



# Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia external relations briefing:  
Slovak Diplomacy as a Traditional Promoter of the  
Dialogue with the Western Balkans**

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# **Slovak Diplomacy as a Traditional Promoter of the Dialogue with the Western Balkans**

## **Summary**

*After relative stagnation last year it seems there is an interest for resumption of accession negotiations to join the EU which was emphasized at the May's Foreign Affairs Council of the EU Ministers of Foreign Affairs. Slovakia has traditionally been promoting the discussions with countries of the Western Balkans due to its strategic geopolitical position as well as an opportunity for economic or social cooperation. Especially the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo is of special interest of Slovakia as Miroslav Lajčák has been promoted as the EU Special Representative for Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue. However, the countries of Western Balkans will have to show a great degree of dedication and effort to proceed to more advanced stages of negotiation<sup>1</sup>s due to the specific historical background. A new EU methodology has been recently presented to offer transparent feedback of the candidate's progress.*

## **Introduction**

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of May, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivan Korčok, attended the meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) primarily to discuss the Western Balkans, transatlantic relations and to exchange views on climate change with the US Special Presidential Envoy on Climate, John Kerry. However, it was the discussion about Western Balkans which had been initiated by the Slovak diplomacy and which is starting to gain some traction.

## **Building of a strong leadership role of the EU in the Western Balkans region**

Although cohesion of the EU suffered recently by the migration crisis or Brexit, it seems that the politics of enlargement still remains one of the main tools of the EU. One of the most important non-EU regions is the Western Balkans which was set as an EU integration priority

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission. 2003. *The Thessaloniki Summit: a milestone in the European Union's relations with the Western Balkans*

already in 2003 at Thessaloniki summit<sup>1</sup>. Further, in its communication on the new enlargement methodology the Commission calls the prospect of membership a “geostrategic investment” and underlines the importance of the enlargement process “particularly at times of increased geopolitical competition”<sup>2</sup>. Currently, most of these countries (together with Turkey) are considered as major candidates to become full members of the EU. However, this region has been marked by a tense past which in some cases has not been fully resolved (e. g. Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence from Serbia) and this is just one of the reasons that the EU integration process is lagging. It seems that a lot of work needs to be done on several fronts. Though resolving the geopolitical situation is one of the most important and taught tasks to be done, the EU leaders are fully aware of other issues such as higher political engagement, economic cooperation or COVID-19 pandemic related help from the EU<sup>3</sup>.

But let’s go back to more critical aspects. The situation around the unilateral declaration of Kosovo independence from Serbia is even more complicated since some of the EU member countries (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) have not recognized Kosovo’s independence. This will definitely affect and potentially prolong the negotiations but it seems that the EU leaders are now willing to accelerate the enlargement process. Slovakia is traditionally one of the countries which pay a special attention to Balkans and this is not only thanks to a cheaper workforce coming from Balkans or a relatively large community of Slovaks living in Vojvodina, Serbia. Western Balkans has become the first region where Slovakia implemented a new type of projects called “transfer of transformational experiences”<sup>4</sup>. On 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2020, Miroslav Lajčák was appointed EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other western Balkan regional issues (EUSR) with an initial mandate of 12 months which has been extended till 31<sup>st</sup> of August 2022<sup>5</sup>. This interest is for a good reason. A geopolitical situation of Western Balkans due to its relative proximity (it’s basically surrounded by the other EU countries) may have a direct impact on neighboring EU regions such as Central Europe. The recent migration crisis is just one of the examples how the relations in the whole EU can be disturbed. Ivan Korčok, who brought up the topic on the FAC, considers Western Balkans a strategic region important for stability, security or closer cooperation and

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<sup>2</sup> Lehne, S. 2020. *Geopolitics, the EU and the Western Balkans* (chapter 1), p. 14

<sup>3</sup> EEAS. 2021. *Foreign Affairs Council: Press remarks by High Representative Josep Borrel*

<sup>4</sup> slovakaid.sk. 2021. *Rozvojová spolupráca Slovenskej republiky s krajinami západného Balkánu*

<sup>5</sup> EUR-Lex. 2021. COUNCIL DECISION (CFSP) 2021/470 of 18 March 2021

despite its rough history, he adds, it is clear that the individual countries are willing to be a part of the European community<sup>6</sup>.

Paradoxically, as mentioned earlier, Slovakia still remains one of a few countries that do not see Serbia and Kosovo as two independent countries. The official statement made as a reaction to Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia on 17<sup>th</sup> of February 2008 is that the unilateral declaration is against the international law and the final decision should be based upon negotiations with UN Security Council<sup>7</sup>. This has been re-affirmed later by the Slovak Prime Minister Róbert Fico<sup>8</sup>. However, if we look at the composition of the countries not recognizing Kosovo's independence, we can see that the most of the countries have some sort of own autonomist issues (e. g. The Catalan independence movement in Spain or a Hungarian minority in the southern part of the Slovakia). Indeed, the precedence of Kosovo's independence could possibly escalate such tendencies in the EU territory but for now, at least in case of Slovakia, it is not considered as a real issue comparable to countries such as Spain. On the other hand, the potential autonomy within Slovakia has a persistent support in the Hungarian minority which was reaffirmed by a non-parliamentary political party SMK in "The Memorandum of Hungarians" on 4<sup>th</sup> of July 2020<sup>9</sup>. Thus, Slovakia will be closely watching how the situation between Belgrade and Pristina is advancing especially if Serbia emphasized many times, they won't recognize Kosovo's independence in any way.

So far, the enlargement policy of the EU has not brought expected outcomes and the accession negotiations are considered ineffective by some authorities. According to the Prime Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivan Korčok, the EU should utilize all aspects of its new accession methodology, especially those with a positive impact on the negotiations<sup>10</sup>. There are four main principles of the revised methodology. Firstly, it is credibility of negotiations which warrants that every important candidate's achievement will be appropriately recognized by the EU. Secondly, a top level political engagement with the candidates through regular summits and ministerial conferences. Thirdly, a "step-by-step" approach of progressive achievement of required criteria organized as thematic clusters. The cluster on fundamentals (rule of law,

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<sup>6</sup> Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí Slovenskej republiky . 2021. *Minister Korčok na rokovaní ministrov zahraničných vecí v Bruseli: Ak chce byť EÚ globálnym hráčom, musí byť jednoznačným lídrom vo svojom susedstve, osobitne to platí o západnom Balkáne*

<sup>7</sup> Národná rada SR. 2007. *Vyhlásenie Národnej rady Slovenskej republiky k riešeniu budúceho štatútu srbskej provincie Kosovo*

<sup>8</sup> ct24.ceskatelevize.cz. 2015. *Fico: Uznat Kosovo? Na to nejsme připraveni*

<sup>9</sup> ta3.com. 2020. *V maďarskom memorande je 10 požiadaviek, Korčok ho kritizuje*

<sup>10</sup> Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí Slovenskej republiky . 2021. *Minister Korčok na rokovaní ministrov zahraničných vecí v Bruseli: Ak chce byť EÚ globálnym hráčom, musí byť jednoznačným lídrom vo svojom susedstve, osobitne to platí o západnom Balkáne*

economic criteria and public administration reform) will be the starting point which needs to be fulfilled in the first place before moving to other clusters. At last, it is clear communication of the EU expectations supported with clear incentives after reaching the milestones. This helps to provide better predictability for both sides and allows for more decisive measures of sanctioning if the reforms are not moving forward as they should<sup>11</sup>.

Despite the recent stagnation (enhanced by the coronavirus pandemic), the recent FAC conference is a sign that the EU leaders are willing to move this topic forward and Slovakia representatives confirm that the Western Balkans belong to its traditional key priorities of foreign policy. According to Ivan Korčok, the relationships should be developed beyond the accession negotiations and the EU should perceive Western Balkans as a partner. If the EU wants to be a global player it definitely needs to be a strong leader in the wider European community<sup>12</sup>. For example, Western Balkans is considered a partner region in the Slovakia's middle-term developmental strategy (for years 2019-2023) with the emphasis on public administration, building of civil society, infrastructure and sustainable use of natural resources as well as support with the development of a market environment<sup>13</sup>. Slovakia is also a member of International Visegrad Fund (IVF) with the main office in Bratislava which is promoting regional cooperation and supporting partner regions through grants, scholarships and artist residencies.

## **Conclusion**

Although, the EU representatives are willing to resume the accession negotiations the enlargement decisions are not up to the EU alone. Each single member country has a right to raise objections or issues which may be hard to overcome. The perception of each candidate's rate of progress will probably come across disagreements between the member states. Furthermore, the recent political situation in the EU, such as Hungary or Poland being criticized for eroding civil and democratic principles of the EU is only giving water to enlargement opponents' mill. If countries which joined the EU already in 2004 strongly promote their own interest before the interests of a wider community no wonder the opposite forces will exist. On the other hand, help from the EU as well as single member countries is essential for the

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<sup>11</sup> European Commission. 2020. *Revised enlargement methodology: Questions and Answers*

<sup>12</sup> Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí Slovenskej republiky . 2021. *Minister Korčok na rokovaní ministrov zahraničných vecí v Bruseli: Ak chce byť EÚ globálnym hráčom, musí byť jednoznačným lídrom vo svojom susedstve, osobitne to platí o západnom Balkáne*

<sup>13</sup> Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí SR. 2020. *Hodnotenie priorít zahraničnej a európskej politiky Slovenskej republiky v roku 2019 a ich zameranie na rok 2020*

fulfillment of the key reforms and Slovakia could be a significant partner in this challenge. Although the political narrative of the country's future orientation has been shaken recently (there are more voices asking for greater cooperation with Russia), Slovakia remains a strong supporter of an EU integration. And it can offer its valuable experience with such transformation process from the past. Overcoming an obsolete political regime, a shift to democracy and respect of human rights and minorities, corruption fighting or building a functioning market economy and joining the eurozone are valuable learning lessons. Indeed, Slovakia itself has a lot of work to do but sharing genuine experiences with each other can be beneficial for both sides.

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