived by Slovak respondents as a nearly permanent coalition and an automatic force multiplier.

When asked whether they “Agree”, “Somewhat agree”, “Somewhat disagree”, “Disagree” or “don't know” that the Visegrad Group is an influential actor in the EU, 28.9% of Slovak respondents answered they agree, while the V4 average was only 12.1%. Answers “Somewhat Agree” were a bit more balanced: 41.3% Slovak respondents chose the option, while the V4 average was 32.8%.

The term “influential” is of course relative and means something else to each V4 country, but in general reveals how individual countries' stakeholders regard the group as being able to have an impact on the EU policy making. In this light, the divide between Slovak and Polish perception is not so striking. While Poland is by far the biggest of the V4 countries, Slovakia is on the other end of the spectrum and thus has naturally lower criteria on what to view as influential. In other words, Poland has the capacities to develop considerable pressure in the EU arena all by itself, and thus has expectations that for a group of 4 states to be considered influential, it should wield even stronger leverage than by itself. On the other hand, Slovak Republic, the smallest country of the group, needs allies the most – precisely because it lacks the ability to develop influence on its own.

Particularly interesting is the result from another question: The participation in the Visegrad Group is beneficial for pursuing your country's national interests. 65% Slovaks agreed, 26% somewhat agreed; 62.9% Hungarians agreed, 33% somewhat agreed; 47.9% Czechs agreed, 43.8% somewhat agreed; 22% Poles agreed; 58% somewhat agreed. There is a clear convergence of views of Slovak and Hungarian respondents. Bear in mind that the survey was conducted in summer 2015, when the V4 was intensively coordinating its joint position on refugee quotas (although the crisis was not full-blown at the time) and was heavily criticized by majority of EU member states for its unconstructive approach. At the time,



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Hungary was perceived as the strongest hardliner, but soon was unseated by the Slovak Republic and PM Fico, who rather faced the possibility of taking the country to court than submitting it to the quota system. At the time, it was thus exceptionally topical to view the grouping as a means to pursue national interests, especially for countries which paid so much attention to the migration crisis. It is reasonable to expect that had been the Nordstream 2 project (drawing immense opposition from Poland) announced few months earlier, Polish responses to this particular question would be very different, as Poles are happy to use the platform to coordinate against Nordstream 2 and thus protect national interests as much as possible.

Positive Outlook on Bilateral Relations

Slovak respondents were also generally more positive in evaluating country's quality of relations with other countries. When asked to mark the country's relations from 1 (best) to 5 (worst), the Slovak Republic came to have better than V4 average relations with a considerable number of countries, such as: naturally Czech Republic (1.1 against an average of 2.0), USA (1.6 against an average of 2.1), Russia (2.7 against 3.7), Serbia (1.9 against 2.6), Poland (1.7 against 2.0), Germany (1.4 against 1.6) or Austria (1.6 against 2.2). The last mentioned is particularly interesting, since Czech respondents – the main initiators of the Slavkov trilateral – rated their relations with Austria with the grade of 2.1.

Relations with Russia

Although the Slovak Republic was not the one to give the best mark to the relations with Russia (quite unsurprisingly, it was Hungary, which rated it with a mark of 2.2), Slovak respondents were the most conciliatory on sanctions against Russia. Although they fairly converged with others on the question whether sanctions should be kept until Minsk II accords are respected by Russia, only 51.3% (lowest score) of the respondents said they agree and somewhat agree that the EU sanctions should be kept in place until Russia retreats from Crimea (the V4 average was 61,2%). At the same time, 13.8% Slovak respondents said they agree and somewhat agree that the sanctions should be abandoned immediately, while the V4 average was 10.1%.



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Still Enthusiastic about EU Enlargement

Slovaks confirmed their reputation as being the most proactive in support the Western Balkans on their path of EU integration. While a V4 average of 59.1% respondents stated they agree and somewhat agree that the EU will admit some of the remaining Western Balkan countries within the next 10 years, 70.1% of Slovak respondents (highest score) said so. Similarly, a V4 average of 45.6% respondents agree and somewhat agree that the EU will open negotiations with at least one associated country, 61% of Slovak respondents think so.

Slovakia Preparing Its First EU Presidency

For all the V4 countries, energy policy – and energy security in particular – is perceived as current and future top priority. Slovak government is already taking a lead, together with Poland, in opposing Russia's plans to double the capacity of its Nordstream gas pipeline to Germany, by-passing Ukraine (as well as Slovakia, depriving the government of hefty revenue from transit fees). And even though the joint stance on redistributive quotas for refugees attracted a lot of harsh criticism from EU partners, it did prove that when the V4 countries stand together, key EU countries take note.

As the last of the V4 countries, Slovakia will hold the rotating Presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2016. A good Presidency is measured by how competent management of EU dossiers and many deals are done under its watch. Nevertheless, its performance at the EU helm will also shape the way how the Visegrad Group will be perceived within the EU and more globally.



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