



Why Is Slovakia, a NATO Member That Promotes Its EU Ties, Drifting Toward Russia?

Dariusz Kalan | Tuesday, June 26, 2018

BRATISLAVA—Slovakia, a NATO member that has called itself part of the “core of the European Union,” may talk positively about its Western orientation, but its actions recently suggest an increasingly closer alignment to Russia and its interests in Europe. Many observers point to the junior partner in its coalition government, the Slovak National Party, or SNS, whose nationalist, euroskeptic leader, Andrej Danko, the speaker of the Slovak parliament, has visited Moscow twice in the past eight months.

Earlier this month, Slovakia’s Defense Ministry, which is headed by a member of the SNS, postponed a long-awaited decision to replace Slovakia’s fleet of aging Russian-made MiG-29s with Swedish Gripen fighter jets or U.S.-made F-16s. The move was widely criticized, including by members of the ministry’s own leadership as well as partners in the coalition government. Defense Minister Peter Gajdos had put the years-long talks with Gripen’s manufacturer, Saab, on hold and invited other bids

(<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-slovakia-defence/slovakia-delays-decision-to-replace-russian-fighter-jets-idUSKBN1JG1QW>).

Just a few months ago, the SNS, according to sources in the Slovak government and others in Bratislava, had blocked Slovakia from joining the mass, EU-wide expulsion of Russian diplomats over the poisoning of ex-Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the United Kingdom. During a Slovak Cabinet meeting in late March in which the expulsions were discussed, “Danko said expressly that no Russian will be kicked as long as he is in the coalition,” Juraj Krupa, a former Defense Ministry official who now directs the security and defense program at the Slovak Security Policy Institute, told me, citing sources within the government. Two officials, one from the Foreign Ministry and the other from the European diplomatic service, later confirmed that account. Both officials insisted on anonymity to discuss internal government matters.

Slovakia even refused to symbolically expel one Russian diplomat in a show of solidarity with the EU, unlike some other European states with more public sympathies toward Moscow, such as Hungary, that



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Robert Fico, Slovakia's prime minister at the time, during a meeting in the Kremlin, Moscow, Russia, Aug. 25, 2016 (AP photo by Alexander Zemlianichenko).

were able to escape international attention by going along with the consensus in Brussels

(<https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-whos-expelling-diplomats-and-who-isnt-united-states-ukraine-uk/>). “We did expect to see your solidarity,” Andrew Garth, the British ambassador to Slovakia, said in a pointed interview

(<https://dennikn.sk/1095532/prekvapili-a-sklamali-ste-nas-stale-sa-vsak-mozete-pridat-do-klubu-hovori-britsky-velvyslanec-na-slovensku/>) with the Dennik N, a Slovak daily. But as an official in Slovakia’s Foreign Ministry put it to me, Danko “tries to conduct his own, alternative foreign policy.”

Sympathy for Russia among SNS lawmakers has been out in the open for years, but only recently has it appeared to affect Slovakia’s foreign policy. The impact of the SNS has risen as the main governing party, the social-conservative SMER-SD, has weakened amid the political turmoil that followed the murder of an investigative reporter, Jan Kuciak, in February. His killing sparked massive street protests

(<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/24404/a-journalist-s-murder-has-opened-a-political-vacuum-in-slovakia>) and eventually led to the resignation of SMER-SD’s longtime leader, Prime Minister Robert Fico, after 10 years in power.

“If Fico was prime minister when the reaction on the Skripal case was discussed, I can imagine he would loudly advocate a less Russia-hostile course, but would sign whatever the majority [of EU leaders] decided,” says a European diplomat.

The nature of Danko’s sympathies toward Moscow is murky. Despite rumors of clandestine Russian funding of the SNS, there is no hard evidence. But the party includes many former apparatchiks from the era of communist rule in Czechoslovakia. Established on the heels of the Velvet Revolution in 1989 that ended that regime, the SNS has sided with Russia on various issues since the 1990s, from Russian skepticism over NATO enlargement to the celebration of common Slavic roots.

Anton Hrnko, an SNS member of parliament, says there is nothing suspicious about the party’s course. The EU is “part of Eurasian space,” he insists, and it would be an exaggeration to call Russia an aggressor. “Russia is a world power and acts in what it believes is its best interest, just as the U.S.,” he adds. “The stability of Europe without Russia or against Russia is not possible.”

Hrnko doesn’t deny that Danko, the head of the SNS, helped block Slovakia from expelling Russian diplomats in March. But he adds that “he wasn’t the only one” involved in that decision.

Fico is to blame, too. For years, under his leadership, Slovakia conducted a calibrated policy of maneuvering between Brussels and Moscow. What this meant in practice was that the former prime minister talked positively about Russian President Vladimir Putin and was a critic of sanctioning Russia, but rarely acted on it. He largely followed the EU line toward Moscow, and some of his decisions even exposed Slovakia to Russia’s anger. In September 2014, for instance, at the peak of the crisis in

neighboring Ukraine, Slovakia opened a reverse-flow oil pipeline (<http://www.dw.com/en/slovakia-opens-reverse-flow-pipeline-to-carry-gas-to-ukraine/a-17895333>) to Ukraine, offering the easiest and cheapest way for Kiev to buy gas from the EU.

Public opinion in Slovakia is more favorable toward Russia than anywhere else in Central Europe. But the country has many reasons to be wary of Moscow.

According to Krupa, at the Slovak Security Policy Institute, Fico allowed the SNS to push and shove to save his party's coalition. Support for SMER-SD, which Fico has led since 1999, has decreased drastically (https://dennikn.sk/1070281/fica-opustaju-takmer-vsetci-okrem-seniorov-a-robotnikov/?ref=rss&utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter) from a record high of 51 percent in March 2012 to just 20 percent in March, so snap elections were too risky. As Krupa adds, the voters of both parties "share a similarly positive view on Russia."

Indeed, if anything, the pro-Russian positions of Slovak politicians seem to strengthen their support at home. Public opinion in Slovakia is far more favorable toward Moscow than anywhere else in Central Europe. This attitude is a mixture of sentiments over a common Slavic background, the lack of historical problems with Moscow—the one exception, of course, being the 1968 Soviet invasion of what was then Czechoslovakia—and widespread distrust among Slovaks toward NATO, despite the country's membership in the alliance.

According to a 2018 study (<https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2018.pdf>) by GLOBSEC, a Bratislava-based think tank, only 37 percent of Slovak respondents consider NATO "a good thing." That is almost half the number of Poles, at 67 percent, and Czechs, at 65 percent, and still less than Hungarians, at 56 percent. According to the same survey, Slovaks approve of Russian President Vladimir Putin's policies more than their neighbors, with 41 percent agreeing with them compared to just 13 percent in Poland.

But Slovakia actually has more reasons than its neighbors to be wary of Russia. The country is completely dependent on Russian oil and gas, both for its own consumption and as a transit country for Russian gas to the EU. That's why it is vehemently opposed to the proposed Nord Stream II, the major Russia-backed gas pipeline that would run under the Baltic Sea to Germany, bypassing Central and Eastern Europe. Slovakia's economic relationship with Russia remains one-sided and narrowly focused on energy imports, though. When it comes to trade, Russia isn't even among Slovakia's 10 largest export destinations.

“There are a few companies doing business in Russia, such as Tatravagonka,” which builds freight trains, “but these are small islands,” says Rastislav Mojto, a former senior Slovak diplomat in Moscow. “If we lost our trade to Russia overnight, it would have no impact on the country whatsoever.”

Russia relies instead on soft-power initiatives to maintain its positive standing among Slovaks. Pro-Putin propaganda campaigns, aiming to shift attitudes in Slovakia against the West, are evident online (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-europe/news/russian-targets-slovakia-as-the-weakest-link-in-v4/>) and among traditional media publishers. A year ago, Slovakia’s largest news agency signed a controversial agreement with Russia’s state-run Sputnik news agency. It was forced to cancel it (<https://www.rferl.org/a/slovakia-news-agency-cancels-sputnik-contract-russia/28400557.html>) days later under pressure from liberal media, opposition groups and some more Western-oriented members of SMER-SD.

Critics say Slovakia’s reaction to the Skripal affair showed how risky it is to subordinate foreign policy to short-term domestic goals. “In government, only a few see that Central Europe is considered by Russia to be a sphere of its influence,” says the Foreign Ministry official. The delayed deal to replace Slovakia’s MiGs may be another sign.

The Russians “know exactly where to prick,” the official adds. “In Poland, they support classic nationalism, in Czech Republic, anti-Europeanism. And here in Slovakia, anti-NATO and Slavic sentiments. The goal is clear: to keep the region away from the West.”

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