



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia external relations briefing:
Perception of the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the PRC in
Slovakia
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The 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, as well as the related 70th anniversary of the opening of diplomatic relations between it and the former Czechoslovakia (of which Slovakia is one of the successor states) did not resonate very strongly in Slovakia. The reason for this is that neither political nor cultural relations between the two countries are very highly developed, which means Slovaks view China principally through the lens of economic relations. Even so, despite the fact that China is the third largest source of imports into Slovakia, there has not been sufficiently high-profile economic cooperation (such as a successfully completed major Chinese investment project) to date to warrant closer attention of Slovak official or commercial media to events in China. For this reason, this anniversary was treated as just one of many other foreign events by the media, without any perceived connection to or consequence for Slovakia.

As for the official governmental response to this anniversary, there was a report on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Beijing had organized a diplomatic reception on September 25th, which highlighted common economic projects in agriculture and business in China, as well as other forms of cooperation. Similarly, the Embassy of the PRC in Bratislava organized a reception to commemorate these events in the Slovak capital. This event included the awarding of prizes to two high-school student winners of an essay competition on the topic of this anniversary, which was declared by the Confucius Institute in Bratislava. However, the most senior government representative to attend was František Ružička, one of the two state secretaries (i.e. vice-ministers) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic. There was no coverage of either official event in the national public media. Nor was there any mention of the anniversaries on the website of any governmental official or institution. When it comes to the president Zuzana Čaputová, such a lack of recognition of these events can be expected, since she is politically situated on the liberal right, meaning strongly pro-Western and critical of China concerning the situation in the area of human rights in China according to Western standards and concepts of such rights. The silence is more surprising in the case of the prime minister Peter Pellegrini (from the center-left Smer-SD party) and speaker of parliament Andrej Danko (from the conservative nationalist SNS), who both advocate for building stronger ties not only with Western countries, but with countries and powers “in all directions”.

These highest representatives of the state reflect the opinions of the political currents from which they came. For example, the many parties of the fragmented center-right are still rather cool towards China and deepening relations with it. These parties also emphasize the Western concept of human rights and values in their rhetoric on China. In contrast, the center-left, represented by the dominant governing Smer-SD party, is more favorable to China, on the basis of economic pragmatism. This pragmatism is a source of criticism by the center-right parties, who see it as an instance of Smer-SD sacrificing Slovakia's Western values for economic gain. It must be mentioned, however, that these center-right parties are currently in opposition (and have been so for the better part of the previous decade and a half). This means that their stance can be seen as rhetoric based on a lack of responsibility for the governance of the country, and it is not certain whether they would or would not pursue the same pragmatic course if they were to gain power. As for the radical political currents, China has a positive image not only among the radical left, which is natural, but increasingly though somewhat surprisingly also among the radical right, which is gaining strength. This can be attributed to a mentality of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", where China is seen as a counterweight to the liberalism and progressivism of Western powers and organizations such as the EU, to which the forces of the radical right are opposed. For this reason, coverage of the anniversary and its commemorative events are generally positive in the radical and alternative media. While the topic of China and the issues surrounding the relationship of Slovakia toward it are not seen as important political questions among the general public, the increasingly polarized and tribal nature of Slovak politics mean that the attitude of any given citizens towards China can be inferred from his or her self-described political affiliation.

When reporting on the anniversary, most news media got their information from the Press Agency of the Slovak Republic (TASR), the official public press agency of the country. This agency put out two reports which relied on information from Reuters, the Associated Press and the Deutsche Presse-Agentur, therefore all Western press agencies. It must be pointed out that TASR did not use information directly from Chinese sources. One of the two reports by TASR focused on the military parade, while the other report concentrated on the continuing unrest in Hong Kong. Consequently, the majority of the media in Slovakia, whether public or private, focused on these two aspects of the anniversary commemoration. Concerning the military parade, apart from always mentioning the numbers of personnel and military hardware taking part in the parade itself (and therefore that it is the largest military parade ever held by China), reporting focused on the increase in Chinese military power and the resulting consequences for the distribution of power in the region and the world, especially as concerns the USA. As an example of this focus, the title picture accompanying the report of this event in print and

electronic media invariably showed the military parade. There was however no reflection on how or whether this development concerns Slovakia, since it is seen as being a purely Asian-Pacific affair, with no bearing on the Slovakia or the broader region in which it is situated. Concerning the unrest in Hong Kong, focus was on the Chinese ban on demonstrations on the day of the anniversary, and on the Hong Kong opposition movement's refusal to accept the ban, as well as on their demands. This focus on Hong Kong can once again be explained by the fact that most of the largest and most popular newspapers, TV stations, and internet news portals have a right-wing liberal bent, and they are very much in tune with values declared by the Hong Kong protestors and hostile to the values and mode of governance represented by China.

As was mentioned, the reflection of this anniversary in Slovakia was minimal, and what response there was rather cool or skeptical of China's accomplishments. The reasons for this kind of response can be found in the interpretation of the recent history of Slovakia by the political, and media elites, as well as those from the public sector and civil society. Slovakia, as part of Czechoslovakia, was under communist rule prior to the 1990s, and its national political and media cultures and self-image is built upon the distancing of the contemporary Slovakia from its communist past. China is still seen through the lens of the communist experience of Slovakia, meaning it is portrayed as a dictatorship with a lack of political pluralism and democracy and a lack of respect for human rights. The Hong Kong issue is seen through the experience of Slovak and Czechoslovak dissidents towards the Czechoslovak communist regime. China is also seen as a country that does not play by the rules of global trade, leading to unfair trade practices which will be developed below. Linked to this is the image of China as a manufacturer of inferior products; a perception which is changing only very slowly, mainly thanks to companies like Huawei. The view of China as a country with environmentally unfriendly policies and suffering from smog and pollution is also deeply entrenched in the public mind. For this reason, governmental representatives, journalists and editors are wary as being seen as too favorable to China. Since there has been no major development (e.g. in the sphere of economic relations) to counteract this view, it stands to reason that China's 70th anniversary would be seen through this prism.

As explained above, the attitude of Slovaks towards China is determined first and foremost by economic relations. These have not been as dynamic as promised. This does not imply any hostility on the part of the country or its people so much as a lack of substance in mutual relations. Even though for the past decade and a half, Slovakia, usually under the rule of the center-left Smer party and its leader Robert Fico, declared its intentions to develop relations with China and not to focus its foreign policy orientation solely on the West, in practice there has not been much progress in this regard. There is a certain disappointment in

Slovakia with regard to the 16+1 initiative due to it not delivering the results that were hoped for. Without a solid foundation in economic relations, China does not have a particularly positive image in Slovakia. Therefore, the attitude of Slovakia towards China's 70th anniversary and its celebration has been muted and cool. An improvement in mutual economic relations between the two countries, such as an increase in the volume of trade (but especially of Slovak exports to China, i.e. the removal of trade barriers on products exported by Slovakia), as well as an increase of Chinese investment (especially a major flagship project) would go a long way in improving the image of China in Slovakia, and ensure that the 75th anniversary would be seen in Slovakia in a more positive light.