

WALKING ON THIN ICE: SLOVAK PERSPECTIVE ON UKRAINE CRISIS¹

Stanislava Brajerčíková

Masaryk University, ORCID 0000-0002-5629-6088

and Marek Lenč

Matej Bel University, ORCID 0000-0002-3759-723X

Abstract. *This paper aims to present an analysis of Slovak positions towards Ukraine and Russia since the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis till the middle of 2017. Partial attention is also devoted to Slovak policies towards the Eastern Neighborhood and Russia preceding the Ukrainian crisis. Authors emphasize the surprising rhetoric of Slovak political elites which left many observers with the impression of Slovakia being unsure of its place on Europe's geopolitical map, mainly thanks to the statements of Prime Minister Robert Fico. These statements were challenged by President Andrej Kiska and the official position of the country represented mainly by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Miroslav Lajčák. The paper also discusses the results of the first-ever Slovak Presidency in the European Council in the second half of 2016 and its impact on the EU-Ukrainian as well as Slovak-Ukrainian relations. Finally, the paper aims to assess the changed image of Ukraine in Slovak domestic debate and possible future prospects for further development.*

Keywords: *Ukraine, Russia, Slovakia, crisis, Eastern Neighborhood, security.*

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Slovakia's Foreign policy towards the Eastern Neighborhood and Russia

Overall, Slovak relations with Ukraine never became a real priority at the political level despite the fact that such efforts were declared by several governments. In certain moments, relations with Kyiv were even side-lined, especially when it came to the Slovak interests in Moscow.

Since 1993 when Slovakia became an independent state with its own foreign policy-making, and especially in the late 1990s, Slovak attitude towards Ukraine might be characterized as “indifferent neighborhood.” The then Slovak governments were viewing Ukraine as a “gateway to Russia” rather than a partner worthy of attention in its own right. At that time, Ukraine was overshadowed by Russia in the Slovak eastern policy. The new Slovak government that came to power after the 1998 parliamentary election proclaimed a will to change the attitudes and practices of the previous years, but without real results. On the contrary, 1998-2000 could be characterized as the most problematic years in the modern Slovak-Ukrainian relationship since both countries gained independence owing to the Slovak support for the Russian plan to construct a new natural gas pipeline known as Jamal 2 that bypasses the territory of Ukraine via Belarus, Poland and Slovakia, which brought new negative impulses to the Slovak-Ukrainian agenda. In addition, Slovak government introduced a visa requirement for Ukrainian citizens in 2000, arguing that Slovakia must bring its visa policy in line with that of the EU, a step that Ukraine regarded as premature. Kyiv argued that unlike Slovakia, other Western neighbors of Ukraine, namely Poland and Hungary that also follow the EU standards are not in a hurry in this regard. As a response, the Ukrainian government decided to respond by denouncing the readmission treaty with Slovakia. The Slovak-Ukrainian relations witnessed intense high-level bilateral contacts in 2001 succeeding in reaching an agreement on the liberalization

of the visa regime. At the same time, Ukraine stopped the process of denouncing the readmission treaty with Slovakia. Both countries also reached an accord concerning cooperation in the transit of crude oil from the Caspian basin to the EU and Central European markets, etc. Thus, 2001 might be characterized as a new beginning in the modern Slovak-Ukrainian relationship (Duleba, 2002).

However, not only did Ukraine become an important partner at that time, but also the role of Russia in the Slovak foreign policy has increased due to the Slovak business and energy interests. In 2007, Slovakia was placed in “power audit” of the 28 European Union member states’ relations with Russia in the group of “friendly pragmatists”, which “maintain a close relationship with Russia and tend to put their business interests above political goals”. Moreover, things have already changed as Slovakia is listed as an EU “leader” in two out of five areas of the EU’s relationship with Russia. On the one hand, it is supporting the strong line of the European Commission’s Directorate General for Trade on compliance issues with Moscow. On the other hand, it is pushing for the diversification of gas supplies away from Russia. (Kobzová, 2015)

The 2009 gas crisis had a significant impact on both Slovak-Russian and Slovak-Ukrainian relationships. Based on the suspicion of Gazprom, a Russian natural gas group that Ukraine is illegally pumping gas for Central Europe, the Russian side has reduced, and then discontinued, the supply of natural gas to Central Europe. As a result of the gas conflict between Russia and Ukraine Slovakia was cut off from natural gas supply for almost two weeks. The crisis prompted a solution to the situation of different actors, politicians, industry representatives as well as strategic enterprises, in this case the Slovak gas industry.

Despite energy issues, this crisis had major political implications. Prime Minister Fico, even President Gašparovič, tried to contribute to the

resolution of the Russian-Ukrainian dispute and personally traveled to Ukraine. The related comments of the Slovak Prime Minister's reveal that he considered the Ukrainian side and the Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko as a "contravener and responsible". The Russian-Ukrainian dispute also significantly disrupted the level of Slovak-Ukrainian relations. In this case, similarly as in the question of positioning of the European missile defense system in the Czech Republic and Poland or in the Russo-Georgian conflict, the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic defended a pro-Russian position. These events returned Slovak-Ukrainian relations almost to a point of zero.

The next challenge in Slovak-Ukrainian cooperation is the current crisis, which might change the paradigm that Slovak relations with Ukraine never became a real priority at the political level. The position of the current Prime Minister Robert was heavily affected by the course of events during the 2009 Russia-Ukraine gas dispute.

Nevertheless, the current Slovak government declared in its foreign policy strategy for 2016 the importance of the Eastern Partnership in general as well as of the continuous and positively developing relations with Ukraine and Russia. Eastern Partnership is seen as the basic outcome of the Eastern vector of the Slovak foreign policy. Slovak Republic's priority was to use its Presidency in the EU Council for more promotion of the EU enlargement and Eastern Partnership as only consistent and credible enlargement policy, fostered by financial tools, which shall secure political stability, security and economic prosperity in the potentially unstable neighborhood. In this context, Slovakia is able to offer its direct experience from its own reforming process of the integration in the European and transatlantic structures. Furthermore, Slovakia will support the European orientation of Ukraine and contribute to the deepening of relations with Ukraine, whereby the main framework for this cooperation in both mid-term and long-term perspective is the Association Agreement, including the

Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement. The principal objective of Slovakia is to make mutual relations more dynamic, especially economic relations. In energy, opportunities for more intensive cooperation are not limited to the gas and oil sectors (e.g. the ambition to maintain Slovak-Ukrainian gas corridor as a secure and cost-effective manner of gas transport to Europe (MZVaEZ, 2016). This aspect is will also play a significant role in the discussion about the proposed project Nord Stream 2, causing some controversy among the EU members.

To sum it up, Bratislava had good reasons to seek economic cooperation with Moscow: most of its gas supply as well as nuclear fuel for its Russia-built nuclear power plants come from Russia, and some of its core defense equipment is still procured from Russian manufacturers. So when the EU discussed the first round of sanctions on Russia in spring 2014, Slovakia (along with several other countries) pushed for keeping some of the more high-profile Russian names off the sanctions list, hoping to safeguard its interests. Top government officials in Bratislava warned against “too hawkish” steps towards Russia. Moscow gave Slovakia no special consideration for these efforts: the country’s gas supplies from Russia have been cut by 50 percent, after the country started in 2014 to supply natural gas to Ukraine through reverse gas flow (which now accounts of one-third of Ukraine’s annual consumption). Russian actions such as Turkish stream or Slovak car industry hit by crisis in Russia affected the political decisions of Slovak elites. Bratislava has, for example, begun to see the country’s economic closeness to Russia as a potential liability and started taking steps to diversify its ties. The government is negotiating a new gas connection to Poland, which would add one more route to the three new connections that have been built in the past five years (to Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Austria), and thereby decrease Slovakia’s vulnerability to future gas cut-offs from the east. The Slovak defense

ministry has announced a plan to replace virtually all Soviet-made weapons, beginning this year with military helicopters, to be followed by supersonic jets and air defense radar systems. (Kobzová, 2015)

Slovakia's foreign policy since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis

The Ukraine crisis brought a seismic breakdown to the European post-Cold War architecture. The conflict is, first of all, about the territorial integrity of Ukraine² and, indeed, its very existence, but it is also about the future of Russia, the future of the EU project as well as identity of particular countries.

Regarding the outbreak of the current conflict, Slovakia sent mixed messages, mainly thanks to PM statements, which were very sensitively perceived by Ukrainian public. They covered various issues, ranging from acknowledgement that as neighbors Slovakia and Ukraine „*were unable to establish normal political relations*³,” through labeling Ukraine as „*unreliable partner*” (in relation to the gas crisis), to questioning of Ukraine's abilities to manage difficult challenges arising from rapprochement with the EU⁴. Besides this, Slovak PM also has remained very critical of the introduction of sanctions against Russia. On August 14, 2014 Fico said: „*Why should we*

² All Slovak political parties represented in parliament support the territorial integrity of Ukraine; however, a Member of the European Parliament from the ruling party Smer-Social Democracy Monika Flašíková Beňová described the referendum on the independence of Crimea as expressing the will of the majority of the local population and disagreed with the EU and US decision not to recognize it. (Marušiak, 2015)

³ After the culmination of protests on Maidan, Fico stated that „*despite the fact that Ukraine is our neighbor, we share almost 100 km boundary, as a politician, I have to say that we never managed to establish normal political relations.*” (Fico uzna..., 2014)

⁴ In September 2014 Fico stated in his interview for Nový Čas that „*we want peace in Ukraine, because it is our neighbor..., because it is a transit country... It is also good that AA was signed, which gives Ukraine a perspective to bring it closer to the EU. However, I think that Ukraine can hardly handle difficult challenges related to the accession to the Union, because it is before absolute disintegration. And I reject the idea that Ukraine could at some point be a member of NATO, because it could undermine security in the region.*” (Premiér Fico otvorene o konflikte..., 2014)

jeopardize the EU economy that begins to grow? If there is a crisis situation, it should be solved by other means than meaningless sanctions. Who profits from the EU economy decreasing, Russia's economy having troubles and Ukraine economically on its knees?" (Slovakia grumbles as EU..., 2014) It is very rare that an ambassador responds to the statements of the Prime Minister of their hosting country, but in the case of the Ukrainian ambassador to Slovakia it happened. The Prime Minister has also warned that Slovakia might potentially veto any sanctions that would damage the national interests of Slovakia. The pro-Russian narrative has been mainly challenged by the Slovak President Andrej Kiska and the opposition parties (Sloboda a solidarita, Most-Híd, Obyčajní ľudia – nezávislé osobnosti), which on several occasions confirmed Slovakia's commitment and support to the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Ukraine.

The Slovak government, and the Prime Minister in particular, continue to publicly oppose further sector-specific sanctions on Russia, and public opinion is also divided. But in practice, the administration has avoided taking any steps that would undermine EU's unity. The government thinks that the solution to the crisis in Ukraine lies both in diplomacy with Moscow and in strengthening Ukraine itself. In other words, Ukraine's success hinges not only on Kyiv's or Europe's ability to limit Russia's actions in the Donbas but also on the Ukrainian government's resolve in implementing long overdue, deep structural reforms. (Kobzová, 2015)

However, in the case of the official position of the Slovak Republic, Ukraine has found a strong partner in Slovakia. Since the outbreak of the protests on the Maidan till Minsk II agreement, Slovak FM Lajčák traveled to Ukraine six times. In the format of Foreign Ministers of the V4 Lajčák was even one of the first foreign statesmen who visited Ukraine after the regime change (the day after the Russian annexation of the Crimea). In March 2014, under the auspices of Slovak and Swedish diplomacy a

meeting of „*Friends of Ukraine*” was organized in Brussels. And, finally, Slovak-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce and Industry was established last year. The most important dimension of Slovak-Ukraine relations, however, is energy security.

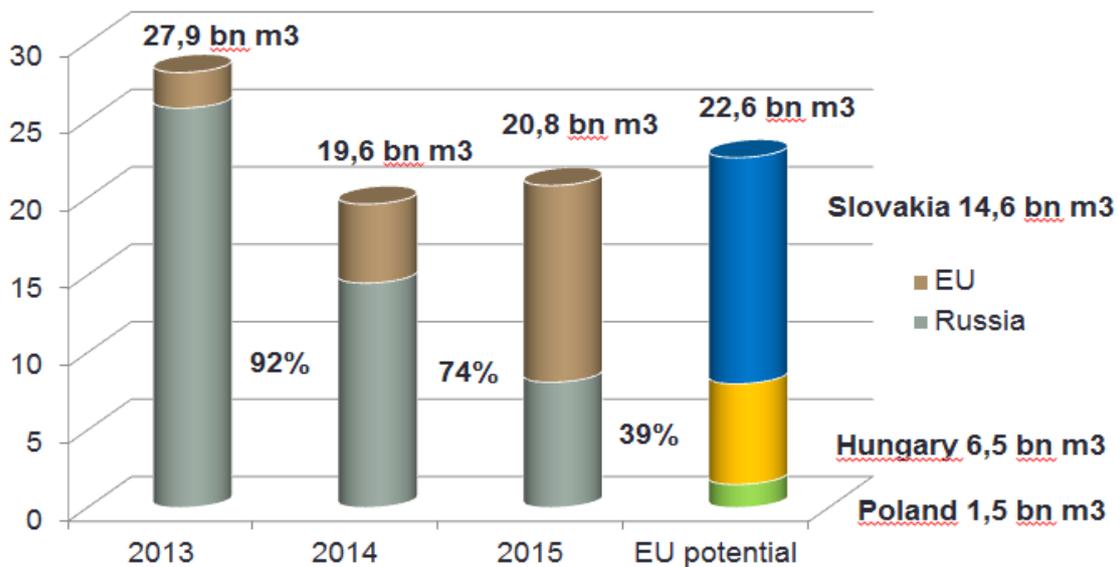
In this regard, Slovakia launched reverse gas flow of Vojany-Uzhgorod pipeline through Velké Kapušany in September 2014 and subsequently finished works on another switch point - Budince. The fact that there was no „*Russian Winter*” in Ukraine, was achieved mainly due to the position and diplomacy of Slovak government. This was technically possible only thanks to the interconnection built with Czech Republic. However, it took both sides almost 1,5 years to overcome all technical and legal obstacles in order to launch the reverse gas flow to Ukraine.⁵ To a smaller extent, Ukraine was also receiving reverse gas flow from Poland and Hungary. However, Hungary, under the pressure from Russian political circles stopped its supply, helping bring Ukraine “to its knees.”

From the Ukrainian perspective, Slovakia is of strategic importance for at least three reasons. The first is the already mentioned reverse gas flow. The second is a self-confident statement of Russian Gazprom that after 2019 the transit of Russian gas will be completely diverted from Ukraine to Turkey. Thirdly, the European Commissioner for Energy Union is a Slovak, Maroš Šefčovič. In this regard, it is going to be Šefčovič who will be in charge of the forthcoming trilateral talks between the EU, Russia and Ukraine over Russian gas supply.

The abovementioned trilateral dialogue shall be continued also from the Visegrad Group perspective with the aim to contribute to finding a long-term market-based solution to Russia-Ukraine energy relations. V4

⁵ Although Kyiv and its European advocates (notably from Poland) put the blame on Slovakia for the delay, in practice it was Ukraine that refused to accept the Slovak offer to utilize the existing pipeline and pushed for a much expensive (and longer-term) solution. (Jarabik, 2016)

wants to underline the importance to ensure and maintain an uninterrupted and safe transit route via Ukraine and infrastructure investments enhancing at the same time diversity of sources, suppliers and routes to the EU Member States and its neighbors like Ukraine. Ministers of Visegrad countries responsible for energy issues agreed in the context of mutual EU-Ukraine-Russia relations to recall the principle of solidarity, which constitutes a basis of the European Union external policy and having in mind March 2015 European Council conclusions, to highlight the need of thorough reform of the Ukrainian energy sector to sustain secure energy supplies to Ukrainian consumers in the future and to appeal to the European Commission and the Member States to keep Ukraine energy situation on the top of the political agenda. In addition to it, they welcomed reaching the agreement between Ukraine, Russia and the EU on the “gas winter package” and call for its due implementation, aiming to ensure uninterrupted gas supply to Ukraine and transit to the EU during the upcoming winter. (Joint Declaration of Visegrad Group Ministers..., 2015)



Graph 1: Ukraine gas consumption over the last 3 years⁶

⁶ In 2013 Ukraine imported 27,973 bcm gas out of which 25,842 came from Russia and 2,132 from the EU (92%), in 2014 out of 19,6 imported 14,5 from Russia and 5,1 from the EU (74%),

The Ukrainian crisis has also been reflected in Slovak foreign policy agenda after the adoption of the Minsk agreements. In 2015, both the President of the Slovak Republic Andrej Kiska and PM Robert Fico visited Ukraine. While Fico visited Kyiv in early February 2015, President Kiska traveled to Kyiv later in May. PM Fico planned to visit Ukraine also on May 8 as a part of his criticized participation in the celebrations of the 70th anniversary of the victory of the former Soviet Union over Nazism in World War II in Moscow on May 9. However, his trip to Kyiv was later cancelled and he traveled only directly to Moscow. This event sparked a significant controversy and serious domestic political debate over Fico's decision as President Kiska declined to attend. His decision was announced earlier in March 2015 when President stated that he will commemorate the anniversary of the end of WWII only at home in Slovakia and will not go to Russia. This step could be well interpreted as a clear expression of support for Ukraine. Despite controversies over Russia's actions and its meddling in Ukraine as well as President's decision, Fico decided to travel to Moscow and honor the Victory Day celebrations. In his view the historical aspect prevailed over the current political turmoil between Russia and Ukraine. With Czech President Miloš Zeman and President of Cyprus Nicos Anastasiades he was one of the few European leaders to do so while not joining the long list of EU's statements who boycotted the celebrations. However, what is even more interesting, PM Fico visited Moscow again on June 2nd. During this meeting he reaffirmed his counterparts, both PM Medvedev as well as President Putin, that there are no open issues that would harm Slovak-Russian relations. It should be taken into consideration

while in 2015 out of 20,8 bcm 12,7 came from the EU and 8,1 from Russia (39%). In 2015, imports of gas from the European market more than doubled from 5.0 to 10.3 bcm. In 2015, the import from the Russian Federation decreased 2.4 times compared to 2014, from 14.5 to 6.1 bcm. As a result, the share of Russian supplies in Ukraine's gas consumption decreased from 34% in 2014 to 18% in 2015.

that PM pragmatic approach towards Russia did not harm the pragmatic relations with Ukraine especially when it comes to energy issues, reverse gas flow and the energy security of CEE countries. That was well illustrated in September 2015 during Ukrainian PM Arsenij Jaceňuk visit of Slovakia where he met both President Kiska and PM Fico. Following the meeting with PM Fico in Bratislava both PMs remained very critical towards Nord Stream 2 project calling it anti-Ukrainian and anti-European project.

In the 2nd half of the year 2016 Slovakia chaired its first-ever presidency in the Council of the European Union. This event most significantly shaped the Slovak foreign policy agenda. Bratislava became one of the European political power centers what could be also seen by informal gathering of 27 European leaders without the British PM in Bratislava on 16th of September 2016, so called Bratislava summit. The political program of the Presidency tried to reflect upon the need to contribute to a development of a secure, prosperous and democratic European society. It was putting forward a positive agenda based on four priorities: economically strong Europe, modern single market, *sustainable migration and asylum policies and globally engaged Europe*.

Six months of the EU presidency offered great opportunities to pay more attention to the current development in Ukraine, to the Ukraine-Russia as well as EU-Russia relations. It was also important to discuss Eastern Partnership issue more intensively on the European level as Ukraine and Georgia already achieved essential progress on their way to the integration or at least to the deeper, comprehensive and closer cooperation with the EU.

Especially in the context of relations with Eastern Partnership countries Slovak Presidency tried to promote an effective European neighborhood policy that seeks to maintain the momentum of the accession process. During the Presidency Slovak FM Miroslav Lajčák stated

at the Alpbach Forum that „*the Eastern Partnership policy of the European Union aims to extend stability, predictability and prosperity in our neighborhood and is not directed against anyone.*” He further underlined that since Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine already have association agreements with the EU on political convergence and economic integration, „*the biggest challenge for the EU now in this context is to define where we want the Eastern Partnership to be directed.*” (Lajčák: *Východné partnerstvo...*, 2016) In terms of progress regarding visa liberalization with Ukraine Slovak presidency brought concrete results. Slovakia has succeeded in reaching an agreement on the suspension mechanism.⁷ It was a condition for visa liberalization for countries like Ukraine and Georgia. Agreement at the level of COREPER was reached on November 17, 2016. The process of adoption of the regulation on visa liberalization for Ukrainian citizens was finished under the Maltese Presidency in the first half of 2017. The visa requirement was formally lifted on June 11, 2017 and at this occasion Slovak President Andrej Kiska met his Ukrainian counterpart Petro Poroshenko at a border crossing in Vyšké Nemecké-Uzhgorod.

Ukraine`s image and its place in Europe`s security architecture

In 1993, Ukraine's Deputy Foreign Minister Borys Tarasyuk described Europe's security architecture as resting on twin pillars - strategic partnerships between Germany and France and Ukraine and Poland. (Dobriansky) Regarding current Europe`s security architecture one might ask whether the crisis has led to its collapse. For 20 years Europe has been building a system relying on security collaboration with its underlying principles of refraining from either threatening or using force, of respect for national sovereignty and territorial integrity, the inviolability of borders,

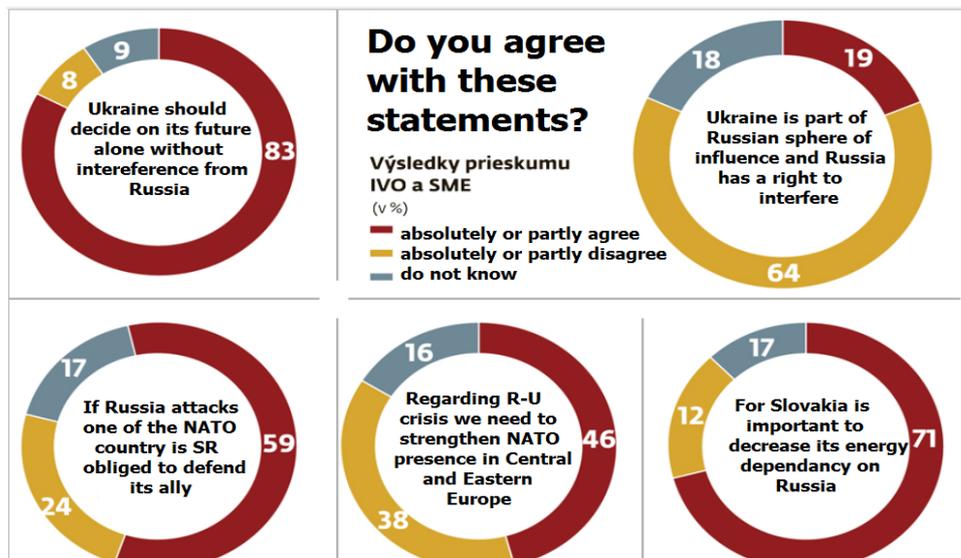
⁷ The mechanism sets out the conditions under which the visa may be reintroduced.

and the right of states to choose freely their allies. These principles are contained in the UN Charter and in such underlying documents of European security as the CSCE's Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris, as well as in the Founding Act on NATO-Russia relations. *"The EU's sanctions should not be lifted until the reasons for those sanctions have disappeared, which does not seem likely to happen any time soon"*. Russia violated these principles when its troops set foot in Ukraine. But that violation does not necessarily mean the end of Europe's security architecture. A violation of agreed upon principles doesn't make them automatically null and void, for this crisis has both unified and strengthened Europe. But even if the basic principles of that architecture still apply, the security environment has clearly changed. Borders have been changed by force and the predictability of international relations has been seriously reduced. (Paet, 2015)

We could assume Ukraine has EU absolute support but this is not reality in all aspects. Rather we could say Ukraine's position in the EU is very questionable because of some influencing steps taken by Russia which "force" not only Slovakia but also other European states to think about proper foreign policy behavior towards both Ukraine and Russia. All parties, the EU as well as Russia, are aware of their interdependence in energy, economic and security area therefore each "incorrect" political decision would lead to more stagnation of their relations and to more tension with negative impact on their economies or energetic interests.

As a consequence despite the EU's unity towards sanctioning Russia due to its actions in Ukraine, its former "strategic partner" (that by some has been called "a strategic enemy") still has much leverage. First is the chronic energy supply dependency as most Eastern and Central European countries still import most of or all their gas from Russia. Second, Russia directly funds far left and right wing populist parties in nearly half of the EU countries (including France, the UK, and Germany), of which many,

along with opposing further European integration, favor closer ties with Russia or an exit from the EU. Third, the case with the French *Mistral* warship deal in 2014 proved Russia plays EU countries against one another to raise tensions and mistrust. Likewise, Russia sabotages the possibilities for deeper EU–NATO cooperation as it strengthens ties with historical adversaries like Turkey and Cyprus. Although NATO has carried out reassurance and deterrence measures, it is not yet the ultimate answer to the multifaceted challenges to European security the Ukraine crisis has either unearthed or deeper exacerbated. Likewise, the Ukraine crisis highlighted that the EU and NATO had not been expecting, nor were prepared, to meet the challenges of hybrid warfare consisting of massive propaganda campaigns and proxy insurgent groups used in combination with conventional politico-military tools. The longer the Ukraine crisis remains unresolved, the longer Russia will be perceived globally as “a winner” over EU and Western powers, which have not been able to avert new protracted conflict zones in countries willing to integrate within their structures. (Bambals, 2015)



Graph 2: Slovak views on Ukraine (2014)

Source: Institute for Public Affairs - IVO, 2014

As we can see, the situation in EU regarding the position of Ukraine in the EU architecture is very precarious. Although some surveys, such as the results of the IVO and SME survey, (visible in the diagram above) show that there is a strong support for Ukraine in the Slovak public. It agrees absolutely or partly with the statements, Ukraine should decide on its future alone without interference of Russia; Slovakia is obliged as a NATO member to defend its allies if Russia attacks a NATO member state and also with the statements to strengthen NATO presence in Central and Eastern Europe and subsequently to decrease energy dependence on Russia. In our opinion, the first results and public opinions would correspond with the opinion and decisions of Slovak political leaders. This issue is also closely connected with the next statement of the survey; Ukraine is part of Russian sphere of influence and Russia has right to interfere; with which both political elite and general public absolutely or partly disagree. Obligation to defend NATO allies is also clear and without any doubts, even though current political elite does not promote strengthening of NATO presence in Slovakia.

Convergence of divergence with the rest of the EU

In fact, the Slovak internal debate only reflected a broader distribution of views within the EU, which included also other Central and Eastern European countries with significant pro-Russian views. As regard the *Visegrad Group*, V4 positions towards Ukraine and Russia represent a twofold story – one at the multilateral and second at the bilateral level. The Ukrainian „*revolution of dignity*” followed by Ukrainian crisis and latter Russian aggression found Visegrad Four (V4) countries unprepared in having a common European answer for these crucial events. This was well demonstrated by significantly different, sometimes even opposite understandings and positions regarding European prospects of Ukraine as

well as Russia's actions and their consequences for the Central European security. All four Central European countries mirror a broader distribution of positions within the EU, with a strong pro-Ukrainian line of Poland on one side, Hungary aligning in a pro-Russian stance on the other and ambivalent positions of Czech Republic and Slovakia. (Lenč, 2015)

Visegrad Group has recently deepened its cooperation with Ukraine in some specific areas of their interests. On the one side their military cooperation is developing as representatives of general staffs of the Visegrad Four met on the occasion of passing the V4 military presidency from the Czech Republic to Poland on a two-day meeting discussing military cooperation inside the V4 and with Ukraine, whereby Ukraine's joining the V4 EU Battle Group is one of the examples in which the coordination has already occurred. Ukraine has contributed to it by singling out its capacities of strategic air transport. Another direction in which V4-Ukraine cooperation may be heading is reform of the logistics of the armed forces. Moreover Ukrainian military may be helped by the training and education of its officers in the Czech training command in Vyskov. (CTK, 2016)

On the other side it is also interesting to observe initiatives of the V4 to deepen its cooperation with this Eastern European country. V4 countries announced a plan to create a special fund to support Ukraine. While the assets of the Fund have not been made public, it was announced that the Fund is ready to provide Ukrainian students with 410 scholarships to study in Europe. In addition to this step during the official meeting in Kyiv with the Foreign Ministers of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, the Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko announced Ukraine's intention to join the "Visegrad Four", and subsequently to convert the group into "Visegrad five". Thus, it is essential to deepen cooperation between Ukraine and the "Visegrad Group", in particular, for sharing the European experience

and further development of cross-border cooperation in the process of enlargement of the European Union (using certain benefits from the creation of free economic zones, development of joint cross-border projects and cross-border infrastructure, improvement of cross-border control, etc.). It is also important to consult on other issues of mutual interest, such as promotion of political and economic interests of Ukraine in international organizations and receiving effective assistance from the countries of the Visegrad Group in the form of additional financial resources. (Makoukh, 2016)

Taking into account current political trends in Central Europe as well as rising East-West tensions among the EU member states, Slovakia could take over an *honest broker* position among Visegrad countries and Ukraine's Western neighbors. Slovakia might be favored for this position as it has neither a checkered history like Poland, nor a sizable minority like Hungary. However, this position has not yet been consolidated for various reasons: the lack of focus and capacity Slovakia devoted to its largest neighbor (as the Euro-Atlantic integration was an absolute priority) as well as its traditionally balanced position when it comes to Ukraine as well as Russia. (Jarábik, 2016)

An important energy issue that might possibly trigger Slovak-Ukrainian as well as Slovak-German relations is the future of the project Nord Stream 2. Both Bratislava as well as Kyiv perceive Nord Stream 2 as a threat to own national interests and a politically motivated project, which main objective is to cut off Ukraine from the position of a transit country in terms of transit of Russian gas to Western European customers. It should be noted that the construction of additional transmission capacity is unnecessary, since the necessary capacity already exists. Just to illustrate the capacity of the Brotherhood pipeline is 90 bcm³/year, but its real use is

currently at 46.5 bcm³/year. The planned capacity of Nord Stream 2 is 55 bcm³/year. (Nord Stream goes against ... 2, 2015)

Scenarios for future developments

The current situation and development offers to Slovakia both – great political and economic potential on one hand, but also direct threats to its security. The country's diplomacy is very much aware of the fact that the Russian aggression in the East of Ukraine represents a serious threat to its own national security in case no progress will be found in Minsk II deal and no real solution to the conflict will be found. From the political and military point of view it is obvious, without Russia it is impossible to find any solution to the Ukrainian crisis.

Further on, Slovakia was in a similar position to Ukraine as a state in the 1990s and 2000s and therefore fully realizes the potential economic and political challenges. So if Ukraine anchors itself in the EU economic and security sphere, Slovakia could and should benefit considerably as addressing the economic problems is one of the pillars how to solve the current political and military crisis in Ukraine. Slovakia has a potential to play a crucial role in Ukraine's aspiration of much bigger economic cooperation with the EU and we should be prepared for this change (to be a strategic window or bridge between the EU/West and Ukraine). Along with our diplomatic efforts, it is probably one of the most crucial roles we can play in the current crisis and changing geo-economical and geo-political situation.

There are strong arguments for Ukraine's possible accession to the EU from the long-term perspective, especially in the economic terms. Enlargement of our eastern neighbor would flesh out the obstacles that hinder the development of trade between the Slovak Republic and Ukraine.

The rate of our bilateral trade is currently the lowest in comparison with other neighboring countries of Slovakia. In 2014 it amounted import from Ukraine only 0.92% of the total import and export of the SR 0.5% of total Slovak exports. (MZVaEZ SR, 2015) The country welcomed Ukraine's Association Agreement as a tool that might Ukraine closer towards EU not only economically, but also politically and that can serve as modernization instrument for modernization of Ukraine's large Soviet-style inherited economy.

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