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1. INTRODUCTION

Ukrainian-Slovak relations are hard to explain in black-and-white tones of world perception. Their history abounds in both positive examples of cooperation and more controversial and complex examples. At this moment of time, an analyst or an average Ukrainian citizen would find it hard to attach a straightforward label of “friend” or “opponent” in Europe to the Slovak Republic (SR). Our Slovak interlocutors acknowledge that Slovak society and political circles have a mixed approach to Ukraine. In turn, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict became a test which exposed the value contradictions in a society with its own post-Communist syndrome.

Ukraine is an unknown neighbour, which, in contrast to Hungary or Austria, is perceived as a distant periphery of Europe. And this is not only due to the fact that Bratislava, the epicentre of Slovak policy-making, geographically borders the afore-mentioned countries, whereas Ukraine lies on the extreme opposite border. It is also because the “iron curtain,” which in communist times separated the Central European countries not only from Western Europe, but also from their neighbours in the USSR, remained intact in its mental, rather than physical, form. The events in Ukraine drew attention to it but the problem of recognition for Ukraine and Ukrainians in Slovak Republic was not resolved. The existing information vacuum is further filled with distorted ideas and stereotypes.

The reason for the historical “coolness” of Slovaks to Ukraine is that they view it through the Russian prism. Slovak nationalism, in contrast to Ukrainian or Polish nationalism, has been traditionally pro-Russian. Slovaks have always been open to the ideas of Pan Slavism¹. According to Slovak expert Alexandr Duleba, *“Taking the history of Slovak and Ukrainian nationalism together, it is hard to find examples of common interests and cooperation in the past. On the other hand, unlike Polish-Ukrainian relations, there are also no historical conflicts which*

¹ Alexander Duleba. *Slovakia's foreign policy towards the Russian-Ukrainian conflict*. In *“Diverging Voices, Converging Policies: The Visegrad States' Reactions to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict”*. Edited by Jacek Kucharczyk, Grigorij Mesežnikov. Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. Warsaw, 2015. – P.163.

*could be a source of national animosity or conflict in the future. Rather, Slovaks and Ukrainians are historically indifferent to each other”.*²

«We have a common border with Ukraine but it looks like many have forgotten that beyond this border is Ukraine and not Russia». This is the way a Slovak MP described the situation with the Slovak position to Ukraine during a discussion on the ratification of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement.³ Russia is a separate cultural stratum in the Slovak collective conscience. The Prague spring oppression in Czechoslovakia in 1968 did not necessarily deal an identical trauma to the Czech and Slovak society, and opposing the Kremlin’s dictatorship did not become a part of the Slovak genetic code. As a result, opinion polls register a rather indifferent attitude towards the Russian aggression in Ukraine.

To the Slovak Republic as to many other countries, Russia is an heir to everything which represents the Russian (in a wide sense) culture, which is treated with respect by Slovaks. According to Eurostat, SR is fourth among the EU Member States in terms of school children who chose Russian as a second foreign language (after Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia), with 20,5% in 2013.⁴ So in the eyes of many Slovaks, a harder stance on the Russian aggression in Ukraine is tantamount to Russophobia, which plays into the hands of the Russian propaganda in the country.

Starting from the end of 2015, experts describe the Ukrainian-Slovak relations as a “honeymoon period” – at least in regards to political dialogues. The bilateral meetings usually feature praise for Ukraine from the Slovak partners, who say that in the last two years Ukraine has made a breakthrough in reforms, unprecedented in the last two decades. The Ukrainian decision-makers appreciate the

² *Ibid.* – 163.

³ *The transcript of the discussion can be accessed to the SR National Council’s website. 9. deň rokovania, 23. 9. 2014.*<http://nrsr.sk.sayit.parldata.eu/6-n%C3%A1rodn%C3%A1-rada-2012-/37-sch%C3%B4dza/9-de%C5%88-rokovania-23-9-2014.-> Last access 9.06.2016.

⁴ *Eurostat Newsrelease 64/2015-24. September 2015. Available at* <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7008563/3-24092015-AP-EN.pdf/bf8be07c-ff9d-406b-88f9-f98f5199fe5a>. – Last access 10.06.2016.

realization of the “small reverse” gas flow project as a “gesture of friendship” from Slovakia, which helped to diversify Ukraine’s energy supply and decrease the gas dependence on Russia. Both countries joined efforts in opposing the Russian project “Nord Stream-2”. In the European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2016 of the European Council on Foreign Relations Slovak Republic received the highest “leader” grade on the issue “Support to Ukraine” (alongside Denmark, Sweden, France, Germany, Poland and Lithuania), which is mainly due to the gas reverse.⁵ In 2014, the Ukrainian expert community included Slovakia in the top-10 according to the results of the expert opinion poll «Who is Ukraine’s friend in the EU?», mainly because of the gas reverse project.⁶

The bilateral meetings usually feature praise for Ukraine from the Slovak partners, who say that in the last two years Ukraine has made a breakthrough in reforms

The intensity of bilateral contacts lately is spectacular: Slovak foreign policy observers refer to Ukraine as a top destination for Slovak policy-makers. The Minister for Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, Miroslav Lajčák, paid several visits to Ukraine, meeting the President,

the Prime Minister, the Head of the Verkhovna Rada and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The key points for discussion was the support for large scale reforms in Ukraine, visa liberalization for Ukraine, and functioning of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement between Ukraine and the EU. These discussions were especially important given the Slovak Presidency in the EU Council of Ministers in July-December of 2016.

However, Slovakia’s position can also be described as controversial, given some messages that Ukraine and the international community received from the Slovak government. Despite the fact that the Slovak Republic traditionally follows the common EU foreign policy

⁵ *European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2016 by European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). – P. 68. Available at http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR157_SCORECARD_2016.pdf. - Last access 31.05.2016.*

⁶ *The expert opinion poll was conducted among 42 Ukrainian experts from 12 to 19 June 2014. Who is Our Friend in the EU? Institute of World Policy 20.06.2014. Available at <http://iwp.org.ua/eng/public/1156.html>. - Last access. 03.06.2016.*

course, the Slovak government – and especially Prime Minister Robert Fico is famous for its statements on not being willing to accept Muslim refugees. Fico also claimed that sanctions against Russia were counterproductive. However, it is important to underline that Slovakia never officially questioned sanctions in Brussels – in contrast to the issue of the EU migrant quotas against which the Slovak government filed a lawsuit.

Currently, the interests of Ukraine and the Slovak Republic match in a number of spheres. The interests of Ukraine towards Slovakia lie in the following realms:

- 1) political, which means primarily studying the Slovak experience of reforms and democratic transition as well as securing Slovak support for Ukraine's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations;
- 2) security, which means using the Slovak experience of accession to NATO, reaching compatibility with NATO standards, as well as participation in regional security initiatives;
- 3) economic, making use of the advantages provided by the neighbouring location of two countries, strengthening the economic ties between the border regions, boosting the economic cooperation through EU-Ukraine DCFTA;
- 4) energy, continuation and intensification of natural gas reverse flow from the Slovak Republic to Ukraine, joint energy efficiency projects and implementing Slovak best practices on the matter;
- 5) humanitarian, which is connected to Slovak humanitarian aid, the issue of Ukrainian minority of Slovakia, cross-border cooperation, etc.

The interests of the Slovak Republic to Ukraine lie in:

- 1) supporting stabilization of the political and security situation in Ukraine as an element of Central Europe security architecture;

- 2) guaranteeing stability on the Slovak-Ukrainian border, which is its only border with a non-Schengen zone country and hence crucial from the point of view of countering illegal migration and organized crime;
- 3) using the potential of economic cooperation more efficiently, especially in border regions, as a way of boosting economic growth in Slovak Eastern regions;
- 4) securing a reliable partnership with Ukraine on Russian gas transit to Europe, applying joint efforts to obstruct the projects which bypass the two countries (e.g. "Nord Stream-2").

2. UKRAINE'S INTERESTS TOWARDS THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC AND THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC'S INTERESTS TOWARDS UKRAINE: "A MAP OF GOALS"

2.1. POLITICAL DIALOGUE: "KYIV OVERSHADOWED BY MOSCOW"

In the political realm, Ukrainian-Slovak relations have gone through different stages: "indifferent neighbourhood" during the era of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar (1993-1998), active pro-Ukrainian policy of Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda (1998-2006), "double track" policy of Robert Fico (2006-2010, 2012-until present) – the policy of balancing between Ukraine and Russia.⁷ The history of these relations shows that Kyiv was very often overshadowed by Moscow, as everything beyond the Carpathian mountains was viewed as Russia. "We invented a Russia which never existed. Slovak nationalism contains an idealistic image of Russia. Panslavism was invented not by Russians, but by Slovaks and Czechs. The logical link "communism-USSR-Russia" works in case of Poland, the Baltic states, but not Slovakia," according to a commentary of a Slovak expert on intrinsic reasons for Slovakia's special attitude towards Russia.⁸ Slovak nationalism was formed as pro-Russian because the Slovak territories historically belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, at a time when Russia was perceived as a unique ally for the Slovak national project.

SR's policy towards Russia is the epitome of this ideology. The idea of a "dual-track approach" is popular among Slovak decision-makers: sanctions must be tied to the implementation of certain conditions by Russia, but the dialogue with it must be maintained if Slovak interests are concerned. The Slovak government positions itself as a

⁷ See Alexander Duleba. *Op.cit.* – P.161-172.

⁸ Interview with Alexander Duleba, 17 May 2016.

pragmatist who sees no controversy between values and realpolitik: "while values are the aim, realpolitik is the means."⁹

There are examples of effective cooperation between Ukraine and Slovakia (e.g. in the implementation of the reverse gas flow), but also of conflicts. The two countries competed in the elections of the UN General Assembly session held in 1998 and UN Security Council non-permanent membership in 1999. Ukraine was critical of the visa regime introduction by Slovakia in 2000. Ukraine's attempt to suspend the readmission agreement with Slovakia was another conflict-prone issue. In addition, the image of Ukraine as an "unreliable" partner is wide-spread among a part of the Slovak political establishment, which stems from some negative experiences when communicating with Ukrainian authorities. One such instance was the recent bilateral meeting on energy efficiency, which was called off by the Ukrainian side, which then led the Slovak partners to complain that Slovak influence and aid tools to the Eastern partnership countries have a limited effect because these countries "are happy with being where they are"¹⁰. The image of "unreliable" Ukraine became a part of Fico's discourse after the incident back in 2009, when, against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine gas conflict, then-Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko cancelled a scheduled meeting in Kyiv, and an important gas deal with Slovak Republic fell through.¹¹ The Slovak side also complained that at the early stages of gas reverse negotiations (since 2012), the talks between Eustream and Ukrtransgaz often fell through, since Kyiv did not treat the issue seriously and used it only as a pressure tool on Russia, de facto bringing Slovakia into the conflict with Gazprom. Finally, there is lack of understanding in the Slovak Presidential Administration of the reason why Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko has still

⁹ Dušan Dacho, *Ambassador for the Eastern Partnership, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, Speech at the conference „Shaping Priorities for the Slovak 2016 Presidency in the Council of the European Union: Recommendations for More Effective Democracy Support in the Eastern Partnership“*; 8 June 2016, Bratislava.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Tomasz Dąbrowski. *Difficult path towards gas partnership: Visegrad Group countries' gas cooperation with Ukraine*. Available at http://visegradexperts.eu/data/_uploaded/Finals/Tomasz%20Daborowski.pdf. – Last access 30.06.2016.

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not taken his counterpart's invitation to come visit Slovakia. In turn, Ukrainian diplomats confirm that Poroshenko's visit to Bratislava is on the agenda. They also underline the intensity of the Presidents' meetings on the margins of international events, which allows them to coordinate¹².

It is not just Kyiv that is overshadowed by Moscow in Slovakia. Bratislava is also overshadowed by other, more crucial tracks for Kyiv. The role of the Ukrainian Western neighbour has been unreasonably underestimated. According to a Ukrainian diplomat, "we used to treat the Slovak Republic as a little region in the West, not as a priority". So, the reverse gas flow was "the new wind" for bilateral relations. However, even today the recognition of the mutual importance on each other from the two countries is limited to narrow circles of expert and policy-making communities. Despite the fact that the Visegrad Group European integration track is often cited as a model for Ukraine¹³, the Slovak Republic remains the least-known partner out of Visegrad Group.

Slovakia has always declared its support for Ukraine's European integration. It might be difficult to compare the Slovak and Ukrainian European integration tracks, since the two countries followed different European integration paths: Slovakia went through the "Europeanization of enlargement" path, while Ukraine followed that of the "Europeanization of neighbourhood."¹⁴ However, Ukraine faces the same factors that impeded Slovakia's progress towards accession to

¹² Interview with a Ukrainian diplomat, 4.07.2016, Kyiv, Ukraine.

¹³ "Ukrainian Prism: Foreign Policy 2015". Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" and Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2016. – P. 56. Available at <http://prismua.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Prism-en.pdf>. Last access 31.05.2016.

¹⁴ For more on Ukraine's and Slovak Republic's Europeanization see Maria Zolkina. *The Impact of Europeanization on Democratic Transformations: The Cases of Slovakia and Ukraine*. November 2013. Available at http://www.djf.org.ua/modules/pages/files/1390828563_2866.pdf. - Last access 07.06.2016.

the EU – a high level of corruption in society, lack of transparency in state institutions, and ineffective justice and rule of law.¹⁵

Slovak expertise in post-Communist transit, democratization, energy efficiency is actively promoted in Ukraine. Ukrainian officials learn from the experience of their Slovak colleagues within the energy efficiency projects. There is also best practices exchange within the security sector reform where Slovak partners share their expertise in strategic communications and strategic defence review with the Ukrainian civil servants and media. The Visegrad Group and Ukraine especially emphasize the role of the Centre for Experience Transfer from Integration and Reforms in Bratislava. This group helps aid democratic transition and helps the International Visegrad Fund with projects on democratization, social and economic transformation, civil society development, etc.¹⁶ The governmental agency SlovakAid provides material aid to Ukraine for transferring Slovak expertise, civil society support, institution-building, etc.¹⁷ Ivan Mikloš, ex-Deputy Prime Minister for Economy and Minister of Finance of the Slovak Republic, is now heading the Group of Advisors to Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko, etc.

In the security sphere, Slovakia provides training to de-mining specialists, military doctors, and also receives wounded Ukrainian soldiers for treatment in Slovak hospitals. Ukraine's participation in the watch of the Visegrad EU battle group has become an issue of mutual interest, as an opportunity to enhance the operational and combat capabilities of Ukraine's Army.

¹⁵ *European integration will sustain domestic reforms in Ukraine – experts from Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia. "Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation" survey. Available at <http://www.dif.org.ua/ua/events/evrointa-slovachini.htm>. Last access 03.06.2016.*

¹⁶ *Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group together with Ukraine Kyiv, 16 December 2014. Available at https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/131217/141216_spolocne_vyhlasenie_V4_Ukrajina.pdf/1ee2c500-e847-4132-82df-45c614a9a8df. Last access. 03.06.2016.*

¹⁷ *<http://slovakaid.sk/en/technical-aid>. - Last access 10.06.2016.*

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Unfortunately, the Ukrainian interests in the Slovak Republic lack diplomatic representation. While the diplomatic mission of the Slovak Republic to Ukraine was traditionally praised in Ukraine¹⁸, Ukraine's mission to SR suffered from the financial and human resources shortages of the Ukrainian diplomatic service. The Consulate General of Ukraine in Preshov was shut down in 2014, and the Embassy staff was cut down. Besides, the image of Ukraine is hampered by lack of effective communication between some members of the Ukrainian mission and their Slovak partners and journalists in part because of the formers low language skills. An unprecedented incident involving the connection of the Ukrainian Embassy to cigarette smuggling only made matters worse. The information visibility of Ukraine in expert and media discussions, as well as social networks, leaves much to be desired. Ukrainian NGO and diaspora efforts might have some effect but they cannot be a substitute for state representation.

The image of Ukraine in Slovakia is hampered by low language skills of some diplomats in the Ukrainian mission

2.2. NUANCES OF ECONOMIC COOPERATION

Bilateral economic relations are hindered by the fact that Ukraine and Slovakia's economies are at varying development stages. The Slovak economy has demonstrated some of the biggest growth rates, unemployment reduction, and foreign investment growth among the EU member states in the recent years. In turn, the financial and economic crisis in Ukraine has led to a reduction in the bilateral trade turnover.

At the moment, the general turnover of trade in goods and services amounts to 1 bl 115 mln USD (exports from Ukraine amount to 495, 13 mln USD, imports to Ukraine account for 620, 2 mln USD). Export volumes for some trade lines have shortened by 47%. The key ex-

¹⁸ See, for instance, «Top-10 Ambassadors in Ukraine and Abroad» Ranking of the Institute of World Policy (2010). – 10.02.2011. – Available at : <http://iwp.org.ua/eng/public/314.html> ma «TOP-10 Ukrainian and Foreign Ambassadors» (2012). – 20.02.2013. – Available at : <http://iwp.org.ua/eng/public/687.html>.

port lines from Ukraine to Slovakia are machinery and equipment, black metals, electric cars, mineral fuels, oil and refining products, wood and wood products. Ukraine's imports from Slovakia focus on mineral fuel, oil and refining products, means of land transport, black metals, sulfur, earths and stone, nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery, plastics, polymers.

Slovak investments to Ukraine tend to decrease – as of the beginning of 2016, Slovakia has invested 68,4 mln USD into Ukraine's economy, and this number has decreased by 5,8 mln USD as of the time of writing. The majority of Slovak investments are directed to industry (48,7%), transportation and warehousing, post and delivery services (19,9%), agriculture, forestry and fisheries (18%). Owing to an unfavourable investment climate in Ukraine, Slovak commercial banks do not provide loans to enterprises for projects in Ukraine because they are considered highly risk-prone.

Ukrainian-Slovak cooperation is institutionalised within the inter-governmental commissions: a Commission on economic, industrial and research and development cooperation, a Commission on transborder cooperation and a mixed Commission on international vehicle connection. Their activity is not intensive. The commissions last convened in autumn 2013. The next meetings of the commissions are scheduled for the second half of 2016. The Ukrainian insiders explain the break in commissions' work by the political situation in Ukraine and Slovakia as well as lack of funds¹⁹.

The Slovak-Ukrainian Forum, which was held in 2016 for the second time within «The Days of Ukraine» Project in Kosice, is a potentially important tool of cooperation. The aim of the forum was to present the region of Eastern Slovakia opportunities for cross-border cooperation on the issues of economy, culture and tourism between the two countries. A Slovak-Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce was registered in 2015. Its claimed goal is to promote the interests of Ukrainian exporters in Slovakia, however, it seems to be a private body.

¹⁹ *Interview with a Ukrainian diplomat, 4.07.2016, Kyiv, Ukraine.*

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The regional economic development in Slovakia is uneven, with the central and eastern regions lagging behind the western areas. A number of enterprises in the former used to export to the Eurasian Union (e.g. through related contracts), so the breach of traditional contacts caused losses to their income. However, the actual numbers are so minute that they are not even reflected in the state statistics of the Slovak Republic. Despite the general claim that Slovakia has suffered from sanctions against Russia, Slovak economy is EU-integrated, with the Russian market far down the list as a priority destination.²⁰

The implementation of the integrated border management (IBM) is an important aspect of the bilateral cooperation. IBM will allow to simplify the border crossing procedure and increase the efficiency of people, goods and vehicle border crossing. At the time of writing Ukraine is looking into the possibility of IBM with all neighbouring countries – members of the Schengen zone: the Slovak Republic, Poland, Romania and Hungary. The negotiations with Slovakia are at the most advanced stage (several crossing points with Poland already operate under IBM). If the draft of the Agreement on joint border and customs control between the Slovak Republic and Ukraine is approved by the European Commission, it will serve as a blueprint for the agreements between other Schengen states bordering on Ukraine.

2.3. ENERGY SECURITY: TWO IN THE SAME BOAT

Energy sector is literally a locomotive of Ukrainian-Slovak bilateral cooperation. The project of reverse transportation of natural gas from Slovakia to Ukraine has made Bratislava a strategic partner in terms of energy security. Ukraine stopped importing gas from Russia, replacing it with reverse flow from Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary and saving millions of Euros. The reverse flow has

²⁰ *Before the Russian-Ukrainian conflict Russia accounted for 4% of the Slovak exports and 10% of imports (mainly gas). Grigorij Mesežnikov. Visegrad States and the Russian-Ukrainian war: a view from the inside. 12.04.2016. <http://charter97.org/ru/news/2016/4/12/199295/>. – Last access 29.06.2016.*

become not only a goodwill gesture of Slovakian Government, but also an extremely profitable project for Slovakia. Since March 1, 2015, after modernization of Vojany-Uzhgorod pipeline, its capacity has increased to 40 million cubic meters per day (14.5 billion cubic meters per year). Currently, the pipeline is being further modernized in order to increase its capacity to 55-57 million cubic meters per day. Importantly, since April 2016, the pipeline is able to operate in two directions (with the capacity of 19 million cubic meters per day in Ukraine-Europe direction), which allows Slovakia to use Ukrainian UGSs. Now Ukraine is interested in the implementation of the “great reverse flow” project, which is not only an issue of Ukrainian-Slovak agenda, but also relates to the position of both Russia and the European Commission²¹. Ukrainian authorities’ address to the European Commission with a request to review the Russian-Slovak contract in order to eliminate the obstacles to the implementation of the “great reverse flow” project has raised discontent in Bratislava.

Energy sector is literally a locomotive of Ukrainian-Slovak bilateral cooperation

Maintaining the transit of Russian gas to Western Europe is the common interest of Ukraine and Slovakia, forcing the two countries to form a united front against

the plans to refocus Gazprom’s gas transit to Nord Stream 2 (or, previously, Turkish Stream or South Stream across the Black Sea). Moreover, their mutual interests include the establishment of the Eastern European gas hub on the basis of gas markets of Ukraine, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, and Romania. Ukraine and the Slovak Republic could also cooperate within the framework of the East-ring pipeline project developed by Slovak gas transport company Eustream, aimed at construction of the North-South gas transport corridor.

²¹ *Ukraine needs to get the shipper codes from Gazprom; furthermore, according to the Slovak-Russian agreement, the major part of Slovak GTS is acquired by Russia until the end of 2029. Therefore, the Prime Minister of Ukraine appealed to the EC to recognize this agreement contradictory to the provisions of the Third Energy Package and an obstacle to the implementation of the “great reverse flow” project. Memorandum of the MFA of Ukraine: Cooperation between Ukraine and Slovakia in Energy Sector. May 2016.*

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Furthermore, within the framework of cooperation between Ukraine and the Visegrad Group, Slovakia has taken cooperation in the field of energy efficiency under direct patronage²². A project funded by SlovakAid and the International Visegrad Fund aims to promote the exchange of experience between Slovakia and Ukraine in reforming the energy sector, including energy efficiency and renewable energy, implementation of legislation and programs of the EU, and introduction of best field practices, e.g. in the form of a Fair for Successful Slovak Energy Efficiency Projects or trainings for Ukrainian public officials²³. Moreover, such issues as strengthening the common electric power grid in accordance with the ENTSO-E safety standards, and reconstruction and expansion of Veľké Kapušany – Mukachevo power lines are currently under discussion.

2.4. THE UNDISCOVERED NEIGHBOURS: MENTAL "IRON CURTAIN" BETWEEN UKRAINIAN AND SLOVAK SOCIETIES

Despite the geographical proximity and linguistic affinity, Slovak and Ukrainian societies have no systematic contacts with each other and are not well-informed on each other, except the border areas. Ukrainian media pay little attention to Slovakia, and Slovak media cover Ukraine solely through the prism of war, conflict, corruption, etc. The analysis of Slovak media shows that such main-

²² *The Visegrad Group states have shared the sectors as follows: Slovakia – energy security and security sector reforms; Czech Republic – development of civil society, media, and education; Poland – decentralization and finance sector; Hungary – support for the SMEs and implementation of the FTA between Ukraine and the EU. Ukrajina: Konkrétna pomoc SR a V4 pri reformách 16.12.2014 https://www.mzv.sk/aktuality/detail/-/asset_publisher/lw1ppvnScIPx/content/ukrajina-konkretna-pomoc-sr-a-v4-pri-reformach/10182. – Last access 07.05.2016.*

²³ *Building Capacities for Energy Sector Reform in Ukraine project is implemented by the Centre for Global Studies Strategy XXI (Ukraine) in partnership with the Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association. See more at <http://geostrategy.org.ua/ua/proekt/energoefektivnist-slovachchina-ukrajina/item/951-building-capacities-for-energy-sector-reform-in-ukraine>. – Last access 03.06.2016.*

stream Russian media meta-narratives on events in Ukraine as “Ukraine is a failed state,” “discrimination of Russian-speaking people in Donbas,” etc. are present on a marginal (although quite significant) level. At the same time, Russian propaganda is distributed by certain conspiracy theory biased media that employ the public sentiments on Pan-Slavist ideas, communist past, Russia, and Putin personally²⁴.

Ukrainian minority in Slovakia is divided in terms of identity

Speaking of the Ukrainian minority in Slovakia, we should take into account the specificity of the situation. Ukrainian minority in Slovakia is divided in terms of identity. In 1990, the Rusyns of Slovakia, who were previously considered Ukrainians, were given identity rights. Subsequently, the former Ukrainian minority has been divided into community identifying itself as Ukrainians and Rusyns declaring their separate Slavic identity. Similarly, Transcarpathian Rusyns have rejected their Ukrainian national identity as one imposed on them by the former communist regime²⁵.

According to the latest population census (2011), a renaissance of Rusyn identity is observed: 33 thousand have identified themselves as Rusyns, making them the third (after Hungarians and Roma) largest national minority in Slovakia, while Rusyn language has been declared native by 55 thousand. There is also an institutional competition within Rusyn minority: after 1990, the Cultural Association of Ukrainian Workers (founded in communist times) has been divided into Rusyn-Ukrainian Union of Slovakia with a focus on Ukrainian identity and Rusyn Renaissance with Rusyn identity. These organizations compete for public and government support²⁶.

24 *Fischer Dusan. The Channels and Distinguishing Elements of Russian Propaganda in Slovakia. In Fog of Falsehood. Russian Strategy of Deception and the Conflict in Ukraine. FIIA REPORT 45. Ed. By Katri Pynnöniemi & András Rácz. P.301-302. Available at http://www.fiaa.fi/assets/publications/FIIAReport45_FogOfFalsehood.pdf. – Last access 31.05.2016.*

25 *A. Duleba, I. Dulebova. The Rusyn Question in the Historical Contest of the Slovak-Ukrainian Relations // Rusyn, 2015. – 4 (42). – P. 192.*

26 *Ibid.*

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The experts note that different legal statuses of Rusyn communities in Slovakia and Ukraine have led to certain confusion between Ukraine and Slovakia, especially in the 1990s. Ukrainian authorities tried to enlist the support of Slovakia in combating separatism, partially due to belief that extended rights of Rusyns in Slovakia might have indirect effects on the increase in separatist sentiments in Transcarpathian region. While in Slovakia, the legal status of Rusyns as a minority is formally established with all legal consequences, Rusyns in Ukraine have not yet received the status of a national minority. Kyiv saw the potential threat of separatism inspired by Moscow in Transcarpathian region, especially after the Rusyn community had held a referendum on territorial autonomy not recognized by Kyiv in 1991, and organized the transitional government within the framework of the Association of Transcarpathian Rusyns in 1993²⁷.

During the population census of 2011, almost 7.5 thousand people have identified themselves as Ukrainians (0.1% of the population of Slovakia). There are several ethnic organizations: the aforesaid Union of Rusyn-Ukrainians of the Slovak Republic, the Slovak-Ukrainian Association, Association of Ukrainian Writers in Slovakia, Taras Shevchenko Scientific Society, Slovak Association for Ukrainian Studies, etc²⁸. Remarkably, these organizations play a cultural and educational role, while such organizations as Ukraine-Slovakia SOS, Ukrainian-Slovak initiative etc. have certain political orientation.

Slovak humanitarian aid to Ukraine (according to the official Slovak data, 2.8 million Euros from 2014 to February 2016)²⁹ is an important dimension of humanitarian cooperation between the two states. This aid is aimed at the rehabilitation of soldiers and children, medical

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ukrainian-Slovak Bilateral Relations. Memorandum of the MFA of Ukraine, May 2016.*

²⁹ *M. Lajčák v Kyjeve: SR podporuje politickú stabilitu a ekonomickú prosperitu Ukrajiny. 2.2.2016. Available at https://www.mzv.sk/aktuality/detail/-/asset_publisher/lw1ppvnScIPx/content/m-lajcak-v-kyjeve-sr-podporuje-politicku-stabilitu-a-ekonomicku-prosperitu-ukrajiny/10182. – Last access 03.06.2016.*

supplies, training courses on evacuation of the wounded from the battlefield and providing them with first aid in the field.

Slovakia supports Ukraine in the issue of implementation of the visa-free regime. After the introduction of visa regime between the two countries due to Slovakia's accession to the Schengen area, people to people contacts have definitely become complicated. However, Slovak diplomatic mission is not among the countries known for unfriendly visa policy: Slovakia's consular practice is traditionally considered friendly, or, according to the most recent public monitoring by NGO "Europe without Barriers" (autumn 2015), "neutral" with positively low rate of refusals³⁰. Ukrainians are confident leaders by the number of visa applications and visas issued by Slovak consular offices (45,000 in 2015; see Appendix 1). Furthermore, Ukrainians also receive the largest number of residence permits compared to the citizens of other third countries (11,000 permits as of December 31, 2015; see Appendix 2). This means that Ukrainians are leaders in both categories, not only among the citizens of other third countries (Russians, Belarusians, and Serbs), but also among the EU citizens registered in Slovakia (Czechs, Hungarians, and Romanians).

In the area of cross-border cooperation, the implementation of amendments into the Agreement on Local Border Traffic in 2011 was a major accomplishment, introducing charge-free permit processing, increasing the term of legal stay within the border areas from 30 to 90 days for 180 days, etc³¹.

³⁰ *According to the results of public monitoring of visa practices of Schengen states conducted in autumn 2015, the consular practices of Schengen countries have been divided into three groups: "friendly," "neutral," and "contradictory." As of that moment, the Slovak consular practices have been attributed to the 'neutral' group. The multiple-entry visa practice by Slovak Consulate contradicted the EU Visa Code in terms of the visa validity period (up to 6 months, although the Code provides 6 months to 5 years). Furthermore, Slovak Consulate demanded the largest package of additional documents. The refusal rate was not high though. See more at: „Schengen by Fingerprints: How Has the EU Visa Practice Changed?“ March 10, 2016. http://novisa.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Reliz_10.03.20161.pdf. – Last access 01.06.2016.*

³¹ <http://eu.prostir.ua/news/251091.html>. – Last access. 03.06.2016.

2. Ukraine's interests towards the Slovak Republic and the Slovak Republic's interests towards Ukraine: "a map of goals"

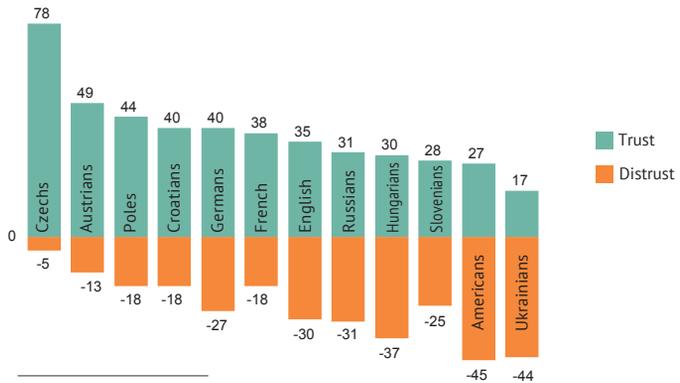
Moreover, Slovakia was the first EU state to sign the Agreement on Mutual Academic Recognition and Equivalence of Documents on Education with Ukraine (April 2014). After this document comes into force, it will substantially facilitate academic and educational exchange between the two countries. It is noteworthy, that Ukraine is currently the largest recipient of grant assistance from the Visegrad Fund in higher education³².

³² *Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group together with Ukraine Kyiv, December 16, 2014.* https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/131217/141216_spolocne_vyhlasenie_V4_Ukrajina.pdf/1ee2c500-e847-4132-82df-45c614a9a8df – Last access 05.06.2016.

3. STAKEHOLDERS, INTEREST GROUPS AND GROUPS OF INFLUENCE

As noted above, in general Slovakia officially supports the European aspirations of Ukraine and declares a willingness to contribute. However, the Slovak political elite are not completely immune to the internal contradictions that reflect not only the differences in tactical issues of current policies, but also the deep ideological divide. Although the viability of EU membership is not questioned by the mainstream political forces (except the radicals, whose election campaign has been built on anti-migrant and anti-EU rhetoric), there are certain nuances regarding the attitudes towards NATO and the United States. According to some observations, anti-American sentiments are widespread in Slovak society (according to the survey, 45% of respondents claimed that they do not trust the Americans; see Graph 1³³), which automatically leads to an imitation of the Russian discourse on American imperialism and neo-colonialism.

Graph 1. Attitudes of the Slovak citizens to the citizens of other states.



³³ The answers of Slovak respondents for the question “Could we trust or rely upon...?” The answers “definitely yes” and “rather yes” are combined in section “trust,” while the answers “definitely no” and “rather no” are consolidated in section “distrust.” The poll has been conducted in May-July 2015 among 1067 Slovak respondents. Source: Olga Gyárfásová, Grigorij Mesežnikov. 25 Years of the V4 as Seen by the Public. Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava 2016. – P.21. Available at http://www.ivo.sk/buxus/docs/publikacie/subory/25_Years_of_the_V4_as_Seen_by_the_Public.pdf

Ukraine's place on the mental map of Slovak society should be considered within the context of those deep contradictions and multiple political identities. The debates in Slovakia are not on Ukraine per se, but on the general world order, "the right of power and the power of law," and moral responsibility and justice, regardless of how differently it is perceived by different actors.

The Russophile attitudes of Slovaks toward Russia have been shaped under the influence of 19th century intellectuals (e.g. such Pan-Slavists as Ľudovít Štúr), interwar intellectual circles, and Slovak communists after the Second World War. Their legacy in the post-communist period has been adopted by nationalist and left-wing parties, as well as by predominantly isolationist organizations and radical movements with anti-Western positions. Their intellectual opponents are center-right parties, NGOs, think tanks, and the intellectuals who had inherited the values of the dissident movement (Charter 77)³⁴. Since the beginning of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, center-right parties characterized these events as Russian aggression against Ukraine, and also expressed support for Ukraine and for strengthening the defense capabilities of the NATO on the Eastern flank. Experts note that the greatest paradox is that before the 2016 parliamentary elections, the official foreign policy trend of Slovakia as a member of the EU and NATO had been supported by the opposition parties more than by Robert Fico and some of his colleagues from the ruling party³⁵.

In spring 2016, political changes occurred in Slovakia due to the parliamentary elections. For the first time, *Robert Fico's Smer-SD* left-wing party, which formed single-party governments since 2006 (with a break in 2010-2012), lost its majority and was forced to form a wide coalition government. As the efforts to establish a center-right government without *Smer-SD* failed, the government has been formed by four parties with little common ground: *Smer-SD*, the nationalist *SNS*, *Most-Hid*, and *Siet*. Despite its hybrid nature in terms

³⁴ Grigorij Mesežnikov, *Olga Gyárfášová. Slovakia's response to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict: Domestic socio-political aspects, parties' stances, public opinion // Diverging Voices, Converging Policies: The Visegrad States' Reactions to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict/ ed. by Jacek Kucharczyk, Grigorij Mesežnikov. – Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Warsaw, 2015. – P. 146.*

³⁵ *Ibid.* – P.158.

of foreign policy ideology (Smer-SD with dual rhetoric of some of its representatives on the EU and the NATO; the EU-skeptics and anti-NATO nationalists; the pro-Atlantic and pro-European of *Most-Hid*), the Government maintains its traditional pragmatic foreign policy course, while ideological battles mostly remain the subject of internal discussions. For instance, despite the fact that such positions as the Minister of Defence and the State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs have been occupied by the representatives of *SNS*, the party that favors Slavic brotherhood and cooperation with the Eurasian Union, Slovak experts claim that it has no impact on the pro-European and pro-Atlantic course of the Government.

Aside from that, the liberal Freedom and Solidarity (*SaS*) party, the *Ol'ano+Nova* block, the "We the Family" party, which has an unclear ideology, and the extremist People's Party – Our Slovakia have all been elected to the Parliament. For the first time, the National Council of the Slovak Republic is comprised of eight political forces.

Despite the fact that (like in any other country) electoral campaigns were developed around a domestic agenda, the events in Ukraine had a certain impact in the political programs of the parties that participated in the elections. While the ruling *Smer-SD* had no program at all, just a short list of priorities, and the *Ol'ano+Nova* bloc has not paid attention to foreign policy in its program, other parties felt the need to specify their attitudes to the EU's enlargement policy and Ukraine. The Christian Democratic Movement (*KDH*), which has unequivocally condemned Russian aggression against Ukraine, supports Ukraine's membership in the EU in its program and points out the need for large-scale internal reforms. This party was not included in the National Council due to lacking a few thousand votes to achieve the required 5%. The Slovak-Hungarian *Most-Hid* party has paid the most attention to Ukraine in its program and expresses the most definitive support for European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Ukraine (the membership in EU and NATO), compared with the other parties. Furthermore, they stress the integrity of Ukrainian and European security, which means that the greatest strategic interest for Slovakia is Ukraine belonging to the same security structures. Moreover, it is the only party that described Russia as a strategic adversary. The *SaS* also supports EU enlargement, but without men-

tioning any specific countries³⁶. Therefore, the unequivocal support of EU and NATO enlargement with the inclusion of Ukraine has been declared by two parties, one of which (*Most-Hid*) is represented in both the Parliament and the Government.

Interestingly, the Manifesto of the Slovak Government, formed after the parliamentary election, avoids references to Ukraine in the foreign policy section, “Reacting Flexibly to the Opportunities and Threats of the External Environment.” In general, the Manifesto states that Slovakia, taking over the EU presidency, will spread stability, democracy and prosperity in the Western Balkans and in the countries of the Eastern Partnership. The only reference to Ukraine in the 70-page document can be found in the “Internal Order and Security” section. It states that the Government will implement the physical and technical protection system along the border with Ukraine. The document also does not mention Russia, although it refers to the “long-term and complex changes in the security environment” and the need to update the security and defense strategy “taking into account the strategic adaptations of NATO and EU.”³⁷ The Slovak observers attribute this to the fact that the Government has no consensus on these issues; therefore, the document contains neither specific characteristics of these changes, nor their causes.

The position of Prime Minister *Robert Fico* on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is consistent in its inconsistency: as the opposition complains, in Brussels he stresses his commitment to the Pan-European course, while “flirting” with Russia and complaining about the sanctions in other contexts. However, his position should not be interpreted in such terms as “pro-Russian” or “pro-Ukrainian,” since he is rather focused on positioning himself for the domestic audience as a business executive caring only about his country through the prism of pragmatic national interests. This often leads to outright populism and

³⁶ *Róbert Ondrejcsák. Zahraničná a bezpečnostná politika vo volebných programoch strán. CENAA Policy Paper. Február, 2016. – Available at : <http://cena.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Ondrejcs%C3%A1k-PP-012016.pdf>. – Last access 04.06.2016.*

³⁷ *Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic 2016-2020. Available at <http://www.vlada.gov.sk/data/files/6489.pdf>. – Last access 04.06.2016.*

flirting with an electorate that is impressed by the authorities' leftist slogans. In addition to the economic factors, the Prime Minister tends to sympathize toward the "strong hand" types of governance, the "patriotic" regime in Russia, and President Putin personally³⁸.

That, however, does not affect the position of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, currently presided by the ruling *Smer-SD* party. There is continuity and consistency in the policies of the Ministry on issues related to Ukraine in particular. Foreign Minister *Miroslav Lajcak* emphasizes that Ukraine is not subject to Slovakia's temporary interest; on the contrary, Slovakia is interested in Ukraine remaining on the European agenda³⁹. *Lajcak* remains a hostage to the rhetoric of the Prime Minister; however, his advantage is in the involvement of career diplomats instead of political appointees into foreign policy, which allows him to mitigate the negative impact of Fico's messages to Slovak allies with the institutional memory of the Ministry.

We should also note the position of President *Andrej Kiska*, who expresses a definite position on Russian policies. He opposes Russia's violations of international law both "in private and in public statements," condemning the controversial signals sent by Slovak Government to its allies and partners in NATO and the EU after the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis⁴⁰. Furthermore, the President has also been advocating the need for anti-Russian sanctions, noting that commercial interests should not prevail over freedom and democracy⁴¹. The participation of the Slovak President in the March of Dignity, held in Kyiv on the anniversary of the Revolution of Dignity on Febru-

38 *Grigoriy Mesezhnikov. Visegrad States and Russian-Ukrainian War: An Outward Glance. 12.04.2016. <http://charter97.org/ru/news/2016/4/12/199295/>. – Last access 29.06.2016.*

39 *SR-Ukrajina: Politické rokovania i humanitárna pomoc. 1.2.2016. Available at https://www.mzv.sk/aktuality/detail/-/asset_publisher/lw1ppvnScIPx/content/-sr-ukrajina-politicke-rokovania-i-humanitarna-pomoc/10182. – Last access 10.06.2016.*

40 *Prezident vystúpil s príhovorom pred poslancami v Národnej rade. 07.10.2015. <https://www.prezident.sk/article/prezident-vystupil-s-prihovorom-pred-poslancami-v-narodnej-rade/>. – Last access 10.06.2016.*

41 *Grigoriy Mesezhnikov, Olga Gyárfášová. – Op.cit. – P.150.*

ary 22, 2015, had been a symbolic gesture. Importantly, he gained a decisive victory over Robert Fico in the presidential elections of 2014 due to his particular position on the issue of annexation of Crimea.

In the matters related to Ukraine, the Parliament (National Council) of the Slovak Republic follows the line declared by the Government, although certain anti-Ukrainian and anti-European rhetoric is still present (in particular, sounded by the MPs representing the Smer-SD party).

Importantly, Andrej Kiska gained a decisive victory over Robert Fico in the presidential elections of 2014 due to his particular position on the issue of the Crimea annexation

The discussion during the ratification of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU among the MPs of the previous convocation has become a clear reflection of the ideological divide in Slovak political elite⁴². This discussion has actually led to debates on Ukraine's relation to Europe in general, assessment of the role of Russia in international relations and the nature of its internal political processes, as well as debates on Russophobia and Russophilia, and NATO enlargement (with anti-NATO sentiments, criticism toward the European project itself and its "double standards" etc.).

On the one side of that discussion, there were ideas that Ukraine is a key Eastern partner of Slovakia, and by ratifying the Association Agreement, Slovaks could facilitate the Europeanization of Ukraine. The debaters emphasized that in the long-term, the Association would reduce the economic and civilizational gap between Michalovce (Slovak town near the border with Ukraine) and Uzhgorod, which is in Slovak interests; that "political association and economic integration of Ukraine with the European Union is deliberate, necessary, and reasonable contribution of Ukraine into the joint [European] project," while "Europe should not be divided by the Carpathians."⁴³ The acknowledgement of the fact that conflict in Donbas is inspired by Russia and "is not a geopolitical conflict between America and Russia, but Russia's open aggression against

⁴² See the transcripts of the debates on the website of the National Council of the Slovak Republic. 9. deň rokovania, 23.09.2014. <http://nrsr.sk.sayit.parldata.eu/6-n%C3%A1rodn%C3%A1-rada-2012-/37-sch%C3%B4dza/9-de%C5%88-rokovania-23-9-2014>. – Last access 09.06.2016.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

its smaller neighbor” is widespread among the opposition of that convocation of the Parliament. There was also criticism addressed toward the MPs of the ruling party that their certain statements represent some kind of “Munich rhetoric.” The ruling party was accused of “*Mečiarovština*” for “voting ‘for’ in Brussels while voting ‘no’ and ‘against’ at home,” which, according to the opposition, results in the loss of Slovakia’s international prestige and weight. There were also discussions on the threat of conformism and complacency after gaining membership in the NATO and the EU; on prevailing serenity and misconception that the country’s security is irreversible; on the threat of losing consensus in foreign policy orientation of Slovakia for the first time in history due to Russian-Ukrainian conflict⁴⁴.

On the other side, there was criticism towards Ukraine, the West, the United States, NATO etc. In moderate speeches, the MPs representing the ruling party and occupying the so-called “pacifist” niche called for peace and compromise, emphasized the need for “talks” and “dialogue” with Russia, while some of them even condemned the “fratricidal war” in Ukraine, “disproportionate” response by Kyiv in the ATO zone, approved of the “free will” expressed by Crimean population on the so-called “referendum” (“they want to belong to Russia” and “it is a positive result that there is no war and people are not killed there”). The opposition MPs who openly condemn Russia’s policies towards Ukraine were criticized for pushing the world to the Third World War and “rattling the sabres.”⁴⁵ Nevertheless, none of the 150 members of the National Council voted against ratification, which indicates Smer-SD’s party discipline and coordination of the official Government policies with European partners.

The discourse expressed by the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee for European Affairs, Marxist *Lubos Blaha* (*Smer-SD*), is an accumulation of every possible stereotype of Ukraine and Russia. He is known for such rhetoric as “Europe pushes Russia into a corner,” “the West wants to subjugate Russia with their values,” “the Maidan was a geopolitical game of the Western superpowers,” and an interview with the Ambassador of Ukraine published in Slovak newspaper

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

3. Stakeholders, interest groups and groups of influence

*SME*⁴⁶, which contained the reaction to certain anti-Ukrainian statements made by the Prime Minister, has become a reason for constant accusations toward Ukraine. This attitude is balanced by the prudent stance of the Chairman of the Foreign Policy Committee of the National Council *Frantisek Sebej (Most-Hid)*, who has repeatedly expressed his support for Ukraine.

While not being an active politician, *Ivan Mikloš* remains an authoritative opinion-maker in Slovak Republic as an ex-reformer. Slovak experts and decision-makers perceive him as an insider and trust his views on the reforms in Ukraine.

As for the media, the mainstream ones, such as *SME*, *Dennik N*, and *Týždeň*, mostly provide objective information on the events in Ukraine, in line with support for its struggle for European choice and territorial integrity. On the other side of the information spectrum are conspiracy-biased *Bojovník* and anti-Semitic, anti-American, and anti-Western *Zem a vek*, both actively spreading such materials as “Ukrainian Fascism.”

The activities of NGOs like Ukraine-Slovakia SOS, Ukrainian-Slovak Initiative, Slovak religious organizations (Slovak Catholic Charity Organization) and others are rather noticeable in the context of humanitarian assistance for Ukraine. The academic community and expert organizations of Slovakia, such as Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA), Strategic Policy Institute (Stratpol, formerly CENAA), GLOBSEC Policy Institute, Institute for Public Affairs (IVO), headed by Grigorij Mesežnikov, and others, are operating intensively on Ukrainian direction. However, there are also openly anti-Ukrainian organizations, such as the Peaceful Warriors (*Pokojní bojovníci*) and Slovak-Russian Society (*Slovensko-ruská spoločnosť*).

⁴⁶ *Ukrajinský veľvyslanec: Fico rozpráva ako zlý sused. 5. sep 2014. Available at <http://svet.sme.sk/c/7369480/ukrajinsky-velvyslanec-fico-rozprava-ako-zly-sused.html>. – Last access 15.06.2016.*

4. EXISTING AND POTENTIAL RISKS AND CONFLICTS

PERCEPTION OF UKRAINE AS A FAILED STATE

It is in the air that along with the confirmation of commitment to the Pan-European course toward Ukraine (support of the territorial integrity and condemning Russian aggression), the Slovak elite suffers from “Ukrainian fatigue.” Despite the acknowledged progress in some reform areas, namely in banking and finance, Ukraine is blamed for the absence of a consolidated political system and the oligarchic nature of state. It is noted that Ukraine “can not afford the luxury of delaying reforms,” since there has been insufficient progress in decentralization, public administration and fighting corruption⁴⁷. The specific examples of reforms and implementation of the Minsk agreements are expected. Despite the progress in energy cooperation, over time, the general perception of Ukraine is increasingly drifting towards less optimistic assessments.

Probability. Very high. The trend of emphasizing the subjective and objective obstacles for reforms in Ukraine has been already established, while the positive examples of political transformations in Ukraine do not get sufficient attention.

How to avoid? Due to the skeptical attitude of a part of the Slovak political establishment towards political processes in Ukraine, only specific examples of reforms and resolution of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine may quench that skepticism. Interestingly, Slovakia has been positioning itself as a conscientious advocate of Ukraine in the EU, even during the Yanukovich regime. On the eve of the Vilnius summit, it supported the signing of the Association Agreement with Ukraine based on the sentiment that “the fate of 45 million Ukrainians is more important than one political

⁴⁷ M. Lajčák: *Ukrajina si nemôže dovoliť luxus čakať s reformami*. 18.1.2016. Available at https://www.mzv.sk/aktuality/detail/-/asset_publisher/lw1ppvnScIPx/content/m-lajcak-ukrajina-si-nemoze-dovolit-luxus-cakat-s-reformami/10182. Last access 2.06.2016.

prisoner.”⁴⁸ Today, when Slovakia claims that the visa-free regime with Ukraine is a priority of its presidency in the EU, Ukraine can only appeal to the mutual benefit of both Ukrainian people and Slovakia.

CONSOLIDATION OF RUSSIAN NARRATIVE ON THE CONFLICT IN EASTERN UKRAINE DUE TO INSUFFICIENT KNOWLEDGE OF UKRAINE WITHIN SLOVAK SOCIETY

As noted above, Ukrainian-related topics are not a subject of interest of the ordinary Slovaks, whose perception is biased by limited, non-critical information. As shown by the opinion polls, Slovaks display the highest confidence in Russia and the lowest in the United States among the Visegrad nations. Moreover, the perception of Ukrainians in Slovakia is the worst among the Visegrad countries. When asked “Can we trust and rely on Ukraine?” only 17% of respondents answered “definitely yes” or “rather yes,” while 44% answered “definitely no” and “rather no” (see Graph 1 on p. 22)⁴⁹. These trends in public attitudes of a neighbor country are disturbing. A realistic view on the events beyond the Eastern border of Slovakia is limited to narrow circles. According to an expert poll conducted in Slovakia, the experts there believe that the main risks for Ukraine are the factors of Russian aggression and versatile pressure of Russia, the EU’s clear support for Ukraine, as well as political and economic pressure applied by the EU

⁴⁸ *Speech at the Shaping Priorities for the Slovak 2016 Presidency in the Council of the European Union: Recommendations for More Effective Democracy Support in the Eastern Partnership conference by Dusan Dacho, the Ambassador for the Eastern Partnership, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, June 8, 2016, Bratislava.*

⁴⁹ *Opinion poll conducted in May-July 2015 among 1067 Slovak respondents. See Olga Gyárfášová, Grigorij Mesežnikov. 25 Years of the V4 as Seen by the Public. Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava 2016. Available at http://www.ivo.sk/buxus/docs//publikacie/subory/25_Years_of_the_V4_as_Seen_by_the_Public.pdf. - Last access 11.06.2016.*

toward Russia are regarded as the prerequisites for the increase in support for European integration within Ukrainian society⁵⁰.

Probability. High. Despite the existence of objective media professionally covering the information, Russian propaganda falls on fertile soil of speculations and phobias, as well as the anti-American and other sentiments.

How to avoid? This issue is part of an effective public communication strategy, which should be specifically adjusted to the target audience (in this case, Slovak one). The situation might change only if the activities of governmental and non-governmental organizations in this area reach their critical mass.

FAILURE TO MAKE USE OF THE BENEFITS OF ECONOMIC COOPERATION

Slovakia has occupied a very important niche in Ukrainian foreign policy due to the energy issue; however, there is little spill-over effect (the “overflow” of positive examples of cooperation towards the other spheres). The expectations regarding immediate results of the deep and comprehensive free trade area between Ukraine and the EU did not come true; in fact, there is a decrease in foreign trade activity. In this context, the problem is not limited to Ukrainian-Slovak relations only; it is systemic. The experts complain about low quotas for duty-free exports to the EU, which are exhausted very rapidly, hence the justification for the need to review the conditions of the Agreement. Second, the first observations are that for now, only big business is trying to enter Slovak market, while SMEs lack knowledge and experience.

⁵⁰ *Expert poll conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation in partnership with the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO, Slovakia). The poll involved 31 experts and has been conducted on September 8-24, 2014. See more at: European Integration Will Promote the Internal Reforms in Ukraine – Experts from Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia. <http://www.dif.org.ua/ua/events/evrointa-slovachchini.htm>. - Last access 03.06.2016.*

Another problem is the ineffective intergovernmental communication and weak interagency cooperation between different government agencies, which is symptomatic for both states. For instance, Slovak partners point out duplication of certain ministries' functions (e.g. Ministry of Economy and Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the field of economic diplomacy). This leads to a dispersion of information and duplication of functions by different authorities, which results in the lack of coordination in case of the absence of clear action plan for bilateral cooperation.

Probability. High.

How to avoid? A more effective information campaign aimed at Ukrainian manufacturers should be held. Furthermore, coordinated activities at all levels (tax administrations, chambers of commerce, foreign trade departments in the regional state administrations, councils of exporters etc.) are required in order to inform Ukrainian manufacturers on the procedures of entering Slovak market, obtaining certificates etc.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

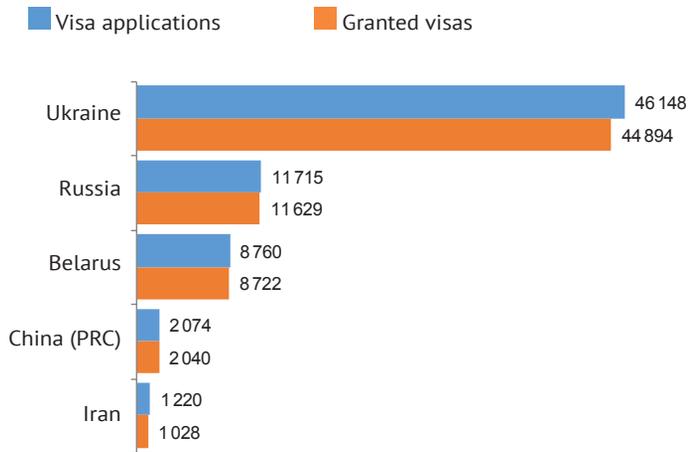
1. The key to the development of Ukrainian-Slovak relations is their pragmatization, as exemplified by the increase in the number and quality of political contacts after the launch of a reverse pipeline transit between Slovakia and Ukraine. This is a case of both countries realizing that “we should be friends, because it’s cheaper.”⁵¹ Today, when a unique coincidence of interests in Ukraine and Slovakia occurred in the energy sector due to their critical attitudes toward the Nord Stream-2 pipeline project, both countries should not only be “friends against the third party” and resist that project, but should also try to move towards other directions of cooperation in the energy sector. As for the “great reverse” project, the implementation of this idea requires substantial diplomatic efforts of Ukrainian side, as well as the relevant regulation base (signing of the connection agreement between the national interconnectors of Ukraine and Slovakia, and the full implementation of the Law of Ukraine on Gas Market).
2. The obvious task for Ukrainian Foreign Ministry is the institutional and staffing supply for Slovak direction of foreign policy. The Head of the Embassy should be an expert who knows and understands Slovak specifics. The “manual control” of the topical issues of bilateral agenda is not sufficient; the interagency activities should be synchronized in order to avoid duplication of functions or lack of coordination between various agencies. It is important to intensify cooperation within the framework of intergovernmental commissions, referring to the existing experience of more regular and effective cooperation of Ukraine in similar commissions with other partners.
3. Ukraine could use Slovak experience in local governance in terms of establishment of an efficient model of financial cooperation between the center and the regions.

⁵¹ *Interview with the Slovak expert, May 2016, Bratislava.*

4. Integrated border management system between Ukraine and Slovakia should be implemented. The objective that is long-awaited is an increase in the capacity of border crossings on the Ukrainian-Slovak border and the introduction of the joint customs control.
5. As a part of the general global information campaign on Ukraine, a specific Slovak-targeted campaign should be developed. Such tools as the traditional annual Days of Ukraine in Slovakia (in Kosice), Days of Neighborliness in the border regions, or the recently introduced Slovak-Ukrainian Business Forum should be employed more effectively.
6. Another important issue for academic and educational cooperation, as well as for the lives of thousands of Ukrainians and Slovaks, is the speeding up of the internal administrative procedures required for the entry into force of the Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Equivalence of Education Documents.
7. The efforts of the Slovak Republic during its presidency in the European Union in the second half of 2016 aimed at the implementation of the visa-free regime between Ukraine and the EU would add additional momentum to the development of bilateral relations in a spirit of mutual trust and partnership.

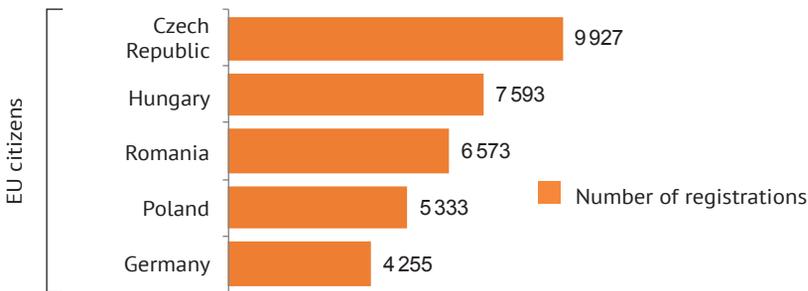
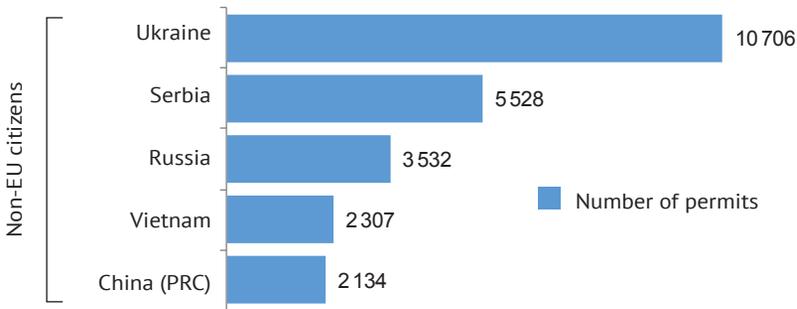
APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Visa applications and granted visas by Embassies of the Slovak Republic by visa type and nationality of applicants in 2015.



Source: *Annual Statistical Overview of Legal and Illegal Migration in the Slovak Republic 2015.* - P.21. Available at http://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/policia/hranicna_a_cudzinecka_policia/rocniky/rok_2015/2015_rocenka_UHCP_EN.pdf. - Last access 01.07.2016.

Appendix 2. Top 5 nationalities with valid residence permits/valid registration for residence as of 31.12.2015 (third country nationals).



Source: *Annual Statistical Overview of Legal and Illegal Migration in the Slovak Republic 2015.* - P. 10, 13. Available at http://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/policia/hranicna_a_cudzinecka_policia/rocniky/rok_2015/2015_rocenska_UHCP_EN.pdf. - Last access 1.07.2016.

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