



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia external relations briefing:

External Relations of Slovakia: Reacting to the COVID-19 Outbreak

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As with other aspects of public policy, the main issue of foreign policy in Slovakia in March was the COVID-19 pandemic. March was when the pandemic went from being merely one of several developments abroad that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) had to monitor, to becoming the primary focus of Slovak diplomacy.

Until the coronavirus appeared in Slovakia, the pandemic was strictly a foreign policy issue. Already on February 5th, the Slovak government pledged to give 200 000 Euros to the World Health Organization to help combat the pandemic, which was confirmed by an agreement between Slovakia and the WHO on February 18th. Apart from that, the MoFA limited itself to the usual monitoring of the safety situation and travel restrictions in other countries and issuing travel advisories, until early March.

The first extraordinary measures that Slovakia had to take with regards to its external policy were on March 6th, when the first case of the disease was confirmed in Slovakia. On the same day, a host of new measures were approved by the government. Concerning external relations, Slovakia instituted a ban flights to and from Italy (to which the first cases were traced) starting from March 9th. Travel to other countries hit by the pandemic was merely discouraged without being banned outright, apart from school trips abroad, which were cancelled. This changed on March 12th, when travel abroad by air, bus and train was suspended and only individual travel by private automobile or aircraft was allowed under certain conditions. Beginning on the same day, everyone returning home from abroad had to undergo a fourteen-day quarantine. Furthermore, from that day only those people with permanent or temporary residency in Slovakia or another valid permit were allowed to enter the country. Border controls were also instituted on the borders with all the surrounding states apart from Poland (which followed suit a day later).

Such policies led to problems when people living in one country but working in another were left stranded. The drawbacks of this measure became more apparent when Hungary also closed its borders on March 17th, meaning that only Hungarian citizens could get into the country. Several hundred Slovaks were left stranded on the wrong side of the border, unable to get home or to work. The situation was compounded in the region of the Slovak capital Bratislava, which lies near the Austrian and Hungarian borders. Namely, many Slovaks from Bratislava had bought houses in the border regions of these neighboring states to avoid the high housing prices in the capital. These Slovaks living in Hungary could not return home from their

jobs in Bratislava without a special residency card which was difficult to obtain quickly, or else they had to skip work, for fear of not being able to return home. It took a day for authorities from both countries to come to an agreement on this category of people, though implementation was spotty and problems continued.

Foreigners from third countries were also in an absurd situation, as both countries allowed them to leave their territory, but neither of them let them in, meaning that these people were stranded in the border zone, until Slovakia implemented a transit corridor. Such border closures were criticized by the European Commission as going against the free movement of Europeans within the bloc. The Commission advocated for a common EU solution in closing external EU borders, while leaving internal borders open. But this approach had little chance of being accepted, since many member states wanted to continue restrictions on travel from the most severely impacted countries like Italy or Spain.

Also on March 17th, Slovak embassies and consulates abroad started collecting information on Slovak citizens to begin repatriation back to Slovakia. The execution of this measure was met with criticism when it became known through the media that it was difficult to contact these diplomatic missions by telephone and e-mail (personal contact had been discouraged since March 12th) even after multiple attempts, due to the high demand for repatriation. Because of this demand, the MoFA defined several categories into which Slovaks abroad were assigned, based on their age and reason for being abroad. Repatriation was then carried out according to the priority status of each category. The priority categories were minors, students, pregnant women and citizens abroad for work-related reasons. The least priority was assigned to tourists. Almost 2 000 Slovaks from all continents immediately expressed interest, with hundreds more in the following days.

In some instances, the MoFA worked with other countries to get its citizens home via a third country. This led to minor incidents in Hungary and the Czech Republic when repatriated Slovaks disobeyed instructions and decided to carry out the last leg of repatriation to their homes on their own, thus breaking quarantine. The most serious incident was on March 24th, when four Slovaks repatriated by plane by the Czech Republic to the Czech capital Prague refused to board a bus bound for a quarantine center in Slovakia, and instead decided to get home on their own. The police forces of both countries began a search for these quarantine breakers, and there were fears in Slovakia that the Czechs might stop accepting Slovaks for repatriation. Luckily, these fears did not come to pass, but Slovak citizens wishing to be repatriated through the Czech Republic had to sign an affidavit or declaration on oath that they would board the buses prepared by the Slovak government to get to Slovakia.

Another problem linked to the lack of discipline of the repatriated citizens was that some of them later returned to the country where they were staying previously. This led the MoFA to set a deadline till April 2nd for Slovak citizens to register for repatriation. After that date, further requests for repatriation to Slovakia will no longer be accepted. The rationale given by Slovak officials was that these people were using this crisis repatriation effort as a taxi or shuttle service.

Another way the COVID-19 crisis impacted Slovakia's external relations was through purchase of medical equipment abroad. Like most other countries, Slovakia underestimated preparations and did not have enough medical supplies, notably surgical masks and respirators. These two articles were especially important because Slovakia was one of the few European countries to institute mandatory wearing of surgical masks (or any other form of facial protection, such as scarves or bandanas) for all citizens venturing outdoors. This led to a scandal which resulted in the firing of the director of the Administration of State Material Reserves of the Slovak Republic, Kajetán Kičura, when certain practices concerning sourcing of foreign medical supplies came to light, such as paying giving contracts to questionable companies, buying testing kits of limited use, or paying overly high prices for the supplies. As for the sourcing of supplies from abroad, most of them came from China, where Slovak diplomacy obtained the help of the Czech Ministry of the Interior in forging new contacts. Part of these supplies were delivered through the SALIS (Strategic Air Lift International Solution) program of the NATO Support and Procurement Agency. Cooperation with other countries such as the Czech Republic and organizations such as NATO show that obtaining supplies is a broader multilateral diplomatic effort, necessary for a small country like Slovakia, which does not have a strong diplomatic presence on its own. Slovak diplomacy also obtained 100 000 FFP3 respirators from Turkey, which were held up for several weeks for customs reasons but finally arrived on March 25th.

The unprecedented difficulties of this situation were compounded by the fact that Slovakia was in the midst of a transfer of power between the incumbent government and a new one formed after the parliamentary elections of February 29th. This power transfer took place on March 21st. At the MoFA, the outgoing longtime minister Miroslav Lajčák was to hand over the reins of Slovak diplomacy to his successor Ivan Korčok. Korčok was a professional diplomat and up till his nomination, ambassador of the Slovak Republic to the USA. He was a nominee of the center-right libertarian Freedom and Solidarity (Sloboda a solidarita, SaS) party, which is Atlanticist and moderately eurosceptic. However, he was previously a MoFA official for both center-right and center-left governments. But due to the center-right composition of the new government, his nomination is expected to herald a shift away from the foreign policy

“aimed in all directions” of the preceding government towards a more staunchly pro-Western stance. In a twist, the newly appointed minister had to enter into domestic quarantine for two weeks, as he had just returned from abroad, namely the USA where he had been stationed up to his nomination. In the meantime, his administrative and policy duties are to be carried out by his deputy, newly appointed State Secretary Martin Klus, also from SaS. Official and representative duties will be carried out by Richard Sulík, the chairman of the SaS party and the new Vice-Premier and Minister of the Economy. The new government affirmed that its foreign policy priorities will be to continue repatriating Slovak citizens and to obtain medical equipment from abroad. Apart from criticism about medical supplies mentioned above (and the firing of Kičura), there has mostly been continuity in the approaches of the successive governments. Since Slovakia was one of the last EU members to suffer a virus outbreak and the rate of its spread has also been among the slowest, it seems that the measures of both governments have been largely effective.