

# MARCHING TOWARDS EURASIA

The Kremlin connections of the Slovak far-right

Péter Krekó  
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**Political Capital** is a Budapest-based, independent political research and consultancy institute with a decade of experience, a strong international network and reputation. The basic values of the institute are parliamentary democracy and market economy. The institute's main fields of interest are political radicalism, extremism and its social background, conspiracy theories, prejudices, election research and Russian political influence within the EU. Political Capital has strong expertise in quantitative analyses.

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All errors and omissions are our own.

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# A note on methodology and terminology

The idea of the current research emerged during our earlier analysis<sup>1</sup> on East European far-right parties' orientation towards Russia in 2009 and the study<sup>2</sup> on the promotion of Kremlin's interests through European far-right and far-left parties' pro-Russian policies in 2014. The findings of these papers led us to the hypothesis that certain far-right (and partly far-left) organizations within the EU have specific functions imposed by the Russian state and actors close to it. These functions include: (1) destabilization of the EU, its member states and the transatlantic relations; (2) legitimization of the Putin regime and its policies; (3) gathering information and spreading disinformation. In order to reveal these functions and to analyze the role of far-right parties and organizations within the EU, we launched a series of publications that focus on individual member states (Hungary, Slovakia, France, Greece and Bulgaria) and EU institutions. This piece of the series, with the support of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, provides an in-depth analysis of the Slovak far-right's pro-Kremlin's stance. The time scope of the study reaches from the early 90's to current developments. The focus, however, is on the time before and during the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

During the study we refer many times to the terms "Russian influence" or "Russian state influence" or "Kremlin's influence." These notions are connected with the term "Russian influence through power," by which we mean explicit and implicit actions by the Russian state and related actors (including intellectuals, businessmen, journalists, etc.) or organizations aiming at creating political changes in the behavior and/or political agenda of certain political actors through political means and/or financial instruments.

The main goals of the research are the following:

- 1) Identify the relevant connections between Slovak far-right and far-left stakeholders and Kremlin stakeholders.
- 2) Collect and analyze the most important pro-Russian declarations and actions of the relevant radical political players in Slovakia.

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<sup>1</sup> Péter Krekó and Krisztián Szabados: „*Russia's Far-Right Friends. In-depth analysis.*” Risk and Forecast, December 3, 2009, accessed October 20, 2014, [http://www.riskandforecast.com/post/in-depth-analysis/russia-s-far-right-friends\\_349.html](http://www.riskandforecast.com/post/in-depth-analysis/russia-s-far-right-friends_349.html)

<sup>2</sup> “*The Russian Connection*”, Political Capital, April 10, 2014, accessed October 20, 2014, [http://www.riskandforecast.com/useruploads/files/pc\\_flash\\_report\\_russian\\_connection.pdf](http://www.riskandforecast.com/useruploads/files/pc_flash_report_russian_connection.pdf)

3) Create a list of the meetings and links between radical players and Kremlin stakeholders and analyze their relations.

4) Reveal personal, organizational, media and other linkages between the far-right and Kremlin stakeholders.

We used the following research methods:

1) Desktop research to collect the necessary information, restore the order of developments and events and gather statements and quotes.

2) In-depth interviews with experts from academia, politics and media to gather non-public and background information, and deeper view on certain actors and events.

3) Methods of investigative journalism in order to gain confidential and background information from actors within or close to the far-right scene (e.g., confidential talks). In order to protect their identity, sources of such information remain anonymous in the study.

4) Analysis of Slovak far-right media outlets and Facebook pages.

5) Analysis of Russian online media in order to examine how Slovak far-right actors are presented to the Russian public. For ensuring the comparability of the results, each national case study applied, where possible, identical structure for analysis and presentation, including the same questions during interviews with experts.

In the first part of the study the political, economic, and social environments of the relations between Slovakia and Russia are presented. In the second part we analyze Slovak mainstream politics amidst the Ukraine crisis. In the third part we present the Kremlin's influence on today's Slovak far-right scenery assessing both parties and paramilitary organizations. The fourth part of the study elaborates the contemporary Slovak public discourse about Russia including Kremlin's propaganda in the Slovak media. In the last part of the study, we provide a detailed assessment of the Slovak National Party's and The People's Party – Our Slovakia's in Russian online media.

## Disclaimer

Since this study does not intend to give more space to or propagate extreme and/or illegal views and sites, the authors have decided upon a certain referencing principle regarding far-right sites and materials used in the analysis. Links are only provided to expert analyses, databases, and mainstream press articles. Contents on the official website of far-right parties are also referred to by links since those have or had elected officials in different political institutions. All other far-right, extreme, or illegal contents and sites mentioned or quoted in the study are referred to by the name and date of the source in the text. The exact references with screenshots for the latter sources are stored in a separate document at author institutes, Social Development Institute Kft. and Political Capital Kft., and may be requested for expert and academic use.

## Executive summary

- In 2009, Political Capital was among the first to call attention to East European far-right parties' orientation towards Russia. Subsequently, in an analysis generating widespread international attention, in April 2014 we indicated that with the assistance of far-right parties' pro-Russian policies "the promotion of Russian interests couched in national colors is proliferating throughout Europe," and we also demonstrated that with their votes cast in the European Parliament, far-right and far-left parties had pledged allegiance to Putin and his regime. All this makes it patently clear that ***the Russian state's political influence across Europe has increased in recent years***. The European extreme right, with its Eurosceptic and anti-Western ideology, provided a fertile ground for the double-faced foreign policy of Russia – ideologically hostile, yet economically cooperative – towards Europe. Moreover, the current Ukrainian crisis clearly highlights the "vectors" and tools of Russian influence in Europe, as well as in Slovakia.
- ***Traditionally, because of the religious (Orthodox Church), and ideological links (Pan-Slavism), Slovak relations with Russia has generally been strong***. Furthermore, ***the current Slovak government is considered to be among the "doves" of the EU's foreign policy when it comes to taking a harder stand against Russia***, for example during the debates on imposing sanctions to retaliate against Russia's actions in the Ukrainian crisis. While it is true that PM Robert Fico has opposed sanctions against Russia many times, the Slovak government is in fact walk-

ing a fine line of political pragmatism. While it tries to avoid open confrontation with the Kremlin, it also conforms to common Euro-Atlantic foreign policy by supporting the Eastern Partnership program and Ukrainian territorial sovereignty, providing reverse gas flow and military, as well as humanitarian aid to Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> The Slovak governmental party Smer follows the Russia-critical mainstream stance of the center-left S&D political group in the European parliament.

- ***This kind of foreign policy pragmatism is supported by public opinion, which is divided in two parts: on the one hand, it favors Ukraine's independent democratic path and disapproves Russian intervention, and, on the other hand, rejects sanctions and confrontation with the Russian Federation.*** While there are some obvious attempts to reinforce pro-Russian attitudes in the public in the traditional and social media with an intense information warfare,<sup>4</sup> the impact of these efforts on the broader public is limited. ***The Ukrainian-Russian conflict has changed the Russophile Slovak public, which perceives Russia as the main threat to Slovakia nowadays, at least in the short run.*** At the same time, the Kremlin's influence on the far-right and extreme right in Slovakia still relies on the Russia-friendly and Slavophil roots.
- With the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Kremlin's attempts at influencing the extreme right became more apparent. The political formations on the Slovak extreme right pursue Russia-friendly politics; both Slovak National Party (SNS) and The People's Party - Our Slovakia (LSNS) blame the EU or NATO for the conflict, while evoking Slavophil sentiments. Some of the leaders of these parties can be linked to Russia on the basis of their personal and cultural networks.
- ***The unique feature of the Slovak case is that Russia is endorsed not only by the political parties on the right, but also by some Slovak paramilitary organizations with far-right ideology.*** In the case of the paramilitary Slovak Conscripts, we can assume that active measures<sup>5</sup> and transfer of political know-

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<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, these steps do not add up to a consistent anti-EU or anti-West economic and political ideology, as it is the case for example with Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán.

<sup>4</sup> The manifestations of the positive attitudes to the foreign policy of Russian Federation are very often connected not so much with the approval of Kremlin's course of actions, foreign policy, etc, but with the protests against some policies implemented by the Slovak or "Western" political elites.

<sup>5</sup> Through the "active measures" (aktivnyye meropriyatiya) dating back to the USSR, political support is provided by the Kremlin to "friendly" parties and organizations. This has three major components: (1) proactive political measures, (2) "NGO-diplomacy" and (3) funding friend-

how plays a direct role, since its leader gained his position after attending a training in Russia conducted by ex-Spetsnaz (Russian Special Purpose Forces) instructors. In this case, it seems that there are some successful attempts of some Russian circles to export possibly violent extremism to an EU member state.

- ***In general, the military trainings delivered by ex-members of the Russian special forces in Slovakia and Russia unite the various figures of the extreme right paramilitary scene, presenting a security threat in the region, as (with the parallel Russian support for the Slovakian and Hungarian far-right) age old territorial claims might become militarized and revived again in the CEE-region.***
- The specificity of the Slovakian case is the direct role of far-right parties and movements participating in the Eastern Ukrainian conflict, which is an important problem not only for Slovakia but the entire region. ***Slovak volunteers are fighting on the side of pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine.*** A notable example is a former member of the paramilitary far-right Slovak Conscripts, Martin Kepřta, who has been fighting for the 15<sup>th</sup> international brigade of the DPR Army since autumn 2014.<sup>6</sup> The Slovak involvement in direct fighting means that not only military training is put to use by far-right military actors, but the Kremlin's influence in the Slovak extremist scene proves to be a geopolitical and international security risk, playing on the edge of Eastern-European national animosities dating back to WWI. The Hungarian (and also pro-Russian) Jobbik and its paramilitary satellite organizations harbor revisionist endeavors against Slovakia, Romania, and, first and foremost, Ukraine, basically wherever Hungarian minorities are present. Furthermore, there are Slovak and Ukrainian far-right organizations with actual military experience to counter Jobbik and its affiliates –one Ukrainian nationalist paramilitary organization called Karpatska Sic Guard has already threatened to annihilate Jobbik and the revisionist Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement, which is close to Jobbik, in April 2015.<sup>7</sup>

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ly media operations. See: Sinikukka Saari: "Putin's Eurasian Union Initiative: Are the premises of Russia's post-Soviet policy changing?", *Ulbrief* NO9, 1 Nov 2011, accessed February 15, 2015 – <http://www.ui.se/upl/files/65793.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> "Spoved' Slováka, ktorý bojuje za proruských separatistov," *aktuality.sk*, February 23, 2015, accessed, February 25, 2015, <http://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/271050/nevzali-ho-do-armady-siel-k-separatistom/>

<sup>7</sup> "Likvidálással fenyeget Jobbik-aktivistákat egy ukrajnai csoport", *index.hu*, April 24, 2015, accessed, April 27, 2015, [http://index.hu/kulfold/2015/04/24/likvidalással\\_fenyeget\\_jobbik-aktivistákat\\_egy\\_ukrajnai\\_csoport/](http://index.hu/kulfold/2015/04/24/likvidalással_fenyeget_jobbik-aktivistákat_egy_ukrajnai_csoport/)

- ***Russia is operating a remarkable (wartime) propaganda machinery on the extreme right-wing and/or conspiratory online platforms and social media pages*** created in 2013 and 2014, which combine pro-Russian attitudes with conspiracy theories and anti-Western sentiments. One of the Russia-friendly media personalities is known to have close ties with the godfather of the Eurasianist ideology, Alexander Dugin.
- On the other hand, the Slovak extreme right is afforded little exposure in the Russian media, as opposed to Hungary's Jobbik, probably due to their weak institutional position and political support, and their consequently weaker ability to lobby and spread propaganda.
- However, ***the extensive Russian influence on the entirety of the Slovak extreme right indicates that Russia has long-term plans with the Slovak extremists. The colorful palette of far-right players in itself fulfills the three major functions of Russian influence:***
  1. ***smaller far-right parties legitimize the Russian regime;***
  2. ***neo-Nazi and paramilitary formations have an important potential for destabilization;***
  3. ***the different media channels connected to the Russian far-right spread direct pro-Kremlin propaganda.***
- Since a significant proportion of the Slovak public is known to harbor Russia-friendly sentiments for historic and cultural reasons, the pro-Russian messages, coming to them from the extreme or the mainstream, have a receptive audience.

# Political, economic and social environments

## Slovakia's geopolitical position

In Slovakia, we can find a strong pro-Western and pro-Russian public attitude beside each other, and both have strong historical, political, and social bases. While in the EU membership referendum back in 2004, up to 92 percent of the participating voters voted for the EU membership, and the majority of the Slovaks are still supportive of Europe,<sup>8</sup> there is a high level of popular sympathy to Russia within Slovak political elites and population, even 25 years after the collapse of Communism. Whereas the importance of the EU membership seems to be a matter of consensus, popular support to NATO membership was lower in 1990s and at the beginning of 2000s. However, since 2000 the overwhelming majority of the political elite expressed their commitment to Slovakia's accession to NATO.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, in terms of its relations with the Russian Federation Slovakia was considered as a "friendly pragmatist" state; i.e. a country with good relations with the Russian Federation, interested in economic cooperation and avoiding open criticism towards Russia's domestic and foreign policy.<sup>10</sup> The reluctance of Slovakia's government to get involved in any confrontation between the EU and Russia reflects the public opinion in the country.

Due to this crisis, the Slovak-Russian relations have become (once again) a point of disagreement between the government and the opposition, regarding the appropriate foreign policy attitude in Slovakia. Nonetheless, unlike before 1999 (in the Meciar-era) currently there is no political party in the parliament that assumes open pro-Russian and anti-Western position. The main pro-Russian political party represented in the National Council of the Slovak Republic was the Slovak National Party (see below).

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<sup>8</sup> According to the last public opinion survey carried by Eurobarometer (Autumn 2014) and described in the "European Citizenship" report, 54 percent of respondent from Slovakia feel attached to the European Union, i.e. above the EU average of 45 percent. Standard Eurobarometer 82 / Autumn 2014 – TNS opinion & social. Available online: [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb82/eb82\\_citizen\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb82/eb82_citizen_en.pdf), p. 10., accessed February 15, 2015

<sup>9</sup> Therefore, this issue hasn't become the matter of political conflict in 2004, when Slovakia joined the Alliance.

<sup>10</sup> Leonard, Mark & Popescu, Nicu: "A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations." Brussels: ECFR., November 7, 2007, accessed February 15, 2015, [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_pr\\_russia\\_power\\_audit/](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_pr_russia_power_audit/), p. 36.

Still, in this reconfiguration of the geopolitical playing field, the relationship between Eastern European states and Russia draws a greater attention internationally as it is being reevaluated. Considering their international position, due to their size, Poland and Romania carries the most weight in Eastern Europe. At the same time, somewhat similar to Hungary, Slovakia has merited greater attention among the V4 countries because of its strongly critical attitude towards the EU sanctions against Russia.

## **Slovak-Russian relations in a historical context**

The Slovak public's positive attitude towards Russia is shaped by the historical role that Russia played in Slovakia's past.

Relations with Russia played an important role in the shaping of Slovak nationalism, which had emerged as non-state nationalism. As before 1918 Slovakia was a part of the multi-national Austria-Hungary, and more precisely an integral part of the Hungarian Kingdom without a distinct legal status, Slovak nationalism couldn't be based on the tradition of the statehood, but rather on the right for self-determination. Tsarist Russia was perceived as the single independent Slavic nation at that time, and Slovak political elites tried to seek their political allies predominantly among other Slavic nations within or even outside Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Therefore, the idea of Pan-Slavism, according to Slovaks and other Slavic nations, is the union of Slavic nations – initially cultural<sup>11</sup>, later also political: Ľudovít Štúr was one of the leaders of Slovak national revival after the defeat of the Slovak uprising in 1848-1849. "Slavdom and the World of the Future"—was a political testament written in 1851 by Ľudovít Štúr, who was the leader of the first Slovak National Council in 1848. This piece is considered to be one of the first declarations of the political and cultural unification of all Slavic peoples.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, Pan-Slavism was not only a tool in the geopolitical strategy of the Slovak national movement, which perceived Russia as a potential

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<sup>11</sup> Ján Kollár and Pavol Jozef Šafárik were the main ideologists of Pan-Slavism in the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, the ideas of anti-Western social conservatism contained in this book became an inspiration for further generations of Slovak politicians in 19<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, associated with the Slovak National Party (e.g., Svetozár Hurban Vajanský). The Slovak National Party had been established in 1871, predominantly as the political representation of Slovak protestant intellectuals and it ceased to exist in 1938. There is no institutional, political, ideological, or personal continuity between the historical Slovak National Party (SNS) and the Slovak National Party, founded in 1990. Kopeček, Lubomír: *Politické strany na Slovensku 1989 až 2006*. Brno : CDK 2007, p. 414. Štúr, Ľudovít: *Slavstvo a svet budúcnosti*. Bratislava: SIMŠ 1993.

ally to help Slovak nationalism against the Hungarian government, but it was considered to be an integral part of the Slovak national and cultural identity at the time.

Another significant historical development, which continues to influence Slovak-Russian relations to this day, is the liberation<sup>13</sup> of Slovakia by the Red Army and the political and material support provided by the Soviet Union to the Slovak National Uprising in August 1944. As opposed to Hungary or Poland, Soviet troops left Czechoslovakia after the war. However, the deportations of thousands of citizens of Slovakia to the GULAG in 1944-1945, the Stalinist persecutions against the Catholic Church and other churches, the persecutions of peasants and the old, pre-war "intelligentsia" heavily affected Slovak society. Even the Slovak national communists (later Secretary General of Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and President of Czechoslovakia), such as Gustáv Husák, Ladislav Novomeský and others who were among the leaders of the Slovak National Uprising, became the victims of Stalinist persecutions. On the other hand, the years following World War II were a period of rapid industrial modernization of the country. These developments contributed to the change of the initially negative perception of Communism within the Slovak society. Despite the fact that the last free election in 1946 was won by the non-communist Democratic Party, reaching 63 percent of the votes,<sup>14</sup> ten years later, during the Hungarian revolution, the Slovak society remained passive and support for democratization in 1968-1969 during the uprising was much lower in Slovakia compared to the Czech Republic.<sup>15</sup> The critical distance to the Communist regime in certain segments of the Slovak society was not transformed into anti-Russian nationalism. Moreover, the anti-Westernism and anti-liberalism, which were the components of some parts of the Slovak nationalist politics in 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, coincided with the hardline communist ideology.

While there were intensive protests against the Soviet intervention in August 1968 on the streets of Bratislava and other Slovak cities and towns, the federalization of Czechoslovakia and the establishment of the Slovak Socialist Republic in October 1968, just two months after the occupation, contributed to the passive reaction of the Slovak society to the upcoming period of so-called "Normalization." The intensity of purg-

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<sup>13</sup> The fact that it was liberation rather than occupation was never questioned. Košice (hitherto occupied by Hungary) was liberated on January 19, 1944; Bratislava on April 4; and on the following day the Czechoslovak government was established in Košice.

<sup>14</sup> Barnovský, Michal: *Na ceste k monopolu moci*. Bratislava : Archa 1993, p. 97.

<sup>15</sup> Sikora, Stanislav: "Rok 1968 a politický vývoj na Slovensku." Bratislava : *Pro Historia – Historický ústav SAV* 2008.

es under “Normalization” in Slovakia was lower, and the real opponents of the regime were weaker compared to the Czech Republic. However, even the dissident movement in Slovakia was weaker than in the Czech Republic, and it was caused by the continuation of the positive social and economic trends of 1950s and 1960s in the modernization of Slovakia. On the other hand, the federalization of ČSSR became a window of opportunity for a high number of younger and educated people to secure jobs in Slovak national or federal institutions.<sup>16</sup>

As a consequence of the modernization, the nostalgic sentiments towards communism remained strong. While about 90 percent of Slovak citizens agreed with the departure of the Soviet troops, the end of the communist regime in 1989 was viewed positively only by 57 percent of respondents in 2000.<sup>17</sup> The period of 1970-1989 was assessed as the best period of the Slovak history.<sup>18,19</sup> Other data reflect that the extent of approving the necessity of both political and economic reforms in 1989 was also lower in Slovakia compared to the Czech Republic and Poland, but it was slightly higher than in Hungary.<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, current Slovak-Russian relations represent a multi-layer phenomenon, which contains not only foreign policy, but also historical elements of economics and security. After 2000, in connection with the upcoming EU-accession of Slovakia the role of Russian Federation in Slovakia’s domestic politics arguably decreased. Since the emergence of Ukrainian crisis in 2013-2014 the relations with Russia became an important and divisive topic again. The current Slovak government is aware of the need to stabilize the situation in Ukraine, as well as protect

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<sup>16</sup> Marušiak, Juraj: “The Normalisation Regime and its Impact on Slovak Domestic Policy after 1970”, *Europe-Asia Studies*. December 2008, Volume 60, Issue 10, pp. 1805- 1825.

<sup>17</sup> Gyárfášová, Olga: “Individuálna historická pamäť.” In: Gyárfášová, Olga – Krivý, Vladimír – Velšic, Marián et al., *Krajina v pohybe*. Bratislava : Inštitút pre verejné otázky 2001, pp. 251 – 264.

<sup>18</sup> Pekník, Miroslav et al.: *Verejná mienka a politika. Historické vedomie slovenskej spoločnosti*. Bratislava: Veda 2006, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> According to the public opinion polls conducted by the Institute of Political Science of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in 2003. Saimilar data was presented in the survey conducted by the non-governmental Institute of Public Affairs, according to which in November 2004 the number of the respondents who perceived the communist regime positively before the regime change in 1989 was slightly higher (39 vs. 38 percent). Source: Bútorová, Zora – Gyárfášová, Olga – Velšic, Marián: “Verejná mienka.” In: Kollár, Miroslav – Mesežnikov, Grigorij (eds.): *Slovensko 2004. Súhrnná správa o stave spoločnosti*. Bratislava : Inštitút pre verejné otázky 2004, pp. 301 – 334.

<sup>20</sup> Bútorová, Z., Gyárfášová, O. (2009) “Return to Europe. New freedoms embraced, but weak public support for assisting democracy further afield” (Prague: PASOS), available at: <http://www.ivo.sk/6387/sk/studie/return-to-europe-new-freedoms-embraced-but-weak-public-support-for-assisting-democracy-further-afield>, accessed February 15, 2015

its territorial integrity and its pro-European orientation. At the same time, the government's priority is to keep close and correct relations with the Russian Federation as well.

## **Slovak-Russian economic ties**

The Kremlin's main economic influence in Slovakia still relies on energy dependence, which Slovakia has not been able to really challenge in order to diversify the country's energy supply after the Communist period. At the same time, there is a slight suspicion that another source of economic influence can be traced back to the surviving structures of the Communist era, that are interested in keeping good economic ties for their own benefits. After the transition, Slovak-Russian trade relations remained significant and active in terms of energy supplies, since Slovakia is almost unilaterally dependent on Russian oil, gas, and nuclear-fuel imports. However, in the last decade, especially after the gas crisis with Ukraine, some successful attempts have been made to increase the share of gas supply between the CEE countries.

## **Trade**

Russia belongs to the most significant trade partners of Slovakia and the economic dimension has been the only crucial component of the bilateral relations, in particular in the post-accession period.

Taking into account the import of energy resources, Russia is the third largest trade partner of Slovakia and it covers 7.5 percent of total trade turnover of the country,<sup>21</sup> while Slovakia belongs to the top 20 trade partners of the Russian Federation. Due to the supply of energy and raw materials, Russia's share in Slovakia's import was 8.2 percent in 2014. Thus, the Russian Federation is in the third place, after Germany (14.9 percent) and the Czech Republic (10.4 percent). However, due to the negative trends in Russian economy and the sanctions, the volume of Russia's import in 2014 dropped to 80 percent of the level in the previous year, 2013. The share of the Russian Federation in Slovakia's export is significantly lower, only 3.2 percent (2014)<sup>22</sup>, and it dropped to 81.5

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<sup>21</sup> Overview of Slovak Foreign trade for 2013, Ministry of Economy, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.economy.gov.sk/zahranicny-obchod-2013/140725s>

<sup>22</sup> The main export destinations for Slovakia are Germany (22,1 percent), Czech Republic (12.8 percent), and Poland (8 percent), however exports to Russia are even lower than to Hungary and Austria (both 6.1 percent), Italy (4.6 percent), France (4.9 percent) and the United Kingdom (5,2 percent).

percent compared to previous year. The persistent problem though is a negative balance of Slovakia's trade with Russia, and its amount in 2014 was 2 836,5 million USD (approximately 2 529,6 million EUR).<sup>23</sup>

According to the official data provided by the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bratislava, the amount of Slovak foreign direct investment in Russia during 2013 was 24 million USD (21,4 million EUR), the amount of Russian investment in Slovakia was 34 million USD (30,3 million EUR). Generally, despite the already important economic relations, and the attempts of the Slovak government to increase the volume Slovakia's export to Russia, Russian investment into the Slovak economy is at quite a low level.

Economic cooperation between Russia and Slovakia is coordinated on the official level by the bilateral Slovak-Russian Intergovernmental Commission for Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation (ISESC), co-chaired by Russian Minister of Industry and Trade, Denis Manturov and Slovak Minister of Economy, Pavol Pavlis.<sup>24</sup> Activities of ISESC are supplemented by the Slovak-Russian Entrepreneurs Council (Slovensko-ruská Podnikateľská rada - SRPR), founded in May 2007.<sup>25</sup> The Council is composed of entrepreneurs and companies interested in the development of Slovak-Russian economic cooperation. Activities of the Council include legal and economic assistance, organizational support to various events, support to and implementation of investment projects.

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<sup>23</sup> "Foreign trade detailed data in 2014." Bratislava: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2015; Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic 2015; Obchodná a hospodárska spolupráca. Bratislava: Embassy of the Russian Federation in Slovakia 2015.

<sup>24</sup> "Comment by the Information and Press Department on Sergey Lavrov's working visit to Slovakia", The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, April 3, 2015, accessed July 31, 2015, [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/026E1EB919A30B6343257E1C00528ACA](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/026E1EB919A30B6343257E1C00528ACA)

<sup>25</sup> SLOVENSKO - RUSKÁ podnikateľská rada , see at: <http://srpr.sk/o-nas/>

**Table 1. Slovak imports from Russia<sup>26</sup>**

	2013
Imports from Russia(€)	6 064 352 470
Total imports (€)	61 598 493 086
Russian imports as a percentage of overall imports (%)	9.84%
The relevance of Russian imports (in order of importance)	3.
The most important products imported from Russia (based on BEC rating)	
Fuels and lubricants – from materials (BEC 310)	91.97%
Industrial raw materials – processed (BEC 220)	3.89%
Industrial raw materials – from materials (BEC 210)	2.14%

**Table 2. Slovak exports to Russia**

	2013
Exports to Russia (€)	2 554 872 126
Total exports (€)	64 652 411 452
Exports to Russia in percentage of overall exports (%)	3.95%
The relevance of Russian exports (in order of importance)	9.
The most important products exported to Russia (based on BEC rating <sup>27</sup> )	
Transport equipment and parts and accessories thereof / Parts and accessories (BEC 530)	30.16%
Transport equipment and parts and accessories thereof / Passenger motor cars (BEC 510)	24.05%
Capital goods/Parts and accessories (BEC 420)	17.75%
Capital goods (BEC 410)	11.27%

<sup>26</sup> Our own calculation is based on Eurostat (EU trade since 1988 by BEC [DS-032655]) database.

<sup>27</sup>See description of the rating process here: "Classification by Broad Economic Categories," [unstats.un.org](http://unstats.un.org)

## Slovakia's energy dependence

Unlike some other countries in the region, Slovakia did not diversify its energy imports after the fall of communism. The country is almost unilaterally dependent on the supplies of crude oil and natural gas, but it also needs the nuclear fuel to the power plants in Mochovce and Jaslovské Bohunice. About 90 percent of Slovakia's total consumption of energy resources (oil, natural gas and nuclear fuel) is provided by the Russian Federation.

There is a long-term contract for delivery of Russian gas in place, signed in November 2008 and valid until 2029. The Slovak government signed a bilateral oil deal as well recently, in December 2014, which will provide up to 6 million tons of oil to Slovakia for the next 15 years.<sup>27</sup> The newly-signed deal took effect on January 1, 2015 and is scheduled to expire on December 31, 2029. The contract also proposed an annual transit of another 6 million tons of crude oil via Slovakia to third countries. The oil will be delivered through the Družba pipeline (Friendship pipeline), while – as a typical feature of the energy contracts with Russia – the oil price was not revealed in the contract. The latest oil contract could not only boost Slovakia's oil revenues, but it also increases Slovakia's importance as a regional energy hub, especially after the failure of the South Stream pipeline project. During his 2015 June visit to Moscow, PM Robert Fico announced the connection of the gas pipeline Eastring linking Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria to the Russian-sponsored Turkish Stream and its prolongation, the Tesla pipeline<sup>28</sup> through the Balkan states in spite of the fact that the (Slovakian) EU commissioner for energy issues Maroš Ševčovič announced that the Turkish Stream would be blocked on the territory of EU. The initial aim of Eastring, presented by the Slovak company Eustream, was to deliver gas from Central Europe to the Balkans and from the Black Sea coast to Central and Western Europe<sup>29</sup>. The main aim of the PM's trip to Moscow was to receive guarantees about the continuation of the payments for gas transit through Slovakia after 2020, when Gazprom will stop the transit of Russia's gas through the territory of Ukraine.

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<sup>27</sup> "Russia, Slovakia ink major oil supply deal", globaltimes.cn, December 5, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/895212.shtml>

<sup>28</sup> Tesla pipeline is the continuation of the planned Turkish Stream pipeline across the territories of Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary, reaching the Baumgarten gas hub in Vienna.

<sup>29</sup> Hirman, Karel: "Studený plynový závan z Moskvy. Konzervatívny výber", June 6, 2015, accessed July 31, 2015, <http://www.konzervativnyvyber.sk/karel-hirman-studený-plynový-zavan-z-moskvy/4140/>

**Table 3. Slovak and EU 28 imports of petroleum oil<sup>30</sup> and natural gas<sup>31</sup> from Russia in 2013<sup>32, 33</sup>**

	Value (€)	Share of imports from Russia in total extra-EU28 imports of petroleum/gas (%)	Share of imports from Russia in total imports of petroleum/gas (%)
Slovakia, petroleum	3 398 776 696	100.0%	99.7%
EU28, petroleum	99 160 929 595	33%	29%
Slovakia, gas	2 097 852 244	100.0%	82%
EU28, gas	17 472 466 881	46.0%	24%

## Nuclear energy dependence

According to an analysis by the Atlantic Council,<sup>34</sup> for most Eastern European countries Russia holds a second ace in the energy politics game: nuclear fuel. Five countries – Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, and Ukraine – rely almost entirely on Russian state-owned companies to fuel their nuclear power plants. For these 80 million Europeans, the Russian state provides services essential for around 42 percent of electricity production.

Slovakia continues to operate two nuclear power plants built on Russian technology. Additionally, the Russian company Rosatom participates in the construction of the 3rd and 4th blocks of the nuclear power plant in Mochovce, and is interested in enhancing the capacities of nuclear power plant in Jaslovské Bohunice. Delivery of nuclear fuel is based on long-term contract signed in November 2008 valid until 2015, with the total value of the nuclear fuel to be delivered amounting to 300 million USD (270 million EUR). The share of nuclear energy was 52% of the total electricity production in 2013<sup>35</sup>; for this, based on 2014 data, 392 tons of Uranium is required<sup>36</sup>. The main fuel supply provider is Russia.

<sup>30</sup> Petroleum oils and oils obtained from bituminous minerals, crude.

<sup>31</sup> Natural gas in gaseous state.

<sup>32</sup> Calculations based on the Eurostat (EU trade since 1995 by HS6) database.

<sup>33</sup> Calculations based on the Eurostat (EU trade since 1995 by HS6) database.

<sup>34</sup> "Europe's Dependence on Russian Energy: Deeper Than You Think", Atlantic Council, April 27, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/eastern-europe-s-russian-energy-dependence-deeper-than-you-think>

<sup>35</sup> "Slovak Republic", International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.iaea.org/PRIS/CountryStatistics/CountryDetails.aspx?current=SK>

<sup>36</sup> World Nuclear Association, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.world-nuclear.org/info/Facts-and-Figures/World-Nuclear-Power-Reactors-and-Uranium-Requirements/>

## Other sources of economic influences

The main Russian investment in Slovakia is Sberbank, which also obtained the Central and Eastern European branches of the Austrian bank Volksbank in February 2012. Another widely discussed possible Russian investment in the Central European region is the project of the broad-gauge rail from Košice to Vienna.<sup>37</sup> Such a project was initially discussed in the second half of 1990's during the era of Mečiar. The idea came back to life in 2005 and it was promoted by the first government of Robert Fico. However, the center-right governments and recently the opposition parties criticized this project, arguing this is not profitable for Slovakia.<sup>38,39</sup> The general concerns are that the Russian-Slovakian economic relations are connected predominantly with Russian state-owned companies; therefore, they could be affected by the political decisions of the Russian government.

The continuation of economic sanctions could heavily damage some branches of Slovakia's industry, e.g., the production of vehicles, as at least a quarter of them is exported to Russia.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, Slovakian officials have a critical attitude towards intensifying of sanctions. According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic, the direct impact of Russian embargo on European food export is 6 million EUR<sup>41</sup>. In some segments, the impact of sanctions is easy to see: already in March 2015 the Railway Casted Components Company announced the layoff of 200 employees from its factory in Prakovce (Eastern Slovakia) producing railway carriages for Russian Railways.<sup>42</sup> The decreasing demand from the Russian Federation affected other companies in Slovakia as well, some of which are situated in regions with high unemployment rate (e.g., Prakovce, Tisovec, etc.).<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> The section from Ukrainian-Slovak borders (Matovce) to Haniska near Košice has been constructed already in the communist era and recently it was used for transportation of iron ore to the U.S. Steel Košice steelwork.

<sup>38</sup> Liptáková, Jana: "The saga of broad-gauge rail line continues." Slovak Spectator, 1. 9. 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Broad-gauge railway is discussed in the Chinese "New Silk Road" program as well, however until now China is rather skeptical of that project. Kaczmarek, Marcin: *The New Silk Road: a versatile instrument in China's policy*. Warsaw : Centre for Eastern Studies (February 10, 2015); Jedinák, Juraj: "Projekt širokorozchodnej železnice. Rozhlasová stanica Slovensko". Rádiožurnál Slovenského rozhlasu, June, 6. 2014.

<sup>40</sup> "Sankcie proti Rusku by Slovensku uškodili". STV 1, Správy RTVS, March 19, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.rtvs.sk/televizia/archiv/1/34837>

<sup>41</sup> "Sankcie proti Rusku stáli slovenský agrosektor 6 miliónov eur", TASR, October 15, 2014

<sup>42</sup> Krajanová, Daniela: Zlievareň v Prakovciach prepustí vyše polovicu ľudí. Denník N, 18. 3. 2015.

<sup>43</sup> The unemployment rate in Slovakia was 13.95 percent in February 2015. Central Office of Labor, Social Affairs and Family. Bratislava 2015.

## Military cooperation

Since Slovakia inherited some Russian military equipment, such as fighter jets and helicopters, Russian companies continue to provide services and upgrades in order to keep them operational. Slovak Ministry of Defense and RSK MiG signed a contract in October 2011 for servicing and upgrading of a fleet of 10 Slovak MiG-29 fighter jets.

There was also a profitable business in arms imports from Russia as part of the compensation for Soviet-Russian government debt. As Milan Nič, managing director of the Central European Policy Institute noted, "this was done by the same people who have been around since Mečiar's time," the most famous of them being Miroslav Výboh,<sup>44</sup> who made deals with most of the governments since Mečiar (including Dzurinda's). Výboh is often mentioned as one of the chief sponsors of the ruling Smer-SD. The military cooperation was the topic of the Slovak-Russian bilateral talks during R. Fico's visit to Moscow in June 2015.<sup>45</sup>

## Slovak-Russian diplomatic relations

Slovak diplomacy after the Communist regime change used to be geopolitically double-faceted for many years, since the political leadership and elite both endorsed the country's integration into the Western structures, and its own path of a "bridge"-like role between East and West – with the Western geopolitical integration prevailing after 2000.

Generally, the diplomatic relations between Slovakia and the Russian Federation have been good. There has been a bilateral visa agreement between the two nations since 2001; it was adjusted to the Schengen rules in 2007.

Since the first years of Slovakia's independence, there were two main foreign policy approaches. The first one, which was shared by the national-populist political parties (Slovak National Party and the anti-Western

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<sup>44</sup> In 2013, the Austrian Public Prosecutor's Office began to investigate a bribery case involving Výboh; even well-informed Slovak sources knew nothing of the outcome.

<sup>45</sup> As some military systems, as for example mechanized infantry combat vehicle, missile system S-300 and Mi-17 helicopters are still part of the Slovakia's military equipment, Slovakia is interested in their servicing and upgrading. "R. Fico: Spolupráca s Ruskom bude pri vojenských systémoch, ktoré máme", teraz.sk, June 5, 2015, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/r-fico-spolupraca-s-ruskom-bude-iba-p/138887-clanok.html>

wing of the Movement for Democratic Slovakia, led by Vladimír Mečiar<sup>46</sup>) and by the leader of Christian Democratic Movement (1990-2000), Ján Čarnogurský, advocated the vision of Slovakia as a geopolitical bridge between the East and West, promoting the neutrality of Slovakia<sup>47</sup>. The second concept of the opposition against Mečiar's authoritarian rule rather promoted membership with the EU and NATO. For Mečiar the policy of close relations with Russia compensated for deteriorating relations with the USA and EU member states. Already in July 1992 even Mečiar suggested the possible closer cooperation with Russia. After the adoption of the Declaration of Sovereignty of Slovakia he admitted that "if they don't want us in the West, then we'll turn to the East."<sup>48</sup> However, Mečiar's calculations, grounded on Slovakia's supposed geopolitical "added value," failed and Slovakia was not invited to the pre-accession negotiations with NATO and EU in 1997, unlike her Visegrad neighbors, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. According to the Slovak political scientist Alexander Duleba, Slovakia in 1994-1998 bought into a "Russian view of the security architecture in Europe."<sup>49</sup> Additionally, the former president of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin openly expressed the support of his country to Mečiar on the eve of parliamentary elections in Slovakia in September 1998,<sup>50</sup> which ultimately led to the end of the Mečiar-era.

The establishment of the broad right-left coalition government led by M. Dzurinda abandoned the course of rapprochement with the Russian Federation, and its priority became an acceleration of the integration to EU and NATO. Closer ties with Russia were pursued by only two minor parliamentary political parties – Slovak National Party or SNS and radical-left KSS (Communist Party of Slovakia). However, the pro-Western turn of Slovakia's foreign policy and its accession both in the EU and NATO were not followed by deteriorating relations with the Russian Federation. Relations remained good but pragmatic, focused mostly on economic relations, and continued in spite of Slovakia's active support of the EU and NATO integration efforts of Ukraine and activities of democratic opposition in Belarus. In the "Medium-Term Foreign Policy

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<sup>46</sup> Vladimír Mečiar was the Prime Minister of Slovakia in 1990-1991, 1992-1994 and 1994-1998.

<sup>47</sup> In fact, Čarnogurský promoted the EU-membership, while opposing Slovakia's NATO membership.

<sup>48</sup> Marušiak, Juraj: "Slovakia's Eastern Policy – from the Trojan Horse of Russia to 'Eastern Multivectoralism.'" *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, Vol. XXII, No. 1–2, 2013, p. 43.

<sup>49</sup> Duleba, Alexander: The blind pragmatism of Slovak eastern policy. The actual agenda of Slovak–Russian bilateral relations. ., Bratislava: Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, 1996, pp. 28-29.

<sup>50</sup> Jelcin Mečiarovi: "Chceme, veľmi-veľmi chceme, aby ste vyhrali voľby", *Sme*, May 29, 1998, pp. 1, 2, 5, 7.

Strategy of the Slovak Republic until 2015," the Russian Federation was mentioned only in the context of supporting EU efforts to create four common spaces.<sup>51</sup> Slovakia actively backed the U.S. invasion of Iraq and its military troops participated in the post-war administration of Iraq. Furthermore, Slovakia supported the Orange Revolution in Ukraine as well. Both cases were perceived by the Russian Federation in a negative way, but did not make a negative impact on the bilateral Slovak-Russian relations. This was one of the reasons why the summit of the presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin took place in Bratislava in February 23-25, 2005.

In spite of the replacement of the center-right government of Dzurinda by a center-left one, led by the leader of Direction – Social Democracy party Robert Fico, after the parliamentary elections in 2006 the main trends of Slovakia's foreign policy continued.

The main change took place on a symbolic level with Prime Minister Fico underlining the common Slavic identity of both countries in the bilateral Slovak-Russian relations. Fico's government also supported some projects of the bilateral economic cooperation, mainly in the field of energy and infrastructure policy (for example, broad-gauge railway from Košice to Vienna, supply of the nuclear fuel for Slovakia's power plants, creation of the research facility "Cyclotron centre," etc.).

At the same time, Slovakia has become an active promoter and participant of the EU Eastern Partnership Program.<sup>52</sup> The effort of Slovakia's diplomacy in 2009 was to overcome the negative stance of Russia to this program. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovak Republic Miroslav Lajčák repeatedly described Eastern Partnership as a "pragmatic project" and he didn't exclude the participation of the Russian Federation in certain activities within its framework.<sup>53,54</sup> At the beginning of 2009, bilateral relations between Slovakia and Ukraine came to a crisis, as Fico blamed

<sup>51</sup> "Medium-Term Foreign Policy Strategy of the Slovak Republic until 2015", National Council of the Slovak Republic, Bratislava, 2004.

<sup>52</sup> The EaP's aim is the enhancement of the cooperation of the former European republics of USSR (Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) with the EU.

<sup>53</sup> "Vystúpenie M. Lajčáka na Moskovskom štátnom inštitúte medzinárodných vzťahov", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic (September 8, 2009). <sup>54</sup> "Vystúpenie ministra zahraničných vecí SR M. Lajčáka na Univerzite Mateja Bela v Banskej Bystrici", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic (November 4, 2009).

<sup>54</sup> Probably Lajčák's statements had a certain impact on the position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of RF Sergey Lavrov, as in November 2009 he admitted Russia's involvement in certain projects of the EaP- "Lavrov: Rusko by sa mohlo zapojiť do Východného partnerstva EU," SITA (November 25, 2009).

Kyiv for the gas conflict that resulted in cuts of gas supply to Central European countries. These events had an impact on Fico's stance on Ukraine even during the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, when he characterized Ukraine as a non-reliable partner.<sup>55</sup>

Both governments of Iveta Radičová (centre-right, 2010–2012) and Fico, who came back to power after the early elections in March 2012 and received an absolute majority in the parliament, continued the policy of active Slovak involvement in the Eastern Partnership and supported the dialogue between EU and Ukraine regarding the signing of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. The manifesto of the current Slovak government understands the Eastern Partnership as a framework for "enlargement of the area of stability" and it recognizes it as a foreign policy priority. Furthermore, according to the document, Ukraine is perceived to be on an equal level as other neighboring EU member states, while the government declared its aim to develop bilateral relations with the Russian Federation and other BRICS countries as well.<sup>56</sup> Almost immediately after the early election of 2012 PM Fico defined the EU as "the source of political, economic and social security of Slovak citizens" and he highlighted the commitment to continue to honor Slovakia's obligations to NATO.<sup>57</sup>

Although Fico was interested in keeping the good relations with the Russian Federation, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovakia Miroslav Lajčák and Minister of Culture Marek Maďarič criticized the punishment of Pussy Riot members<sup>58</sup> Paradoxically, the previous government led by Radičová, which was regarded as much less pro-Russian than Fico's, didn't address any critical remarks regarding presidential and parliamentary elections in the Russian Federation in 2011 and 2012.

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<sup>55</sup> "Na sankcie voči Rusku nie je dôvod, tvrdil Fico v Bruseli", SITA (May 28, 2014).

<sup>56</sup> "Manifesto of the Government of Slovak Republic." Bratislava : Government Office of the Slovak Republic, May 2012.

<sup>57</sup> Statement by H.E. Robert Fico, Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic at GLOBSEC 2012. Bratislava : Global Security Forum, April 12, 2012, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.vlada.gov.sk/prejav-predsedu-vlady-sr-roberta-fica-na-fore-globsec-v-anglickom-jazyku/>

<sup>58</sup> Tódová, Monika: "Fico o rozsudku pomlčal, ostatní nie", Sme, August 17, 2013.

## Russia's perception in the Slovak public

While the Slovak public may be cast as being one of the most Russophile among the European countries under normal circumstances, the recent crisis in Ukraine seems to have seriously altered this positive sentiment for the time being. This being said, nationalist and far-right actors can still use this sentiment to their political advantage.

After the Velvet Revolution and its drastic economic changes, the re-structuring of the whole economy resulted in a high level of unemployment and nostalgia for the stability in the communist era, mixed with nationalism, anti-Americanism, and hidden anti-Semitism in certain parts of the Slovak population. This rejection of "Western culture and values" (often portrayed in a distorted way) prompted a search for alternative societal models and values. After 2000, Putin as a strong authoritarian leader, describing the world events through the prism of conflict between the Euro-Atlantic (Western) and Euro-Asian (Russian) doctrine, provided a perfect model for groups that buy into this anti-Western narrative due to its conservatism, protection of "traditional Christian values" and rejection of certain aspects of modern society (rights of LGBT people, liberal values, etc.). As a result, Russia became a very attractive model for relatively large segments of population.

According to available public survey results, Slovaks are in general less inclined to be pro-US and more inclined to have pro-Russian attitudes than Europeans on average. These findings are well demonstrated in a 2013 GMFUS Transatlantic trends survey: only 38 % of Slovaks described strong U.S. leadership in world affairs as desirable, compared to 55% of Europeans. On the other hand, almost the same percentage of Slovaks (39%) described strong Russian leadership in world affairs as desirable, compared to 27% average on EU level. Overall Russia was favored the most in Slovakia (58%) among all the surveyed countries.<sup>59</sup>

However, the Ukrainian crisis highlighted certain political polarization regarding Slovak-Russian relations, not only on the level of political elites, but also within the society. According to a public opinion poll conducted by Focus agency and the Slovak think-tank Institute for Public Affairs in July 2014, the majority of respondents (83%) think that "Ukraine should choose its future in a democratic way and Russia should not intervene in

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<sup>59</sup> "Transatlantic Trends, Country Summaries 2013", GMFUS, 2013, accessed July 17, 2015, <http://trends.gmfus.org/files/2013/09/Country-summaries-edit2.pdf>

it.”<sup>60</sup> Only 19 percent of Slovaks agreed with the statement that Ukraine is a part of Russia’s sphere of influence and approved Russia’s right of intervention, while almost two-thirds of respondents (64%) disagreed with it. At the same time, 59 percent agreed that NATO membership for Slovakia is the guarantee for security;<sup>61</sup> however, only 46 percent agreed with enhancing of the NATO military presence in Central and Eastern Europe, whereas 36 percent were against it.<sup>62</sup>

Similar contradicting data about Ukrainian changes and confrontation with Russia was confirmed by the survey conducted again by Focus agency and Slovak Foreign Policy Association in October 2014. According to the study, it seemed that Slovak citizens accept Ukraine’s pro-European choice, however they are rather skeptical of the Ukrainian government’s capacities to manage this mission, and thus the public was reserved to Slovakia’s active contribution to this process.<sup>63</sup>

On the one hand, 66 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that the Ukrainian government has the right to implement reforms, which will bring Ukraine closer to the EU. On the other hand, almost half of Slovakia’s population (48%) thought that Ukraine should grant high degree of autonomy to the eastern regions of Ukraine with the high share of Russian-speaking population. However, the issue of Slovakia actively backing Ukraine’s approach of the EU has a support of only 45 percent of respondents.

However, the Slovak society is not willing to confront Russia; only 25 percent of the population think that the Slovak politicians “should be more critical and decisive to Russia,” whilst 54 percent disagree with such statement. In spite of eventual evidences of a direct Russian intervention in Ukraine, almost one half of the respondents (49 percent) suppose that Slovakia should keep active relations with Moscow. Sanctions are supported only by 27 percent of the population, and the deployment of NATO facilities in Slovakia was approved only 17 percent of respondents.

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<sup>60</sup> Including 81.2 % of the voters of the ruling party Smer-SD.

<sup>61</sup> The same number of respondents accepted Slovakia’s duty to participate on the defense of any NATO member state in case of Russian aggression.

<sup>62</sup> Diversification of the unilateral energy dependence on Russia was supported by 71 percent of respondents. Piško, Michal: “*Ruské zasahovanie na Ukrajine Slováci neschvaľujú*”, Sme, June 23, 2014.

<sup>63</sup> Duleba, Alexander: *Kríza na Ukrajine ako impulz pre východnú politiku SR a EÚ*. Bratislava: RC SFPA 2014, p. 8-19.

Another public opinion poll, conducted in Autumn 2014 by the Institute of Sociology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, focused on another geopolitical ambiguity in the foreign policy orientation of the Slovak population. More than one half of Slovak citizens (and the majority of the voters of Smer-SD) preferred a foreign policy approach based on the balance between East and West (59.5% of the entire population and 50.3% of respondents under 35 years). In spite of the high support of this position, only 3 percent of respondents considered Russia as culturally most similar to Slovakia (compared with 4% in 1996), while almost 24 percent of the population considered Russia as the country that represents the main threat to Slovakia (34% in 1996). These results clearly reflect the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and its ambient impact on public opinion, as almost the same number of respondents (22%) perceived Ukraine as the main threat. At the same time, the fear caused by the war in Eastern Ukraine overshadowed the historically rooted perception of Hungarian menace. Whereas in 1996 as high as 40 percent of Slovak citizens perceived Hungary as the main threat, in 2014 their number dropped to 5 percent.<sup>64</sup>

Ipsos carried out a survey in the V4 countries in May 2014, commissioned by Greenpeace,<sup>65</sup> focusing on energy dependence. One of the questions referred to the extent to which the respondents thought the energy dependence of their country on Russian import was problematic. 79 percent of Hungarian respondents thought this dependence to be problematic, while an even greater percent of Polish people (88%) shared this opinion. Among the Slovaks (70%) and the Czechs (65%), fewer respondents thought that such dependence was a definite a problem.

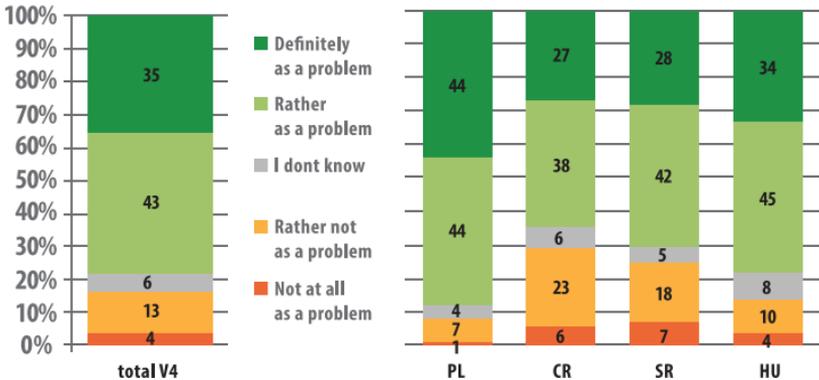
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<sup>64</sup> "Prvé výsledky výskumu ISSP Slovensko 2014", Institute of Sociology, Slovak Academy of Sciences Bratislava, (March 3, 2015).

<sup>65</sup> "Energetics – international poll", Greenpeace-Ipsos, June 2014, accessed February 15, 2015, [http://www.greenpeace.org/hungary/PageFiles/619385/Ipsos\\_for\\_Greenpeace\\_report-17062014.pdf](http://www.greenpeace.org/hungary/PageFiles/619385/Ipsos_for_Greenpeace_report-17062014.pdf)

## Figure 1. Energy dependence attitudes in V4 countries, 2014

*To what extent do you think that your country's dependence on Russian import of energy carriers (natural gas, petroleum, coal, uranium) is a problem?*



Q05: Do you perceive our country's dependence on imports of energy sources (gas, oil, coal, uranium) from Russia as a problem?

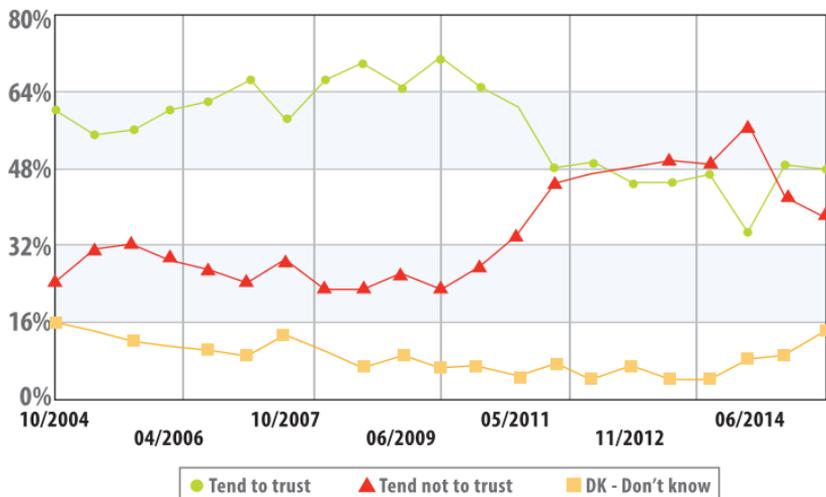
As a consequence of the crisis, the Eurosceptic tendencies of Slovak public opinion have strengthened for a while, then started decreasing sharply after June, 2014. According to a Eurobarometer survey conducted in May 2015, almost half of Slovakia's population tended to trust the European Union, while 28% said that they tend not to trust the EU (Eurobarometer surveys – Trust 2015).<sup>66</sup> Although, the lack of trust has been on the rise since the accession, particularly between 2009 and 2013, the latest crises (for example the war in Ukraine) must have made the case for common European institutions, so lately more Slovaks tend to have confidence in the EU. In terms of membership, the opinion of the Slovak population is not as divided: in May 2011, 72% of the respondents thought that all in all Slovakia benefited from EU membership, while only 22% shared the opposite viewpoint (Eurobarometer surveys – Membership, 2011).<sup>67</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Standard Eurobarometer Surveys 19-82, 1983-2015, accessed November 25, 2015, [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/cf/showchart\\_line.cfm?keyID=2193&nationID=26,&startdate=2004.10&enddate=2015.05](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/showchart_line.cfm?keyID=2193&nationID=26,&startdate=2004.10&enddate=2015.05)

<sup>67</sup> Standard Eurobarometer Surveys 19-82, 1983-2014, accessed February 15, 2015, [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/cf/showchart\\_line.cfm?keyID=6&nationID=26,&startdate=2004.10&enddate=2011.05](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/cf/showchart_line.cfm?keyID=6&nationID=26,&startdate=2004.10&enddate=2011.05)

## Figure 2. Eurobarometer survey - Trust, 2015

I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions.  
 For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it?  
**The European Union**  
 Slovakia (from 10/2004 to 05/2015)



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The ambivalence of the Slovak public regarding the international relations, the above mentioned anti-Western sentiments create a fertile ground for the Kremlin's information warfare in Slovakia, often echoing conspiracy theories blaming the West.

## Slovak mainstream politics in the 2013 – 2015 Ukraine crisis

The Slovak government's behavior in the Ukrainian crisis clearly showed the limits of the pro-Kremlin politics in Slovakia. While PM Robert Fico does rhetorically support Moscow on several issues, he also complies with the common European policies. Slovakia provided, without publicly advertising it, substantial energy, humanitarian and non-lethal military aid to the Ukrainian government and society.

Slovakia, as one of the like-minded countries of Eastern Partnership, supported the process of EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, provided transformation aid to Ukraine and together with Poland insisted on the need to keep a "critical dialogue" with Ukraine, even during the malfunctioning of democratic institutions and violation of human rights during the presidency of Viktor Yanukovich since 2010. The decision of his administration from November 2013 not to sign the Association Agreement on the upcoming Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius was initially met with surprise; however, the National Council of the Slovak Republic (Slovak Parliament) declared the support of the EU integration ambitions of Ukraine, articulated by the protesting citizens on Maidan Square in Kyiv. Slovak parliamentarians stressed their demand for a peaceful solution of the political situation in Ukraine.<sup>68</sup> In the meantime, Fico stated that the decision regarding EU membership is Ukraine's domestic affair, and he indirectly criticized the policy of EU towards Kyiv due to the loans and projects offered to Ukraine.<sup>69</sup>

The annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation also raised negative reactions among Slovak political elites. Both the government and the parliament expressed their support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine; the National Council of the Slovak Republic didn't recognize the Crimean referendum as it was "in contradiction with the constitution of Ukraine." At the same Slovakia, in accordance with other EU member states, condemned the incorporation of Crimea as the "violation of international rights by the Russian Federation."<sup>70</sup> In sum, territorial integrity of Ukraine and support of its pro-European orientation is a matter

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<sup>68</sup> Vyhlásenie NR SR k situácii na Ukrajine. Uznesenie č. 956. Bratislava: NR SR, December 13, 2013.

<sup>69</sup> "Fico: EÚ je do seba taká zamilovaná, že nič iné neexistuje", SITA (December 3, 2015).

<sup>70</sup> "Vyhlásenie NR SR k situácii na Ukrajine", Uznesenie č. 1060. Bratislava: NR SR, March 18, 2014.

of consensus among Slovakia's political representation. Slovakia, as an EU member state, joined the sanctions against the Russian Federation as well. Prime Ministers of Slovakia and Ukraine Robert Fico and Arseniy Yatsenyuk, launched the reverse flow of gas from Slovakia to Ukraine on September 2, 2014 through the gas pipeline Vojany – Uzhhorod, which might provide 10 billion m<sup>3</sup> of gas per year.<sup>71</sup> The Slovak Prime Minister, during his official visit to Kyiv, promised to increase the gas flow to 14.5 billion m<sup>3</sup> per year.<sup>72</sup> Fico also offered to increase transformation aid to Ukraine as well as the number of scholarships to Ukrainian students at Slovak universities.<sup>73</sup>

The Slovak government, in accordance with the position of Germany and the Czech Republic, assumed a reluctant stance regarding Ukrainian demands for supply of weapons, while Slovakia provides training to Ukrainian military experts.<sup>74</sup> Slovakia's official humanitarian aid is designated to the Ukrainian Ministries of Defense and Health.<sup>75</sup>

However, the official standpoint of Slovakian authorities is to try to avoid open confrontation with the Russian Federation. Slovakia was also reluctant to support the sanctions, and opposed the intensification of sanctions introduced against the Russian Federation. Milan Nič, managing director of the Central European Policy Institute, explains this with the fact that Smer's leadership is divided on the Russian issue. Minister of the Interior Robert Kaliňák and, interestingly, Minister of Culture Marek Madarič, leader of the nationalist faction, are both "Euro-Atlantists," while the post-communist "old guard" of Slovak foreign policymakers and former Speaker of the House Pavol Paška, who is rumored to have Russian business ties, are, on the contrary, pro-Russian.

During the Slavkov summit on January 29, 2015 with the Prime Minister of Czech Republic Bohuslav Sobotka and Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann, Fico again criticized the policy of sanctions against Russia

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<sup>71</sup> The reverse gas flow through the territory of Slovakia is a significant contribution to the energy security of Ukraine in the conditions of potential attempts of the Russian Federation to block gas import to Ukraine. The estimated amount of Ukrainian gas needs is about 25 billion m<sup>3</sup> per year. "Fico a Jaceňuk spustili reverzný tok plynu na Ukrajinu," SITA (September 2, 2014).

<sup>72</sup> Which promise was reasserted by PM Fico to President Petro Poroshenko of Ukraine in June, 2015 before the Slovak PM's visit to Moscow.

<sup>73</sup> "Fico: Odmietame dať Ukrajine zbrane, konflikt by sa len prehĺbil," Pravda (February 6, 2015).

<sup>74</sup> "M. Glváč: Slovenskí vojaci budú v rámci pomoci pre Ukrajinu školiť odmiňovačov." Bratislava: Ministry of Defense (September 25, 2014).

<sup>75</sup> Čaplovič, Miroslav – Stupňan, Igor: "Slovensko pomohlo ukrajinským vojakom." Pravda (September 12, 2014).

because they “didn’t stop the slaughter in Ukraine” up to that point.<sup>76</sup> In February 2015, Fico stepped forth in favor of lifting the sanctions against Russia in order to support the ceasefire in Minsk II.<sup>77</sup> During his visit to Moscow in June 2015, the Prime Minister repeatedly opposed the sanctions comparing the situation to the embargo against Cuba.<sup>78</sup> A different stance towards the conflict in Ukraine was presented by the Slovak president Andrej Kiska, elected in 2014 with the support of center-right opposition. During the NATO summit in Newport in September 2014, he expressed that “there is no doubt that in Eastern Ukraine, Russian soldiers are fighting.” He promised the creation of a NATO logistics center in Poprad, which would include ammunition storage as well.<sup>79</sup> However, PM Fico rejected the proposed idea to establish a permanent military base.

Fico also opposed Ukraine’s potential membership in NATO. According to him, the best solution for the conflict would be economic and political stabilization of Ukraine, but without the country’s accession to NATO. The prime minister described the conflict in Ukraine as a geopolitical struggle between Russia and the USA. Furthermore, he stressed that the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 was a crime. Slovakia did not even recognize Kosovo.<sup>80</sup>

Fico argued that Slovakia had no chance to affect the extensive conflict in Ukraine,<sup>81</sup> and therefore there was no need to increase military spend-

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<sup>76</sup> Palata, Luboš: “*Slavkov, bermudský trojúhelník české diplomacie. Zahraničná politika*”, zahraničnopolitika.dennikn.sk, February 20, 2015, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.zahranicnopolitika.sk/slavkov-bermudsky-trojuhelnik-ceske-diplomacie/>

<sup>77</sup> Koník, Juraj: “*Fico by zmiernil sankcie voči Rusku, veď vyrokovali prímerie*.” Denník N, February 22, 2015.

<sup>78</sup> “*Fico: Sankcie Rusku škodia, zrušme ich*”, spravny.pravda.sk, June 2, 2015, accessed July 31, 2015, <http://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/357071-fico-v-rusku-nepotrebuje-rin-canie-zbranami-ani-sankcie/>

<sup>79</sup> “*Kiska z útoku viní Rusov, NATO sme ponúkli sklad munície*”, Sme (September 5, 2014).

<sup>80</sup> However, Balázs Jarábik, associate fellow at the Spanish think tank FRIDE, said that it is common knowledge that “Slovakia’s rejection of Kosovar independence was borne out of sheer domestic policy” (due to a suspicion of Hungarian initiatives for territorial autonomy, however subdued they might have been).

<sup>81</sup> Also Miroslav Lajčák, Slovakia’s Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovak Republic, who generally holds a pro-European Union view, in November 2014 stated that the EU underestimated the political dimension of the situation in Ukraine. According to him “Russia is too big than that it could be ignored”, while the policy of sanctions against RF is a tool of the peaceful solution of the conflict and he stressed that “Slovakia is a friend of both Ukraine and Russia.” “*Situáciu na Ukrajine sme nepochopili. Únia mala reagovať inak, vyhlásil Lajčák*”, TASR, November 2, 2014; “*Slovak minister: All of EU should share burden of sanctions*”, B92.net, September 18, 2014.

ing.<sup>82</sup> Another gesture from Fico towards the Kremlin manifested itself in the attendance of the celebrations of Victory Day in Moscow along with the other only European leader, President of Czech Republic Miloš Zeman. However, they didn't attend the military parade, but chose to take part in a bilateral meeting instead.<sup>83</sup>

Thus, the main desire of the current Slovak government is to keep at least cordial relations with Russia to avoid confrontations, while, at the same time, Fico is interested in stabilizing the political and security situation in Ukraine. Additionally, Fico, and rather his party Direction – Social Democracy, demonstrated their desire to become an acceptable partner both for the Russian Federation and Ukraine by hosting the conference “Path to Peace” on March 6–7, 2015 in Košice, organized by the German-Russian Forum, led by the former chairman of SPD Matthias Platzeck, who is considered to be pro-Russian politician and chairman of the German-Russian Forum business lobby. Representatives of pro-Russian separatists from Donbass were present at the conference as well. Vague results of the conference were caused by the absence of relevant SPD representatives, who didn't support the conference in an official way, as well as by the absence of Fico, who withdrew his participation in the last minute.<sup>84</sup> Representatives of the Russian Federation, however, declared their interest in the continuation of negotiations within the framework of the conference. Indeed, according to member of State Duma Alexander Petrov, Slovakia might play a role of mediator in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine<sup>85</sup>.

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<sup>82</sup> “Fico: Na Ukrajinu hrozí veľký konflikt, nemyslím ten vojenský”, *Sme*, December 2, 2014.

<sup>83</sup> The representatives of other opposition parties didn't condemn Fico's trip to Moscow, they appreciated his decision to ignore the military parade on the Red Square in the context of Russia's involvement in the Ukraine crisis. “Provokace i splněný slib. Slováci hodnotí Fica v Moskvě různě”, *tyden.cz*, May 11, 2015, accessed July 31, 2015, [http://www.tyden.cz/rubriky/zahranici/evropa/provokace-i-splneny-slib-slovaci-hodnoti-fica-v-moskve-ruzne\\_342468.html#.VaEUVfntmko](http://www.tyden.cz/rubriky/zahranici/evropa/provokace-i-splneny-slib-slovaci-hodnoti-fica-v-moskve-ruzne_342468.html#.VaEUVfntmko)

<sup>84</sup> “Pro-Russia conference to open in Košice”, *Slovak Spectator* (March 5, 2015); “The Košice conference about Ukraine ended vaguely”, *Slovak Spectator* (March 9, 2015).

<sup>85</sup> “Ukrajina: Podľa Rusov by Slovensko mohlo byť mediátorom vzťahov”, June 6, 2015, accessed July 31, 2015, <http://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/357569-ukrajina-podla-rusov-by-slovensko-mohlo-byt-mediatorom-vztahov/>

# Kremlin's influence on today's Slovak far-right

The Slovak far-right political spectrum is quite fragmented due to the fact that its most significant party, and member of several governments in the past, the Slovak National Party fell out the parliament in 2012 and from the European Parliament in 2014 as well. Therefore, Russian influence needs to be assessed across several smaller parties and far-right organizations, all trying to win over the nationalistic electorate which has been successfully mobilized by the SMER-SD populist ideology during the last elections. The colorful palette of far-right players in itself fulfills the three major functions of Russian influence: smaller far-right parties legitimize the Russian regime; neo-Nazi and paramilitary formations have an important potential for destabilization; lastly the different media channels connected to the Russian far-right spread direct pro-Kremlin propaganda. Currently, as a result, the most important developments mainly occur outside of the party arena with different paramilitary organizations being active in the current Ukrainian conflict. Of course, with the return of the nationalist, pro-Russian SNS in the 2016 elections (it seems like it will happen) the political representation of strong pro-Russian far-right can gain importance again.

## Slovak National Party (SNS)

From the early '90s until this day, one the most vocal supporters of strong Slovak-Russian ties was the Slovak National Party - SNS. SNS, which used to be for many years the most important political subject of the nationalist far-right, was re-established in 1990 as a continuation of the party originally established in 1871 and discontinued during the Slovak wartime state in 1938. SNS used to have a stable support around 5-8 percent in the parliamentary elections, and was a member of several governmental coalitions, for example during times of Meciar in the '90s, but also in the 2006-2010 period as a partner of SMER-SD. Currently SNS is not represented in the Parliament, since its support dropped below 5 percent in the 2012 elections.

SNS and its leaders may be characterized as openly anti-EU, anti-American, xenophobic and pro-Russian. In the '90s, SNS was strongly against joining the NATO and openly voiced preference for pro-Eastern and pro-Russian orientation of the Slovak Republic. At this time, the party even had a cooperation agreement with the Russian Liberal Democratic Party.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> *Bilateral relations of the Slovak Republic and the Russian Federation in context of integration*

The pro-Russian orientation of SNS became even stronger after 2000, mainly through personal connection of then SNS chair Anna Belousovova, who married a Russian businessman Alexander Belousov in 2001. Belousovova also used to be the chair of the Administrative Board of Slovak-Russian association until 2011, and she was awarded for her activities in this organization by the President of the Russian Federation Medvedev the Award of Friendship among Nations. However, when it was part of the ruling coalition with Smer-SD and People's Party - Movement for the Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) from 2006 till 2010, it weakened its pro-Russian rhetoric and didn't argue against Slovakia's membership in the NATO and EU.

In the context of the Ukrainian conflict, SNS criticized the "one-sided approach of the EU,"<sup>87</sup> was critical of EU sanctions against Russia,<sup>88</sup> and used the rhetoric of geopolitical conflict and new Cold War with Russia.

Rafael Rafaj, then vice-chair of SNS,<sup>89</sup> stated in April 2014: *"The current centrist leadership of the European Union is likely to have provoked the conflict in Ukraine and continues to support it, even risking political, economic and perhaps even local military conflict with Russia. This crazy plan is caused by a real concern of the unionists (EU leaders) from the possible loss of the majority in European Parliament elections and therefore losing the European Commission. The reason for this is the growing influence of reform and Eurosceptic parties in Europe before the May EP elections."*<sup>90</sup>

Its current chair, Adrej Danko stated in his October 2014 statement that the conflict in Ukraine is the outcome of geopolitical struggle between Russia and the US, and added: *"The truth is that this conflict, embargo and sanctions damage Slovakia. Therefore, we should jointly and patriotic, regardless of right or left, defend pro-Slovak national interests."*<sup>91</sup>

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(Bilaterálne vzťahy Slovenskej republiky a Ruskej federácie v integračnom kontexte), Masaryk University, June 17, 2010, accessed July 31, 2015, [http://is.muni.cz/th/273714/fss\\_b/bakalarka.txt](http://is.muni.cz/th/273714/fss_b/bakalarka.txt)

<sup>87</sup> "Rafael Rafaj: EÚ neskoro hasí separatistický oheň, do ktorého sama prilievala olej", sns.sk, July 23, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.sns.sk/nazory/rafael-rafaj-eu-neskoro-hasi-separatisticky-ohen-do-ktoreho-sama-prilievala-olej>

<sup>88</sup> "Rafael Rafaj: Slovensko by malo vystúpiť z mechanizmu sankcií proti Rusku", sns.sk, August 11, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.sns.sk/aktuality/rafael-rafaj-slovensko-by-malo-vystupit-z-mechanizmu-sankcii-proti-rusku/>

<sup>89</sup> Rafael Rafaj lost his vice-chair status in SNS in September 2014.

<sup>90</sup> "Rafael Rafaj: Slovakia should not be dragged into a strategic cold war of Brussel with Russia" (Rafael Rafaj: Slovensko by sa nemalo dať vtiahnuť do strategickej studenej vojny Bruselu s Ruskom), sns.sk, April 15, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.sns.sk/aktuality/rafael-rafaj-slovensko-by-sa-nemalo-dat-vtiahnut-do-strategickej-studenej-vojny-bruselu-s-ruskom/>

<sup>91</sup> "Andrej Danko: Ukrajinský konflikt nie je čierno-biely!", sns.sk, August 30, 2014, accessed

## The People's Party - Our Slovakia (LSNS)

LSNS became the best known political party of the current Slovakian far-right. Its leader, Marián Kotleba is the prime example of a successful transformation of an extremist with far-right roots into a successful populist politician.

Originally, LSNS was registered as the party of friends of wine, and changed its name and statutes in October 2010 into the People's Party - Our Slovakia. The official chairman of the party is Martin Beluský, however the unofficial head, election leader and the best known public representative of the party is Marian Kotleba. LSNS used to be closely linked with the civic association Slovak Togetherness (Slovenská Pospolitost'),<sup>92</sup> but recently there was a split between the two due to opposing views regarding the current conflict in Ukraine. LSNS describes itself as a political party based on (1) national and Christian traditions and values, with the main objective to restore the Slovak Republic's national character, and (2) a legal and socially just state, based on the principles of direct democracy and absolute freedom of thought. The party also expressed its strong opposition to the EU and NATO.

The most important success of LSNS until today was the victory of Marián Kotleba in the November 2013 regional elections, where he gained 56% of the votes (70 000 votes overall) beating the SMER-SD party candidate Vladimir Manka by a great margin.

For years Kotleba has been expressing his open anti-EU, anti-NATO and pro-Russian attitudes. However, at that time it did not receive much attention. This has changed after he became the head of Banska Bystrica self-governing region.<sup>93</sup> Probably the best known example of his open public support of the pro-Russian anti-Western stance was his open letter addressed to the former President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich in January 2014:

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February 15, 2015, <http://www.sns.sk/aktuality/andrej-danko-ukrajinsky-konflikt-nie-je-cier-no-biely/>

<sup>92</sup> LSNS was originally set up as a political wing of the SP.

<sup>93</sup> Slovakia is divided into 8 self-governing regions. Mr. Kotleba was elected leader of the Banska Bystrica region in November 2013, when he was elected by some 70 000 votes.

*“As a member of the Slavic nation, I fully understand what is now being fought for in Ukraine. The European Union needs new markets and the NATO terrorist organization is trying to move closer to the border of the Russian Federation. As a citizen of an EU Member State I can responsibly tell you that the opening to the EU will not bring anything good to the Ukrainian people. Ukraine will become just another huge market where there is no place for the original Ukrainian goods. Production will be replaced by imports and consumption, and hundreds of thousands of people will lose their jobs. At the end of this process there will be anything but totally enslaved Ukrainian people and the transfer of Ukrainian land into the hands of foreign investors.”<sup>94</sup>*

This stance was repeated in the July edition of the party newsletter, which described the situation in Ukraine as the outcome of the scenario created by the EU and NATO, trying to get closer to Russia and undermine Russian security.<sup>95</sup>

Kotleba confirmed his open anti-American attitude also in August 2014, when he displayed a banner on the seat of the self-governing region with the title *“Yankees go home - STOP NATO”* during the celebration of 70th anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising in Banska Bystrica.

As for the distribution of pro-Russian sympathizers among far-right politicians, both SNS and Marián Kotleba’s even more extremist LSNS (The People’s Party – Our Slovakia) have always professed such views. They arguably “copy Russian narratives,” as Milan Nič, managing director of the Central European Policy Institute, described their communication.

Despite these open public statements, there is no publicly available direct evidence of LSNS’ links to Russian organizations, be it governmental structures or others. Experts interviewed for this study agree that there is no visible evidence of the main radical parties being funded from Moscow; their Russophile and anti-Western declarations might stem mostly from the political culture of “Slavic nationalism.” Despite the lack of evidence of direct connections at the level of party leadership, there are various connections of individual party members, or people affiliated with the LSNS, to Russia and pro-Russian organizations.

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<sup>94</sup> infonoviny.sk, January 31, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015

<sup>95</sup> “10 rokov paktovania s NATO”, Nase Slovensko, June-July, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015

Especially interesting is the alleged participation of Mario Reitman, a 38 year-old far-right extremist from Banská Bystrica, in the conflict in Ukraine on the side of pro-Russian separatists.<sup>96</sup> He published on Facebook a picture of himself in Russian-style military uniform and another one of his Novorossija passport.

However, it is questionable whether he really fought in Ukraine or merely posted pictures and messages supporting pro-Russian separatists. According to the experts interviewed, Mario Reitman has ties to the Prešov branch of LSNS,<sup>97</sup> but he seems to simply be an adventurer with a criminal background, and he is too young to have Russian state security connections in the first place.

There is not much information about any official meeting between LSNS' members and Russian stakeholders, but as Jarábik noted, it is rather Smer-SD officials, who fly to Moscow regularly, and the Slovakian radicals have no such spectacular Russian connections as the Hungarian far-right party, Jobbik. The main reason might be the lack of widespread national political support for the party.

## **Nation and Justice party (Národ a spravodlivosť - NaS)**

NaS was established in 2011 as a project of Anna Belousovova, after being ousted from SNS. The party declares itself as “patriotic party” without a left or right leaning. In the party's campaigns and public speeches, Belousovova used rhetoric and issues similar to that of SNS: anti-EU, anti-Americanism and anti-Roma. Belousovova continues to enjoy close contacts with representatives of the Russian Federation. Additionally, official Russian representatives participated in several events organized by Ms. Belousovova, and she attended events organized by the Russian embassy (a picture with then Ambassador Pavel Maratovič Kuznecov testifies to this).

Close affiliation of NaS to Russia could also be illustrated with the case of European Parliament elections. In preparation for the EP elections in May 2014, NaS submitted a joint list of candidates

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<sup>96</sup> This was reported in the national media - TV Markiza on 22 August 2014, see “Ďalší Slovák na Ukrajine má “za ušami”. Trestne stíhaný bol až sedemkrát!”, tvnoviny.sk, August 22, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015, [http://www.tvnoviny.sk/domace/1767982\\_dalsi-slovak-na-ukrajine-ma-za-usami-trestne-stihany-bol-az-sedemkrat](http://www.tvnoviny.sk/domace/1767982_dalsi-slovak-na-ukrajine-ma-za-usami-trestne-stihany-bol-az-sedemkrat)

<sup>97</sup>Prešovský kraj- Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (LSNS)

with “Good Power” movement headed by Sergej Chelemendik, a long-time publicist and journalist of Russian origin advocating for stronger ties with Russia. The party’s election program stated:

*“We are for the neutrality of Slovakia as the life-necessity for survival and prosperity of the Slovak nation and the state. Neutral Slovakia means peace for us and our children. We open the issue of real sovereignty of Slovakia - only a strong and sovereign state [the Russian Federation] could protect Slovakia. We are for friendly and brotherly relationship with Russia and we would do everything in order for European Slavic nations would not be dragged into suicidal war against brotherly Russian nation.”<sup>98</sup>*

Anna Belousovova also confessed in the same election newspaper (in an interview with Sergej Chelemendikov) her close emotional relation and admiration of Russia:

*“I have a very positive relationship towards Russia simply because my family lives there, I had a husband from there, but not just because of that. I like the Russian culture and I consider Russia to be the second country in my heart after Slovakia. Of course, Slovakia is my homeland, but whenever I am in Russia, I feel very well there (...). Russians are mentally close to me, unlike in the West, where they think differently, there are other priorities, people behave differently. In Russian everything is close to me, understandable, it is simply mine.”*

In regard to the conflict in Ukraine she stated: *“We do not want to be dragged into a war against Russia for the benefit of American capital.”<sup>99</sup>*

Some evidence suggest closer relationship between NaS and the Russian Orthodox Church, which seems to participate more and more in the information (propaganda) warfare.<sup>100</sup> In 2002, Russian businessman Alexander Belousov, the late husband of Anna Maliková (Belousovova), began the construction of a large Russian Orthodox Church building in Bratislava. After his death in 2004, construction went on with unknown sponsors, and it was finished in 2012. However, the church is unused now.

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<sup>98</sup> Quote taken from the Nation and Justice party’s 2014 European Parliament Elections Program.

<sup>99</sup> “BELOUSOVOVÁ: NENECHAJME SA VTAHNUŤ DO VOJNY PROTI RUSKU V ZÁUJME KAPITÁLU USA”, nas-ns.sk, accessed February 15, 2015

<sup>100</sup> It is important to note that while in Hungary there is a whole diocese under the Moscow Patriarchate, there is no such religious subordination present in Slovakia.

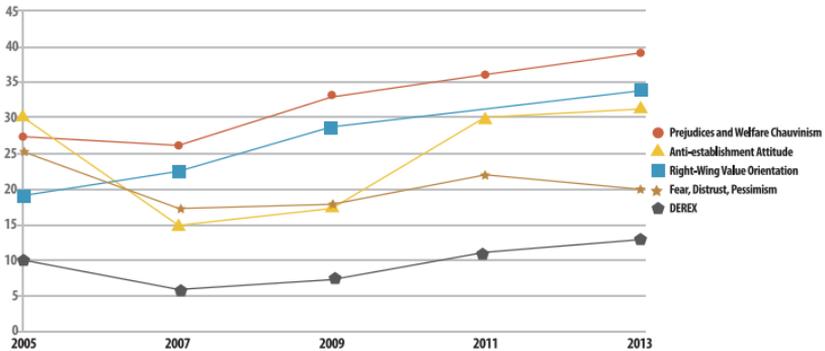
**Table 4. Slovak far-right parties' election results in general and in European Parliament elections since the transition (vote %)**

Parties	SNS		LSNS		NaS	
	National	European	National	European	National	European
1990	13.94					
1992	7.93					
1994	5.4					
1998	9.1					
2002	3.3					
2004		14.15				
2006	11.7					
2009		5.55				
2010	5.07		1.33			
2012	4.55		1.58		0.63	
2014		3.61		1.73		1.38

Source: [www.statistics.sk](http://www.statistics.sk)

Table 4 clearly showcases that despite the disappearance of the far-right from the parliament in 2012, the need for such parties did not vanish. On the contrary, according to Political Capital Institute's calculations, demand for right-wing extremism in Slovakia has rather been on the rise in the last years (see figure 3).

**Figure 3. Demand for Right-Wing Extremism in Slovakia, 2005-2013<sup>101</sup>**



If the Slovakian National Party gains representation in the Slovak parliament again after the 2016 general elections (which seems to be likely according to preliminary polls), it can increase the influence of Russia on the Slovakian political landscape – most importantly, if they will become a governmental party or support the government from outside, but even if they will be in opposition.

## **Pro-Russian far-right extremist movements and paramilitary organizations**

The Slovak far-right militiamen's actual participation in the military activities in the separatist regions (along with some French, Serbian and Spanish counterparts) poses a real security threat.

## **Slovak Togetherness (Slovenská Pospolitosť - SP)**

SP was established in 1995 and belongs to one of the oldest far-right extremist organizations with the status of civic association. In the years of 2004-2008 the organization was the most important subject of the extreme right and was a stepping stone for Marian Kotleba—SP's leader

<sup>101</sup> The Political Capital Institute designed the Demand for Right-Wing Extremism (DEREK) Index using its own theoretical model and data from the European Social Survey (ESS), a biannual study that tracks changes in societal attitudes and values in more than 30 countries in Europe and the Middle East. See: <http://derekindex.eu/>, accessed December 8, 2015

at that time—into the politics. SP became quite famous for its open admiration of the fascist war-time state and the use of uniforms resembling those of Hlinka Guard, fascist militia during war-time Slovakia. After 2010, when LSNS was set up, SP leadership was handed over to Jakub Skrabak a known far-right radical and activist with links to neo-Nazi groups. Under his leadership, SP adopted a different approach to some of the world events, intensified its international cooperation with the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary. Rising tensions between SP and LSNS manifested fully in 2014, when SP openly supported the Right Sector by organizing a symbolic event in their support together with hooligans from Slovan Bratislava,<sup>102</sup> and issued condemnation of Putin as “slave of the oligarchs.”<sup>103</sup> More recently they supported actions of Battalion Azov, affiliated with the Right Sector.<sup>104</sup>

## Slovak Revival Movement (Slovenské hnutie obrody - SHO)

SHO is a civic association whose official aim is to “awake national awareness in the Slovak nation.” In its discourse, SHO links its ideology to historical public figures such as Ludovít Štúr, Andrej Hlinka or the president of fascist war-time state, Jozef Tiso. Important aspect of its activities is cooperation with nationalist organizations in other Slavic countries and the idea of unity of Slavic nations. SHO supports Russia on both the political and ideological levels, and unlike other far-right groups also supports president Putin and issued a special T-Shirt with Putin in its online store.<sup>105</sup>

SHO interprets actions in Ukraine as a geopolitical necessity, triggered by the West. Their support for Russia is also explained by the importance of Ukraine for Russia. Actions of Russian armed forces in Ukraine are described as a legitimate protection of the superpower status and Russian national interests: *“We need to understand that this is not just the policy of Russia, but the policy of all superpowers on the planet. Did not the USA break the UN Charter and its international obligations in 1999 when they bombed with their NATO allies Yugoslavia without the mandate of the Se-*

<sup>102</sup> On 26 January 2014, Ultras Slovan Pressburg (German name for Bratislava used by hooligans) in cooperation with nationalists from Bratislava organized an event to show solidarity with Ukrainian nationalists fighting against the corrupt regime of Yanukovich, *pospolitost*. wordpress, January 26, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015

<sup>103</sup> *pospolitost*.wordpress, April 25, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015,

<sup>104</sup> Slovenská *pospolitost* Facebook Page

<sup>105</sup> SHO recently issued a T-Shirt portraying Putin as the hero – see separate resources.

*curity Council? Was not the creation of independent Kosovo also a breach of international law by the Euro-Atlantic powers under the guidance of the US and the EU?*<sup>106</sup>

In November 2010, SHO signed an official cooperation agreement with the Russian umbrella organization Narodniy Sobor (National Union) represented by the head of Moscow regional department, Alexander Lapin.<sup>107</sup> SHO was represented by the head of its international relations department, Marek Rusyniak, who has extended ties to various Russian and pro-Russian subjects, and he is also an administrator of the Facebook group called "Russian Combat"<sup>108</sup> with some 20 000 followers, which is used extensively for spreading of pro-Russian propaganda.

Members of SHO participated in an extensive military-patriotic training program organized by Russian paramilitary organization Stjag (member of the Narodniy Sobor).<sup>109</sup> SHO acknowledged cooperation with Stjag also on its website in the partners section.<sup>110</sup>

## **Resistance Kysuce (Vzdor Kysuce – VK)**

VK was, until recently, a far-right group with paramilitary character, mixing extreme nationalism, chauvinism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia and nativism with anti-EU, anti-NATO and anti-US attitudes, topped by conspiracy theories. Its best publicly known figure, Marián Magát ran in the European Parliamentary elections on the Slovak People's Party list, but received only marginal support.

Magát openly admires National Socialism as a model for economic and social order in the society. In regard to the conflict in Ukraine, he labeled the Ukrainian government as "Jewish Zionist scum"<sup>111</sup> and further stated:

*"Many think that the Right Sector is neo-Nazi and because it was involved in the coup, also the government is neo-Nazi. What a mistake my friends! The Right Sector was financed by the West and if they could they would be sweeping the synagogues, they have nothing to do with true nationalism.*

<sup>106</sup> sho.sk, March 3, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015

<sup>107</sup> sho.sk, December 12, 2010, accessed February 15, 2015

<sup>108</sup> Rusky styl boja

<sup>109</sup> despiteborders.com, October 10, 2011, accessed February 15, 2015

<sup>110</sup> See separate resources.

<sup>111</sup> See separate resources.

*True nationalists are the separatists, they did not sell out and protect their land with arms against financial schemes aimed at forestalling the collapse of the dollar monetary system."*

## Slovak Conscripts (Slovenskí Branci - SB)

Slovenskí Branci (SB) came into existence in early 2012 and quickly became the most important paramilitary group with patriotic and nationalistic character. It was set up by Peter Švrček (at that time 17 years old) after his attendance at a three week training course organized by Narodny Sobor with ex-Spetsnaz instructors. Švrček is a prime example of the active means used by Russian influence and the transfer of political know-how, as mentioned in our **earlier Russian Connection analysis**.<sup>112</sup> SB at first accepted among its members several representatives of known far-right groups and publicly acknowledged the need to prepare for internal and external military threats. Later they tried to picture themselves as mere patriots who wish to defend their country in the form of a voluntary national guard.

Formally SB was not linked to any other organization or political party, yet their Facebook page proves their sympathies to subjects such as LSNS, SP or SHO. Although SB as a group does not carry out any activities linking it to Russia, the pro-Russian stance is very visible among its individual members, such as Jan Doval', Tomáš Bičkoš, and others. Many of them are fans of Facebook pages linked to Vladimir Putin or pro-Russian separatist in Novorossija, and publicly display their sympathies.

The most direct link of SB to Russia is participation of Russian instructors from Narodny Sobor in several of SB's trainings in 2012, and participation of several SB members at seminars of Russian Combat and summer trainings in Russia.<sup>113</sup>

In early 2015 SB became a subject of focused media attention, following a revelation that one of its founders and former members – Martin Kepřta – was interviewed by the Russian First Channel in Donbass as a member of the International brigade no. 15 fighting in Doneck airport and Debalcevo.

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<sup>112</sup>"The Russian Connection", Political Capital, April 10, 2014 accessed February 15, 2015, [http://www.riskandforecast.com/useruploads/files/pc\\_flash\\_report\\_russian\\_connection.pdf](http://www.riskandforecast.com/useruploads/files/pc_flash_report_russian_connection.pdf)

<sup>113</sup> Since the SB online presence was reset in 2014 it is not possible to document this, however at that time their facebook page included pictures of Russian instructors attending some their trainings.

In this interview he stated: *“This confrontation does not concern only Donbass, this is a war between Russia and NATO. It means that I am fighting here actually also for my own country.”*

After his identity was revealed, he was interviewed by several major national media<sup>114</sup> and subsequently SB as such became a subject of public scrutiny and debate. In their reaction, SB tried to distance from Keprta, claiming that their aims are legitimate and that SB resisted attempts by other Russian organizations to gain control over SB’s organization.<sup>115</sup> This might be seen as an attempt to repair their public image, since other members of the SB leadership were seen at anti-NATO protests in Bratislava in April 2015 and continued to post pro-Russian propaganda.

## Slovak support for pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine

Other than the above-mentioned case of Martin Keprta, there is little publicly available information regarding Slovaks fighting on the side of pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine. Besides the cases presented in the Slovak media (Miroslav Roháč,<sup>116</sup> Richard Branický<sup>117</sup> and Mario Reitman) the Ukrainian organization “Mirotvorec” (peacemaker) monitoring presence of foreign combatants fighting on the side of pro-Russian separatists documented three other individuals from Slovakia fighting in Ukraine or providing direct support to pro-Russian separatists.<sup>118</sup>

Aside from direct participation in the conflict, several individuals orga-

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<sup>114</sup> *“Spoved’ Slováka, ktorý bojuje za proruských separatistov,”* www.aktuality.sk, February 23, 2015, accessed February 25, 2015, <http://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/271050/nevzali-ho-do-armady-siel-k-separatistom/>. Interview with Donetsk People’s Republic army officers Martin Keprta – branik.blog.sme.sk, February 24, 2015, accessed July 31, 2015

<sup>115</sup> Interview with the leader of Slovak Conscripts Peter Švrček – branik.blog.sme.sk, March 8, 2015, accessed July 31, 2015

<sup>116</sup> According to interview with Miroslav Roháč published in Slovak daily Nový čas in September 2014, he was captured by Ukrainian Army during fighting in Ilovajsk, where he fought for the DPR separatist forces. He was taken prisoner and freed within the prisoner exchange programme. *“Exkluzívna spoved’ Miroslava Roháča, ktorého väznila ukrajinská armáda: Bili ma po papuli a pažbou do hlavy!”*, cas.sk, September 23, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.cas.sk/clanok/294181/exkluzivna-spoved-miroslava-rohaca-ktoreho-vaznila-ukrajinska-armada-bili-ma-po-papuli-a-pazbou-do-hlavy.html>

<sup>117</sup> Richard Branický fled Slovakia in order to avoid prison sentence for a fraud and joined DPR forces. *“Slovák Richard bojuje na Ukrajine po boku separatistov: Pre mňa už cesta nazad nie je!”*, cas.sk, September 23, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015, <http://www.cas.sk/clanok/294227/slovak-richard-bojuje-na-ukrajine-po-boku-separatistov-pre-mna-uz-cesta-nazad-nie-je.html>

<sup>118</sup> Mirotvorec has his own webpage, see separate resources.

nize donations and delivery of material support to the pro-Russian separatists. One of the most known is “Peaceful Warriors” (Pokojní bojovníci), whose activities were presented by the pro-Russian and communist media in Slovakia and Czech Republic<sup>119</sup>. Another example has to do with Marián Farkaš, who became an “Ambassador” of the Novorossija in Slovakia in November 2014,<sup>120</sup> who provided an extensive account of his journeys to Doneck with material support from Slovakia in a public event organized by *Zem a Vek* magazine in March 2015,<sup>121</sup> and was interviewed by the Voice of Russia.

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<sup>119</sup> “Slováci pomáhajú Novorusku”, halonoviny.cz, October 25, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015; “Slovenští Pokojní bojovníci pomáhají Donbasu”, news.e-republika.cz, February 8, 2015, accessed February 15, 2015

<sup>120</sup> “Marián Farkaš – ambasádor Putinovej Novorossije”, dennikn.sk, March 6, 2015, accessed July 31, 2015

<sup>121</sup> See separate resources youtube.com, March 30, 2015, accessed July 31, 2015

# Russia in the contemporary Slovak public discourse

## Political discourse

If the foreign policy orientation of Slovakia, including the relations with Russia, were not a subject of controversy, the recent crisis in Ukraine would not have seriously challenged the consensus among the political parties regarding the country's active role in the Eastern Partnership dialogue.

The official policy of Slovak government and Smer-SD party is in accordance with the position of EU and NATO. However, another representative of this party, the head of the European Integration Committee Ľubomír Blaha, who belongs to the younger generation of Slovak left-wing politicians, sharply criticized the policy of EU towards Ukraine and Russia. He highlighted the role of radical right during the Maidan and the presence of fascist Svoboda (Freedom) party in the Ukrainian government after the overthrowing of Yanukovich.<sup>122</sup> Blaha blamed the West for "arranging a coup in Kyiv and legitimizing the government in which fascists take part." He also stressed that the inhabitants of Crimea have equal rights "to practice disobedience against the government and occupy the governmental offices."<sup>123</sup>

He is opposing the policy of isolation of the Russian Federation and on June 26, 2014 he took part in the Inter-Parliamentary Forum in Moscow organized by the Speaker of State Duma, Sergei Naryshkin. Blaha stressed the need for dialogue and suggested that the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation is comparable with the recognition of the unilaterally proclaimed independence of Kosovo, or the American control of Guantanamo, or Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights.<sup>124</sup> According to him, the sanctions against the Russian Federation are useless because Russia will not abandon its vital interests, and the collapse of Russian economy would provide a risk to Slovakia<sup>125</sup>.

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<sup>122</sup> Aktuality.sk (February 25, 2014).

<sup>123</sup> Noveslovo.sk (March 2, 2014).

<sup>124</sup> Noveslovo.sk (June 26, 2014).

<sup>125</sup> Aktuality.sk (November 21, 2014).

Centre-right opposition criticized Fico and his party for their pro-Russian stance, and some members of the Parliament from the neo-conservative party of NOVA, led by the chairman Daniel Lipšic, visited Maidan at the beginning of February 2014 and met the leaders of the contemporary opposition.<sup>126</sup> Opposition parties requested more radical actions against the Russian Federation, and they also demanded more active Slovak involvement in the military aid to Ukraine. Leader of the liberal Euro-skeptic party Freedom and Solidarity, Richard Sulík accused Fico of being a threat to national security.<sup>127</sup> In the meantime, as mentioned earlier, the leader of extreme right The People's Party - Our Slovakia and the chairman of Banská Bystrica region, Marián Kotleba expressed support to Yanukovich in autumn 2013. He condemned Maidan as an attempt to bring NATO nearer to Russia.<sup>128</sup>

Besides the traditionally pro-Russian Communist Party of Slovakia, which has not been represented in the Parliament since 2006, the main advocate of Russia's policy towards Ukraine became the leaders of the NGO "Slovak-Russian society," Ján Čarnogurský and Branislav Fábry. Although the former Slovakian Prime Minister Čarnogurský (1991-1992) received only 0.64 percent of the votes in the March 2014 presidential elections (i.e., less than candidate of KSS, Ján Jurišta),<sup>129</sup> his organization received a significant coverage in the media. According to him, the annexation of Crimea was a "return of the historical territory to Russia" and a consequence of the violent overthrowing of Yanukovich.<sup>130</sup> The organization also participates in arranging a series of protest meetings against the deployment of eventual NATO military bases in Slovakia.<sup>131</sup>

During the first months of 2015, there is an observable radicalization of the public discourse in Slovakia regarding the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Already mentioned Čarnogurský was labeled by the liberal daily *Denník N* (N Daily) as a "public enemy,"<sup>132</sup> while the Slovak-Russian Society, led by him, published a list of the most prominent Russophobes

<sup>126</sup> Piško, Michal: "Lipšic rečnil na Majdane, Ukrajincom slúbil rokovať o pomoci." *Sme*, 7. 2. 2014.

<sup>127</sup> "SaS: Fico je pre národnú bezpečnosť riziko," Bratislava: Sloboda a Solidarita (March 24, 2014).

<sup>128</sup> Vražda, Daniel: "Kotleba píše list ukrajinskému prezidentovi Janukovyčovi: Neustupujte." *Sme*, 31. 1. 2014.

<sup>129</sup> Election of the President of the Slovak Republic, March 2014. Bratislava: Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2014.

<sup>130</sup> Čarnogurský, Ján: "Krym patrí Rusku", *blog.sme.sk*, March 21, 2014, accessed July 31, 2015

<sup>131</sup> "V Bratislave sa dnes skandovalo proti umiestneniu základne NATO na našom území", *Aktuality.sk* (March 12, 2015).

<sup>132</sup> Čikovský, Konštantín: "Je vojna a ľudia ako Čarnogurský nie sú na našej strane." *Denník N*, February 27, 2015.

in Slovakia.<sup>133</sup> Several prominent persons of the public and intellectual life, including former mayor of Bratislava Milan Ftáčnik, invited the President of Slovak Republic Andrej Kiska to attend the celebration of the Victory Day on May 9, 2015 in Moscow.<sup>134</sup> Respective internet petition demanding the president's attendance on Victory Day has been signed by more than 700 people. Another group of public intellectuals and civic activists addressed Kiska not to visit Moscow.<sup>135</sup> As a result of this public controversy, the President decided to celebrate the anniversary in Slovakia at the military cemetery.<sup>136</sup> Pro-Russian sentiments or criticism of the Western involvement in Ukraine are spread not only by media, but also mostly through social networks. There is a very wide and diversified spectrum of activists, organization and websites promoting the Russian view of the situation in Ukraine and the negative relations between the Russian Federation and the West.

## Kremlin's propaganda in the Slovak media

There are no overt signs of Russian encroachment in the Slovakian mainstream media as opposed to some far-right mediums. Still, as Morvay noted, Andrej Babiš, an ethnic Slovak<sup>137</sup> who is now Minister of Finances of the Czech Republic, has recently bought *Hospodárske noviny*, the third largest serious daily paper in Slovakia. In the Czech Republic, his firm Agrofert had bought Mafra, the publishing company of the prestigious dailies *Lidové noviny* and *Mladá Fronta Dnes* and incorporated in that media group the news portal Česká pozice ([ceskapozice.lidovky.cz](http://ceskapozice.lidovky.cz)), which appears to be a Russian mouthpiece, resembling the Hungarian Hídfő.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> "Definitívne výsledky ankety – Najhorší rusofóbi Slovenska". Bratislava : Slovensko-ruská spoločnosť, February 18, 2015.

<sup>134</sup> "Rešpektujte hlas mierumilovných ľudí", [changenet.sk](http://changenet.sk), accessed July 31, 2015

<sup>135</sup> "Osobnosti vyzývajú prezidenta Kisku: Pozvanie od Putina odmietnite." Pluska, February 20, 2015.

<sup>136</sup> "Kiska do Moskvy na oslavy nepôjde. Rusi očakávajú Fica," (dôlt), [aktuality.sk](http://aktuality.sk), March 18, 2015, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/272509/kiska-do-moskvy-na-oslavy-nepojde-fico-vraj-ucast-zvazuje/>

<sup>137</sup> Mr. Babiš with an alleged communist state security background won a court process in June 2014, when a first degree court ruling cleared him of the connection to communist secret service.

<sup>138</sup> A portal formerly operated by a Hungarian Neo-Nazi group, the Magyar Nemzeti Arcvonal (Hungarian National Front Line) probably fulfills an important disinformation role in the Hungarian operations of the Russian secret services.

In the “mainstream” media, the pro-Russian articles are widely published on the left-wing website *Slovo*, close to SMER – Social Democracy, but also the very popular conservative anti-establishment monthly *Zem a Vek* (Earth and Age) is spreading pro-Russian conspiratorial views similarly to internet radio “Slobodný vysielač” (The free broadcaster).

Mainly in the social networks, but also in the media, a discussion about Slovakia’s membership in NATO and EU arose. The teacher, blogger, and local politician from the town of Považská Bystrica, Juraj Smatana prepared a list of 42 websites spreading pro-Russian or “conspiracy” propaganda. The list contains Slovak and Czech imitations of the Russian governmental website *Voice of Russia* (since March 2015, Sputnik News Agency and Radio), as well as neo-communist, Pan-Slavic nationalist, and ultra-catholic websites promoting pro-life agenda.<sup>139</sup> Some of them are close to marginal NGOs and protest movements, and others publish anonymous articles. Generally, the common attribute of these websites is not only criticism of capitalism, but also the negative attitude to the European Union and the West as whole, perhaps with the exception of *Slovo*. The Western involvement in Ukraine and anti-Russian policy of EU and NATO are very often criticized by the libertarian left publicist Eduard Chmelár as well. He accuses Europe of subjugating itself to the pressure of USA, although “the interest of Europe isn’t to have tensions with Russia.”<sup>140</sup> In May 2015 E. Chmelár launched the pacifist initiative “United for Peace” (Zjednotení za mier), which has the aim to spread a culture of peace. The initiative is opposed to the violent solution of international conflicts.<sup>141</sup> Chmelár’s double talk can be observed in his latest initiative which seems to serve Kremlin’s agenda without mentioning Moscow directly: in July 2015, he announced the establishment of the new political movement SEN (Solidarity – Environmentalism – Non-violence).<sup>142</sup> One of its targets is the dissolution of the NATO and its replacement with the EU territorial defense, but the relations with Russian Federation are not mentioned in the initial documents of the movement.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Šnidl, Vladimír: “Proruskú propagandu o zhýralom Západe u nás šíri 42 webov.” Denník N (February 26, 2015).

<sup>140</sup> Chmelár, Eduard: “Európa ako pasívna korisť geopolitického zápasu.” Aktuality.sk (August 8, 2014).

<sup>141</sup> Until July 2015, support to this initiative amounted to more than 5,170 people, including prominent Slovak intellectuals and diplomats.

<sup>142</sup> The acronym of the new political movement means “Dream” in Slovak.

<sup>143</sup> “V deň Deklarácie zvrchovanosti SR začíname náš SEN”, hnutie-sen.sk, July 17, 2015, accessed July 31, 2015

The radical wing of pro-Russian segment of left-wing politics is represented by the “anti-fascist” non-partisan initiative Charter 2015, led by the former officer of the communist State Security Peter Nišponský. Their main message the allegedly aggressive policy of the West against the Russian Federation.<sup>144</sup> However a common pro-Russian platform shared by leftist and rightist forces cannot be presented on every issue, so otherwise pro-Russian left-wing activists opposed the pro-life activists, who organized a referendum “on protecting the family” and indirectly against the LGBT rights as well on February 7, 2015.<sup>145</sup>

Activities of the pro-Russian activists intensified in the beginning of 2015, and they organized several public meetings attended by hundreds of people. Perhaps the commemoration of Soviet soldiers who died during liberation of Bratislava was the most controversial event in April 2014, when the crowd, represented mainly by the followers of the already mentioned Charter 2015, booed President Andrej Kiska (due to his pro-western attitudes) and cheered Russian MFA Mr. Lavrov.<sup>146</sup>

As a sign of activation of pro-Russian organizations in Slovakia, a broad coalition composed of far-right and far-left organizations and individuals arranged series of anti-NATO demonstrations in the center of Bratislava from March 2015. These meetings were characterized by a unique mixture of activists and individuals from all parts of the political spectrum, ranging from the neo-Marxist Resistance - Party of Work (Vzdor-strana prace), communists, certain part of left-wing intellectuals, members of the Slovak-Russian Association up to Eliot Rostas, head of conspiracy magazine *Zem a Vek* and leader of the far-right Slovak Revival movement – SHO and Slovak Conscripts, all united against NATO and the US.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Charta 2015, accessed February 15, 2015

<sup>145</sup> Some conservative Christian activists and Čarnogurský described Russia as a protector of traditional values, including traditional family. Kazharski, Aliaksej: The Rainbow rationalization. Ponars Eurasia (November 22, 2013).

<sup>146</sup> “Na Slavine sa zišli stovky ľudí, Lavrova víтали s nadšením”, sme.sk, April 4, 2015, accessed July 31, 2015, <http://www.sme.sk/c/7734300/na-slavine-sa-zisli-stovky-ludi-lavrova-vitali-s-nadsenim.html>;

<sup>147</sup> “Kto protestuje proti základniam NATO?”, dennikn.sk, March 16, 2015, accessed July 31, 2015, <https://dennikn.sk/blog/kto-protestuje-proti-zakladniam-nato/>

## Significant pro-Kremlin media sites in Slovakia

### Chelemendik.sk

The web portal was set up and is being operated by Sergej Chelemendik, a Russian author living in Slovakia, who co-founded the Nation and Justice Party with Anna Belousovova. He openly propagates stronger ties with Russia, advocates neutrality for Slovakia and tries to revive the idea of Pan Slavism. He stated that Alexander Dugin is his friend, featured an interview with him on his web site, and presented Dugin's geopolitical vision of Euro-Asian doctrine. On his Facebook page, Sergej Chelemendik repeatedly portrays NATO and the US as archenemies and spreads pro-Russian propaganda.

### Slobodný vysielateľ (The free broadcaster)

The internet-based radio broadcast founded in January 2013 with tens of thousands of listeners became the medium of choice for a wide range of alternative world views, leaning to conspiracy theories. The radio broadcast frequently airs interviews with representatives of radical far-right groups, including Vzdor Kysuce, SP, SHO, SB and others.<sup>148</sup> In regard to Russia, it adopted many of the claims spread by the Russian media and its Facebook page, flooded by pro-Russian propaganda. Officially it is funded by voluntary contributions of its listeners.

### Zem a Vek (ZaV, Earth and Age magazine)

Set up in 2013 ZaV became the most important media outlet for spreading conspiracy theories, pro-Russian geopolitical views, and anti-EU, anti-American and anti-liberal attitudes. Its editorial board includes people in the past associated with far-right extremism. Its chief editor, Tibor Eliot Rostas was granted an official audience at the Russian embassy and is considered the brain behind the whole magazine. The magazine has a monthly circulation of some 30 000 copies, distributed in mainstream bookstores and magazine shops, with high visual quality. The chief editor announced a campaign demanding the referendum on Slovakia's withdrawal from NATO.<sup>149</sup> An important part of its agenda is the informa-

<sup>148</sup>medialne.etrend.sk, September 25, 2013, accessed February 15, 2015

<sup>149</sup> Benčík, Ján: "Rostas vymýšľa referendum o vystúpení z NATO", dennikn.sk, February 2, 2015, accessed February 15, 2015, <https://dennikn.sk/blog/rosta-vymysla-referendum-o-vystupeni-z-nato/>

tion war about Ukraine, according to ZaV ruled by fascists and followers of Stepan Bandera and a puppet-government controlled by the EU.<sup>150</sup> In June 2015 T. E. Rostas and member of ZaV's editorial board Dušan Budzák paid a visit to Moscow. After the roundtable with the representatives of Russian media and media experts they announced the aim to create a media house, comprising journal, TV and radio stations, daily newspaper and online media. T.E. Rostas once again confirmed the close ties with the Embassy of RF in Slovakia. He stressed "Russia is not an enemy of Slovakia".<sup>151,152</sup>

## Pro-Russian Facebook groups

### Alexander Ivanovič Možajev<sup>153</sup>

This Facebook group, set up in 2014, offers "uncensored information from Novorossija" but in fact is an outlet for pro-Russian propaganda regarding the conflict in Ukraine. Among its fans are Švrček (SB), Tomáš Bičkoš-Regec (SB) and Ján Dovál (SB).

## Russian Combat

Facebook page has been dedicated to original Russian martial art Stenka (Russian box) since 2007, but it also incorporates elements from the Russian Special Forces, Spetsnaz. It has more than 20 000 fans and is an electronic outlet of the martial arts club. Besides regular activities related to martial arts, it also displays pictures and messages in support of the Russian international policies and pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine. One of its recent seminars<sup>154</sup> was attended by former Spetsnaz instructors, Roman Gruzinov and Valerij Majstovoj. These seminars were also attended by Rusynak from SHO, and several SB leading figures were invited.

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<sup>150</sup> Smoleňová, Ivana: *The Pro-Russian Disinformation Campaign in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Types of Media Spreading Pro-Russian Propaganda, Their Characteristics and Frequently Used Narratives*. Prague : Prague Security Studies Institute 2015, p. 10-11.

<sup>151</sup> konzervativnyvyber.sk, June 24, 2015, accessed July 31, 2015

<sup>152</sup> However the announcement of the open cooperation with Russia's official state institutions caused a split within the editorial team and one of the prominent editors Ľubomír Huďo left ZaV. "ZNÁMY SLOVENSKÝ NOVINÁR ĽUBOMÍR HUĎO OPÚŠŤA MESAČNÍK ZEM A VEK", nieje.totak.sk, June 24, 2015, accessed July 31, 2015

<sup>153</sup> Alexander Ivanovic Mozajev is a legendary fighting figure among pro-Russian separatists. See separate resources.

<sup>154</sup> Facebook.com, July 23, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015

Between August 22 and 27, 2013, Russian association of military-patriotic clubs Stjag (member of the Narodniy Sobor) organized the Second Slavic Patriotic Camp in Moscow. The camp was attended by Rusnyak from SHO, and Svrček and Bičkoš, both leading figures of the SB, were among the invited.

### **Czechs and Slovaks support Russian Crimea<sup>155</sup>**

A Facebook group supporting the Russian stance in the conflict, expressing solidarity with the separatists.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> facebook.com, accessed February 15, 2015

<sup>156</sup> See separate resources.

# Slovak radicals in the Russian online media<sup>157</sup>

Table 5. Selected Russian media sites featuring Slovak extremism

News site	Lenta.ru	Ria.ru	Kp.ru	Kommersant	Voice of Russia	Russia Today
Readership	10 179 million	11 311 million	7 566 million	2 338 million	N/A	N/A
Orientation	Kremlin-friendly	Kremlin-friendly	Kremlin-friendly	Independent	Kremlin-friendly	Kremlin-friendly

Readership is defined by the number of clicks every day, based on the data of Web Index Report, 2014. See: [www.tns-global.ru/services](http://www.tns-global.ru/services).

Russian online media rarely cover stories featuring Slovak radicals; in the past year they have barely published anything about them. Slovakia also rarely features in the Russian media although lately it has been mentioned in connection with gas trade.

## Marian Kotleba at the regional elections

At the end of last November, several news sites covered the victory in the regional elections of Marian Kotleba, the leader of The People's Party – Our Slovakia. Out of the above-mentioned news sites, the Kremlin-associated *Lenta* and the independent *Kommersant* published full-length articles, while the Kremlin-friendly *Ria Novosti* adopted a piece from *Kommersant* verbatim.

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<sup>157</sup> The relevance of the *Voice of Russia*, replaced by Radio Sputnik, part of the *Sputnik News* multimedia platform operated by Rossiya Segodnya from November 22, 2014 (the *Voice of Russia* merged with RIA Novosti into the Rossiya Segodnya media holding), aimed at a foreign audience is based on the fact that with its help the Kremlin tries to inform/influence the population of a given country, directly through their own language. Admittedly, *Russia Today* competes with *CNN*, *BBC* and *Al Jazeera* in an effort to present the Russian perspective in a global news competition. However, in some cases its coverage turned out to be rather biased; e.g., reporting on the Ukrainian crisis, *Russia Today* claimed that a number of Western journalists resigned in a public gesture... The examined period focused on the prelude and the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis, i.e. articles were chosen from the October, 2013 – October, 2014 period.

Both articles have a clearly negative view of the Slovak radicals. The news piece published in *Lenta*<sup>158</sup> refers to Marian Kotleba as a neo-Nazi, and after detailing the election results, it discusses Kotleba's training as a high school teacher, and his role as a representative of right-wing radicals in Slovakia. The article also speaks of his involvement in organizing and participating in anti-Roma protests, and of being charged of hate speech. In addition, the article mentions the Slovak Brotherhood (Slovenská pospolitost), an organization founded by Kotleba.

The article of the independent *Kommersant*,<sup>159</sup> similarly to that in *Lenta*, calls Kotleba a neo-Nazi, and goes one step further: already in the lead, they call him Hitler's fan, and in the introduction, the article describes Kotleba's victory as a real shock in Slovakia. The *Kommersant* article provides more details on Kotleba's party and on the activity of the banned Slovak Unity Party, while it also mentions that they wore uniforms much like that of the Nazis and propagated anti-Jewish and anti-Hungarian views.

The *Kommersant* article also quotes a Slovak political scientist, Pavol Szalaj, currently working in the research institute of Sciences Po in Paris, to the effect that Kotleba's victory can be attributed to the lack of interest of people in municipal elections; accordingly, in Slovakia voter turnout was around 20%.

## Other articles on Slovak radicals

Another article published by *Kommersant*<sup>160</sup> discusses the attempts of Eurosceptics to create a political faction. Here, the Slovak extreme right appears in a neutral light, as someone "Marie Le Pen counted on, but could not gain a seat in the European Parliament."

Another news site, *vesti.ru*<sup>161</sup> published an article in June 2013 about Slovakia declaring that its constitution defines marriage as between a man and a woman. The article describes how, contrary to many other EU member states, Slovakia explicitly prohibits same-sex marriages.

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<sup>158</sup> "The head of Slovak radicals became the mayor of the county", *Lenta*, November 25, 2013, accessed February 15, 2015

<sup>159</sup> "The heirs of partisans voted for a Neo-Nazi. The fan of Hitler has become a Slovak governor", *Kommersant*, November 26, 2013, accessed February 15, 2015

<sup>160</sup> "Eurosceptic of the world, unite!", *Kommersant*, May 30, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015

<sup>161</sup> "The definition of traditional marriage has been instituted in the Slovak constitution", *Vesztly*, June 5, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015

The constitutional amendment was proposed by the Christian Democratic Movement, and supported by the Slovak National Party. As opposed to the currently fashionable homophobia in Russia, the article does not take a stand on the matter and adopts a neutral tone of voice.

The Kremlin-associated news site, *Vzgljad*, also mentions the Slovak National Party in an article<sup>162</sup> published in January 2013, where a Greek journalist, Thanasis Karagiannis discusses the radical parties of Europe. The article was written before the European Parliament elections, and therefore only took guesses at the future performance of the radical parties. Karagiannis touched on the leader of the French National Front, Marine Le Pen's idea to create a new political alliance, "A European alliance for freedom," characterized by Euroscepticism and racism towards immigrants. Le Pen mentioned the Slovak National Party among its possible allies.

## Conclusions

Both Kremlin-associated and independent news sources condemn the Slovak extremists. Although they publish articles that are more neutral in tone, a negative attitude is more often adopted towards them. The minimal attention given to Slovak extreme right-wing parties could mean that due to their weak institutional position, they cannot be relied on for Russian international and domestic political purposes. Based on *Vzgljad's* article, the possible future membership of the Slovak National Party in the European Parliament, as part of some coalition created by National Front, could potentially alter the Kremlin's current negligent attitude towards the party. Consequently, if the Slovak National Party managed to regain its institutional positions, they would be expected to continue to represent Russian interests in the parliament as well as in the media.

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<sup>162</sup> "Europe: "brown menace": *Vzgljad*, January 14, 2014, accessed February 15, 2015