



# Weekly Briefing

**Slovakia external relations briefing:  
The “New” Government’s Foreign Policy Priorities  
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# The “New” Government’s Foreign Policy Priorities

## Summary

*Slovakia has a new government since April 1, 2021. Several ministers have returned to their positions after the resignation of the Prime Minister, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs. In connection with the appointment of the new government, the main priorities of Slovakia in the field of foreign policy were presented, which we analyze in the briefing. Above all, it is a strong partnership with the EU and a Security Strategy that we will focus on in our analysis.*

## Introduction

On the first day of April, the President appointed a new government of the Slovak Republic. After several weeks of ongoing tensions in the governing coalition, the conditions of individual coalition partners were met. However, the only significant change in the government is the change of the Prime Minister. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivan Korčok, also returned to his original function, informing about the priorities of foreign policy for the following period. In principle, they remain without any deviations and respond to the most critical areas in current international relations.

## The EU as the strongest partner during the pandemic

In his statement, the Minister of Foreign Affairs confirmed that thanks to the solidarity of EU member states and the efforts of Slovak diplomacy, Slovakia was able to secure the earlier delivery of 340,000 doses of Pfizer vaccines.<sup>1</sup> The negotiations took place in silence and, according to the minister, their result is a manifestation of clear solidarity between member states towards the Slovak Republic.<sup>2</sup> The reason for the negotiations was that Slovakia found itself among the last in the process of ordering this vaccine. It should be noted here that within

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<sup>1</sup> Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí Slovenskej republiky. 2021. *Ivan Korčok: vďaka solidarite 19 štátov EÚ a šikovnosti našich diplomatických vyjednávačov v Bruseli bude na Slovensku vakcínou Pfizer zaočkovaných 340 tisíc občanov o pol roka skôr.*

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

the framework of foreign policy, these negotiations are a means of securing registered vaccines, which Slovakia considers safe for vaccinating its citizens. Although the increase in vaccine supplies seems obvious and banal, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly emphasizes the success of the work of Slovak diplomats, without the efforts of which Slovakia would not preferentially get to these benefits.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, several countries have sought to deliver more doses of Pfizer earlier (possibly as a result of a review of Astra Zeneca vaccination strategies). In this context, we can say that citizens' attitudes to vaccination depend on the current situation elsewhere in the world. Slovak citizens were quite sensitive to the reassessment of possible side effects of Astra Zeneca, which resulted in a (so far) slight change of the vaccination strategy in terms of the age group of the population. After changing the vaccine to a substance from Pfizer and Moderna, we again witnessed an increased interest in vaccination.

In connection with the supply of vaccines, it is also necessary to note the issue of evaluation and possible registration of Sputnik V. The import of the vaccine was ultimately also one of the impulses that led to the government crisis. In April, the vaccine came to the fore again in connection with the business trip of the new Minister of Finance, which, however, was not approved by the government. According to reserved statements from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, negotiations on the vaccine are more in the competence of the Ministry of Health.<sup>4</sup> Following the negotiations, a situation arose in which Russia requested the return of the supplied vaccines. The reason is a breach of the contract for the supply of vaccines, namely in-laboratory testing, which is not part of the official EU network of vaccine quality control laboratories.<sup>5</sup> The inadequate steps of the Minister of Finance (former Prime Minister), in particular the subsequent meeting and negotiations on Sputnik V testing in Hungary, where the Slovak ambassador was directly excluded from the negotiations,<sup>6</sup> puts unnecessary pressure on the domestic political scene and creates an inconsistent picture of Slovakia's foreign policy priorities. In connection with the controversial import of the vaccine, it can be assumed that the topic of the Sputnik vaccine will provoke tensions not only on the domestic political scene, but will also negatively affect Slovakia's external relations and reputation as a partner.

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<sup>3</sup> Press conference of the Minister of Foreign Affairs on 09 April 2021

<sup>4</sup> Press conference of the Minister of Foreign Affairs on 09 April 2021

<sup>5</sup> DennikN.sk, Folentová, V. 2021. *Ruský fond žiada, aby sme vrátili vakcínu Sputnik V, a obviňuje slovenský ústav zo sabotáže a z fake news.*

<sup>6</sup> Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí Slovenskej republiky. 2021. *Stanovisko ministra zahraničných vecí a európskych záležitostí SR I. Korčoka k tvrdeniam poslanca G. Gyimesiho.*

Apart from Slovakia, other EU countries have also expressed interest in this vaccine, all of which have been confirmed for use only after the substance has been registered in the Union. In this context, the activities of the Minister of Finance are inconsistent with the activities of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The main reason is that, according to a survey, around half a million Slovaks want to be vaccinated with Sputnik, while expressing distrust of other vaccines. Although in the current pandemic situation several countries, as well as Slovakia, emphasize the preference of the interests of their own citizens over the interests of the EU, the statements that the EU member states should be united in the fight against a pandemic resonate.

The growing pro-European rhetoric of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs can be observed since the government of Igor Matovič, and this trend continues. The reason is clearly the reservation of foreign policy priorities in the context of the previous government's activities, when there were often disproportionate statements and foreign policy activities aimed at emphasizing the importance of relations with Russia. Slovakia has only limited opportunities to influence events in the world, so it must rely on cooperation with partners. This confirms the importance of membership of the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance as the best alternative for promoting Slovak foreign policy interests.

### **The Security Strategy and the support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine**

Slovakia, like some other countries, has expressed concern about the current situation near Ukraine's borders. It is about increasing Russia's military potential in three places, in the Crimea and on the northern and eastern borders of Ukraine. Although tensions over the annexation of Crimea, which Slovakia condemned as a violation of international law in recent times, have not been the subject of acute interest, a frozen conflict persisted in Ukraine. A few days ago, NATO declared the Russian Air Force's extremely intensive activities close to the airspace of member states.<sup>7</sup> The intensive movement of Russian tanks and other equipment is also beginning to be confirmed by the inhabitants, for example through social networks. In addition, Russia's operations in the information space are intensifying, which is an unfortunate sign in the context of a potential escalation of the conflict. Russia did not deny the movement of soldiers in its statements, but stressed that it can make such a move on its territory as and when it wants without endangering anyone. Ivan Korčok discussed the current escalation with

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<sup>7</sup> NATO. 2021. *NATO jets intercept Russian warplanes during unusual level of air activity.*

his colleague, Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba. The Slovak Government continues to support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, as it was the case of Crimea annexation.

In the context of Slovakia's position on the situation in Ukraine, it is necessary to mention the document of the new Security Strategy, which was approved by the National Council on 28 January this year. The importance of its implementation was also confirmed with the words of Minister of Foreign Affairs. The Security Strategy, as one of the basic strategic documents of the Slovak Republic, also responds to the existing trends of weakening multilateralism, renewed geopolitical competition, assertive promotion of individual interests and continuing instability in Europe's neighborhood and regional crises in the world. Although the Slovak Republic is primarily responsible for its own security, the membership in the North Atlantic Alliance and the EU is a basic pillar of the security of the Slovak Republic and expresses its civilizational, value-based age-political anchoring. As stated in the Strategy, the key to the security and stability of the Slovak Republic is the ability of both organizations to prevent, address and mitigate the consequences of conflict conflicts, as well as all other security challenges of the Euro-Atlantic area facing both organizations and their members.<sup>8</sup>

In the context of the current escalation of tensions at our neighbors' borders, the Security Strategy explicitly emphasizes the need to pay attention to power and territorial ambitions and the illegal use of force in the region.<sup>9</sup> The Slovak Republic considers this tension to be a real threat of potential armed conflict, disinformation campaigns or hybrid warfare. The Slovak Republic clearly defines that the occupation of Crimea is in gross violation of international law. On the other hand, it also expresses - and repeatedly - its support for Ukraine in its efforts to join NATO. This also appears to be a possible tool for strengthening the peace in the region, but at present this entry is not entirely realistic.

## **Conclusion**

The new government's foreign policy priorities have not changed, mainly because the old-new minister remains in the department. In the context of the ongoing pandemic, our

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<sup>8</sup> Bezpečnostná stratégia SR. 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

membership in the EU and the assistance of the member states are perceived as key to ensuring the interests and especially the health of Slovak citizens. On the other hand, attention is paid to security in connection with the Ukrainian border, where a frozen conflict persisted after the annexation. It is in the interest of the Slovak Republic to act diplomatically in such a way that there are no escalations in the given territory and that peace (or truce) is maintained. In the minister's statements, Slovakia's involvement in the V4 group or negotiations with the Chinese ambassador regarding sanctions imposed on some Slovak representatives in the EP also resonated in emphasizing foreign policy priorities.

It must be recalled that foreign policy in recent days has been and it is continuously being greatly affected by the domestic political crisis. We are thinking in particular of interfering in the competencies of Slovak diplomacy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Such hasty actions, which we have seen in recent days, create unnecessary tension not only on the domestic political scene, but also make the work of diplomacy and the maintenance of consistent and thoughtful diplomatic steps considerably more difficult.

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