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UKRAINE-SLOVAKIA RELATIONS: DEVELOPING A TRUE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP?



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INTRODUCTION

Slovakian-Ukrainian relations may be best described by words “pragmatic” and “balanced”. They are free from historical burden, ideological sentiments, and geopolitical speculations. At the same time partnership is driven by complementing interests, most importantly in security and energy areas. Slovakia is believed to be one of Ukraine’s best friends in the EU, while Ukraine is an opportunity for Slovakia to play a more active role in the region. Russian factor shouldn’t be discounted: the two countries treat Russia differently. For Ukraine Russia is a primary security threat; while for Slovakia it is often an opportunity and a long-term partner.

There are also points of conflict, disagreement, and concern, as it is always the case between neighbors. These points mostly deal with smuggling and illegal trafficking, policies towards Russia, and corruption. At the same time, Slovakia and Ukraine enjoy bilateral relations free of scandals and distrust. These relations are getting very close to a notion of *strategic partnership*. Sharing just 97 km of border, the two countries are good neighbors and trustful friends.

BACKGROUND OF THE RELATIONS

Both Slovakia and Ukraine are new states, which emerged as results of geopolitical shifts in Europe following the end of the Cold War. Both states spent opening years of independence in attempts to build effective states institutions, introduce economic and political reforms, and define major vectors of foreign policies. For Slovakia the center of gravity has been westward, with Vienna in 55 km of distance, Prague in 291 km, and Kyiv more than thousand km far away.

On the other hand, Slovakia has been paying much attention in its foreign policy to Russia, which is the supplier of energy resources, a huge market, and an important factor of regional (in)stability. In first decade of independence relations with Russia were much more important to Bratislava, than those with Ukraine, given the intensity of trade, mutual investment and political contacts on the highest level.

Both countries have been transit states for Russian natural gas and oil supplies to Europe. However, the emphases of their energy strategy have been different. Ukraine was struggling for diversification of supplies and access to Caspian energy. Slovakia was solidifying its role as a regional hub for Russian gas and oil supplies. At some point Slovakia supported the Jamal-2 project, aimed at constructing a gas pipeline through territories of Belarus, Poland, and Slovakia. The pipeline was bypassing Ukrainian territory and thus has been perceived by Kyiv as a threat to Ukrainian security. The two countries have previously often been competing rather than cooperating in energy sphere.

They have also been competing on a political level. Ukraine from time to time has been obsessed with ideas of regional leadership, while Slovakia has been involved into the Visegrad Group (V4), which aimed at advancing interests of and cooperation among Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia (later Czech Republic and Slovakia). The Visegrad Group survived the breakup of Czechoslovakia and accession of all

member-states to NATO and EU. Today it looks like an effective instrument for enhancing interests of the member-states both within the European Union and regionally – much more effective than anything offered by Ukraine in the past.

At some point the two countries also had some discrepancies over visa regime. Visas have been introduced for Ukrainians by the Slovak government in 2000, as a part of preparation for joining the EU. At the same time Poland introduced visas for Ukrainians only in 2003 – and from the point of view of Kyiv, the Slovakian step was made too early. Ukraine responded with introducing visa regime for Slovaks and denouncing the readmission treaty with Slovakia.

Slovakia joined NATO and EU in 2004, the same year Ukraine was going through the “Orange Revolution”. At that moment it seemed that both countries could work together to foster Ukraine’s accession to Western institutions. Slovakia, due to economic and security considerations, was in favor of Ukraine’s closer association with the West. But further developments postponed this perspective for some time.

“Forgotten neighbor” was very often a way to refer to Ukraine in Slovakia. In the beginning of the 1990-ies Bratislava has been betting on Moscow’s support in getting independence from Prague and paid little attention to a former Soviet republic. Kyiv, in its turn, has been much more concerned with settling issues inherited from the former USSR, e.g. shaping relations with Russia, including over the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol, and defining conditions and terms of Ukraine’s non-nuclear status.

Parties may have been underachieving in bilateral performance. Geography, history and social connections provided much more potential for cooperation. Concerned with their problems of transition and state-building, the two countries have often seen each other through the Russian or post-Soviet prism.

CURRENT STATE OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

Balancing – is what perhaps both states do often in bilateral relations. Ukraine today is balancing off Russian influence, tackling tensions with its other Western neighbors, which also are Slovakia's partners in V4 group, and looking for a new modus operandi with the EU. Slovakia attempts to find a balanced approach to deny Russia's revisionist policy, assist Ukraine, preserve regional security, and enhance its own interests. The way reverse gas supplies had been arranged to Ukraine from Slovakia – a step considered to be decisive for bilateral relations by most Ukrainian experts – could be an example of implementing such a policy of balancing. In 2014 Slovakia started to supply EU natural gas through Vojany-Uzhgorod pipeline, which at maximum of about 44 million cubic meters a day is capable of covering about 20% of Ukraine's consumption. It played a critical role then and continues to be an important factor of Ukraine's energy security.

However, even this issue hasn't been completely smooth. In 2014-2015 Ukraine was insisting on a so-called "big reverse flow", which would enable larger amounts of gas to be transported from Europe to Ukraine. Operating Slovak company Eustream was accused by Ukrainian side of making an agreement with the Russian giant Gazprom, which would disable "big reverse flow" of natural gas to Ukraine. At the same time it became clear that the volume of gas delivered by the Vojany-Uzhgorod pipeline is dependent on the volume of gas purchased by Ukraine from Russia. The two parties – Slovakia and Ukraine – spent some time blaming each other, which had a negative impact on mutual trust in both capitals.

More generally, events in and around Ukraine impact the way Slovakia perceives its national security and regional security arrangements. They help reconsider the role Russia plays in

the region, obviously making smaller states perceive Moscow's political aspirations with more realism. They also enhance reevaluation of the role of NATO in regional security and stimulate discussions over security capacities of the European Union. In short, the whole architecture of the regional security has been rearranged. One of the consequences of such a rearrangement has been the appearance of new initiatives, such as the Three Seas Initiative, to which Slovakia is a member.

Issue of ethnic minorities has traditionally been important for bilateral relations. There is Ukrainian diaspora in Slovakia, totaling about 55 thousand according to census of 2001, but estimated by some experts as double that number. Ukrainians in Slovakia often identify themselves not as Ukrainians, but as Ruthenians, speaking a language of their own, which resembles Ukrainian, but is a different one. Ruthenians live not only in Slovakia, but in Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and Hungary. Composition of Ukrainians in Slovakia constantly varies, with some people gaining Slovak nationality, while balance of Ruthenians and Ukrainians is also shifting. Ruthenians and Ukrainians are a part of bilateral agenda. In 1995 a mechanism for dealing with minorities' issues has been bilaterally agreed upon.

A traditional issue of concern has been smuggling. A tunnel for delivering goods (primarily cigarettes) from Ukraine to Slovakia, airplanes, hang gliders and drones for same purposes, bribes and crimes are characteristic features of the problem. An average quantity of cigarettes, illegally delivered from Ukraine to Slovakia is estimated at 5 billion per year. Along with cigarettes drugs are also main item of illegal trade, and those go both ways. In addition, the channel is used by illegal immigrants. Tackling smuggling is a top priority.

PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Slovakia and Ukraine have a dynamic and mostly positive agenda at hand.

Both countries care about regional security. Although Slovakia is a member to NATO and EU, while Ukraine is not, both perceive crisis over Ukraine as a threat. Slovakian government has been consistent in providing Ukraine with diplomatic and political support. Slovakia voted in favor of UN General Assembly Resolution 68/262, dated March, 27, 2014, which stresses territorial integrity of Ukraine and claims invalidity of the so-called "Crimean referendum". Slovakia also advocated signing DCFTA between EU and Ukraine, as well as generally favors Ukraine's pro-Western aspirations.

Within the V4 Group distribution of support to Ukraine following violation of its territorial integrity by Russia in 2014, Slovakia is dealing with security issues and, in particular, energy security. Slovakian experience in enhancing energy security first of all by introducing more energy-effective industries and shifting to renewable energy resources, is of special importance to Ukraine. Slovakia and Ukraine have close positions in what concerns construction of the Nord Stream-2 pipeline. Both see the project as political and both are ready to coordinate efforts against it. Even if it may be too late now, it is important that the two countries have close views on more general problems of European energy security and the role Russia plays in it.

Abovementioned Three Seas Initiative can be a point of discussion the role of Ukraine in the new architecture of security in Eastern Europe. Although Ukraine is not a member of the 3SI, its very establishment in 2016 witnessed a need for additional security institutions. Even without membership in a short-term perspective, Ukraine may offer cooperation.

Most part of Slovakian population does not support occupation of Crimea by Russia and other aggressive Russian steps in Ukraine. The issue has become a cornerstone during Slovakian presidency in the EU in 2016. Sometimes unwillingly, but Bratislava had to deal with political and security areas, rather than economic, when it came to Ukraine. Improving Ukraine's state capacity and ensuring the conflict in the east of the country does not last too long have become priorities of regional security policy.

As one of the possible instruments for that, cross-border cooperation remains important for both countries. Aimed at overcoming natural and administrative borders between the countries, cross-border cooperation is locally focused. Cooperation between Eastern Slovakia and Transcarpathia is to a large extent built on similar problems: social, economic, infrastructural, etc. Legal framework for cooperation within the Carpathian euroregion was established in 1993. Cross-border cooperation could have been more effective, but movement of people, goods and capital across the border heavily depends on relations between EU and Ukraine. As a result, the customs regime at the Slovakian-Ukrainian border is one of the most strict, which can be attributed to migration issues and fears, absence of services at border crossing points, lack of joint planning, differences in administrative systems, and poor infrastructure. Generally speaking, cross-border cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine is more influenced externally than by local initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Relations between Slovakia and Ukraine resemble strategic partnership: parties' interests and positions often coincide or complement. They also have huge potential for development of bilateral trade, and the growth of commodity turnover between the two countries amounted to 36% in the first half of the current year. The two countries have similar vision on regional challenges and close perception of threats.

Russian factor still plays an important role in bilateral relations, and it not only sets parties aside, as it often was the case before, but also may provide additional bridges for cooperation.

One of them may deal with the energy security, especially within the context of the Nord Stream-2 pipeline. Similar positions towards this project may bring parties closer to joint vision of how energy security in the region may be enhanced. Regional security initiatives, e.g. the Three Seas Initiative, also provide additional potential for further political cooperation, while bilateral mechanisms for protecting rights of minorities may serve as a model for dealing with the issue.

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