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CONFERENCE: “17TH ANNUAL REVIEW CONFERENCE ON THE SLOVAK FOREIGN AND EUROPEAN POLICY IN 2016”

Tomáš Madleňák*

The Annual Review Conference on the Slovak Foreign and EU policy was held on the 16th of March 2017, traditionally in the premises of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (MFEA SR). The main topics were current security threats and developments in the European Union.

The event was opened by the Chairman of the board of directors of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA) **Juraj Štern**, who pointed out the problem of immigration and its resemblance to the situation of German Jews who were trying to flee the Nazi Germany but were refused by the USA. “Modern and confident country, which Slovakia is trying to be, cannot be afraid of 2000 migrants who would constitute around 0.03% of its population.”

His speech was followed by the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic **Miroslav Lajčák**, who suggested that 2017 might be a breakthrough year for the future of Europe. This future is threatened by increased tensions, loss of respect and non-compliance with international law in our neighbourhood, as well as the increase of nationalism and extremism as a result of terrorism.

In this context, Slovakia appreciates the EC’s White Paper on the future of Europe and the way forward. “This means that it is not a Bible or that we have to vote for one of these scenarios. It is clear that the result will be an intersection,” but Slovakia adheres to the values of the European Union and wants to be at the core of integration no matter which plan or combination of plans will be implemented in the end.

The next speaker, the President of the Slovak Republic **Andrej Kiska**, confirmed that Slovakia should stay at the core of a possible multi-speed EU. “Strategic interest of Slovakia lays in the core of integration of the EU” but he would appreciate if we could add more to the discussion on how the core should look like. He also does not believe we can be part of the core just by adhering to

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the technical principles.

“A lot depends on the credit we will have between our EU partners. No one takes our right to have our own opinions or to formulate our own proposals away from us. But opportunistically feeding populist passions about ‘Bad Brussels’ anytime it suits us at home is the behaviour of a backwards periphery, not of the core of the most successful project of peace and economic cooperation in the world.”

He also criticised our weakness against the Russian propaganda and hybrid threats. “We are the target who does not defend itself!” he exclaimed. Our foreign policy needs to be clear. Instead, Slovak politicians and government tend to send mixed signals on its orientation and priorities.

Following speaker, Slovak PM **Robert Fico** confirmed that Slovakia must be at the core of the EU moving as fast in the integration as possible. This core must be “the union of countries that are economically healthy and are firmly pushing for fiscal discipline.”

Like the President and the Minister before him, he also highlighted the importance of the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the EU, which was the most important event of the Slovak foreign policy in the previous year.

The main successes of the SK PRES according to **Fico** were the COP21 and CETA ratification and the reached agreement on the Budget of the EU. On the other hand, one of the remaining issues that was not yet solved and divides the EU is the Nord Stream 2 project.

He also highlighted the issue of the western Balkans countries, which should receive more support for their EU integration efforts and some of these countries, especially Montenegro, should be helped to advance towards the full membership.

Following panel discussions summed up the Slovak presidency of the Council of the EU, the future of the EU discussion, as well as the current security threats and preparation of the new Security strategy of the Slovak Republic.

The first panel, oriented on the SK PRES 2016 evaluation and the discussion on the future of the EU was hosted by **Pavol Demeš**, member of the board of directors of the SFPA. Panellists were members of the parliament **Katarína Cséfalvayová** (Most-Híd) and **Martin Klus** (SaS), state secretary of the MFEA SR **Ivan Korčok**, editor-in-chief of EurActiv.sk **Zuzana Gabrižová**, and research fellow of the SFPA **Vladimír Bilčík**.

In the discussion on the five scenarios for the future of the EU as proposed

by the European Commission's White Paper, the panellists agreed that two of them are unrealistic: doing much more together and nothing but the single market. According to **Cséfalvayová**, nothing but the single market would mean that "we would lose a huge added value of the EU." The panellists agreed that the final solution will probably be some kind of intersection of the remaining three scenarios, but welcomed that both the president **Kiska** and PM **Fico** were clear in their support of staying in the core of the integration.

The second panel discussed the current security threats and preparation of the new Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic. The panel was hosted by the Director of the Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (RC SFPA) **Alexander Duleba**. The speakers included the MP **František Šebej**, State Secretary of the MFEA SR **Lukáš Parížek**, responsible for the preparation of the new strategy; State Secretary of the Ministry of Defence SR **Róbert Ondrejcsák** who is responsible for the new Defence Strategy which will be part of the new Security strategy; Director of the Conflict Prevention Centre of OSCE **Marcel Peško**; and the Director of the Slovak Security Policy Institute **Jaroslav Nad'**.

State secretaries of the Foreign and Defence ministries, **Lukáš Parížek** and **Róbert Ondrejcsák**, agreed with the rest of the panellists that one of the chief points of this strategy will have to be internal threats. "We have to be stronger inside." **Parížek** underlined. According to **Šebej** at the core of the internal threats we are facing today is "a misunderstanding of our democratic pro-Western identity."

The conference was summed up by the director of the RC SFPA, which co-hosted the whole event, **Alexander Duleba**. He highlighted the importance of the open debate on the issues of the foreign policy that this conference brings not just to policy-making process but to our society as well. "Foreign policy is a public policy just like any other; it is not just something done by unknown men in black suits in hidden hallways."