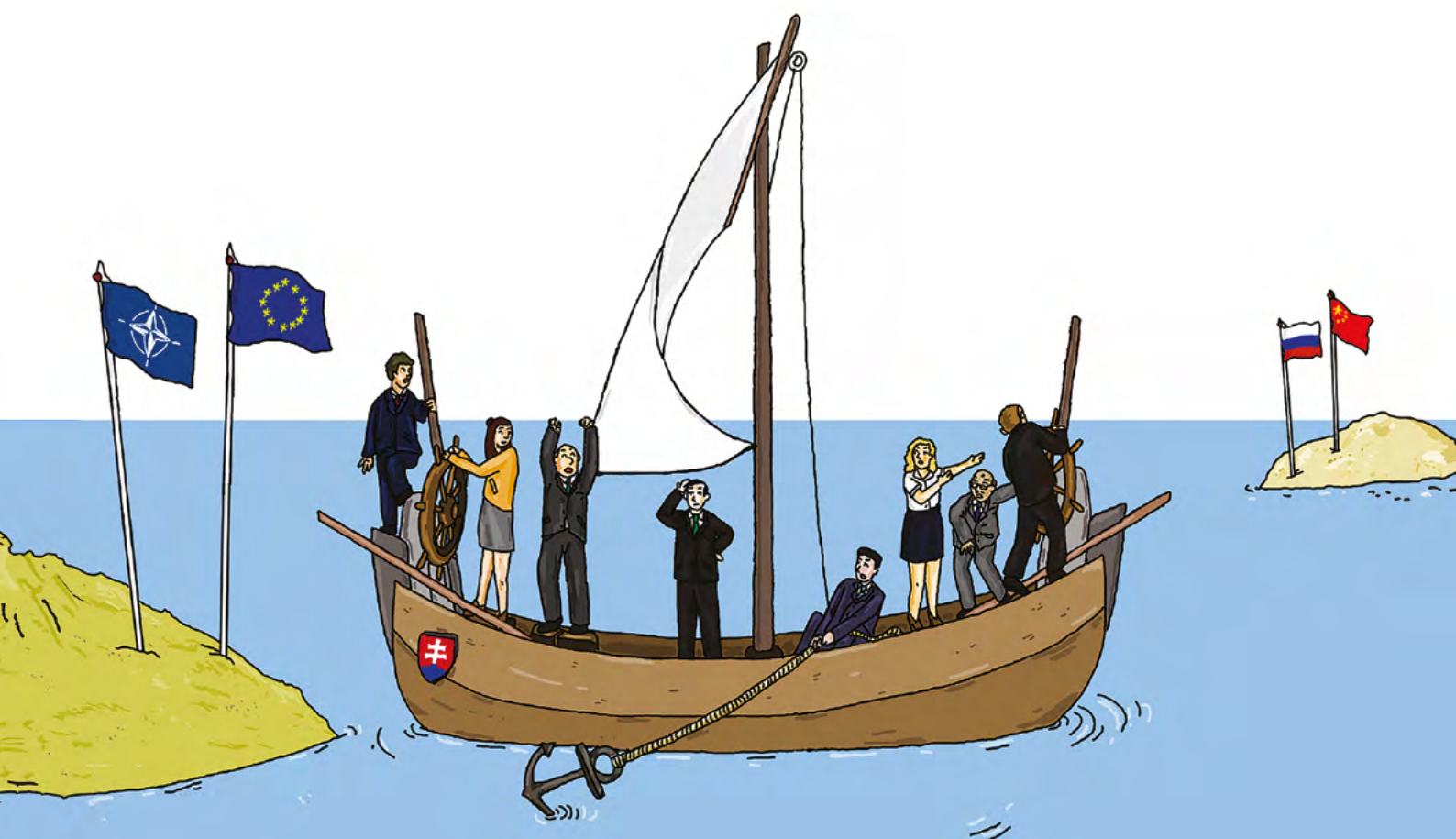


ANALYSIS

# Setting on an East-Bound Course? Slovak Political Parties' Views on China and Russia

Nikoleta Nemečková





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## **Analysis**

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# Summary

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- This study analyzes the positions held by select Slovak political parties on Russia and China, focusing on the parties' views and practical steps on the issue of responsibility for the war in Ukraine, isolation of Russia and sanctions, China's stance on the war, ties with Taiwan, human rights concerns regarding China, and technological and economic dependencies. The study focuses on the period between February 2022 and August 2023 framed by Russia's war on Ukraine, while also referencing earlier statements and moves.
- Russia's influence is far more deeply entrenched in Slovakia compared to that of China. As a result, the domestic debate about Slovakia's foreign policy orientation is primarily shaped by matters related to Russia, which has been further accentuated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- Positive attitudes towards Russia and China are most commonly embraced by the Republika, SMER-SD, and SNS parties, which espouse social conservative and nationalist views in domestic policies. However, these parties often veil their positions by arguing that they strive for a well-balanced foreign policy that ensures good ties with all countries. In regard to Russia, these parties downplay its responsibility for its invasion of Ukraine, advocate against international isolation of Russia, criticize sanctions, and exploit the role of the Soviet Union as a World War II liberator to bolster the contemporary image of Russia as an anti-fascist force in Europe. In relation to China, the endorsement of China's 'peace plan' for Ukraine gained notable traction among these parties during the period under review.
- In contrast, Demokrati, KDH, OĽaNO, SaS, and PS, which are positioned on the liberal to conservative spectrum in domestic issues, expressed critical views towards Moscow. These parties also hold reservations about Beijing, except for OĽaNO, which did not make direct comments on China-related matters through its official channels during the studied period, although it had a record of skepticism towards China before.
- HLAS-SD and Sme rodina find themselves in a middle ground, oscillating between a critical and lenient attitude towards the two powers. Concerning Russia, their stance on sanctions remains conflicted. When it comes to China, they tend to prioritize strong trade relations, often at the expense of downplaying the human rights concerns and the potential risks tied to economic and technological cooperation with Beijing.

- Within the context of Russia-related topics, the issue of sanctions, in particular, garnered significant attention in the Slovak political discourse. Some parties have successfully transformed this originally foreign policy matter into a domestic concern, stressing the socio-economic impact of sanctions on the Slovak population.
- The Chinese 'peace plan' and cooperation with Taiwan stood out as primary points of interest concerning China for Slovak political parties. Other topics held a less prominent place in the parties' agendas. For example, reflection of critical dependencies or risks linked to the reliance on Chinese technologies was largely absent in the discourse, with only a few exceptions. Even the parties expressing a willingness to engage in cooperation with China refrained from providing specific details regarding the nature of such cooperation.
- With the notable exception of Republika and SNS, the parties included in the analysis appear to exercise caution in openly endorsing Russia and China. Instead, they frequently resort to emphasizing Slovak national interests, employing tactics like 'whataboutism', and weaving manipulative narratives. China and Russia often serve as a political, economic, and social counterbalance to the EU and the West in general.
- The tactic of emphasizing narrowly defined national interests is frequently employed to erode Western unity and diminish support for Ukraine as well as sanctions against Russia. HLAS-SD, Republika, SMER-SD, and SNS have often taken Hungary as a model when it comes to approaching these subjects, particularly with regard to addressing sanctions.
- Narratives that paint Russia and China in a positive light are frequently employed to erode trust in the Slovak government and state institutions, and are thus instrumentalized in the domestic political struggle, as found by previous MapInfluenCE research. These narratives create the perception that the government's decisions are shaped not by Slovakia's national interests, but are subjugated to the interests of the West, and especially of the US.
- Political parties that have active Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) play a crucial role in enhancing discussions related to Russia and China, especially in the case of KDH and PS. These MEPs facilitate the translation of European-level discussions into national political conversations.



# Introduction and Research Design

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The economic and security crisis triggered by Russia's aggression against Ukraine has placed even greater strain on the already fragile trust in Slovak state institutions and the nation's pro-Western orientation. Both among the general populace and politicians, the question of Slovakia's rightful place has once again emerged. Should the country persist on its path towards the West, make a U-turn and realign with the East, or perhaps settle as a bridge between the two?

While from the late 1990s onward, despite political divisions, there has been a basic consensus regarding Slovakia's geopolitical alignment, largely adhered to even by the opposition parties, this pro-Western foreign policy stance is now facing open scrutiny. A comparable shift is discernible within the Slovak population as well. Based on a poll published in May 2023, not only had support for Slovakia's membership in Euro-Atlantic structures dwindled in comparison to previous years, but the share of Slovaks perceiving Russia as a security threat had also decreased.<sup>1</sup> When it comes to China, there remains relatively low awareness about the country, presenting an opportunity for pro-Beijing proponents to capitalize on.<sup>2</sup>

There are fears that these sentiments might evolve into an official pivot in Slovakia's foreign policy direction. This is related to the September 2023 elections but supersedes them. This potential transformation carries implications beyond just the nation's identity; it could also impact the broader dynamics of a region that is currently resisting Russia's military aggression. Hence, it becomes essential to examine the values championed by the leading Slovak political parties, as well as their respective attitudes towards the Euro-Atlantic partnership, and in contrast, towards Russia and China.

Favorable views of Russia in Slovakia have deep historical roots. These sentiments date back to the mid-19th century, tied to the Pan Slavist idea of Russia as a protective Slavic 'big brother' Slovaks marginalized under Austro-Hungarian rule.<sup>3</sup> Under the influence of the Kremlin, pro-Russian actors as well as Slovak history textbooks, this narrative has not only endured but also thrived into the 21st century. As of 2021, 58 percent of Slovaks still saw Russia as a big Slavic brother.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the influence of Pan Slavism, the four decades of socialism, marked by the suppression of any critical views on Russia, have further bolstered a positive perception of the country. A 2018 poll showed that 33 percent of Slovaks thought life was better under socialism.<sup>5</sup>

After the end of the Cold War, the Kremlin, along with its proxies, actively undertook the task of maintaining a favorable image of Russia among Slovaks, especially after Crimea's annexation in 2014. Pro-Kremlin outlets like Sputnik spread their narratives through local branches, amplified by local alternative websites and social media. By 2021, over 50 percent of Slovaks had aligned themselves with one of the pro-Russian explanations surrounding the annexation of Crimea. This sentiment even extended to justifying Russia's actions against Ukraine in 2022, with 34 percent endorsing the idea that the West provoked Russia's invasion.<sup>6</sup>

In comparison to Russia, China remains a significantly less familiar presence within the Slovak context. This discrepancy can be attributed to several key factors, such as the absence of shared history, the dissimilarity in language (when compared to Russian and Slovak), and the fact that China's image in Slovak media and among politicians and the general populace is predominantly confined to economic matters. This narrow focus on economic aspects has long characterized Slovak foreign policy concerning China, despite its status as a peripheral partner for Slovakia.<sup>7</sup> Often, economic ties have been prioritized at the expense of human rights issues, and the potential security risks presented by cooperation with Chinese companies. As shown by an opinion poll conducted in the first half of 2023, a mere 38 percent of Slovaks perceive China as a potential threat.<sup>8</sup> This prevailing lack of awareness and the resultant underestimation of the risks it poses provide strategic advantages for Beijing and its affiliated actors to exploit in the future.

## METHODOLOGY

The objective of this analysis is to map out the perspectives held by leading Slovak political parties on Russia and China. The study looks at 10 political parties, selected based on the polling before the September 2023 elections. Drawing from a survey undertaken in July 2023 by the Slovak polling agency AKO, the roster of these parties includes HLAS-SD, Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie (KDH), Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti (OLaNO),<sup>9</sup> Progresívne Slovensko (PS), Republika, Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS), Slovenská národná strana (SNS), Sme rodina, and SMER-SD, all parties that, according to the polls, can clear the 5 percent threshold to enter parliament (Slovak National Council). Additionally, this analysis will also examine a party that fell below the threshold in the polls – Demokrati. Owing to the fact that this party includes several key representatives of previous governments led by Igor Matovič and Eduard Heger (2020-2021 and 2021-2023, respectively), exerting a significant impact on the Slovak information space and societal discourse, an exception is made to include them as well.

The analysis focuses on the period stretching from the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 to August 2023. The war in Ukraine has brought forth a new political, security, economic, and social reality that has required Slovak political players to adjust and respond. The emergence of novel challenges in both domestic and foreign policies, stemming from the Russian invasion, has presented certain parties with the chance to translate mounting social dissatisfaction into political capital. Within this framework, avenues have also opened up for exploiting matters intertwined with China and Russia.

For comprehensive context, the study will also reference the actions and stances of the subjects under examination prior to the onset of the Russian aggression. Given the inherent volatility of the Slovak party landscape and the frequent changes in party memberships, the study will track the involvements of individuals across multiple political entities. The study focuses on parties, not on electoral coalitions.

Apart from issues directly related to the war in Ukraine, the study also delves into topics that have a longstanding resonance in Slovakia's relations with Russia and China. Hence, the analysis will focus on perspectives on:

- the root cause of and responsibility for the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022;
- international isolation of Russia and its designation as a state sponsor of terrorism;
- the sanctions imposed on Russia;
- China's perceived 'neutrality' towards the Russian aggression in Ukraine and its proposed 'peace plan';<sup>10</sup>
- cooperation with Taiwan;
- human rights concerns within China, notably concerning Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Tibet;
- economic and technological dependencies in critical sectors.

In conducting the analysis, the study utilized various sources including the election programs of the parties before the September 2023 elections, their official websites, the social media profiles of the political parties and their members, as well as their comments in the media. To facilitate social media analysis, analytical tools provided by Gerulata Technologies and CrowdTangle were employed.

## **NOTE ON THE SLOVAK POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT**

The Slovak political environment of the past decade has undergone deep changes. The SMER-SD party led the government between 2012 and 2020, most recently between 2016 and 2020 in a coalition with SNS (Slovak National party, a nationalist party) and Most-Híd (a party of the Hungarian minority). The party defines itself as a social democratic party, however, it has exhibited strong conservative and nationalist characteristics. For most of its rule, Robert Fico was the prime minister and concurrently the leader of the party. In 2018, Fico stepped down as prime minister due to large public demonstrations regarding the assassination of a journalist and his partner, and was replaced by his party colleague Peter Pellegrini. Pellegrini was then prime minister until the 2020 elections.

The 2020 elections brought to power a coalition of parties, led by the populist anti-corruption party OĽaNO, together with center right parties SaS, Za ľudí and a populist center party Sme rodina. The government led by Igor Matovič has faced internal strife, which eventually led to his resignation as prime minister and replacement by his party colleague Eduard Heger and subsequently also the exit of SaS from the ruling coalition. The rump government finally resigned in December 2022, while Eduard Heger continued to lead the interim government with restricted powers until it was finally succeeded with a non-political caretaker government in May 2023. The caretaker government remained in place until the September 2023 elections.

Meanwhile, the SMER-SD party has split with the exit of a faction led by Peter Pellegrini, founding the HLAS-SD party in 2020, and trying to portray itself as a more standard social democratic party of Western type as opposed to SMER-SD, which has

continued its transformation towards nationalism and political positions typically found among far-right parties under Fico. Fragmentation was especially evident on the liberal and center right part of the spectrum, with many small parties failing to form coalitions for the September 2023 elections.

While the 2020 elections and the success of OĽaNO were fueled by public discontent with the long rule of SMER-SD marred by corruption scandals, the new government failed to fulfil voter expectations due to constant inter-coalition bickering and a chaotic governance style.<sup>11</sup> Coupled with external shocks, including the invasion of Ukraine, this has led to a fall in trust towards the government and public disillusionment. These developments have contributed to the resurgence of SMER-SD and other parties presenting themselves as anti-establishment, such as Republika (a far-right nationalist party) and the nationalist SNS.

# Demokrati: Familiar Faces of Pro-Westernism in a New Guise

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Established in March 2023<sup>12</sup> mostly by the former members of OĽaNO, Demokrati (Democrats) is the youngest party from those analyzed in the study. However, as many of the party members have previously been in key government positions, among them former Prime Minister Eduard Heger and Defense Minister Jaroslav Naď, they have already built a clear record on foreign policy issues. This has included a steadfast support for Ukraine and opposition to Russia, which the party has continued to promote even after its representatives left the government following its dismissal in May 2023. However, within the framework of its “Political Pillars” for the September 2023 elections, the party does not explicitly comment on matters related to Moscow or Beijing. In relation to Russia, the party merely acknowledges the shift in Europe’s security landscape due to the aggression against Ukraine. The document also underscores the party’s “clear geopolitical compass,” firmly positioning Slovakia within the free democratic world, the EU, and NATO.<sup>13</sup>

## VIEWS ON RUSSIA

During the onset of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, Demokrati had yet to be established. Nonetheless, its current representatives vehemently condemned the invasion at the time. In a media interview, Heger openly identified the Kremlin as the clear instigator of the war and criticized the fact that Putin had been “handled with kid gloves” by world leaders for years. Heger went on to state that if the Kremlin’s leader were to visit Slovakia, the national authorities should apprehend him based on an international arrest warrant and extradite him to the Hague.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Jaroslav Naď labelled the Kremlin regime as an aggressor in the war and even likened Putin to the “Hitler of the 21st century.”<sup>15</sup>

Heger and Naď, along with their party colleagues Miroslav Kollár and Andrea Cocherová,<sup>16</sup> also endorsed the designation of Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism. Both Heger and Naď welcomed the European Parliament’s declaration on the issue.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, Kollár stressed that Russia had already been acting as a terrorist state even before February 24, 2022. He additionally urged the Slovak Parliament to issue a symbolic declaration akin to the one adopted by the European Parliament, officially designating Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism.<sup>18</sup>

Several members of Demokrati have also consistently voiced their concerns about the pro-Kremlin narratives spread in Slovakia. Particularly noteworthy is the recurring criticism from Jaroslav Naď. He denounced the subversive actions undertaken by the Russian embassy<sup>19</sup> in Slovakia,<sup>20</sup> highlighted the presence of domestic spies collaborating with Russia,<sup>21</sup> as well as the pro-Kremlin actors trying to sway public

opinion in Russia's favor.<sup>22</sup> Miroslav Kollár also took a critical stance, sharply rebuking the network of pro-Russian spies and collaborators operating within Slovakia. He underlined that Russia had gone as far as labelling Slovakia as an adversary, prompting his call for a reduction in the Russian embassy's staff stationed in the country.<sup>23</sup> Party members also called out Russia's exploitation of commemorative events as a means to "downplay and rationalize the unprovoked aggression of Putin's Russia in Ukraine."<sup>24</sup>

The resolute backing of party members for the most stringent measures against Russian aggression, combined with their pointed criticism of pro-Kremlin information manipulation, found clear expression in their discourse concerning sanctions too. Eduard Heger, for instance, not only firmly advocated for the harshest possible sanctions but countered prevailing manipulative narratives surrounding these measures.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, during a media interview, he underscored that Western sanctions have indeed had an impact on Russia, even though they have not completely halted Putin's advances into Ukraine.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, in one of his social media posts, Naď shared information about the Russian central bank's significant increase in interest rates and remarked, "If the pro-Russian spreaders of lies and disinformation were still trying to convince you that the sanctions against Russia are weak and the Russians are laughing at them....they are not laughing. They are desperate."<sup>27</sup>

## VIEWS ON CHINA

When it comes to matters concerning China, the party's level of engagement was notably less pronounced than its involvement in Russia-related issues during the reviewed period. The party's official channels refrained from taking explicit stances. Nonetheless, certain representatives, such as Karel Hirman, Miroslav Kollár, and Vladimír Bilčík, did articulate their perspectives. Hirman, for example, responded critically to statements made by the Chinese ambassador to France, who had cast doubts on the international legitimacy of countries that gained independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union which includes Slovakia.<sup>28</sup> Kollár, for his part, commemorated Tibet Day and condemned China's suppression of the local population in the region.<sup>29</sup> Bilčík, who is also an MEP, predominantly directed his attention to China-related subjects in his role in the European Parliament, particularly with regard to Chinese influence in Europe. He played a pivotal part in shaping the report titled "Defending democratic institutions and EP's integrity against malign interference," which was adopted by the European Parliament in July 2023.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, he succinctly summarized the recommendations of the report in a commentary for one of Slovakia's mainstream media outlets, *Aktuality*.<sup>31</sup> In a video from Brussels, he also underscored that, notwithstanding the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, China continues to draw closer to Russia while having significant potential to mitigate Moscow's actions.<sup>32</sup>

In matters related to Taiwan, Andrej Stančík has been particularly active. At the time still as an OLaNO member, he visited Taiwan in June 2022 along with other members of parliament, and subsequently supported Taiwan and its involvement on the international stage multiple times, such as its participation in the World Health Organization.<sup>33</sup>

# HLAS-sociálna demokracia (HLAS-SD): National Interests Come First

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Since its establishment in June 2020 as a group of SMER-SD dissenters, the HLAS-sociálna demokracia (Voice-Social Democracy, HLAS-SD) party has aimed to position itself as a pro-European force. However, akin to SMER-SD, HLAS-SD has displayed a recurring ambivalence in its approach towards both its Euro-Atlantic partners and Russia and China. Throughout the reviewed period, this ambivalence was particularly evident in the positions conveyed by the party's representatives regarding sanctions against Russia, their stance on the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, and its resolution. The "Value Principles" outlined by HLAS-SD for the September 2023 elections do not explicitly mention the party's stance in relation to Russia or China. While these principles openly affirm Slovakia's membership in the EU and NATO, as well as emphasizing the significance of upholding foreign policy sovereignty and territorial integrity, and rejecting the notion of forceful alterations to state borders, they avoid direct mentions of Russia or China.<sup>34</sup> Overall, the party's electoral agenda places a stronger emphasis on domestic issues than on foreign policy concerns, all the while underscoring the importance of safeguarding (often narrowly defined) Slovakia's interests.

## VIEWS ON RUSSIA

The position of HLAS-SD and its representatives regarding Russia remained neither overtly critical nor favorable during the period under review. Despite the party's condemnation of Russian aggression against Ukraine,<sup>35</sup> its chairman and former prime minister, Peter Pellegrini, did not endorse a parliamentary resolution that labelled Russia a terrorist state.<sup>36</sup> He also emphasized the significance of sustaining an ongoing dialogue with both Moscow and Beijing, underscoring that complete disengagement from these nations was not a viable strategy. Pellegrini even indicated his willingness to emulate Viktor Orbán's example by visiting Moscow, primarily to ensure Slovakia's gas supply and to gain insights into Russia's stance on the conflict.<sup>37</sup> It is worth noting that Pellegrini's approach towards Russia remains consistent, as he has long sought to establish "balanced relations on all fronts of the world" well before the emergence of the conflict in Ukraine.<sup>38</sup>

The resignation of one of the party's founding members, Peter Kmec, also highlighted HLAS-SD's tendency to avoid taking a definitive stance against Russia. In April 2023, during a public debate Kmec expressed strong opposition to Russian policies and advocated for Slovakia's alignment with Western values. The discussion was recorded and later purposefully edited by the youth wing of the SMER-SD party. In the video, Kmec asserted that any attempts to pursue alternatives to the West would

be detrimental to Slovakia, likening them to “suicide.” He also concurred that Russia perceives Slovakia’s worth only when the country assumes the role of a “useful idiot” in efforts to disrupt the unity of the EU and NATO.<sup>39</sup> In response to the ensuing controversy, the leadership of the HLAS-SD party declined to endorse Kmec’s opinions and instead stated that they welcomed his resignation after the video’s release. Matúš Šutaj-Eštok, the party secretary, further affirmed that HLAS-SD’s foreign policy remained clear and unwavering, with Slovak national interests taking precedence.<sup>40</sup>

The ambivalence in the attitude of the HLAS-SD party and its representatives towards Russia was also evident in their responses to sanctions. For instance, Pellegrini mentioned in a media interview that he supported the new sanctions packages, but he was skeptical about whether “the sanctions will significantly pressure the Russian Federation into making peace with Ukraine.” He went on to add that the previously imposed sanctions on Russia after the Crimea annexation had not yielded results, considering that Russia had reinvaded Ukraine despite them.<sup>41</sup> Pellegrini’s skeptical stance on sanctions is not new. Even during his tenure as prime minister, while he was still a member of the SMER-SD party, he voiced doubts. In 2018, he acknowledged the importance of maintaining unity with Western allies but criticized the sanctions, stating that they had not accomplished much for either Europe or Slovakia.<sup>42</sup>

The issue of sanctions is frequently interwoven with an emphasis on Slovakia’s national interests in the communication of the HLAS-SD party and its members. For instance, Erik Tomáš asserted that “The president’s and government officials’ call for a swift halt to gas and oil supplies from Russia represents an irresponsible threat to Slovakia’s national interests.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Peter Kmec contended that the then Prime Minister Eduard Heger had disregarded national interests while negotiating additional sanctions and “threw Slovakia overboard.”<sup>44</sup> In another post on his Facebook page, Kmec expressed concern about Heger’s “excessive activism in advocating for a new European sanctions package, potentially to the detriment of Slovakia’s national interests.”<sup>45</sup>

## VIEWS ON CHINA

Similarly as with Russia, the “Value Principles” outlined by the HLAS-SD party for the 2023 elections do not explicitly reference China. Additionally, topics related to China were not notably addressed in the party’s public communication during the reviewed period, with the exception of Pellegrini’s remarks about TikTok and the Chinese supply of medical masks during the pandemic. Touching upon the security concerns associated with TikTok, Pellegrini remarked that apps from other countries could also potential security risks.<sup>46</sup> Regarding the masks, the HLAS-SD party leader criticized the absence of solidarity within the EU amid the COVID-19 crisis. In his view, individual member states were “stealing masks” from each other, with only China providing the necessary medical supplies that he had facilitated in his role as prime minister. Pellegrini tied this issue to the current sanctions on Russia and the imperative of European solidarity. Expressing his perspective on the matter, he suggested that instead of relying on solidarity, Slovakia should focus on its own national interests.<sup>47</sup>



China was not a central priority for Pellegrini during his time as prime minister either. When his attention did turn to China, it was primarily in the context of cultivating trade relationships, even if it meant disregarding security concerns and remaining silent about Chinese human rights issues. A case in point is his visit to China in 2015, during which Pellegrini also toured Huawei's headquarters. The discussions during this visit revolved around collaborative initiatives like the construction of a technology park and the testing of a new mobile network within Slovakia. Four years later, when Pellegrini was still prime minister, he conveyed that Slovakia lacked specific evidence regarding security risks associated with Huawei. In this respect, Pellegrini expressed a desire to avoid instigating a trade dispute with China.<sup>48</sup> Richard Raši, who was then deputy prime minister and is now a member of the HLAS-SD party, also voiced his disagreement with limiting cooperation with Huawei during that period.<sup>49</sup>

# Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie (KDH): The Most Vocal Critic of Russia and China

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Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie (Christian Democratic Movement, KDH) a conservative party emphasizing traditional Christian values, has consistently reaffirmed its pro-Western orientation in recent years. Among the parties under analysis, the KDH's present electoral program stands out as the most comprehensive and detailed regarding matters concerning Russia and China. Within this program, the party expresses its commitment to advancing and enhancing Euro-Atlantic collaboration while fostering positive relations with democratic partners worldwide. Simultaneously, it positions itself firmly against nations that “disregard human rights as established in international agreements,” pledging that, if elected, it will strive to sever Slovakia's political and economic ties with such regimes.<sup>50</sup> The program offers critical assessments of both Russia and China across various current issues. This same stance is consistently reflected in the party's communication, as well as in the discourse of its members across social media platforms and in media outlets. Among the KDH representatives, MEP Ivan Štefanec and MEP and Chair of the KDH Foreign Affairs Committee Miriam Lexmann are particularly proactive in engaging with these topics.

## VIEWS ON RUSSIA

The KDH party delineates its critical stance towards Russia across various thematic domains within its 2023 election program. The document highlights the KDH's inclination to welcome Russia as a potential partner for both Slovakia and the EU. However, the party underscores that Russia's current conduct, characterized by violations of international law, an aggressive war against Ukraine, and engagement in a hybrid war against Western nations, impedes the feasibility of such a partnership. Building on this point, the KDH advocates for strengthening Slovakia's resilience against the disinformation propagated by Putin's regime.<sup>51</sup> KDH also directly challenges two recurring pro-Kremlin narratives. Firstly, it rebuts the Russian narrative attributing the conflict in Ukraine to NATO's expansion. Secondly, it sharply criticizes Kremlin attempts to present Russia as a guardian of traditional Christian values. Beyond addressing hybrid threats, the party's program envisions ongoing endorsement of sanctions on Russia and support for pro-democracy forces and human rights protection within Russia.

This stance towards Russia is consistently echoed across the social media platforms and the website of the KDH. The party has taken a resolute position against the Putin regime and its aggressive actions targeting Ukraine. Shortly after the onset

of the conflict, the party openly denounced the Russian assault and rallied behind the cause of Western solidarity, backing sanctions against Russia.<sup>52</sup> Representatives of the party, including Miriam Lexmann, Igor Štefanec, and Zuzana Bošňáková, have also labelled Russia a terrorist state and supported investigations into the war crimes being perpetrated by Russia in Ukraine.

Lexmann and Štefanec have emerged as the most proactive communicators within the KDH when it comes to matters concerning Russia and China. Both actively incorporate discussions on these authoritarian states and their transgressions against human rights and democratic values into their agenda within the European Parliament. Štefanec has consistently voiced criticism against Russia's curtailment of human rights and liberties and its interference in democratic processes abroad.<sup>53</sup> Štefanec has also condemned pro-Russian espionage activities within Slovakia and called for firm measures to counteract such subversive efforts.<sup>54</sup>

Miriam Lexmann has too consistently addressed Russian repression and hybrid operations, both domestically and internationally. Over the reviewed period, she has placed emphasis on the necessity of collaborating with dissidents and underscored the dire consequences that the Kremlin's suppression of opposition can entail.<sup>55</sup> Lexmann has also drawn attention to pro-Russian proxy actors that disseminate pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation within Slovakia. She has called for an enhanced communication strategy as a response to the activities of these actors.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, she has advocated for the EU and its member states to decrease their dependence on totalitarian regimes that present a dual threat to both democracy and economic security.<sup>57</sup>

## VIEWS ON CHINA

Similar to its stance on Russia, the KDH's official program for the 2023 elections also shows a critical perspective on China. It openly identifies China as a threat to the democratic world, citing various reasons for its concerns. These encompass the utilization of unfair practices within the international market, disregard for established international law, an aggressive stance towards Taiwan, and infringement upon the human rights of individuals within China and Hong Kong. The program also outlines a strategy to counteract China's expanding influence. This includes safeguarding critical infrastructure and intellectual property held by Slovak and European companies. Additionally, measures are proposed to prevent the improper utilization of citizens' personal data by actors from China.<sup>58</sup>

The communication of the party members is aligned with the KDH's election program. Štefanec and Lexmann are again the most proactive in these topics. For instance, in a commentary for the daily *Aktuality*, Štefanec underscored the necessity for a cohesive European strategy to safeguard the EU's interests against China. He emphasized that China employs an aggressive and even adversarial approach, disregarding international norms while relentlessly pursuing its own interests.<sup>59</sup> Lexmann, for her part, has advocated for a swifter EU response to shield European companies from the pilfering of intellectual property by China – a practice that leads to economic losses, erodes European competitiveness, and contributes to job displacement.<sup>60</sup> She

has consistently drawn attention to gaps in the protection of critical infrastructure, including vulnerabilities within 5G networks and highlighted the ongoing reliance on China in crucial sectors, particularly in pharmaceuticals and semiconductors.<sup>61</sup> Lexmann has also sounded the alarm on the hazards of TikTok, explaining the rationale behind its prohibition for European institutions' employees. She cautioned that TikTok poses not only a threat to countries and their leaders but also "to all of us."<sup>62</sup>

In addition to the science, technology, and trade dimensions of China-related topics, Miriam Lexmann has also weighed in on the subject of human rights violations committed by the Chinese government. Notably, she has expressed criticism regarding China's oppressive actions towards the Uyghurs and the people of Hong Kong. She has also highlighted emerging methods of curbing religious freedoms, such as the employment of artificial intelligence.<sup>63</sup> Lexmann has furthermore raised concerns about the "export" of Chinese repression to democratic nations, specifically referring to the unlawful police stations across Europe, including in Slovakia.<sup>64</sup> Lexmann is engaged on the issue also on the global level, not least due to her role as one of the two vice chairs of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC) from the European Parliament.

Lexmann, Štefanec, and KDH chairman Milan Majerský have all been vocal on the issue of Taiwan too. Lexmann, for instance, welcomed Taiwanese investments in the eastern part of Slovakia which has been struggling with underdevelopment and a lack of work opportunities for decades. She emphasized the significance and future potential of nurturing economic ties with Taiwan.<sup>65</sup> In another post, she underscored that Taiwan is planning a billion-dollar investment in businesses across Central and Eastern Europe – a promising opportunity that Slovak companies should seize.<sup>66</sup> Majerský, as the mayor of the eastern Slovakia region of Prešov, personally engaged with the Taipei Representative Office's head David Lee. Their discussions revolved around the anticipated investments and prospects for further collaboration.<sup>67</sup> Majerský also conveyed this prospect to Slovak business leaders. Štefanec, for his part, stressed the imperative of collaborating with Taiwan in the semiconductor domain.<sup>68</sup> He also voiced his endorsement of Taiwan's participation in the World Health Organization – which China has long obstructed.<sup>69</sup>

# Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti (OĽaNO): From Welcoming Sputnik V to Harsh Criticism of Putin

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During its tenure leading the Slovak government from 2020 to 2023, the populist Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti (The Ordinary People and Independent Personalities, OĽaNO) party actively promoted Slovakia's pro-Western orientation. However, beyond this period, the party's positions concerning Russia and China were mostly expressed by individual party members, notably its leader Igor Matovič, rather than being outlined in official programs or strategic visions. Yet, even these statements did not consistently form a significant part of the party's public discourse until the outbreak of the Ukraine war in February 2022. This can be partly attributed to the fact that OĽaNO has predominantly concentrated on domestic matters since its inception. As a result, the party's 11-point vision for Slovakia only lightly touches on foreign policy matters, dedicating just one point to assert its commitment to a pro-Western trajectory for Slovakia and its membership in a "useful EU and a functional NATO." The document refrains from explicitly naming either Russia or China.<sup>70</sup>

## VIEWS ON RUSSIA

Even though Russia was not a primary focus on the OĽaNO agenda before February 24, 2022, the party already held a critical view of it prior to the invasion. According to its official stance dating back to 2020, the party recognized Slovakia's interest in maintaining positive and mutually beneficial relations with Russia. However, OĽaNO pointed out that Russia's own actions were impeding this goal, citing the annexation of Crimea but also the "unacceptable interference in elections, propagation of disinformation and fake news, and mounting intelligence operations even within Slovak territory." OĽaNO also stated that unless Russia alters its behavior, the sanctions imposed after the Crimea annexation should continue in full effect.<sup>71</sup>

A noticeable shift in the party's stance towards Russia emerged in 2021, prompted by Igor Matovič's decision to procure the Russian vaccine Sputnik V for Slovakia – a vaccine not approved by the EU.<sup>72</sup> However, available information suggests that this move was primarily driven by domestic political considerations and the shortage of vaccines at that time, without much consideration given to its international impact. Nonetheless, Matovič emerged as a prominent advocate of the Sputnik V vaccine within the EU. The Kremlin capitalized on Matovič's efforts to boost the vaccine's promotion both domestically and internationally. The then Slovak prime minister's endeavor to secure the vaccine's usage also served to reinforce narratives

of alleged vaccine bias in Europe and the EU's purported shortcomings in supplying sufficient Western vaccines to its member states.<sup>73</sup>

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, OĽaNO adopted a strongly critical stance towards the Russian regime.<sup>74</sup> The party vehemently condemned the Russian attack,<sup>75</sup> advocated for the harshest possible sanctions against the aggressor,<sup>76</sup> supported designating Russia as a terrorist state,<sup>77</sup> countered pro-Kremlin narratives about the war, and cautioned against Russian hybrid attacks.<sup>78</sup> Via several posts on the party's Facebook and YouTube pages, OĽaNO addressed Russian hoaxes about the Bucha massacre,<sup>79</sup> manipulative narratives placing blame on Ukrainians for missile attacks,<sup>80</sup> pro-Kremlin disinformation concerning Ukraine's denazification,<sup>81</sup> and instances of Russian espionage in Slovakia.<sup>82</sup> Igor Matovič even likened Vladimir Putin to Hitler, accusing him of "literally stealing money from the wallets of Slovaks".<sup>83</sup>

On significant anniversaries related to Russia or its Soviet predecessor, OĽaNO brought attention to the dark side of Russian influence on Slovakia. Instead of commemorating holidays celebrating the liberation of Slovakia by the Red Army that could be used to spread pro-Kremlin narratives, OĽaNO and its members chose to commemorate the anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. They drew parallels between the Russian oppression in Czechoslovakia during that time and the ongoing situation in Ukraine.<sup>84</sup> Concurrently, OĽaNO emphasized a clear distinction between the Russian regime and the Russian people, underscoring that the war was not initiated by the Russian people, but by Vladimir Putin.<sup>85</sup> This approach proactively countered the prevalent pro-Kremlin narratives accusing the West of harboring Russophobia.

## VIEWS ON CHINA

In contrast to its stance on Russia, the OĽaNO party has given little attention to topics related to China. In 2020, the party issued an official statement to the daily *Aktuality* acknowledging the potential risks associated with Chinese technologies. The statement highlighted that "Permitting Chinese state-controlled or state-influenced companies to establish an advanced 5G network could present a significant security risk."<sup>86</sup> Since then, OĽaNO has not made substantial comments on Chinese technology issues, and during the reviewed period, the party did not explicitly address other China-related issues. Furthermore, the party's election program for the September 2023 elections does not touch upon its stance towards China.

Even during its time leading the Slovak government coalition in 2020-2023, OĽaNO did not exhibit a clear-cut stance towards the relationship with Beijing. A notable instance is when the then Prime Minister Matovič participated in the summit of the platform for interaction between China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, known as 17+1, at the beginning of 2021. Just a few days prior to the summit, Matovič had insisted that he had no intention of attending and expressed a preference for negotiating with China within the 27+1 format that includes the entire EU. However, the aim of upholding strong trade relations with Beijing ultimately held sway, leading Matovič to reevaluate his decision. Following the signing of a protocol concerning the export of lamb and goat meat between Slovakia and China, Matovič altered his stance and eventually participated in the summit.<sup>87</sup>

# Progresívne Slovensko (PS): Long-Time Advocate of a Pro-Western Course

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Since its establishment in 2017, the Progresívne Slovensko (Progressive Slovakia, PS) party has consistently advocated for Slovakia's alignment with the West and its strong integration within the EU and NATO. Concurrently, the party has maintained a critical stance towards Russia and China, consistently underscoring the discord in values between Slovakia and these two authoritarian nations. The party has also highlighted the multifaceted risks – ranging from security to economic and political – posed by these countries to both Slovakia and the wider EU. This stance carries through to the party's ongoing priorities for the September 2023 parliamentary elections. According to these priorities, Slovakia stands at a crossroads between West and East, with the elections poised to determine the country's path. If PS secures a place in the next government, the party pledges to provide voters with a future for Slovakia firmly anchored within the European Union and NATO.<sup>88</sup>

## VIEWS ON RUSSIA

The stances towards Russia and China that the PS outlines in its election program are also evident in the party's official communication and the statements of its individual representatives on social media platforms and in the media. PS and several of its members have unequivocally condemned the Russian aggression against Ukraine, urging the Slovak government to take every possible measure to aid Slovakia's neighbor.<sup>89</sup> Deputy chairman of the party, Tomáš Valášek, for instance, firmly denounced the attack on Ukraine as “unprovoked, unjustified, and indefensible,” squarely attributing the responsibility to Russia and the “dictator Putin” for the conflict. He not only called for humanitarian assistance but also advocated for military support, sanctions, and enhancing Slovakia's resilience against conventional, informational, and hybrid warfare.<sup>90</sup>

Since the outbreak of the war, the PS has consistently supported the strictest sanctions. The party and its leaders have backed European solidarity in the face of Putin's aggression and criticized Viktor Orbán's disruption of such unity. They have also highlighted that moving away from energy reliance on Russia is in the best interest of Slovakia and the entire EU, asserting that this step should have been taken long ago.<sup>91</sup> Chairman of the PS, Michal Šimečka, concurrently serving as a Vice-President of the European Parliament since 2022, went as far as to claim that “the European response to Putin's aggression should be more robust” and that the “current economic sanctions fall short.” Šimečka disagreed, for instance, with the omission of severing Russia from the SWIFT payment system within the sanctions packages.<sup>92</sup> This stance was echoed by PS members Michal Truban,<sup>93</sup> Michal Wieszik,<sup>94</sup> and Martin Hojsík,<sup>95</sup>

who additionally criticized the readiness of the then Slovak Minister of Economy, Richard Sulík from the SaS party, to settle energy payments with Russia in roubles. Hojsík also countered the pro-Kremlin narrative which blamed the sanctions for rising inflation in the EU.<sup>96</sup> At the EU level, MEPs affiliated with PS lent their support not only to sanctions but also to designating Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism.<sup>97</sup>

The PS was critical not only towards Russian actions in Ukraine but also in Slovakia. Following the revelation by Slovak intelligence services that several Slovak citizens were actively involved in espionage activities benefiting Russia, the PS called for resolute measures against Russian espionage on Slovak soil, emphasizing that the Putin regime had unequivocally designated Slovakia as an adversary.<sup>98</sup> Vice-Chairman Tomáš Valášek even openly referred to Russian actions as a “threat to Slovak sovereignty” during a session with the Russian ambassador at the Committee on Foreign Affairs in the Slovak parliament.<sup>99</sup> The PS also endorsed the subsequent expulsion of three Russian diplomats from Slovakia.<sup>100</sup> PS Vice-Chair Irena Bihariová cautioned against the perils of Russian hybrid warfare in Slovakia. In a similar vein, Martin Hojsík urged Slovaks not to be misled by attempts to downplay the Russian invasion.<sup>101</sup> Michal Truban even called for measures to be taken against “Putin’s propagandists in our country.”<sup>102</sup>

## VIEWS ON CHINA

Similar to their approach to Russia, the PS and its representatives also maintained a critical stance towards China. However, discussions pertaining to China were notably less frequent than those concerning Russia. When such discussions did take place, they predominantly revolved around highlighting critical dependencies and the necessity of upholding a unified EU stance towards Beijing. Offering comprehensive positions on both subjects, the PS Chairman Michal Šimečka played a pivotal role. During one of his media interviews he, for instance, elaborated on the significance of MEPs’ endorsement of a new directive aimed at bolstering the protection of critical infrastructure in the European Union. Šimečka particularly underscored the directive’s potential impact on additional critical infrastructure sectors across Europe.<sup>103</sup>

Šimečka’s criticism of politicians veering towards Beijing at the expense of unity with Western allies has been echoed by PS Deputy Chairman Tomáš Valášek. He strongly objected to the remarks made by French President Macron regarding Taiwan during his visit to China. In his speech, Macron stated that, given the Sino-American tensions over Taiwan, Europe faced a substantial risk of becoming “entangled in crises that do not concern us.” Valášek believes that Macron’s statements “have arbitrarily positioned Europe as a disinterested bystander on the matter of Taiwan.” Furthermore, Macron has also “publicly distanced” himself from the United States, a steadfast ally not only of France but of all of Europe. Valášek also criticized the timing of these remarks, occurring as they did during the period of Russian aggression against Ukraine, which has only underscored the importance of US defense assistance and highlighted the close alignment between Beijing and Moscow.<sup>104</sup>

In September 2022, Šimečka too addressed the escalating tensions between mainland China and Taiwan at the EU level, contributing as one of the authors of the



“Motion for a Resolution on the Situation in the Strait of Taiwan” that cautioned that “China’s aggressive conduct towards Taiwan is the most pronounced in decades.”<sup>105</sup> The resolution also made reference to President Xi Jinping’s strengthening of ties with Vladimir Putin after Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. This, according to the text, “clearly indicated his intent to erode global peace and security and challenge the established rules-based international system.”<sup>106</sup>

During the 2020 election campaign, the PS expressed its reservations about the potential risks tied to the Chinese communist regime, not only in the broader context of the EU but also directly concerning Slovakia. Reacting to a pre-election poll by Aktuality about whether Huawei or other Chinese companies should be involved in building a 5G network in Slovakia, the party gave a definitive negative response. According to the official standpoint of the PS, such participation would present a security risk.<sup>107</sup> As the September 2023 elections approached, one of the party’s representatives, Tamara Stohlová, shared her views on Chinese technologies, particularly focusing on TikTok, during a Denník N podcast. On one hand, she acknowledged the inherent security concerns stemming from TikTok’s parent company, ByteDance, being headquartered in China. She stated that within the PS, TikTok is not used on devices containing sensitive data. However, Stohlová also argued that the PS’s campaign should not entirely avoid the platform, as doing so could potentially cede this space to other parties like SMER-SD and Republika.<sup>108</sup>

# Republika: Balanced Position, But Only on Paper

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The establishment of the party Republika (Republic) took place in 2021 following the departure of several prominent members from the far-right party *Ľudová strana naše Slovensko* (ĽSNS) led by Marián Kotleba. These former ĽSNS members took over the once-centrist party *Hlas Ľudu* and subsequently shifted its direction towards the right-wing of the political spectrum. As outlined in the party's official program, Republika advocates for a well-balanced foreign policy for Slovakia that encompasses "all directions", including relations with Russia and China. The party supports Slovakia's continued EU membership, but emphasizes that its outlook is not solely directed "towards the West, but also towards the East." In addition to fostering economic collaboration with European nations, the party aims to "cultivate trade partnerships with the Russian Federation, China, India, other BRICS nations, and other relevant global economies."<sup>109</sup> However, this professed equilibrium is counteracted by the statements made by key figures within the party who criticize the EU, NATO, and the West at large and at the same time commend Russia and China. Strong pro-Russia or pro-China narratives have emerged in the party's discourse, particularly in connection with the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

## VIEWS ON RUSSIA

Regarding Russia's aggression against Ukraine, prominent members of the Republika party have adopted a stance that seeks to diminish Russia's accountability. Milan Uhrík, the chairman of the party, contended that the West bore "equal responsibility" for the conflict. He asserted that "With over 7 years of anti-Russian sanctions, hateful propaganda, and the expansion of US military influence to the East (even reaching Slovakia), Russia was left with little choice but to halt the encroachment of its adversaries." Uhrík continued his argument by defending Russia's reasoning for the war, asserting that Russia had consistently been victimized by the West, which harbors animosity towards Russia's very existence.<sup>110</sup> This portrayal of Russia as a victim of a Russophobic West has also been propagated by the Kremlin and pro-Russian entities in various forms over the years, as a means to rationalize Russia's assertive foreign policies.<sup>111</sup> Uhrík contended that even with the outbreak of the full-scale war, it was Western actions that forced Russia to react. This perspective is consistent with Uhrík's previously articulated views, including his claim that the anti-government protests in Ukraine in 2013 were funded and coordinated by Western interests. He has also consistently opposed the sanctions imposed on Russia following the annexation of Crimea.<sup>112</sup>

Uhrík's fellow party members shared a similar perspective on the war. Marián Ďuriš went as far as to openly characterize the conflict as “a senseless war driven by the agendas of the US and Western European nations ... with the sole objective of weakening, dismantling, and fracturing Russia.”<sup>113</sup> Miroslav Urban, for his part, contended that the conflict in Ukraine was “meticulously devised and instigated by Western powers.”<sup>114</sup> A number of Republika party members further alleged that the Slovak government was too aligned with the interests of Western powers. They argued that it was time to prioritize national interests and put Slovakia first.<sup>115</sup>

Through a narrowly-defined emphasis on Slovakia's national interests, Republika and its key figures also voiced criticism towards the sanctions imposed on Russia. Milan Uhrík, who is also an MEP, for instance, asserted during a speech delivered to the European Parliament that “self-destructive sanctions should be lifted without delay.”<sup>116</sup> In another video, he warned about the impending “steep price hikes,” claiming that “anti-Russian sanctions will bring the EU to its knees.”<sup>117</sup> Milan Mazurek also weighed in on the sanctions' repercussions, contending that they were “destroying” the European population. He further opined that “Europe is being guided by an anti-European clique that, by proclaiming its intention to conquer Putin, is effectively securing a future marked by impoverishment and a sense of despair.”<sup>118</sup>

In addition to sanctions, members of Republika have openly criticized the designation of Russia as a terrorist state by the European Parliament. Several of them deemed this designation absurd and sought to divert attention from Russian wrongdoings through ‘whataboutism’. For instance, Tomáš Špaček remarked, “Labelling the Russian Federation as a sponsor of terrorism is preposterous for a NATO member state. NATO holds responsibility for millions of innocent lives and could be seen as the largest terrorist organization.”<sup>119</sup> Within the European Parliament, Milan Uhrík cast his vote against the labelling of Russia as a terrorist state. In a video, he further elaborated, stating, “If we were to measure by the same yardstick the US and Ukraine, both of which have also committed atrocities, they could be seen as terrorist states as well.”<sup>120</sup>

## VIEWS ON CHINA

The party's official agenda for the 2023 elections and its communication on social media and in the media reveal an uncritical and at times even sympathetic approach towards Beijing. The party is inclined towards deepening trade relations with China and even positively assessed China's proposed ‘peace plan’ for Ukraine.

Milan Uhrík, for instance, portrayed China similarly to Russia – as a victim of the West's attempts to tarnish its global image. In a speech at the European Parliament, he rebuked the Western labelling of China as a threat, accusing Western nations of hypocrisy. Just as with his approach to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, he steered the focus away from China's escalating tensions over Taiwan and human rights violations. Instead, he highlighted instances of past conflicts involving the West and the United States.<sup>121</sup> Uhrík contended that the West is also provoking China, citing the visit of Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, to Taiwan in August 2022. He urged Slovaks to prevent their country from being dragged into

the “provocations and destabilization” instigated by “Euro-fanatics” and “American cowboys” worldwide. Instead, in his view, Slovakia should strive to secure the nation's prosperity through positive relationships that will endure despite the misguided actions of Western leadership.<sup>122</sup> Additionally, Uhrík's party colleague Miroslav Urban also commented on the Taiwan issue, criticizing the use of Slovak citizens' money to fund a delegation of Slovak MPs to Taiwan.<sup>123</sup>

Republika and its leaders also highlighted China's positive image, contrasting it with the West, in the context of Beijing's stance on the war in Ukraine and its ‘peace plan’ proposed a year after the war's outbreak. China's stated position gained full support within the party.<sup>124</sup> Party chairman Uhrík even met with China's representatives to the European Union in Brussels to discuss the initiative. He expressed his belief that the Chinese proposal “currently offers the most realistic and promising starting point for ending the violent conflict, restoring (global) peace, and, above all, restoring normalcy to all of us.”<sup>125</sup> The Chinese initiative also garnered support from Tomáš Špaček, who shared on his social media profile the endorsement of China's proposal by Hungarian Foreign Minister Szijjarto.<sup>126</sup>

# Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS): Supporting Taiwan and Bashing Russia, Except on Sanctions

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The Sloboda a Solidarita party (Freedom and Solidarity, SaS) has held a longstanding dedication to Slovakia's membership in the European Union and NATO, a stance reaffirmed in its priorities for the 2023 elections. The party's program also takes a critical perspective towards Russia, particularly in light of its actions in Ukraine. However, the program does not directly address China. At the same time, SaS has been one of the parties with the strongest support for developing ties with Taiwan. The strong stance on the authoritarian powers is, however, undermined by the party's sometimes conflicted views on the issue of sanctions.

## VIEWS ON RUSSIA

SaS identified Russia as a security risk for Slovakia already prior to the previous elections in 2020<sup>127</sup>, and the same stance is carried over into the program for the September 2023 elections. The opening paragraphs of the "Foreign and European Affairs" section strongly denounce Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The document depicts Russia not only as an aggressor but also as an unreliable international partner, repeatedly disregarding international law and its own commitments. SaS commits to advocating for Russia's expulsion from the UN and pushing for "the most robust possible sanctions against the Russian Federation and its leaders."<sup>128</sup>

However, a lack of consensus regarding sanctions is evident within SaS, with the party leader Richard Sulík himself frequently undermining unequivocal support for such measures. While Sulík did express backing for the implementation of sanctions after February 24, 2022, during his tenure as Minister of the Economy (2021-2022), he simultaneously advocated for exemptions for Slovakia and proposed a three-year transitional period which would soften the impact of sanctions on Russia.<sup>129</sup> Paralleling pro-Kremlin narratives, he also cautioned against sanctions that might inflict more harm on Europe than on Russia.<sup>130</sup> Even a few months prior to Russia's full-scale invasion, Sulík contended that sanctions "merely cause harm, and the Russians won't be giving Crimea back anyway."<sup>131</sup> These statements were subsequently manipulated by Russian media, notably the state-controlled TASS news agency.<sup>132</sup> However, despite Sulík's statement, the SaS party continued to officially support sanctions, as affirmed through a press release.<sup>133</sup>

Sulík's stance contrasts with that of his party colleagues, who advocated for the strictest possible sanctions. For instance, Vladimíra Marcinková, chair of the European Committee of the National Council of the Slovak Republic and SaS member,

has called for robust sanctions since Russia's recognition of the separatist regions in eastern Ukraine.<sup>134</sup> MEP Eugen Jurzyca has countered the pro-Kremlin narrative that sanctions would harm Europe more than Russia. In a Facebook post, he emphasized, "The entire world will feel the effects of a harsh economic battle, but Russia will be impacted even more significantly than the West."<sup>135</sup> Likewise, SaS security team leader Juraj Krúpa challenged a statement by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, who claimed that sanctions against Russia would not yield the intended results. Krúpa asserted that Russia will experience the repercussions of these sanctions even more intensely than it anticipates.<sup>136</sup>

Several SaS representatives have actively engaged with the topic of Russian war crimes and the designation of Russia as a terrorist state since the war's start. In January 2023, the party took a significant step by presenting a motion to the Slovak Parliament to declare Russia a state sponsor of terrorism, which was subsequently endorsed by the attending MPs. Concurrently, several SaS representatives offered their support for initiatives aimed at establishing a dedicated tribunal for prosecuting acts of aggression, as well as advocating for the prosecution of crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in Ukraine.<sup>137</sup> Throughout the conflict's duration, Mária Kolíková, the former Minister of Justice, played a prominent role in this initiative. She consistently emphasized the imperative of holding those responsible for war crimes in Ukraine accountable. Anna Zemanová, another SaS party member, went even further, likening Russia's actions in the occupied territory to "genocide" after her field trip to Ukraine.<sup>138</sup>

In addition to their condemnation of Russian actions in Ukraine, SaS and its members also expressed criticism towards Russian activities within Slovakia. In the wake of the war's onset, SaS MPs voiced concerns about a "hybrid war being waged by Russia on Slovak territory" and urged law enforcement agencies, intelligence services, and other relevant authorities not to underestimate this threat. Instead, they called for effective measures to counter it, stressing the importance of safeguarding Slovakia's security and democratic values.<sup>139</sup> In the aftermath of the apprehension of three Slovak individuals engaged in espionage activities on behalf of Russia, Juraj Krúpa further underscored the need for a comprehensive investigation into potential collaborators of the Putin regime in Slovakia. He particularly highlighted the role of several politicians who, in recent years, had demonstrated significant support for Russia.<sup>140</sup>

## **VIEWS ON CHINA**

Unlike its approach to Russia, the SaS foreign policy program for the 2023 elections does not address topics related to China at all. Nonetheless, the official SaS Facebook account and party representatives have made multiple comments regarding these topics during the reviewed period. In relation to Tibet and human rights concerns, SaS marked the 74th anniversary of the day when "Communist China forcibly occupied Tibet, resulting in the loss of tens of thousands of lives due to violent suppression of protests."<sup>141</sup> A year prior, SaS had endorsed the strong condemnation of China's ac-

tions in Tibet via one of its members, Peter Osuský, who likened them to the actions of Hitler and Putin.<sup>142</sup>

Osuský, who chairs the Taiwan-Slovakia Friendship Group in the National Council, is actively engaged in several topics related to China. He has consistently argued both in the parliament and in the media that Taiwan has significantly higher investment in Slovakia than China, contributing more to employment in the country.<sup>143</sup> He has also been vocal about Taiwan's exclusion from international organizations and has highlighted China's human rights violations. In April 2023, along with fellow SaS colleagues, he joined a group of Slovak MPs in issuing a statement concerning President Macron's remarks during his visit to China. The statement criticized Macron's comments as "detrimental to the transatlantic partnership between Europe and the United States". The MEPs also expressed their belief in providing more support to Taiwan in its resistance against mainland China's authoritarian regime, emphasizing the need for cooperation in defense and security to discourage any aggressive actions by Communist China towards Taiwan.<sup>144</sup>

Enhancement of cooperation with Taiwan was actively pursued by the SaS representative Karol Galek during his tenure as Deputy Minister of the Economy. Since economic interactions with Taiwan had primarily been driven by private companies for numerous years, Galek aimed to bolster collaborative efforts at the level of governmental authorities, particularly in the realm of microchip technology. Galek underscored the significance of establishing strong business ties with Taiwan, the world's largest producer of microchips – vital components for Slovakia's automotive industry which is one of the drivers of the Slovak economy. This rationale motivated his visit to Taiwan, despite calls from China urging its cancellation.<sup>145</sup> Galek also emphasized the pivotal role Taiwan played during the pandemic. Slovakia's decision to donate vaccines to Taiwan was based on the nation's earlier assistance to Slovakia, including the supply of medical masks. Furthermore, Galek highlighted Taiwan's considerable investments in Slovakia.<sup>146</sup> By highlighting Taiwan's economic significance for Slovakia, Galek stood apart from the approach taken by several members of previous Slovak governments, who prioritized cultivating economic ties with China, even in the face of Beijing's human rights violations.

# Slovenská národná strana (SNS): Sticking to Russia Even After the Invasion of Ukraine

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Founded in 1990, Slovenská národná strana (Slovak National Party, SNS) bore witness to Slovakia's trajectory towards the West following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, the party itself leaned more towards anti-American and Eurosceptic viewpoints. These inclinations were coupled with a pro-Russian stance that gained momentum after the party came under the leadership of its current party chief, Andrej Danko.

During the reviewed period, SNS did not present a comprehensive election program on its official website. Nevertheless, its long-term strategic objectives concerning domestic and foreign policy are outlined in the "Profile" section of the website. In this section, the party advocates for the assertion of the Slovak Republic's state sovereignty across both domestic and foreign policy realms. Regarding the European Union, it rejects the notions of "a centralist European supranational superstate" and "a vision of a strong federation with limitations on national sovereignty and the principles of sovereignty." However, the party does not take an opposing stance towards EU or NATO membership itself. Similarly, the SNS neither manifests opposition nor inclination towards Russia or China. Nevertheless, the party does underscore its endorsement of "strengthening the Slavic identity across the European continent."<sup>147</sup>

## VIEWS ON RUSSIA

While the SNS party does not explicitly outline its stance on Moscow in its "Profile" section on the official website, the party's statements and those of its leader, Andrej Danko, on social media reflect a positive disposition towards Russia. Following the annexation of the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts, the SNS posted on its Facebook page that it views president Vladimir Putin's actions as justified. It also criticized the Slovak government's official condemnation of Putin's actions and the outcome of the 2020 Slovak elections resulting in a pro-Western government, which SNS deemed as placing the country "under the sphere of influence of the West, specifically the United States of America." The SNS opposes this trend and aims to prevent Slovakia from aligning with any single sphere. Instead, it advocates for maintaining positive relations with both the West and the East.<sup>148</sup>

The party's leader Danko expressed a similar sentiment, noting in a July 2022 Facebook post that he "believes the post-2024 government, of which the SNS will be a part, will work to restore amicable relations with the East."<sup>149</sup> He also claimed on his YouTube channel that his perspective on Russia remained unchanged even after its



invasion of Ukraine.<sup>150</sup> Additionally, both the SNS and Danko embraced pro-Kremlin narratives in their Facebook and Twitter posts, asserting that Russia was compelled into war by Western pressure. Both posts contended that Putin's actions were taken to "safeguard the lives and well-being of Russian citizens."<sup>151</sup> Furthermore, Danko argued that "Ukraine had been torn for eight years," suggesting that "the current situation cannot be straightforwardly characterized as a Russian attack."<sup>152</sup>

SNS and its members expressed criticism regarding the sanctions imposed on Russia, contending that they have a more detrimental effect on the EU and Slovakia than on Russia. Danko and his electoral coalition colleague Tomáš Taraba asserted that sanctions disproportionately harm Eastern European countries, while Western European nations as well as the US and China reap benefits from them.<sup>153</sup> They both also lent their support to Hungary's stance on sanctions and commended Orbán's defense of national interests.<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, both Danko and another SNS representative, Ján Krišanda, accused the EU of intending to harm Slovakia. Danko stated that "Brussels is intentionally destroying the middle class and industry in our country"<sup>155</sup> and Krišanda wrote that "the EU is ruthlessly dismantling us, reducing smaller states to mere colonies."<sup>156</sup>

## VIEWS ON CHINA

The SNS party did not address topics related to China on its official channels during the reviewed period, and its representatives made only limited comments on the issue. Tomáš Taraba expressed a positive view of China's stance regarding the war in Ukraine. He commended Beijing as a counterbalance to the West and remarked that discussions about the conflict were more open outside of Europe and North America.<sup>157</sup> Andrej Danko emphasized the importance of Slovakia fostering strong relationships with both the West and the East, including China.<sup>158</sup>

Even during his tenure as the chairman of the National Council of the Slovak Republic from 2016 to 2020, Danko advocated for cultivating favorable ties with Beijing. During this time, he attempted to facilitate a deal on the export of pork from Slovakia to China, a move that contradicted his own policy of promoting the consumption of domestic agricultural products. Despite the minimal impact such exports would have on Slovakia's trade balance with China, Danko criticized President Zuzana Čaputová for addressing human rights concerns when she met Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in 2019. According to Danko, her actions could have endangered bilateral trade relations.<sup>159</sup>

# Sme rodina: Beware of Kremlin Cliques

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Since its establishment, the Sme rodina (We Are Family) party has predominantly focused on domestic matters rather than foreign affairs. Consequently, the party's program for the 2023 elections dedicates minimal attention to this sphere and refrains from explicitly outlining its stances towards Euro-Atlantic partners, Russia, and China.<sup>160</sup> The statements of the party representatives on social media and in the media likewise lack a distinct and unified standpoint concerning these two authoritarian nations and the associated topics. Notably, the party's position on sanctions against Russia and, to a lesser degree, cooperation with China remains conflicted.

## VIEWS ON RUSSIA

Even prior to the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, Sme rodina had already characterized Russia as a "strategic challenge to the European Union and NATO," albeit not yet perceiving it as a threat comparable to Islam, as the party stated.<sup>161</sup> However, in the wake of the events on February 24, 2022, this stance began to shift, and Sme rodina adopted a notably more critical stance towards Russia. The party swiftly condemned Russian aggression and advocated for unity with Western partners within the EU and NATO.<sup>162</sup> Shortly after the invasion, the party's official Facebook profile labelled Putin as an aggressor who, despite international efforts, chose to invade a sovereign nation. The post also highlighted the anticipated surge in disinformation regarding the conflict, including attempts to downplay its underlying causes.<sup>163</sup>

Apart from Boris Kollár,<sup>164</sup> the deputy chairman of the party, Milan Krajniak, and MP Peter Pčolinský, also voiced strong opposition to Russian aggression. Krajniak consistently conveyed his stance on the conflict during the reviewed period through social media and media interviews. Speaking with Denník N, he asserted that the Sme rodina party stood fully united in its pro-Western positions. He emphasized Russia's well-known territorial ambitions, which it has demonstrated a willingness to enforce through military means. Krajniak also criticized Viktor Orbán's approach towards Russia, emphasizing his own endeavors to demonstrate to the public that Slovakia's orientation is towards the West, not the East. He urged people to contemplate whether they had ever "ridden in a Russian car, used a Russian mobile phone, desired to vacation in Crimea, or to study in Krasnoyarsk."<sup>165</sup> Deputy President of the National Council Peter Pčolinský too characterized Russia as an unreliable partner. On the first anniversary of the war, he underscored in a Facebook post that instead of cultivating relations with Russia, Slovakia should focus on developing ties with reliable and predictable neighbors.<sup>166</sup>

The stance of Sme rodina and its members on sanctions against Russia displays less cohesion and clarity. Prior to the war in Ukraine, several party members expressed their critical stance towards the European sanctions imposed on Russia following

its annexation of Crimea. For instance, in a 2019 interview with Euractiv, Pčolinský shared his belief that sanctions against Russia were economically irrational and amounted to an empty gesture that had yielded no benefits for Slovakia.<sup>167</sup> Despite this criticism of the sanctions, Sme rodina openly denounced the annexation of Crimea.<sup>168</sup> A similar sense of ambivalence attends the party's position on the current sanctions on Russia. Although Sme rodina supports their implementation with unity across the EU, its members underscore the adverse repercussions these sanctions have on Slovakia.<sup>169</sup>

The party's backing of sanctions on Russia has also been brought into question by Sme rodina leader Boris Kollár's interactions with individuals close to the Kremlin. In January 2023, he hosted six MEPs from the French far-right Rassemblement National party, led by Marine Le Pen. Notably, two of these MEPs feature on the Ukrainian sanctions list due to their support for Putin's regime and their recognition of the Crimea annexation. Additionally, one of them is under investigation by the French prosecutor's office for alleged corrupt activities in support of Russia. Following media coverage of the meeting, Kollár asserted that he was unaware of the investigation or sanctions list.<sup>170</sup> A similar reply was offered by Kollár in response to a photograph depicting him alongside the pro-Kremlin biker group Noční vlci (Night Wolves) during celebrations commemorating the liberation of Bratislava from fascism in April 2020. The group members are proponents of Russian nationalism, and they have previously been involved in the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The group's leader, Aleksandr Zaldostanov, maintains a close friendship with Vladimir Putin and is subject to Western sanctions.<sup>171</sup>

Kollár's stance concerning pro-Russian alternative media raises questions as well. For instance, in March 2022, he likened the pro-Russian outlet Hlavné správy to standard media outlets like the well-established and factual Denník N, despite repeated warnings from civil society regarding the ties of Hlavné správy to Russia and a video showing one of its contributing writers accepting a bribe from an employee of the Russian embassy in Slovakia. Furthermore, Kollár gave interviews to pro-Russian media, invested in advertising there, and shared their articles on his Facebook page.<sup>172</sup> In an interview with the Slovak daily Postoj in June 2022, he even remarked that he would consider investing in advertising on Hlavné správy again when it resumes its activities.<sup>173</sup>

## VIEWS ON CHINA

In regard to China, the party's positions cannot be easily categorized as overtly pro-China. Rather, there seems to be an inclination within the party to overemphasize China's economic significance for Slovakia while disregarding the potential risks, including matters such as investment in crucial infrastructure or human rights abuses within China. Furthermore, the party's stance on China's position concerning the conflict in Ukraine also appears to be unclear.

This lack of a clear stance was also evident during Boris Kollár's visit to Beijing in April 2023 when he was still serving as the head of the Slovak National Council. Even before the trip, the official press release indicated that the primary topics for

discussion between Chinese and Slovak representatives would revolve around collaboration in tourism, science, technology, and innovation. Indeed, Kollár adhered to an economic approach during his discussions with his Chinese counterpart Zhao Leji. Their talks focused on potential investments in agriculture, car manufacturing, and transportation, including the consideration of an air route connecting Bratislava and Beijing, as well as cooperation between universities.<sup>174</sup> In one of his Facebook posts, Kollár mentioned that the Chinese side expressed a willingness to cooperate, and he indicated that Slovakia can anticipate the introduction of a high-speed train service connecting the capital, Bratislava, in the west with the second-largest city, Košice, in the east of Slovakia in the near future.<sup>175</sup> However, the prospect of such deep involvement in Slovakia's critical infrastructure, although highly improbable, could counteract efforts aimed at curbing Chinese investment in the critical infrastructure of European Union member states. This scenario could potentially present security risks. Based on the available information, the trip's agenda did not include discussions about China's alignment with Russia.<sup>176</sup>

Originally, Kollár's trip was planned to include a visit to the Huawei Shanghai Showroom and a working lunch with company representatives. However, the meeting was eventually cancelled.<sup>177</sup> Concerns about Huawei's technology and its connections to Chinese intelligence services have been present in the EU for several years. The Slovak Information Service (SIS) also issued a warning about this in 2019. Together with the Slovak Ministry of the Interior, they advised top constitutional officials and key civil servants against using Huawei devices.<sup>178</sup> Even the *Sme rodina* party has acknowledged the potential risks associated with Chinese technology in the past.<sup>179</sup> Interestingly, it was under the leadership of Vladimír Pčolinský, a nominee of the *Sme rodina* party, that the SIS published its annual report, which, for the first time, delved more explicitly into the activities of Chinese intelligence services in Slovakia.<sup>180</sup>

# SMER-sociálna demokracia (SMER-SD): From Endorsing the European Path to an Eastward Turn

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For over two decades of its presence on the Slovak political stage, the SMER-SD (Direction-Social Democracy) party has been characterized by a dual-track approach towards Western partners, as well as Russia and China. On the surface, the party and its longstanding leader Robert Fico have supported Slovakia's Euro-Atlantic orientation and unity within the EU and NATO, especially during the periods when SMER-SD was part of the Slovak government. However, certain actions and statements by key party members have contradicted this stance, reflecting inclinations towards Russia and China.<sup>181</sup> Following the party's move to the opposition in 2020 and the split of the HLAS-SD party, increasing positioning against the then pro-Western government led by Igor Matovič, later succeeded by Eduard Heger, emerged. This positioning extended towards the USA and NATO, all the while placing greater emphasis on fostering positive relations and cooperation with Russia.<sup>182</sup> This was evident in the party's support for the use of the Russian Sputnik vaccine during the pandemic and its opposition to the defense agreement with the United States.<sup>183</sup>

## VIEWS ON RUSSIA

The sections in SMER-SD's program for the 2023 elections that address Russia and the war in Ukraine largely mirror the party's two-pronged approach towards Russia after the annexation of Crimea. Even during that time, SMER-SD and the then-Prime Minister Fico officially endorsed Slovakia's alignment with Euro-Atlantic structures, while concurrently advocating for the cultivation of relationships across the globe, including with Eastern partners. Fico characterized the annexation of Crimea as a violation of international law rather than an act of aggression, and he supported diplomatic resolutions instead of sanctions and the isolation of Russia from the global community. While in Brussels, he voted in favor of anti-Russian sanctions, but in Slovakia, he critiqued them and suggested their discontinuation.<sup>184</sup>

The party's program for the 2023 elections affirms that SMER-SD "views Slovakia's membership in the European Union (EU) as indispensable" and "will uphold its commitments stemming from NATO membership."<sup>185</sup> However, the program also criticizes what it sees as the formation of a new "Iron Curtain" between the West and the East, pledging to strive for "fundamental normalization of relations between the Slovak Republic, the entire EU, and the Russian Federation." The party disavows the "policy of creating adversaries" and expresses its interest in fostering amicable ties with all nations globally. The document also refrains from labelling Russia's actions

in Ukraine as aggression. Instead, it asserts that it “regards the deployment of Russian military force in Ukraine as a breach of international law.” Additionally, it notes that it also views the “US invasion of Iraq and the establishment of Kosovo” as instances of international law violations.<sup>186</sup>

The statements made by party members about Russia after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine are also marked by ambivalence. While many members of SMER-SD formally condemned the attack, some also sought to downplay Russia’s culpability. This aligns with the strategy of manipulative narratives employed by the Kremlin itself in defending the war. These narratives include claims such as Russia’s attack being a response to NATO expansion or the conflict being a proxy war between Russia and the US or the West.<sup>187</sup> In a manner reminiscent of Russian state media, Ľuboš Blaha, known for his prolific social media presence and vitriolic rhetoric, even cast doubt on whether Russian soldiers were responsible for the massacre in Bucha.<sup>188</sup> Within the European Parliament, SMER-SD MEP Monika Beňová declined to vote in favor of designating Russia as a terrorist state.<sup>189</sup>

A number of party members even commemorated Russia Day at the Russian embassy alongside Ambassador Igor Bratchikov. The ambassador also attended SMER-SD’s celebration of the Slovak National Uprising anniversary in August 2022.<sup>190</sup> SMER-SD has, in fact, incorporated the commemoration of holidays celebrating the liberation of Slovakia from fascism into its program, affirming its intention to continue honoring the memory of the Red Army sacrifices for Slovakia’s liberation.<sup>191</sup>

Regarding sanctions against Russia, SMER-SD’s stance is more unequivocal. Several party members held the view that the current sanctions regime is either ineffective or, even worse, more detrimental to both Slovakia and the EU than to Russia. In a video statement, for instance, Fico claimed that “The poorly designed anti-Russian sanctions, with disastrous consequences for those who formulated them, prompt European Union citizens to question why they must endure temperatures of 19 degrees in their rooms during winter due to the conflict in Ukraine, and why they are told to wear two sweaters.”<sup>192</sup> In another video, he criticized the “absurd sanctions from Brussels” that are adversely affecting Slovak companies.<sup>193</sup> Ľuboš Blaha also joined the criticism, asserting that the sanctions “are destroying Europe, not Russia.”<sup>194</sup> Furthermore, he propagated the notion that Americans are benefiting financially from these sanctions.<sup>195</sup> Ladislav Kamenický, another SMER-SD representative, echoed the sentiment and appended that “Slovaks are left to freeze and go hungry due to these ineffective sanctions!”<sup>196</sup> During the period under review, multiple posts by SMER-SD representatives linked allegations of ineffectual and damaging sanctions with their support for Viktor Orbán’s policies as well as Hungary’s stance on sanctions.<sup>197</sup>

## VIEWS ON CHINA

SMER-SD’s stance towards China is notably less emphasized than its stance towards Russia. This holds true both for the party’s September 2023 election program and for the statements made by its representatives in the media and on social media platforms. The party’s foreign policy program for the 2023 elections, for instance, makes only two mentions of China. The first instance pertains to China’s alliance

with Russia after the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine. Here, SMER-SD attributes the deepening of this relationship to the Western response and criticizes what it perceives as support for a new Cold War. The second instance arises when SMER-SD pledges, should it succeed in the elections, to adopt a foreign policy that refrains from intervening in the internal matters of other nations and acknowledges the choices of countries like “China, which have opted for governance models differing from parliamentary democracy.”<sup>198</sup>

Nevertheless, the program does not explicitly outline plans for cooperation with China or articulate a vision for the advancement of bilateral relations. Instead, the document broadly asserts that SMER-SD will foster positive relations with all interested countries around the world. This underscores the diminishing interest of SMER-SD and Robert Fico in the matter of Slovak-Chinese economic collaboration. Fico had initially been proactive in this area during his first term as prime minister between 2006 and 2010. During this period, he primarily concentrated on attracting Chinese investments to Slovakia, even at the expense of disregarding human rights concerns in China.<sup>199</sup> Fico also instrumentalized the issue of China in his personal political conflict with the then President Andrej Kiska, who had informally met with the Dalai Lama in Slovakia in 2016. Fico strongly criticized this meeting, stressing that both the Slovak Government and the entire EU adhered to the One-China policy.<sup>200</sup> Subsequently, due to various unrealized investment plans, Fico gradually began to scale back his involvement in matters related to China.<sup>201</sup> Nevertheless, SMER-SD has maintained an active role in the Slovak-Chinese Friendship Group of the Slovak National Council. Notably, the group is chaired by Maroš Kondrôt from SMER-SD, with a majority of its members coming from SMER-SD, including the party’s deputy leader, Ľuboš Blaha.<sup>202</sup>

Blaha holds a very positive stance toward China, which he promoted on his Facebook profile until his account was blocked by Meta in mid-2022 due to repeated violations of the platform’s rules.<sup>203</sup> Currently, he primarily expresses his views through the SMER-SD party’s account and his Telegram profile. His communication on China predominantly revolve around advocating the One-China Policy. During the period under review, he criticized Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan<sup>204</sup> and later contested an article by Aktuality that questioned his stance on Tibet’s independence. He countered the article by asserting that “according to the atlas, Tibet is part of China and is taught as such in schools.”<sup>205</sup> Furthermore, in 2019, Blaha asserted that the communist regime had brought development, prosperity, and liberation from the despotic theocracy of local monks to the Tibetan people, a narrative that closely echoes the official line presented by Beijing. During that same year, he participated in a trip to China funded by the government there.<sup>206</sup> Upon his return, he characterized the Hong Kong protests in line with the official Chinese narrative, portraying them as an attempted color revolution with Western backing.<sup>207</sup> He also downplayed human rights concerns during the pandemic, posting on his Facebook page that “We too have the masks from that ‘evil communist’ China that liberal trolls and American poodles have been criticizing for years for its human rights and democracy violations.”<sup>208</sup>

In contrast to Blaha, the official social media accounts of SMER-SD and several of its members during the period examined primarily focused their comments on the Chinese ‘peace plan,’ which garnered their support. During a SMER-SD press confer-

ence, Robert Fico expressed his approval of China's 12-point document and stated that he had already engaged in discussions with the Chinese ambassador and his team on the issue. He also conveyed his regret that the EU had not engaged with the 'peace plan' on the anniversary of the war's commencement.<sup>209</sup> Juraj Blanár, Fico's party colleague, echoed with a sentiment nearly identical to Fico's.<sup>210</sup> Fico later utilized the Chinese initiative in a Facebook post to criticize what he saw as the EU's undue alignment with the United States, a stance he believed was hindering peace.<sup>211</sup>



# Conclusion

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While parties exhibiting pro-Russian and pro-Chinese stances are in the minority in terms of their numbers, they are garnering significant popular support in Slovakia. Notably, Republika, SNS, and SMER-SD have displayed the most uncritical or even sympathetic attitudes towards both Russia and China during the period under review. Conversely, PS, OĽaNO, SaS, KDH, and Demokrati have maintained a critical attitude towards Russia. Similarly, these parties have expressed a skeptical stance on China, except for OĽaNO, which refrained from openly addressing China-related subjects on its official channels throughout the reviewed timeframe. Positioned in-between critical and uncritical positions towards Russia and China are HLAS-SD and Sme rodina. As is shown by the analysis, positive views of Russia and China are often linked to each other.

It is evident that the Russian aggression against Ukraine acted as a pivotal moment for Slovak politics. For certain parties that had previously held ambiguous stances towards China and Russia, the onset of the conflict marked a clear shift towards a critical viewpoint. On the other hand, for others, the Russian invasion presented fresh opportunities to leverage issues pertaining to Russia and China. This was especially notable in how these parties linked these international matters with domestic concerns, such as criticizing the ruling Slovak government which had openly affirmed its commitment to Western unity and support for Ukraine.

Parties critical of Russia and China have predominantly positioned themselves against these actors on matters pertaining to human rights issues, their global hybrid activities including those in Slovakia, collaboration with Taiwan, and, to a lesser extent, critical dependencies in economy and technology. In light of the conflict in Ukraine, they have identified Russia as the instigator of the conflict, condemned Russian war atrocities, endorsed sanctions, and advocated for a resolution to the conflict that would not be detrimental to Ukraine. Conversely, the issue of risks associated with Chinese technology and academic and scientific cooperation did not emerge as a prominent concern among these parties during the reviewed period. The exception was mainly KDH and PS, which have expressed complex opinions on the issue, partly due to their MEPs bringing the issues from the European level to Slovak politics.

For political parties wavering between critical and lenient stances towards Moscow and Beijing, the issue of sanctions has proven to be a significant point of contention in their approach to Russia. Concerning China, the emphasis has been on fostering favorable trade relations, sometimes at the expense of addressing human rights concerns tied to the Chinese regime and overlooking potential risks tied to Chinese investments in Slovakia. While representatives from both HLAS-SD and Sme rodina expressed support for a unified European stance towards Russia, they have raised doubts about the effectiveness of sanctions and cautioned against their adverse repercussions on Slovakia. Their statements have often echoed narratives akin to those propagated by pro-Kremlin actors. This notably includes the claim that

sanctions purportedly inflict more harm on the countries implementing them than on Russia itself. While the SaS party has been steadfast in its support of Ukraine and the official line of the party has been to support sanctions, the party leader Richard Sulík has also repeatedly cast doubt on their effectiveness and underscored their adverse impact on Slovakia. Given the unpopularity of sanctions among the Slovak population and the central focus of both parties on domestic issues – such as reducing cost of living and everyday expenses – advocating for sanctions could imperil the parties' electoral gains. However, by criticizing sanctions, Slovak politicians also indirectly align themselves with Kremlin strategies, inadvertently contributing to the fragmentation of European solidarity. This approach, ultimately aimed at securing electoral support, exploits people's anxieties about the future and the consequences of the war.

Despite the Russian aggression against Ukraine, three Slovak parties continued to exhibit uncritical or even sympathetic stances towards Moscow throughout the reviewed period. Republika, SMER-SD, and SNS downplayed Russia's culpability in the conflict and criticized the sanctions targeting Russia. They also urged for peace, even if it meant losses for Ukraine and gains for Moscow, and advocated against cutting ties with Russia. In their discourse on these matters, representatives from these three parties also on several occasions employed pro-Kremlin narratives. For instance, they sought to diminish Russia's responsibility for the war in Ukraine by attributing it to Western actions, which they suggested had compelled Russia to resort to aggression. Utilizing 'whataboutism', the parties often redirected attention to the US and Western involvement in conflicts such as those in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yugoslavia.

SMER-SD, Republika, and SNS also underscored Slovakia's narrowly defined national interests in matters related to the conflict in Ukraine. This emphasis on Slovak national interests was also present in the rhetoric of HLAS-SD, which has otherwise largely exhibited a pro-Western attitude. In stressing national interests, these parties positioned themselves against the pro-Western government of Eduard Heger and the interim administration of Ľudovít Ódor. These parties accused the governments of prioritizing the needs of Ukraine and yielding to Western pressure to the detriment of Slovakia and its populace.

At a time when the nation finds itself in close proximity to an armed conflict, this emphasis on nationalism and national interests has the potential to resonate deeply with voters. The war unfolding just beyond the country's borders has also profoundly impacted Slovakia's security, economy, and societal fabric. Escalating inflation, the specter of conflict spreading, the influx of Ukrainian refugees, and various other adverse consequences of the war have ushered in a wave of fears and uncertainties, significantly influencing public sentiment within Slovakia. Against the backdrop of both domestic and international political actors and media devoting considerable attention to Ukraine, a segment of society perceives a sense of neglect, feeling as though their own concerns have been sidelined. This is why the present appeal to Slovakia's national interests holds substantial promise for galvanizing voter engagement and support. SMER-SD, Republika, and SNS have created the impression that the current situation in Slovakia necessitates a resolute change, which they claim to be capable of bringing into motion. However, this narrative concurrently erodes

the trust of the Slovak people in state institutions, a situation that aligns with one of Russia's longstanding objectives within its hybrid campaigns.

Alongside the downplaying of Russia's responsibility in the Ukrainian conflict, SMER-SD, Republika, and SNS have also contributed to the enhancement of Russia's positive perception in Slovakia by commemorating historical anniversaries linked to Slovakia's liberation. Specifically, they focused on Russia's portrayal as the force that liberated Europe from fascism. This very image is consistently exploited by the Kremlin to bolster its domestic and international standing and to uphold historical connections with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Notably, the anti-fascist narrative has also played a significant role in justifying Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Even the parties displaying an uncritical or sympathetic attitude towards Beijing have devoted considerably less attention to matters related to China compared to issues concerning Russia. During the period under review, the focal point has been the endorsement of China's 'peace plan'. Republika, in particular, has coupled this subject with praise for the attributes of the Chinese regime, depicting Beijing as a victim of the West and an alternative to it. However, as a whole, the topic of China has remained largely overlooked. Given the relatively limited awareness about China in Slovakia, there is not a substantial imperative for political actors to extensively address these matters. Notably, even parties expressing interest in boosting ties with China, such as Republika, SMER-SD and SNS, have not provided specifics regarding the nature of such cooperation. The research thus confirms the previous reports published under the MapInfluenCE project that have shown that China remains a marginal topic for Slovak political parties used mostly as a tool of domestic politics, although the public debate on China has become more diversified and has touched upon a growing number of topics over time.<sup>212</sup>

# Author

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# About MapInfluenCE

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The publication was prepared within the MapInfluenCE (previously known as ChinfluenCE) project, which maps China and Russia's influence in Central Europe, specifically Czechia, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia.

The internationally acclaimed project has utilized various tools such as media analysis to uncover who shapes China discourse in the Visegrád countries and why, the mapping of agenda-setters to reveal links between pro-China businessmen and local political elites, an analysis of changes in political parties' positions on China in the Czech and Hungarian Parliaments during the past 30 years, etc.

Through a variety of outputs (media articles, interviews, research reports, open as well as closed door events and briefings of stakeholders), MapInfluenCE broadens and shapes expert as well as public debates on China's influence and activities in the region of Central Europe. MapInfluenCE findings were widely quoted in European, US and Australian press, mentioned in e.g. the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission's 2018 Annual Report or the Reporters without Borders' report on the vulnerability of media, and presented at the European Parliament or to a delegation of US Congressmen and Senators. The original approach of MapInfluenCE set the tone and inspired journalists, think tankers and NGOs both within and outside of the region, who later conducted similar analyses on the media image of China and agenda-setting, drawing on the project's methodology and techniques.

The international team has published more than 20 policy and briefing papers in five different languages (English, Czech, Polish, Hungarian, and Slovak), authored articles or were quoted in numerous local as well as international media including Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, China Digital Times, Sydney Morning Herald, Politico Brussels Influence, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Diplomat, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Le Temps, Radio Free Europe, etc.

MapInfluenCE is designed and run by the Association for International Affairs (AMO), a Prague-based foreign policy think tank and NGO.

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Association for International Affairs (AMO) is a non-governmental non-profit organization founded in 1997. It is not bound to any political party or ideology. The mission of AMO has been to contribute to a deeper understanding of international affairs through a broad range of educational and research activities. We offer space for the expression and realization of ideas, thoughts and projects for the development of education, understanding and tolerance among people.




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