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FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

Slovakia

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1. History of EU-Turkey Relations

1.1. Continuous Support for Turkish EU-membership or given support going backwards?

Despite the recent worrying developments in Turkey, Slovakia generally supports Turkey's attainment of full EU membership on the state level. Enlargement of the EU is generally considered the best way to support democracy, stability and prosperity in the neighborhood – a view which is also based on Slovakia's own experience with EU membership and the accession process. This supportive position towards Turkish EU membership at the government level has been rather stable over the last decade and there have not been any major changes or shifts in the last several years. Bilateral relations between Turkey and the Slovak Republic are mostly free of political disputes, and one could speak of a friendly partnership between the two countries. This is also influenced by the fact that Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize the Slovak Republic's independence in 1993, after the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia.

Cooperation with Turkey has mostly been considered significant for strengthening transatlantic and Eastern ties as a substantial contribution to European security. Besides these security considerations, Slovakia has a high interest in economic relations with Turkey, particularly in the field of trade and energy. Some even speak of an “economic lobby” in Slovakia advocating for Turkey's accession to the EU.

At the international level, NATO and the EU, of which Slovakia has been a member since 2004, are the two main international organizations in which Turkey and the Slovak Republic collaborate closely with each other.

As far as political stakeholders in Slovakia are concerned, there are also some differences in the political spectrum regarding their rhetoric used to advocate Turkey's accession to EU. While centre-right parties have mostly put emphasis on economic, security and strategic partnerships, centre-left parties use a rhetoric that sees Turkey as a bridge between the (Middle) East and the West, not only in economic and strategic terms, but also from a cultural perspective.

1.2. Interest-based narrative dominates the debate

When there is a discussion related to Turkey and its relations with the EU, the regional matters dominate the debates in Slovak Republic.

Identity issues still play a major role, mainly due to the historical wars between the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. Therefore, Turkey is still perceived as an important “Other”, by parts of the Slovak public,¹ particularly when it comes to Europe's asserted Christendom.

Pro-Turkey arguments are mainly related to an economic and interest-based perspective. In line with that, one can identify a rising narrative emphasizing the high potential for economic

¹ The author of this report conducted 30 interviews between November 2016 and January 2017 with Slovak academics, representatives of government institutions and university students.

cooperation between the Slovak Republic and Turkey and underlining Turkey's important geostrategic position.

By contrast, interpretative errors can be seen in Slovak news, which is at the end of the day dictating the debates, as well as the prominent narratives of public opinion.² This is related to misinformation concerning Turkey in Slovak media.

Critics of Turkish EU accession can be found among the conservative and populist movements and in particular in the form of the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH). The main appeal of this party in Slovakia is their focus on Christian tradition, work, and ethics – they consider Christianity as the basis of the national identity. Media coverage and information on Turkey is rather scarce in Slovakia, and the Slovak public is ill-informed particularly regarding the history of Turkey.

1.3. Economic cooperation in the focus

The main shared policy areas between the Slovak Republic and the republic of Turkey are the EU enlargement policy and the Turkish accession process; economic relations (e.g. including tourism), the promotion of human rights in Turkey; and migration policy (including the EU-Turkey migration deal), which is also seen from a security perspective. Many political actors and large parts of the population in Slovakia are convinced that the recent terrorist attacks in Europe are related to the migration crisis – one of the reasons why Slovakia refused to accept Muslim refugees in the context of the EU-Turkey refugee deal.

Slovakia has launched a process of liberalization and intensification of relations with Turkey, exemplified by a Memorandum of cooperation signed on 20 August 2013. One important element is cooperation in science, including scientific research and students' mobility. Other elements are the exchange of knowledge and innovation. A priority is of course the intensification of business and trade relations.

As another example for the interest in economic relations, the Slovak Investment and Trade Development Agency (SARIO) signed a partnership agreement with Turkey, aimed at helping Slovak enterprises to build networks with Turkish companies. Other prospective areas for Slovak-Turkish cooperation can be found in the energy sector, the automotive industry, the chemical industry, engineering, textile, but also the tourism sector, the production of TV series, as well as ecological projects.

Overall, Turkey is still seen as an important actor and strategic partner, ensuring stability and security in the Middle East. It is also considered an important partner for energy security in Europe, and political leaders have underlined Turkey's potential role as an energy hub. However, in the future this might also change due to Turkey's political and economic instability.

² Nastal čas dostať Turecko z NATO? https://dennikn.sk/707438/nastal-cas-dostat-turecko-z-nato/?ref=rss&utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter (17 March 2017)

2. Future of EU-Turkey Relations

2.1. Dominant views used to be consensual with a broad support

The position of the political elites regarding Turkey is mainly consensual with a broad support for Turkish EU membership. However, the Christian Democratic Movement is more cautious in this regard, and criticizes the increasingly authoritarian government in Turkey. Its representatives also claim that there is an “Islamization” of the country. In a similar vein, the Christian Democratic Movement has traditionally pointed out the alleged differences in values between Turkey and the EU countries. In the past, there used to be a more favourable view of Turkish EU membership on the left side of the political spectrum, which however no longer holds true.

At the same time, most of the political parties in the Slovak Republic are concerned by the recent developments in Turkish domestic politics. Some left-wing parties are criticizing Turkey’s poor democratic record, especially as regards freedom of speech and the violations of minority rights going on in the country particularly against the Kurdish minority in the South-East of Turkey, as well as within the parliament. They criticize the suppression of media channels, columnists, the arrest of approximately 155 journalists, the detaining of more than 2 300 judges and prosecutors, as well as the suspension or dismissal of almost 130 000 public employees in response to the failed coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in July 2016.

The right wing of the Slovak political spectrum is mostly opposed to Turkey’s EU membership. The Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the far-right Kotleba-People’s Party Our Slovakia (ĽS Naše Slovensko) are perhaps the most vocal in opposing Turkey’s European Union bid: the regionalist, fascist, xenophobic, and Eurosceptic parties base their arguments on religious as well as identity and culture-related matters and argue that Turkey does not belong to Europe culturally, religiously, socially or geographically. Yet, the same part is also opposed to EU and NATO.

When it comes to the Slovak population, one can identify a decrease in public support in Slovakia for Turkish EU membership in the recent years. At the end of 2016-beginning of 2017, the results of a set of interviews conducted by the author confirm this analysis and show a decrease of the positive stance towards Turkey in the public opinion – but also among the political actors. This is mostly due to the growing authoritarianism of the Turkish government, the suppression of the opposition, and the religious radicalization, factors which have given rise to fears also in Slovakia.

2.2. “Privileged partnership” versus “strategic partnership” debates

Although the Slovak public is mainly cautious about Turkey becoming a full EU member state, the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic Robert Fico highlights the economic and strategic partnership and supports Turkey-Slovakia relations, as well as Turkey’s membership in the European Union. Slovak political representatives focus mainly on economic cooperation – thus

an interest-based discussion has dominated. It is slightly supplemented by a security-based discussion, emphasizing security issues and cooperation with NATO. Slovak political and economic elites consider Turkey a “strategic partner”; however, the concept of differentiated integration does not appear in the ongoing debate among the political elites.

2.3. Immigrants, corruption scandals, coup attempt future of EU-Turkey relations

Among the significant events in 2015 and 2016 influencing the debate in Slovakia were the terrorist attacks in Turkey, a topic which gained a huge attention as Turkey is one of the main tourist destination for Slovaks, the migration crisis and the failed coup attempt in July 2016, followed by the extensive domestic repression measures.

After the July 2016 attempted coup d'état, the Slovak government joined several other European leaders in expressing solidarity with Turkey and at the same time called on Turkey to respect the rule of law and democratic rights and freedoms. However, the solidarity messages were only published some days after the coup, and were not exclusively meant in response to it. The main concerns of the Slovak political elite are indeed Turkey's human rights violations against the opposition, the silencing of the media and journalists, as well as the growing authoritarianism of the Turkish government – overall, they claim that Ankara is heading towards a totalitarian regime.

The public in Slovakia followed the news already earlier, regarding the Gezi protests and the crackdown on the protesters in 2013 (including the corruption scandal), and even more so in light of the purges that followed the attempted coup in July 2016. In Slovakia, the migration crisis became a hot topic both in 2015 and 2016, even though no immigrants were directly entering the country.

3. EU-Turkey Relations and the Neighbourhood/Global scene

3.1. Conflicts and political changes in the neighbourhood (Ukraine, Caucasus, the Middle East and North Africa)

The Ukraine crisis was not a major topic with regard to relations between Turkey and the Slovak Republic in the public discourse, and it therefore did not have a direct effect on the Slovak public opinion. However, currently the closer cooperation between Russia and Turkey opened another topic of debate, namely on the security dimension, which also affects views on Turkey's relations with the EU. Ankara and Bratislava both condemned Russian's annexation of Crimea. Furthermore, the shift in relations between Russia and Turkey became quite significant due to the November 2015 downing of the Russian jet and the assassination of Russia's ambassador to Turkey at an art exhibition in Ankara on 20 December 2016. The neighbouring countries did not take their stance yet, and the issue was solved between the Turkish and Russian leaders, so it is

early to see whether or not this news will have a direct impact on Slovakia's stance towards Turkey.

3.2. Potential areas of cooperation: security and economy

The Slovak Republic and Turkey have a strategic partnership, and cooperation with NATO is deemed key by both countries in order to ensure their stability and security. The main potential geographic areas for conflict resolution are the Caucasus and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Prospects look bleak due to Turkey's current policies, yet the security area (with the migration crisis understood as a security issue – and Turkey seen as a security provider in the Slovak public discourse) has as an enormous potential for future cooperation with Turkey.

In the economic dimension, apart from various business projects (e.g. construction and trade), energy is currently the area with the highest potentials. All the potential areas of cooperation between Turkey and Slovakia can be listed as trade, science sector, security and energy.

3.3. Global developments and Turkey-EU-deal

Global developments shape the debate on EU-Turkey relations in Slovakia. This includes mainly issues related to migration, e.g. the migration route from Syria but also the fight against terrorism in a multilateral partnership with the EU. The future of Turkey as a second-tier BRIC state is discussed, but Turkey's apparent fragility due to a number of concurrent reasons – e.g. social, political and economic - diminished these prospects.

Positioning Turkey as a safeguard state, important hub for Syrian refugees, for 3 million refugees between the EU and the Middle East is not making the Slovak public keen on approving of Turkey's EU membership, as it is already seen as a threat for the stability and development of the South-Eastern European region.

Furthermore, entering to war with Syria is already threatening Turkey's security with 32 terror attacks having taken place in the last 1.5 years in Turkey. These attacks, together with the overall security situation in Turkey, caused a sharp decline in Slovak tourists visiting the country. However, security concerns within the EU and Slovakia could bring the Slovak and Turkish governments closer, but this question still needs to be discussed by the Slovak political actors. Thanks to Turkey's role as both a strategic partner and a neighbour of the EU, cooperation with this country is considered extremely important by Slovakia. This concerns not only the refugees question, but also economic cooperation between the EU and Turkey – and that is why the discussed upgrading of the customs union is an important element.

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