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"TO THE FOUR CORNERS OF THE WORLD" – DETERMINANTS AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FOREIGN POLICY OF ROBERT FICO'S FOURTH GOVERNMENT

Łukasz Lewkowicz
Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin

ORCID: 0000-0002-0129-785X
e-mail: lukasz.lewkowicz@mail.umcs.pl

Abstract:
The coalition government of Robert Fico (Smer-SSD) in Slovakia, established in the fall of 2023, has from the outset pursued a foreign policy of „openness to the four corners of the world". In practice, this means distancing itself from the EU and NATO, limiting aid to Ukraine, and, above all, intensifying relations with non-EU partners, primarily the BRICS countries. This reorientation of foreign policy poses a challenge to regional cooperation and the development of Polish-Slovak relations. This article aims to analyse the conditions and key directions of the foreign policy of Robert Fico's government in 2023–2025 (European and transatlantic policy, regional cooperation, Eastern policy and opening to the Global South). The paper employs qualitative content analysis, comparative method and discourse analysis.

Keywords: Slovakia, foreign policy, Robert Fico

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Introduction

Robert Fico is a Slovak politician who has served several times as Prime Minister of Slovakia and is the long-time leader of the party Direction – Social Democracy (Smer-SD, currently: Smer-SSD). He founded this party in 1999 and became Prime Minister for the first time in 2006. He subsequently headed the Slovak government in three periods: 2006–2010, 2012–2018, and again from 2023. His political agenda has combined elements of social democracy with a strong emphasis on state intervention, social welfare policies, and national sovereignty. Fico has been one of the most influential figures in Slovak politics since the mid-2000s and has played an important role in shaping the country's domestic and foreign policy debates within the European Union and NATO.

The foreign policy of Robert Fico's fourth government (2023–2025) remains a relatively underexplored subject of research within the context of contemporary international relations in Central Europe. Fico's return to power in 2023 marked a departure from the unequivocally pro-Atlantic and pro-Ukrainian orientation of previous cabinets, in favour of a more ambivalent stance toward the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, as well as a more assertive approach to relations with the institutions of the European Union. The government has undertaken initiatives that may be interpreted both as an attempt to enhance Slovakia's decision-making sovereignty and as part of the broader rise of Eurosceptic and pro-Russian currents in the region.

The purpose of this study is to analyse the determinants and main directions of the foreign policy of Robert Fico's fourth government, with particular emphasis on its relations with Euro-Atlantic structures, its approach to the Russian-Ukrainian war, openness to the countries of the Global South, and its engagement with the Visegrád Group. The study also aims to assess the impact of this policy on Slovakia's international standing and on the formation of its image as a partner within the European Union and NATO. The time frame of the main analysis covers the years 2023–2025, that is, the period from the parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2023 to the end of 2025, which marks the midpoint of the current coalition's term in office. At the same time, the previous governments involving Robert Fico after 2006 were also characterised.

The following research hypotheses are put forward in this text: (1) The fourth government of Robert Fico pursues a foreign policy that represents a significant departure from Slovakia's previous pro-Atlantic orientation. (2) Slovakia's new foreign policy reinforces divisions within the EU, particularly in relation

to the war in Ukraine and attitudes toward Russia. (3) The actions of Fico's government are largely motivated by domestic political considerations, including the desire to mobilise an electorate sceptical of European integration and solidarity with Ukraine. (4) In the long-term perspective, the current foreign policy line may weaken Slovakia's position within Euro-Atlantic structures.

The research methods applied in this paper include content analysis of scholarly literature, think tank reports, and press articles; discourse analysis of political speeches and statements by government representatives; and comparative studies of the foreign policies of Fico's previous cabinets.

Determinants of Slovakia's Foreign Policy

A key factor shaping the foreign policy of any state is its geopolitical and geostrategic location. Slovakia is a country situated in Central Europe, with a territory of 49,036 km², which classifies it as a small state both from a European and a global perspective. It shares borders with Poland to the north, Ukraine to the east, Austria and Hungary to the south, and the Czech Republic to the west. It does not border any regional power that could directly determine its foreign policy. A distinctive feature of Slovakia is its landlocked position. The lack of access to the sea is usually considered a limitation that hinders economic development and weakens a country's geopolitical position. In Slovakia's case, however, the significance of this factor is marginal, due to the relatively short distances to seaports and maritime routes, as well as the advantageous access to the Danube waterway. The latitudinal extent of Slovakia's territory will become particularly relevant once the meridional transport routes connecting the Baltic States with the Balkans (Via Carpatia, Via Baltica) are opened, enabling enhanced cooperation among the countries situated in the Intermarium region. It should be emphasised that Slovakia does not possess abundant deposits of natural resources. Brown coal and manganese ores are extracted, while in the east significant uranium ore deposits can be found. Slovakia also has reserves of alginite, which are unique on a global scale. However, these natural resources are not of strategic importance to the Slovak economy, which is why the country remains dependent on imports, particularly from Russia, with regard to energy resources (Ištok et al., 2016, pp. 109–119).

An important determinant of foreign policy is the demographic factor, particularly in cases where a state is multinational in character. Slovakia

belongs to the group of European countries with a relatively high percentage of national minorities. The stance of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar's government in the 1990s toward minorities – primarily the Roma and Hungarians – negatively affected Slovakia's international image and delayed the country's accession process to Euro-Atlantic structures. The most numerous minority group is the Hungarians, who inhabit a contiguous area along Slovakia's southern border. According to the 2021 census, Hungarians accounted for 7.75% of Slovakia's total population (422,065 people). At the same time, a nominal decline in the number of individuals identifying as Hungarian has been observed for many years. Over the past two decades, their population in Slovakia has decreased by approximately 110,000 (Harrach, 2024, pp. 53–61). For years, Slovak–Hungarian relations have been shaped by various political and ethnic conflicts. In the 1990s, the interstate dispute over the construction and operation of the Gabčíkovo–Nagymaros water dam on the Danube played a particularly important role; the ruling of the International Court of Justice ultimately resolved it. Equally significant and contentious were disputes surrounding the introduction of Slovakia's language law, the observance of the rights of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia, the issue of dual citizenship for members of the Hungarian minority, as well as growing Slovak concerns regarding Hungarian irredentism and revisionism (Żarna, 2015, pp. 249–263; Starzyk, 2018, pp. 164–173).

Slovakia's relations with Russia are closely linked to the enduring popularity of the ideology of Pan-Slavism. Among Slovakia's national heroes is Ľudovít Štúr, a 19th-century national activist who advocated the unification of Slavic nations under the leadership of Russia. Unlike Poland and the Baltic states, Slovakia has not had negative historical experiences with Russian imperialism. Following the Second World War, Czechoslovakia oversaw a process of economic modernisation in Slovakia, which is why a segment of the older generation views the communist period with a certain degree of nostalgia. The Slovak National Uprising of 1944, supported by Soviet partisans, also plays an important role in shaping Slovak national identity. Slovakia's stance toward Russia is further conditioned by the country's exceptionally high dependence – one of the highest in Central Europe – on Russian energy resources. Until recently, the gas pipeline running through Ukraine was Slovakia's only possible source of natural gas supply; the same situation applied to crude oil. Among EU member states, Slovakia was the country most severely affected by the gas crisis of early 2009. The contemporary Slovak political discourse is

characterised by a form of quasi-Russophilia. Public opinion surveys in the Visegrád Group countries, conducted regularly by the think tank Globsec, indicate that Slovaks are generally less critical of Russia, while being more anti-American and anti-NATO, compared to Czechs, Hungarians, or Poles. The continuing relevance of Pan-Slavism within Slovak political discourse is evidenced by the rhetoric employed by politicians across the spectrum – whether from the left, the right, the governing coalition, or segments of the opposition (Marušiak, 2023, pp. 329–355; Lewkowicz, 2019).

With regard to domestic determinants, it is worth noting that since the autumn of 2023 the country's foreign policy has been subordinated directly to Prime Minister Robert Fico and his closest political circle. The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic has been reduced largely to implementing the prime minister's decisions, and its strategic function has weakened compared with previous years. Moreover, the head of diplomacy became a local government politician and close associate of the prime minister, Juraj Blanár (Smer-SSD), which represents a break with the long-standing practice of appointing individuals drawn directly from the diplomatic service to lead the ministry. The opposition accuses the current minister of lacking diplomatic experience and foreign language skills, as well as filling key positions in the ministry with trusted political allies, which is said to lead to a decline in professionalism and effectiveness. There have also been accusations that the government and the foreign minister have begun to actively support disinformation spread in Slovakia by the Russian side – referring, among other things, to Blanár's statement about 14,000 Russians allegedly killed in Donbas (Lewkowicz, 2025a).

Slovakia's current international position is determined by its membership in the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the Visegrád Group. The incumbent government's programme affirms the continuation of Slovakia's pro-Western orientation while expressing reservations about the direction of institutional reform within the EU and the increased NATO military presence on Slovak territory. Slovakia was among the first post-communist countries to adopt the euro in 2009. According to forecasts by government economists, accession to the Eurozone was expected to bring higher economic growth and raise the standard of living. Ambition was also important: by adopting the euro as the first Visegrád Group country, Slovakia aimed to position itself as the regional "leader", surpassing even the significantly wealthier Czech Republic. In post-Cold War Central Europe,

many subregional groupings have emerged, including the Visegrád Group, the Three Seas Initiative, the Slavkov Triangle, and the Bucharest Nine. From Slovakia's perspective, the Visegrád Group currently plays the most important role (Skorzycki, 2020, pp. 107–130; Bajda, 2020, pp. 99–107).

The Evolution of the Foreign Policy Goals and Their Implementation under Robert Fico's Previous Governments

Robert Fico served as the Prime Minister of Slovakia three times before returning to power in 2023, during the periods 2006–2010 and 2012–2018. The first Fico government was formed after the elections of 17 June 2006, won by left-wing Smer-SD. The cabinet included ministers delegated by Smer-SD, the People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (ĽS–HZDS), and the right-wing Slovak National Party (SNS). The three-party coalition removed from power the centre-right political bloc of Mikuláš Dzurinda (SDKÚ-DS), which had been governing since 2002. The foreign policy of Robert Fico's first government was characterised by an attempt to combine full integration with Western structures (EU, NATO) while simultaneously building pragmatic, and at times controversial, relations with Russia, along with tensions in relations with neighbouring countries (especially Hungary).

The greatest achievement of this period was Slovakia's entry into the eurozone on 1 January 2009. Despite its populist domestic rhetoric, Fico's government strictly adhered to convergence criteria, allowing Slovakia to adopt the common currency as the first country of the Visegrád Group (Kupich, 2011, pp. 109–122). Slovakia also joined the Schengen Area in 2007. Although Slovakia remained a loyal NATO member, Fico criticised some U.S. actions. In line with his election promise, in 2007 he withdrew Slovak soldiers from Iraq, signalling a distancing from George W. Bush's policies, while maintaining a military presence in Afghanistan. Fico initiated a shift toward more pragmatic and friendly relations with Moscow, motivated primarily by energy concerns. During the 2009 gas crisis, when Russia halted gas supplies through Ukraine, Fico's government faced a difficult situation, which deepened the Prime Minister's scepticism toward Ukraine as a transit country (Wojcieszak, 2019, pp. 175–176).

The years 2006–2010 also saw a significant deterioration in Slovak-Hungarian relations, largely due to the presence of the nationalist SNS party of Jan Slota in Fico's government. The main points of conflict were: (1) The dispute

over the amendment of Slovakia's state language law (restricting the use of minority languages). (2) Slovakia's response to the Hungarian law on dual citizenship (Slovakia introduced a ban on holding two citizenships). (3) The 2009 incident in which Slovak authorities denied entry to Hungarian President László Sólyom, who planned a private visit to Komárno. Fico's government consistently refused to recognise Kosovo's independence (a position Slovakia maintains to this day), arguing it could set a dangerous precedent for the Hungarian minority in southern Slovakia (Strážay, 2013).

The second single-party government of Robert Fico ruled Slovakia from April 4, 2012 to March 23, 2016. This term was characterised by pragmatism, strong integration with the European Union's mainstream, and attempts to balance relations between the West and Russia. Under Fico's leadership, Slovakia positioned itself as a pro-European country seeking to be part of the EU's "core". In its eastern policy, following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Robert Fico criticised EU sanctions against Russia, describing them as ineffective and harmful to the economy. However, Slovakia ultimately supported their extension within the EU forum. Paradoxically, despite the government's pro-Russian rhetoric, Slovakia played a key role in ensuring Ukraine's energy security by launching reverse gas flows in 2014. In the region, Slovakia actively participated in the V4 format, although its approach was more cautious than that of Hungary or (later) Poland. Together with the other V4 countries, Slovakia opposed mandatory quotas for the relocation of refugees. Fico's government even filed a complaint to the Court of Justice of the European Union on this matter (Groszkowski et al., 2017).

The third coalition government of Robert Fico was formed following the elections of 5 March 2016. The coalition agreement was signed on March 22, 2016 by four parties – Smer-SD, SNS, Most-Híd, and SIEŤ (Groszkowski, 2016). On March 15, 2018, after the scandal related to the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak, Robert Fico resigned. The government ended its term on March 22, 2018, when the new cabinet of Peter Pellegrini, then a close associate of Fico, was sworn in. In the second half of 2016, Slovakia held the presidency of the Council of the European Union, focusing on economic strengthening and the management of the migration crisis. Its main achievements included facilitating the signing of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with Canada and the efficient adoption of the EU budget for 2017. In September 2016, an informal meeting of the leaders of 27 EU countries (without the United Kingdom after the Brexit referendum)

took place in Bratislava. The meeting concluded with the Bratislava Declaration, which outlined directions for reforms of the European Union in the areas of security and migration. Slovakia also increased its visibility on the international stage. The Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs, Miroslav Lajčák, served as the President of the 72nd session of the United Nations General Assembly, which represented a peak of Slovakia's activity on the global stage. In 2018, Slovakia was also preparing to assume the leadership of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2019. Slovakia's eastern policy remained ambiguous and controversial. Prime Minister Robert Fico continued his critical rhetoric toward EU sanctions imposed on Russia after the annexation of Crimea, arguing that they harmed the Slovak economy. Despite these pro-Russian political gestures, Slovakia maintained stable gas supplies to Ukraine through the so-called reverse gas flow, thereby supporting the country's energy security. After Fico's resignation, his successor Peter Pellegrini sought to reassure foreign partners by declaring full loyalty to the European Union and NATO, while continuing the course toward deeper integration within the eurozone (*Slovensko*, 2018).

Foreign Policy Main Objectives in the Government Programme for 2023–2027

In November 2023, the policy programme of the coalition government led by Robert Fico for the period 2023–2027 was adopted. The document devotes relatively little attention to foreign policy issues, and the priorities and challenges outlined therein largely overlap with the electoral program of the largest coalition party, Smer–SSD. The new authorities announced a more "sovereign" foreign policy and emphasised the need to "protect Slovak interests". At the same time, the governing coalition highlighted the intention to preserve the positive aspects of European integration, including the free movement of persons and the single market. However, the document also contains a critical assessment of the functioning and activities of European institutions, and it reflects the Fico government's scepticism toward further deepening of European integration. The Slovak authorities expressed opposition, among other things, to the abolition of the veto right in decisions requiring the consent of all EU member states and to what they regard as the unjustified transfer of competences from member states to EU institutions. The government also firmly rejected the EU's introduction of mandatory quotas for the relocation

of irregular migrants or any obligation to pay financial penalties for refusing to accept them. Among the key priorities of the new government's European policy are the maintenance of an adequate level of cohesion funds and the Common Agricultural Policy. The program also expresses support for EU climate policy, provided that it does not significantly undermine the Union's competitiveness or lead to a decline in the standard of living of Slovak citizens.

With regard to eastern policy, the government declared that it would seek to support all efforts aimed at resolving the conflict in Ukraine based on the principles of international law, including Ukraine's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. It also acknowledged Ukraine's right to defend itself against the aggressor, although it did not specify who that aggressor is. At the same time, according to the Slovak side, the current situation in Ukraine demonstrates that a military solution to the conflict appears unlikely in the near future, while the ongoing war continues to result in further casualties. The government therefore intends to support all international initiatives aimed at achieving a ceasefire and launching peace negotiations, particularly at the level of the EU. Slovakia also adopts an ambivalent stance toward the imposition of new EU sanctions on third countries (presumably referring to Russia), considering them ineffective. The Slovak authorities declare their continued provision of humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, but consistently reject the transfer of military support to the Ukrainian side at the governmental level. This position, however, indicates the possibility of commercial arms sales by state-owned and private defence companies. The new government also advocates more effective use of EU funds to support Slovakia's border regions and greater involvement of Slovak companies in the future reconstruction of Ukraine.

In its programme, the new government identified the restoration of effective cooperation within the Visegrád Group as necessary, arguing that this would contribute to better promotion of common interests and to addressing crises between Slovakia and the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary. In order to deepen Visegrád relations, the implementation of joint projects is planned. The Slovak side intends to continue maintaining above-standard relations with the Czech Republic. The programme emphasises the desire to improve Slovak–Czech cooperation, particularly among the younger generation. The new government attaches particular importance to developing cooperation with Hungary, with which Slovakia shares a similar approach to the war in Ukraine, EU institutional reforms, and EU migration policy.

The programme highlights the intention to continue protecting the Hungarian minority in Slovakia as well as the Slovak minority in Hungary. Relations with Poland are practically omitted in the government programme. Other regional cooperation formats in which Slovakia participates (including the Slavkov Triangle and the Three Seas Initiative) are also not mentioned. The programme likewise makes no reference to the development of cooperation with neighbouring Austria or Germany, which remains Slovakia's main trading partner (*Programové vyhlásenie vlady*, 2023).

The Weakening of European Policy and Transatlantic Relations

Since 2023, Slovakia's European policy has shown a marked shift away from deepening relations with the European Union. Interestingly, previous governments led by Robert Fico had been strongly committed to advancing European integration. In the past, Fico argued for the necessity of joining the "core of the EU" – namely Germany and France – and oversaw Slovakia's accession to the eurozone in 2009 (Ogrodnik, 2018). At present, however, the Slovak government opposes treaty reform, the abandonment of unanimity in decision-making, and the transfer of member state competences to the EU level. At the same time, the government's actions are frequently criticised by EU institutions. The European Parliament and the European Public Prosecutor's Office have expressed concerns about the controversial judicial reform. The European Commission has also suspended its assessment of Recovery and Resilience Facility disbursements and voiced criticism of budget expenditures. The primary point of contention is the amendment of criminal law, which enabled the dissolution of the Special Prosecutor's Office investigating abuses committed by Fico's previous governments, as well as the reduction of penalties for crimes such as corruption. These measures are intended to consolidate Fico's power and shield individuals connected to him from prosecution. The EU has also criticised the current government's takeover of public media and cultural institutions. It is worth noting that, in response to the inclusion of the far-right SNS in the government coalition, the Party of European Socialists suspended Smer–SSD's membership rights.

The policies of Robert Fico's government have led to a deterioration in Slovakia's transatlantic relations. This stems both from the negative assessment of judicial reforms by the U.S. administration of President Joe Biden and from the Slovak cabinet's announcement of a revision of the 2022 bilateral defence

agreement. Smer–SSD portrays this agreement as a limitation on Slovakia's sovereignty, for example by allowing the United States to use Slovak air bases. Changes in transatlantic relations are further marked by the reduction of Slovakia's military assistance to Ukraine. The United States supported Slovakia by providing financial and military assistance, including the transfer of 13 MiG-29 fighter jets (Lewkowicz, 2022; Ogrodnik, 2024). A potential opportunity for revitalising Slovak–American relations is the return of Donald Trump to the presidency. In an effort to improve ties with Washington, Fico participated in the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington in February 2025, the largest gathering of conservative activists. In his speech at the event, he expressed admiration for President Trump's efforts to end the war in Ukraine and emphasised that he understood the reasons behind Russia's initiation of the conflict. He also noted that, like the U.S. president, he had survived an assassination attempt by an opposition activist – an allusion meant to underscore a shared fate between the two leaders. Fico's participation at CPAC was met with criticism from the Slovak opposition (Lewkowicz, 2025b; Silenská, 2025).

Robert Fico's government has also come into conflict with several important Western countries. Since taking power in 2023, Slovakia's relations with the United Kingdom have been rather strained. The first point of contention was an interview given by the Slovak Prime Minister to the Russian television channel *Rossiya-1* in October 2024, in which he criticised the West's stance on the Russo-Ukrainian war and accused Ukraine of unwillingness to end the conflict and of escalating tensions. This drew official criticism from the British ambassador in Bratislava. In March 2025, Slovakia's ambassador to London, Róbert Ondrejcsák, announced his resignation in an open letter to Fico's government. In strong terms, the diplomat criticised the authorities in Bratislava for distancing themselves from Western allies and for pursuing diplomatic rapprochement with Moscow. In July 2025, Prime Minister Fico revealed that earlier in the year ambassadors from several countries, including the United Kingdom, had visited the Constitutional Court. He stated that during the visit discussions allegedly focused on the amendment to the NGO law, which was then under parliamentary debate, as well as on the amendment of Slovakia's constitution. Fico interpreted this as foreign interference in the domestic legislative process. A few weeks ago, during a press briefing, the Prime Minister accused the British authorities of meddling in the 2023 parliamentary elections, citing reports from the British portal *Declassified UK*. According to the

Slovak side, the UK government financed – through the media agency Zinc Network – journalists and influencers supporting the opposition during Slovakia's election campaign. The British authorities responded that their efforts were aimed solely at promoting voter turnout, particularly among young people, and were not intended to support any political party (Weissová & Folentová, 2025; Lewkowicz, 2025c).

An Attempt to Revitalise Regional Cooperation

For the past two years, Slovakia has sought to offset the weakening of its ties with Western partners through intensified cooperation within the Visegrád Group. A marked improvement in relations with Hungary has accompanied the change of government in Slovakia. This was underscored by Prime Minister Fico's visit to Budapest in January 2024 – his second foreign trip after travelling to the Czech Republic. The Slovak government's position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine largely mirrors that of the current Hungarian government. This is reflected in a similar narrative emphasising, among other points, the ineffectiveness of military aid to Ukraine, the country's limited sovereignty, and the need for urgent peace solutions. Slovakia and Hungary are the only EU member states that did not join the declaration of 49 countries condemning the transfer of ballistic missiles from North Korea to Russia and their use against Ukraine. Another significant theme in relations with Budapest is the continued protection of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia (approximately half a million people) and the Slovak minority in Hungary (around 30,000 inhabitants). A frequently cited positive example of Slovak–Hungarian cooperation is the coalition government of 2016–2020, when Smer–SSD and SNS co-governed together with Most-Híd, a party representing the Hungarian minority (Ogrodnik, 2024).

Slovakia seeks to maintain close, above-standard relations with the Czech Republic, although significant differences of opinion are evident regarding the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and policy toward Russia. Traditionally, Prague was the first capital visited by Prime Minister Fico, although certain controversies accompanied the visit. The Slovak Prime Minister's meeting with former Czech Presidents Miloš Zeman and Václav Klaus, as well as the leader of the largest opposition party ANO, Andrej Babiš, was perceived by the Czech side as diplomatically unfriendly. Czech President Petr Pavel initially refused to meet with the Slovak Prime Minister, only changing his position

after intervention by Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová. In 2024, intergovernmental consultations between Slovakia and the Czech Republic were "frozen" due to concerns over Bratislava's potential departure from a Western-oriented policy supporting Ukraine. This issue was linked to a meeting between Slovak Foreign Minister Juraj Blanár and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in Turkey (Dębiec, 2025).

Since the change of government in both countries in 2023, Slovakia's relations with Poland have shown little significant activity, including the absence of high-level official visits. In December 2023, Slovak Foreign Minister Juraj Blanár spoke by telephone with Poland's new Foreign Minister, Radosław Sikorski (Civic Coalition). Both parties emphasised the importance of combating illegal migration, and discussions also covered border controls, European policy, and the situation in Ukraine. In mid-November 2024, Prime Ministers Donald Tusk and Robert Fico met informally in Tatranská Javorina. The discussions included transport infrastructure, Poland's upcoming presidency of the Council of the European Union, and the evolving situation in Ukraine in light of the results of the U.S. presidential elections. Particular attention should be paid to the official visit of President Karol Nawrocki to Bratislava in early November 2025. During talks with Slovak President Peter Pellegrini, the issue of revitalising the Visegrád Group, as well as other regional formats such as the Three Seas Initiative and the Bucharest Nine, was discussed. The discussions also covered energy cooperation, the development of cross-border infrastructure (including the missing Slovak section of Via Carpatia), security issues, and approaches to the European Union's migration policy. Nevertheless, these relations are expected to continue in a sectoral manner, particularly in areas such as cross-border cooperation, infrastructure, and military collaboration (*Nieformalne spotkanie*, 2024; Lewkowicz, 2024; Lewkowicz, 2025a).

Rapprochement with the Kremlin and Ambivalent Policy toward Ukraine

Since Robert Fico's return to power, Slovakia has become, alongside Hungary, Russia's closest political partner within the European Union. The Prime Minister demonstrated his intention to revitalise Slovak–Russian relations by paying an official visit to Moscow on December 22, 2024. Among the few EU leaders who have visited Russia since its invaded Ukraine, he remains the only one who has not first paid a visit to Kyiv. The declared purpose of his trip was

to secure the continuity of gas supplies in the face of their suspension following the expiration of the Russian–Ukrainian transit agreement at the beginning of 2025. The visit formed part of a cycle of bilateral meetings, which also included talks between the Slovak and Russian foreign ministers in March and September 2024. In addition, in January of this year, a delegation of the Slovak parliament led by Deputy Speaker and leader of the co-governing SNS, Andrej Danko, travelled to Moscow. Fico himself took part in the May 2025 celebrations of the anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Moscow. Furthermore, at the beginning of September 2025, he met with President Putin in Beijing during the ceremonies marking the 80th anniversary of the end of the war in Asia (Ogrodnik, 2025; *Fico sa v Pekingu*, 2025).

From the outset of his current term, Fico has avoided criticising Russia's policies, particularly in the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. He presents Russia as a reliable partner with whom relations should be normalised. In practice, this implies a withdrawal from EU sanctions – which he argues harm the EU more than Russia – and a return to economic and energy cooperation. This also includes the supply of nuclear fuel for Slovakia's atomic power plants, which are central to the country's energy mix. Fico has voiced the ambition to host a Russian–Ukrainian peace summit in Slovakia, although at present this prospect appears unlikely. His pro-Russian policy and the Moscow visit were the main triggers for the largest wave of public protests in Slovakia in years, which took place in early 2025.

The intensification of relations with Russia has been accompanied by a worsening of Slovakia's relations with Ukraine. Drawing on pro-Russian sentiments within Slovak society, Fico blames Kyiv for the economic losses resulting from the suspension of gas transit, which, according to Slovak authorities, will cost the country EUR 500 million annually in transit fees. He has threatened to cut electricity supplies and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine unless gas transit resumes – something that currently appears unlikely. Fico's government has reduced Slovakia's military assistance to Ukraine. However, this reduction does not extend to the repair of Ukrainian military equipment or to permission for arms transfers through Slovak territory. Slovakia also continues to support Ukraine in mine clearance operations. Although Bratislava has suspended the delivery of equipment from its own armed forces, it still permits the export of weapons by domestic commercial companies.

The current Slovak government remains firmly opposed to Ukraine's accession to NATO and has recently made its support for Kyiv's integration with

the EU conditional upon continued energy cooperation. The deterioration in Slovak–Ukrainian relations is taking place despite ongoing intergovernmental consultations regularly held in border towns, where discussions focus on bilateral cross-border projects. Moreover, in September 2024, the Slovak government adopted the framework for Slovakia's engagement in Ukraine's reconstruction, anticipating participation by domestic companies (Dębiec, 2024; Ogrodnik, 2025). On September 5, of this year, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Prime Minister Fico held their first bilateral talks in Uzhhorod. The meeting was an attempt to normalise bilateral relations. At a joint press conference with Fico, the Ukrainian leader declared that Ukraine was prepared to ensure Slovakia's energy stability, though not through the use of Russian resources. The two sides also discussed security guarantees for Kyiv. Bratislava reaffirmed its willingness to support Ukraine in its EU integration process. The talks are expected to continue in the format of intergovernmental consultations in the near future (Čorej, 2025).

Opening to the Global South

The Slovak government is strengthening cooperation with China, which had been criticised by previous administrations. This intensification of relations was marked by the elevation of bilateral ties to the level of a strategic partnership during Prime Minister Fico's visit to Beijing in November 2024. During the visit, 13 cooperation agreements were signed, and plans were announced to introduce visa-free travel for Slovak citizens (up to 15 days) as well as to launch a direct air connection between Bratislava and Beijing. Fico's government, hoping to attract Chinese investment, was one of only five EU members opposing the imposition of tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles. It also supported the peace plan announced in May 2024 by China and Brazil – which was criticised by the Ukrainian authorities – aimed at freezing the conflict in its current territorial configuration. The desire to develop Chinese investments in Slovakia, along with Bratislava's support for Beijing's efforts to improve relations with the EU, was reaffirmed during Fico's most recent meeting with Xi Jinping at the September 2025 ceremonies marking the end of the war in Asia (Kowalski, 2024; *Xi tells Slovakia's*, 2025).

Slovakia is also strengthening ties with other important Asian partners. During Prime Minister Fico's visit to Ankara in January of this year, Slovakia established a strategic partnership with Turkey. It signed agreements covering

security – including joint military training and counterterrorism – and energy cooperation. Following the suspension of gas supplies through Ukraine, Slovakia is seeking to secure further Russian gas via the TurkStream pipeline and additional connectors. Discussions on these gas supplies and defence cooperation were the focus of Fico's visit to Azerbaijan in May 2024, which also culminated in the establishment of a strategic partnership. Recognising a "geopolitical and economic shift toward the Indo-Pacific region", Foreign Minister Juraj Blanár announced during his visit to India in February 2024 the creation of a government strategy toward this region. In June 2025, an official Slovak government delegation visited two Central Asian states – Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The delegation was accompanied by a trade mission consisting of Slovak business representatives. The visit aimed not only to bring Bratislava closer politically to these countries but also to stimulate economic cooperation. Discussions focused, among other topics, on the defence industry, oil supplies, and nuclear Energy (*Fico v Uzbekistane*, 2025).

Bratislava is also showing increasing interest in Latin America. In December 2024, Fico became the first Slovak Prime Minister to visit Brazil. During the visit, bilateral agreements were signed covering security, intelligence sharing, and the avoidance of double taxation. Plans were also announced to purchase three Brazilian C-390 transport aircraft for the Slovak Armed Forces. Slovakia supports the conclusion of a European Union–Mercosur partnership agreement, viewing it as an opportunity to attract foreign investment to the country and to safeguard the interests of Slovak businesses abroad (Ogrodnik, 2025).

Summary

Slovakia's foreign policy is largely conditioned and shaped by its geopolitical location, economic circumstances, and social structure. As a landlocked country with a small territory and limited natural resources, Slovakia is dependent on the import of energy resources – particularly from Russia. Slovak society is multinational, with a significant Hungarian minority, which has historically generated tensions in relations with Budapest. Another important factor is the Pan-Slavic political tradition and the absence of traumatic historical experiences with Russia, which contribute to the persistence of pro-Russian tendencies in Slovak public debate and society.

Since Robert Fico's return to power in 2023, there has been a marked weakening of Bratislava's pro-Western orientation. The government has distanced

itself from EU integration reforms. At the same time, actions related to the judiciary and the takeover of public institutions have drawn criticism from Brussels and may result in potential restrictions on EU funding. At the same time, transatlantic relations have deteriorated – Fico has reduced military assistance to Ukraine, questioned bilateral defence agreements with the United States, and openly criticised the West's policy toward the Russia-Ukraine war. As a result, relations with key partners such as the United States and the United Kingdom have become strained.

At the same time, there has been a noticeable rapprochement with Russia. Prime Minister Fico regularly visits Moscow, avoids criticising the Kremlin, and opposes EU sanctions against this country. Bratislava maintains close cooperation in the energy sector, including nuclear fuel. This policy is accompanied by a deterioration of relations with Kyiv – Slovakia blames Ukraine for losses related to the suspension of gas transit, reduces military assistance, and opposes its accession to NATO. Despite this, bilateral contacts continue, mainly in the area of cross-border projects, and Bratislava officially supports Ukraine's integration with the EU.

The government in Bratislava seeks to compensate for weakened ties with the West through regional engagement, although with limited success. It maintains particularly close cooperation with Hungary, with which it shares a similar approach to the war in Ukraine and policy toward Russia. Relations with the Czech Republic and Poland are less intensive – due to differences in foreign policy with Prague, and the lack of broader political initiatives with Warsaw. Cooperation is mainly developed on a sectoral basis and within the framework of the Visegrád Group.

An important element of Slovakia's strategy has also become its opening toward the Global South. Bratislava is strengthening cooperation with China, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and India, aiming to diversify energy supplies and attract direct investment to Slovakia. Strategic agreements have also been signed with Brazil, and Slovakia supports the development of the EU–Mercosur partnership. These actions reflect an attempt to diversify the directions of foreign policy, but at the same time they distance Slovakia from its traditional allies within the EU and NATO.

All the research hypotheses posed at the outset can be considered positively verified: (1) The text clearly indicates a distancing from deepening European integration, a reduction of cooperation with the United States and NATO, and an opening toward Russia, China, and other Global South

countries. This represents a qualitative shift compared to the country's previously strongly pro-Western orientation. (2) Bratislava's pro-Russian stance is evident, including opposition to sanctions, criticism of Ukraine, and closer ties with Hungary in contrast to the rest of the EU. Slovakia and Hungary were the only EU member states that did not sign a joint declaration condemning the transfer of weapons from North Korea to Russia, confirming the reinforcement of internal divisions within the EU. (3) The text emphasises that the pro-Russian narrative and criticism of the West align with societal sentiments (a strong Pan-Slavic tradition, Russophilia, and Euroscepticism among parts of the population). Judicial reforms and actions toward the EU also serve to consolidate Fico's power and protect his political base. (4) Fico's policies are leading to a deterioration of relations with the EU, internal isolation within the Union, and a reduction of trust from Western partners. There is a risk of suspension of EU funds, criticism from European institutions, and tensions with key allies. In the long term, this may weaken Slovakia's position within Euro-Atlantic structures.

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„NA CZTERY STRONY ŚWIATA" – UWARUNKOWANIA I IMPLEMENTACJA POLITYKI ZAGRANICZNEJ CZWARTEGO RZĄDU ROBERTA FICO

Streszczenie

Powołany na jesieni 2023 r. koalicyjny rząd Roberta Ficy (Smer-SSD) na Słowacji od początku realizuje politykę zagraniczną „otwarcia na cztery strony świata". W praktyce oznacza ona dystans wobec UE i NATO, ograniczanie pomocy dla Ukrainy i przede wszystkim intensyfikację relacji z partnerami pozaunijnymi, głównie państwami BRICS. Reorientacja polityki zagranicznej stanowi wyzwanie dla współpracy regionalnej i rozwoju stosunków polsko-słowackich. Celem artykułu jest analiza uwarunkowań i najważniejszych kierunków polityki zagranicznej rządu R. Fico w latach 2023–2025 (polityka europejska i transatlantycka, współpraca regionalna, polityka wschodnia i otwarcie na Globalne Południe). W pracy wykorzystano analizę jakościową treści, metodę porównawczą oraz analizę dyskursu.

Słowa kluczowe: Słowacja, polityka zagraniczna, Robert Fico

Author Contributions (Wkład autorów)

Conceptualization (Konceptualizacja): Łukasz Lewkowicz
Data curation (Zestawienie danych): Łukasz Lewkowicz
Formal analysis (Analiza formalna): Łukasz Lewkowicz
Writing – original draft (Piśmiennictwo – oryginalny projekt): Łukasz Lewkowicz
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Biographical note

Dr Łukasz Lewkowicz is an assistant professor at the Institute of Political Sciences and Administration at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. His research focuses on Polish-Slovak relations, Slovakia's internal and foreign policy, cross-border coop-

eration, and the functioning of the Visegrad Group and the Three Seas Initiative. He is the author of monographs such as *Euroregions on the Polish-Slovak Borderland: Genesis and Functioning* and *The Russian Federation in the Internal and Foreign Policy of the Slovak Republic (1993–2020)*. Dr. Lewkowicz serves as a senior analyst at the Institute of Central Europe and collaborates with the Regional Centers for International Debate in Poland. He has received numerous academic awards, including scholarships from the Minister of Science and Higher Education, and actively promotes UMCS internationally.

Notka biograficzna

Dr Łukasz Lewkowicz jest adiunktem w Instytucie Nauk o Polityce i Administracji Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie. Jego badania koncentrują się na stosunkach polsko-słowackich, polityce wewnętrznej i zagranicznej Słowacji, współpracy transgranicznej oraz funkcjonowaniu Grupy Wyszehradzkiej i Inicjatywy Trójmorza. Jest autorem monografii, m.in. *Euroregiony na pograniczu polsko-słowackim: geneza i funkcjonowanie* oraz *Federacja Rosyjska w polityce wewnętrznej i zagranicznej Republiki Słowackiej (1993–2020)*. Dr Lewkowicz jest starszym analitykiem w Instytucie Europy Środkowej i współpracuje z Regionalnymi Ośrodkami Debaty Międzynarodowej w Polsce. Jest laureatem licznych nagród naukowych, w tym stypendiów Ministra Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego, i aktywnie promuje UMCS na arenie międzynarodowej.