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Relations between Ukraine and Slovakia: Recent History and Future Opportunities

Vasil Hudak

Senior Vice President, EastWest Institute

The purpose of this paper is to provide a brief analysis of the modern history of the inter-governmental relations between Slovakia and Ukraine and to outline opportunities for their future cooperation. The main conclusion of the paper is that the two countries on the border between the new Western and Eastern parts of Europe should work together more closely in the future to prevent becoming part of a new “buffer zone” in Europe which may be created as a result of uneven process of European and Transatlantic integration.

I. History of the inter-governmental relations between Ukraine and Slovakia.

Slovakia and Ukraine are two immediate neighbors in Central Europe who were born in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War. They share a 98-kilometer-long border, they both belong to the Slavic nations and have a long history of having been dominated by a larger nation. Despite these similarities, both countries have played a surprisingly minor role in each other's foreign and domestic policy. There are several reasons for this situation, stemming from objective circumstances of internal and external developments affecting Ukraine and Slovakia, as well as from the lack of understanding and attention by the leaders of the two countries to the mutual bi-lateral relations.

1. Different priorities:

Ukraine since its independence in 1991 focused on a set of priorities in its domestic and foreign policies: strengthening its independence and sovereignty; nation and state-building; deepening of relations with the West as a counter-balance to the Russian influence; and promoting cooperation with Central European countries, in particular with Poland. Slovakia did not play a significant role in either of these priorities. The main potential for such cooperation was within the “regional cooperation” priority of the Ukraine's leadership. However, this was met with a cold response from the Slovak side which preferred closer relations with Russia.

Domestic and foreign priorities of the Slovak leadership, lead by the Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar who came to power in the late 1992, focused on gaining and strengthening independence; state-building; development of formal relations with the West; and strengthening the cooperation with Russia as a potential counter-balance to the influence of the West.

It is obvious from this brief analysis of the national priorities of the two young states that the different perceptions of the role of Russia by the elites of Ukraine and Slovakia played a significant role in a slow development of their mutual relations during 1992-1998.

2. Overview of Official Bi-lateral Relations During 1993-98:

Political relations

The first high-level meeting between the leaders of the two countries took place in Kyiv in June 1993 when presidents Leonid Kravchuk and Michal Kovac signed the basic political treaty on good neighborhood and cooperation. The next high level diplomatic contact did not take place

until February 1994 when Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs Anatolii Zlenko visited Bratislava. The first meeting of prime ministers Vladimir Meciar and Leonid Marchuk was held only two years after the signing of the basic treaty, in June 1995 in Kyiv! On the other hand, during the time from signing the basic Slovak-Ukrainian treaty in June 1993 till the first meeting of both Slovak and Ukrainian prime ministers in June 1995, Slovak Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar met his Russian counterpart Vladimir Chernomyrdin on three occasions! This only confirms the fact that the Slovak leadership paid much higher attention to its relations with Russian, rather than with Ukraine.

The second meeting of prime ministers of the two countries took place in Strbske Pleso, Slovakia in January 1996 (between prime ministers Meciar and Marchuk) and the third one in March 1997 in Uzhgorod, Ukraine (between prime ministers Lazarenko and Meciar).

The different weight given to the relations with Ukraine in comparison to those with Russia was also reflected in the fact that toward the middle of 1998 the Slovak-Ukrainian relations were regulated by around 40 agreements while there were over 120 agreements regulating the Slovak-Russian relations.

Economic relations

The economic relations between Ukraine and Slovakia followed the pattern of political relations. Slovak Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Kozlik characterized these relations in the following way: “The Ukraine is a gate to the Russian market for us and its transit capabilities [for Slovak goods] must be increased in ten times at least.”¹ This expression accurately reflected the view of the then Slovak leadership which saw the importance of Ukraine only as a derivative of the primary significance of Russia. The trade turnover between the two countries was developing in the following way (in millions of Slovak crowns; 1\$ = approx. 42Sk): 1993 – 8,993; 1994 – 7,539; 1995 – 9,319; 1996 – 12,553; 1997 – 17,316; 1998 – 15,3.² The significant drop in the trade turnover between Ukraine and Slovakia was caused by the economic crisis in Russia which had a deep negative impact on Ukraine. Despite the lack of encouragement from the political side, Ukraine was among the ten top Slovakia’s trading partners. In 1997 there were 182 companies with the Slovak capital in Ukraine, out of which 133 were joint ventures. The volume of Slovak investments in Ukraine reached 18,387 mln USD by the end of 1998.³ The Slovak chemical and textile company Chemosvit, a.s., Svit, was the largest Slovak investor in Ukraine with its investment of 4 mln USD in the city of Luck. Ukraine took the third place among the countries with the largest volume of Slovak investments (after the Czech Republic – 45,5% and Hungary – 22,7%; Ukraine – 11%). On the other hand, there were 153 joint ventures with the Ukrainian participation registered in Slovakia by the end of 1998. The total volume of Ukrainian investments in Slovakia was around 500-700 thousand USD. Slovakia took the third place in the Ukraine’s trade turnover with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (after Poland and Hungary).

Thus, Slovak-Ukrainian economic relations were developing better than the political ones, however, they were lagging significantly behind opportunities provided by the geographic proximity and an overall complementarity of the national economies of the two countries. Again, the lack of political will and encouragement were the main hampering elements for the development of mutually advantageous economic relations. Such ideas as the creation of a bilateral free trade zone between Slovakia and Ukraine (suggested by the Slovak Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar during the governmental meeting in Strbske Pleso in 1996)⁴ remained only rhetorical declaration

without any signs of practical implementation. In addition, problems with payments, lack of banking insurance and continuing relatively high proportion of barter trade further complicated the development of mutual economic relations.

3. Ukraine-Slovak Relations After the Elections of 1998 and 1999.

General elections in Slovakia in September 1998 lead to the creation of a new Slovak center-right government headed by the Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda. The new government declared the integration of Slovakia into the European Union and the NATO as the key priorities for its foreign policy. At the same time, it began a more balanced approach to Ukraine and Russia. For example, the new Slovak government in its government program promised to “pay a constant attention to the relations with Ukraine which is our largest neighbor”.⁵ The first member of the new Slovak government who visited Ukraine was the Minister of Interior Ladislav Pittner, followed by the Deputy Foreign Minister Jan Figel and by the Chairman of the Slovak National Council (Slovak Parliament) Jozef Migas. Two themes dominated these discussion: introduction of the visa regime toward Ukraine and the competition between the two countries for the post of the non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (see the next chapters for more details). The attention of the new Slovak leadership toward Ukraine was also increased due to the common strategy of the European Union toward Ukraine which was adopted at the EU Helsinki Summit in December 1999. Slovak leaders realized that they can improve Slovakia’s chances for early integration in the EU through an active engagement in promoting stability in Central and Eastern European region. This stability cannot be achieved without a stable Ukraine.

In Ukraine, Presidential elections of 1999 lead to the strengthening of the pro-reform forces in the Ukrainian government and parliament. The re-election of President Leonid Kuchma confirmed Ukraine’s “European choice”, where the gradual integration in the European Union is a key long-term priority. The Ukrainian leaders stressed several times that they see their country’s integration in the European Union through closer cooperation with Ukraine’s Central European neighbors.

These political developments during the last two years have created a more favorable climate for a further development and strengthening of the relations between Ukraine and Slovakia. However, this development has been hampered by a set of issues.

II. Problematic Issues In the Slovak-Ukrainian Relations.

There are several issues which have been complicating the development of the bi-lateral relations between Ukraine and Slovakia since the beginning of their existence as independent states. One of them was the different perception of *Russia* and its role in domestic politics as well as in the Central European space. This issue was described in detail earlier.

Transit of Energy Resources

Both countries are located along the main energy transit lines between the East and the West. Historically, they have been linked to Russia as the main supplier of the energy resources, in particular oil and gas. After gaining their independence, the two countries took different tracks in consolidating their role as transit countries for energy resources.

Ukraine has focused its efforts on decreasing its dependence on energy supplies from Russia. This was related to the overall national foreign policy goal of strengthening the state sovereignty and independence. The new discoveries of oil and gas in the Caspian basin opened an opportunity for Ukraine to gradually diversify the sources of its energy imports as well as the oil and gas transit links by actively participating in the transit of the Caspian oil and gas. In 1996

Ukraine signed an agreement with Georgia and Azerbaijan on creating a Caucasian-European corridor which later led to the formation of the TRACEKA project. The aim of the project is to create a new communication, transportation and trade corridor connecting Central Asia, Caucasus, Ukraine and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This project is actively supported by the European Union which is facing the challenge of diversifying its energy sources due to the possible closure of most of its nuclear power stations in the next decade. Building the oil terminal in Odessa and the oil pipeline Odessa-Brody are key elements of the TRACEKA project from the Ukrainian side. This would also allow Ukraine to actively participate in the transport of oil from the Persian Gulf through the oil pipeline Ceyhan-Samsun in Turkey. Completion of these projects would transform Ukraine into a strategic transport country for the countries of Central and Western Europe.

Cooperation in diversifying energy sources and in developing a modern transport corridor from the East to the West would seem to be natural areas of close and mutually beneficial cooperation between Ukraine and Slovakia. However, the Slovak government under Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar was not interested in a genuine diversification of country's energy sources. Instead, it signed several long-term agreements on importing gas and oil from Russia thus solidifying an almost complete energy dependence of Slovakia on Russia. The Slovak company Transpetrol, a monopoly importer and transporter of oil in Slovakia, has been ignoring cooperation with Ukraine and Poland in developing new transit corridors for the transport of the Caspian and Arab oil to Europe. Instead, Slovakia proposed to Ukraine in 1995 to become something as its barrister before Russia for solving Ukrainian energy debts to Russia and Turkmenistan. Slovak Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar explained this idea in Kyiv as follows: "Between Slovakia, Ukraine and Turkmenistan there exist unsettled liabilities and after our negotiations with our Ukrainian partners there is a real possibility for a mutually advantageous settlement. This system briefly means that Slovakia will supply Turkmenistan with consumer goods. Turkmenistan will decrease Ukrainian debts in this sum. Ukraine that will build four ships for Slovakia in the first phase will close the operation".⁶ Though the plan was not implemented, it demonstrated the fact that the Slovak government was not looking at Ukraine as a potential partner in diversifying energy supplies and developing new transport corridors, but rather as an "intermediary". Russia was considered to be a strategic partner for Slovakia in dealing with its energy issues. This was also reflected in the different approach to the Yamal-Europe gas pipeline via Belarus and Poland which is considered as "anti-Ukrainian" by the Ukrainian side. Slovakia did not cooperate with Ukraine in this question but demanded to construct an extra pipeline from Poland over Slovakia to Southern Europe. This would hurt Ukraine tremendously.

The new Slovak government created in 1998 seems to be genuinely interested in diversifying its strategic energy supplies. This provides a better environment for the cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine in this area.

Krivoy Rog – Dolinskaya Issue

The roots of this problem go back to the times of the former COMECON and it has to do with the construction of a big metallurgic complex in Ukraine, in the area of Krivoy Rog. Czechoslovakia has invested 10.8 billion Kc (about 360 million USD) in this construction⁷. Due to the collapse of the COMECON in 1990 and then the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the construction of the complex was stopped. Ukraine took over the responsibility for the COMECON projects on its territory, however, the National Bank of Ukraine denied any debt to

Slovakia related to the Krivoy Rog complex. The situation was further complicated in December 1992 when the VSZ Kosice (Eastern Slovak Steelworks) bought the Czechoslovak claims and took over the duties for finishing the construction of the complex. Since then, VSZ was privatized by Prime Minister Meciar's cronies which created a disproportional situation where the Ukrainian state was dealing with a private Slovak company about the liabilities created between two non-existent countries (Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia). After more than five years of negotiations, this issue is still unresolved.

“Ruthenian question”

This issue is in a broader context related to the historical question about Subcarpathian Rus (currently the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine – it used to be a part of the interwar Czechoslovak Republic). The problem stems from the fact that the Ruthenian-speaking minority in Slovakia (living mostly in north-eastern Slovakia) has split itself into two groups – those who indicate their ethnicity as Ruthenian and those who proclaim their Ukrainian identity (according to the 1991 census in Slovakia, 16,937 people have indicated their ethnicity as Ruthenian, and 13,847 people as Ukrainian)⁸ The Ukrainian government has seen the Ruthenian issue as a threat to its national integrity. It had some good reasons for it: the Association of Subcarpathian Ruthenians was established on February 17th, 1990. It demanded the Ukrainian government to recognize the Ruthenians as an original ethnic group and provide territorial autonomy for the Transcarpathian Region under its historical name – Subcarpathian Rus'.⁹ The ASR justifies its claims using the results of the referendum that took place in the Transcarpathian Region in December 1991. In that referendum 78% of participants voted for an autonomous statute for the region in the framework of Ukraine. The Prime Minister of this transitional government, Prof. I. Turyanica once said: “The independence of the Subcarpathian Rus' will be declared by Regional Council. This new state power will ask the Commonwealth of Independent States for regular membership¹⁰.

The two countries created a joint Committee on Minority Issues. Various political leaders in Slovakia have expressed a worry that the Ukrainian side is using this Committee as a tool for negative influence on the attitude of the Slovak government toward Ruthenians living in Slovakia. This issue remains open leading to the situation where half of the former Ukrainian minority in Czechoslovakia (those who identify themselves as Ruthenians, not Ukrainians) remains outside of the official inter-governmental contacts and negotiations.

Ukraine and Slovakia in the United Nations

During the last three years, the two countries competed twice for different positions within the framework of the United Nations. In the first case (in 1997), both countries were candidates for presiding over the 52nd General Assembly of the United Nations. The Slovak side eventually withdrew its candidacy, though it was supposed to “inherit” the Presidency as part of the former Czechoslovakia. As a compensation, the Slovak side expected that Ukraine will support the candidacy of Slovakia to become a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 1999. However, Ukraine submitted its own candidacy which lead to a “friendly competition” between the two countries. Eventually, Ukraine won the election. These two cases of the conflicts of interest between Slovakia and Ukraine certainly did not contribute to the strengthening of their political cooperation. It is possible to conclude that the lack of foreign policy coordination between the governments of the two countries played an important role in this undesirable competition.

Introduction of the Visa Regime by the Slovak Government

On March 15th, 2000 the Slovak government decided to impose visa restrictions on Ukraine, Russia, Belarus and Cuba. Slovakia will introduce visa regime vis-à-vis Ukraine at the same time as the Czech Republic – on June 28th, 2000. Visa restrictions on Belarus and Russia are to be introduced together with Poland and Hungary on January 1st, 2001. The Slovak Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda said that this move was aimed at protecting Slovakia's labor market and decreasing the number of illegal immigrants into the country. The move also complies with the visa regulations of the European Union.¹¹ Ukraine announced it would take reciprocal action against Slovakia.

The issue of introducing the visa regime for some countries of the former Soviet Union had been part of an intensive domestic debate in both Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The new Slovak government after the elections of 1998 adopted the integration in the European Union as its supreme foreign policy goal. This required, among other, a better coordination in the area of the visa policy with the EU. The 1999 report by the European Commission on Slovakia stressed the lack of progress in the harmonization of the Slovak visa regime with the EU regulations as one of the negative issues.¹² The other important argument behind the introduction of the visa regime by Slovakia was the necessity of harmonizing this regime with the one exercised by the Czech Republic. If the Slovak government did not introduce the visa regime, it would run the danger of creating a "Schengen-type" border between the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The pressure from Brussels and Prague were the main reasons for introducing the visa regime for Ukraine by the Slovak government.

The other reasons for this step raised by both Slovak and Czech governments included a large amount of illegal economic migrants from Ukraine in both countries (while the level of unemployment in both countries has been rising and in Slovakia reached 20% this year!) as well as the penetration of the "Ukrainian mafia" in the Czech and Slovak republics. However, these arguments are questionable. For example, many more illegal migrants enter Slovakia through its border with Hungary rather than through the one with Ukraine and the level of organized crime on the territory of Slovakia caused by the Ukrainian citizens is estimated at around 1% of the total amount.¹³

While the "real" reasons behind the decision by the Slovak government to introduce the visa regime for Ukraine are understandable, it would be advisable to study the approaches by the Hungarian and Polish governments toward the same issue. Both governments have rejected so far the pressure from Brussels to introduce a visa regime with Ukraine arguing that they will do so closely before their official entry in the European Union. By introducing the visa regime, the Slovak government significantly complicated its possible wider regional role which largely depends on the relations with Ukraine as a strategic country of Central and Eastern Europe.

III. Areas of Common Interests and Future Opportunities for Slovak-Ukrainian Relations.

Despite the uneasy development of the bi-lateral relations between Slovakia and Ukraine, the countries are facing several common threats and opportunities, creating a base for common interests and a closer future cooperation.

1 Common geopolitical interests.

The current governments of both countries see active participation in the European and trans-atlantic integration as key priorities for their respective countries. Slovakia is among the countries considered for the next wave of the NATO enlargement. Ukraine is seeking a closer

cooperation with the NATO, though it has to take into account Russia's negative position toward the NATO. Both countries are actively seeking integration in the European Union. Slovakia has recently begun the accession discussions and is trying to catch up with its neighbors within the "Visegrad group" to be within the first group to enter the European Union. Ukraine signed the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU and would like to become one of the EU associated countries.

Despite the fact that the two countries are at different levels of the European and transatlantic integration, they both face a danger of finding themselves among the "outs" in this process. None of them wants to become part of a possible new "buffer zone" between a more assertive Russia and enlarged NATO and European Union. To avoid this, both countries should better coordinate their foreign policies. Such coordination would include promoting regional cooperation, active lobbying in Brussels and Washington as well as coordinated steps toward Russia. Slovakia might share its experience to-date from the process of EU integration as well as from the cooperation with NATO and military reform. Ukraine's more active cooperation with Slovakia would, on the other hand, improve the chances of Slovakia to be seen as a regional player. This would increase the "value" of Slovakia among the Western decision makers. For such a shift in the relations between the two countries, however, it would be necessary to change the perceptions of each other. The Slovak foreign policy establishment should cease seeing cooperation with Ukraine as an element that might slow down Slovakia's integration in the NATO and EU. On the other hand, Ukraine's leaders should overcome their mistrust in Slovakia due to the previous "Russia first" foreign policy by the Slovak government under the Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar.

2. Regional Stability and Cooperation.

The governments of both countries are interested in their active involvement in regional cooperation, including different regional groupings bringing together the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Slovakia is intensifying its cooperation with the other members of the "Visegrad group" as a way to be included in the first wave of the EU enlargement. Slovakia is a member of the Central European Initiative (CEI) and of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) as well as of other regional organizations. Ukraine is already a member of the CEI and seeks CEFTA membership. Slovakia could play an important role in bringing Ukraine into the CEFTA, which requires membership in the WTO, EU associated member status, bi-lateral treaties on trade liberalization with the CEFTA members as well as agreement by all CEFTA members with accepting the new country. Due to the strategic importance of Ukraine, CEFTA members may want to agree on an "intermediary" membership status in the CEFTA for Ukraine. The Slovak government might initiate this process.

One of the dangers of the uneven process of European and transatlantic integration is the possible creation of a new dividing line between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Ukraine is among the countries to be most negatively affected by this process. The Slovak government (as well as the governments of the other Central European neighbors of Ukraine) should define and undertake a set of measures to prevent the creation of such dividing line. Regional and cross-border cooperation, innovative border management and better foreign policy coordination should be among such measures. Polish foreign policy toward Ukraine may serve as a good model for Slovakia.

3. Economic Cooperation.

There is a lot of unutilized space for more active economic cooperation between Ukraine and Slovakia. To facilitate this process, the governments of the two countries should agree on a solution of the Krivoy Rog – Dolinskaya project and to intensify support to their local businesses in pursuing bi-lateral economic cooperation. Providing the necessary banking and financial support as well as investment insurance guarantees should be one of the high priorities. In general, there is a continuing lack of information about investment opportunities and good business partners on both sides.

Strategically, both countries should cooperate in developing their roles as key transport routes for energy resources from the East to the West. This applies both to the “traditional” transit of energy resources from Russia as well as developing new transport lines from Central Asia and Caucasus to Western Europe. A closer coordination of the policies of the two countries in this area would allow them better utilize their strategic geographic location as well as would enhance the diversification of their energy supplies thus decreasing any one-sided dependency.

4. People-to-people Cooperation.

The leaders of the two countries have done a very poor job so far in encouraging people-to-people cooperation between Slovakia and Ukraine. There are persistent stereotypes on both sides which hamper such cooperation: most of the Slovaks perceive Ukraine and Ukrainians through the notions of “Ukrainian mafia”, organized crime, cheap labor force and unreliable business partners. On the other hand, Slovakia and the Slovaks are largely perceived in Ukraine as being too nationalistic and “inward looking”, uninterested in Ukraine and its interests, preferring relations with Russia or sacrificing Ukraine because of Slovakia’s integration in the West. These perceptions on both sides do not contribute to enhanced mutual cooperation. The leaders on both sides should pay more attention to promoting “positive” information about the two countries, strengthening linkages between political parties, businesses, civil society, regions, cities and villages.

One example of such support might be a stronger encouragement to different forms of cross-border cooperation between neighboring communities and regions, including such transfrontier organizations as the Carpathian Euroregion and the Carpathian Foundation. Both sides should support such “bottom-up” approaches to improving their bi-lateral cooperation. As demonstrated by the experience of Western Europe, the localized, people-to-people forms of cross-border cooperation play a key role in building mutual trust and confidence and in improving the image of each other. They can create a solid and sustainable base for the other forms of bi-lateral cooperation.

IV. Conclusion

The evolution of bi-lateral relations between Slovakia and Ukraine has experienced several difficult moments and is far from utilizing its potential. Both countries are new state creations and they have been struggling with the formulation of their national interests and defining their own identity. However, they are both facing a number of common threats and opportunities, largely related to the implications of the process of the European and transatlantic integration as well as the creation of new geopolitical alliances in the Euro-atlantic and Eurasian space. These realities, as well as geographic proximity, historical, cultural and linguistic similarity, common national interests and foreign policy orientations, all these factors create a strong and good ground for future cooperation between Ukraine and Slovakia. It’s only up to the leaders and peoples of the two countries to utilize this potential!

Endnotes

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