



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# Slovakia's shift towards Russia - a risky scenario for the EU and NATO, but primarily for Slovaks



The European Union and NATO may suffer their first substantial rift in unity regarding support for Ukraine as Slovakia's parliamentary elections take place in a month and a half.

The left-wing populists from the Smer party, led by former Prime Minister Robert Fico, have good prospects of forming a government after the elections on September 30.

His past policy - both as prime minister and later as opposition leader - hints at a shift away from Slovakia's current strong support for Kyiv.

Fico's party has been steadily leading the polls ahead of the elections for months now, and is independently at around 20 to 25% of support.

This does not offer him the opportunity to form a government independently, but opens the door to being the principal majority contender, given the large number of parties with a considerably lower percentage of support.

If that happens, Slovakia's foreign policy, particularly its relationship with Russia and Ukraine, will shift away from its current strong support for Ukrainian defence against aggression and full solidarity with the EU and NATO partners regarding sanctions against Russia.

## Leader in support of Ukraine

Since the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine in February last year, Slovakia has been at the very top of the Western bloc in terms of support for Ukraine regarding its GDP (0.6%), right behind the three Baltic states and Poland.

This is the result of the pro-Western government of Prime Minister Eduard Heger (until last May) and Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová, who took the lead in military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, even within the Eastern European wing of the EU and NATO, which was more enthusiastic about it than others.

This trend could stop with the September elections, and move in the opposite direction.

Robert Fico, the leader of the left populists, made this quite apparent during his campaign. Fico has embraced powerful anti-Western rhetoric and pushed for closer connections with Russia ever since he lost the post of prime minister and his government collapsed in 2018.

## Indulging pro-Russian sentiment

With such a policy, he has been indulging the still widespread pro-Russian sentiment, which, unlike almost all Eastern European countries, has persisted in Slovakia three decades after gaining independence and the collapse of the socialist bloc.

Numerous Slovaks still view Russia as an "older brother", and 3 years ago, more than 70% of respondents said so in surveys. A significant percentage continues to support rapprochement with Russia and attribute the Ukrainian issue to NATO and the US.

As many as a third of Slovaks are convinced that the war was caused by the West, provoking Russia, which is twice as many as in Viktor Orbán's Hungary, which is still the sole "black sheep" in the Western bloc, with regard to attitudes towards Russia and its aggression against Ukraine. Only 40% of Slovaks hold

Russia responsible for the invasion of Ukraine (GlobSec).

Robert Fico successfully exploits the fruits of this sentiment, and promises that his government's policies will meet such strong anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiments of Slovaks.

As a first move, he announced the suspension of arms deliveries to Ukraine. Slovakia has been the leader among the Western allies so far, even supplying MiG-29 fighter jets to Kyiv.

He called the pro-Western president Čaputová an "American agent", Slovakia's military cooperation with the US "a betrayal of national interests", and the leadership in Kyiv "Ukrainian fascists" who started the crisis in 2014.

## Personal revenge of the former prime minister

Fico has predominantly built his anti-Western policy as a personal revenge because he attributed his departure from power in 2018, under the pressure of large protests due to the murder of an investigative journalist, to the West.

The popularity of Fico's Smer increased as a result of the very powerful Russian misinformation impact in Slovakia, in addition to the legacy of the positive feelings of a significant number of Slovaks towards Russia, which served as a fertile ground.

For many reasons, Moscow recognised that Slovakia could be one of the weaker links in the monolithic relationship between the EU and NATO towards the war in Ukraine.

That is why Moscow has directed hundreds of propaganda outlets and thousands of fabricated profiles on social media to the Slovak audience, through which it has been spreading misinformation and a pro-Russian narrative.

Robert Fico also showed a favourable attitude towards Russia during his last prime ministerial term, from 2012 to 2018, despite the country's annexation of Crimea.

In public, he called for lifting sanctions on Russia imposed by the EU because of that annexation, but he continued to vote in favour of them in European fora.

## Orbán as a role model

However, if he again gets support in the elections and manages to form a government, the Slovak populist could play much more aggressively in European fora.

At the very least, he could act like the Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, whom he can definitely consider as a good role model, by blackmailing and delaying until the last moment his agreement to shared decisions regarding Ukraine, seeking in return benefits for his country, primarily financial benefits.

EU and NATO leaders should be prepared for such a possibility, even as the mildest variation of a definite shift in Slovakian politics, if Fico and the left-wing pro-Russian populists succeed in the September elections.

It would be a more severe but not inconceivable outcome if Slovakia were to cause the first substantial crack in the Western bloc's unwavering support for Ukraine, leading to Russia's economic and political isolation.

Slovakia is one of the biggest beneficiaries of EU and NATO membership amongst Eastern European countries.

Since joining the EU in 2004, it has doubled its GDP to nearly \$120 billion. Due to its high growth and particularly by attracting substantial industrial investments from one of the weakest economies, it has become the "Eastern European economic tiger".

The price Slovak citizens risk paying for returning to their sentiment of Slavic brotherhood with Russia is much higher than the success they have achieved since accepting to be part of Western integration.