

Matej Šimalčík

Slovakia in East Asia: no longer naive, still not committed

In 2020, Slovakia's relations with East Asia changed significantly as a consequence of domestic and international disruptions.

First, a new government was formed following the February 2020 general elections. The elections brought to an end the almost 15-year-long domination of *Smer–Sociálna demokracia* [Smer–Social Democracy] in Slovak politics.¹ After the elections, a broad coalition of four right-of-center parties was formed, headed by Prime Minister Igor Matovič, from *Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti* [Ordinary People and Independent Personalities] (*OLaNO*), a political movement. The domestic political change caused a profound shift in the ideological basis of Slovakia's approach to international affairs, including relations with countries in East Asia.

The second highly disruptive event, which rocked Slovak relations with East Asia, is the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, which spread from the Chinese city of Wuhan to the rest of the world in early 2020. The disruptive effects have not only complicated diplomacy, but also highlighted the systemic fragility of relations with some countries (especially China), and opened up new areas for potential cooperation.

¹ Prime ministers from the *Smer–SD* led governments in 2006–2010, 2012–2016, and 2016–2020. During the 2010–2012 intermezzo, the Slovak government was led by Prime Minister Iveta Radičová from a right-of-center party, the *SDKÚ–DS* [the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union–Democratic Party]

■ Perceptions of East Asian countries in Slovakia

Domestically, perceptions of East Asian countries among both the general public and politicians acts as an important driver of Slovakia's engagement with these countries, and are a source of legitimacy for specific policies.

A recent public opinion survey conducted by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies and Sinophone Borderlands at Palacký University Olomouc found, that among a sample of seven East Asian countries, only Japan attracts predominantly positive views among Slovak respondents – 47.3 per cent of Slovaks see it positively or very positively, while 24.0 per cent see it negatively (the remainder are neutral). In the case of the remaining six countries/territories, negative opinions prevail over positive ones, most notably in the case of North Korea, China, and India.²

The survey also shows that the Slovak public distinguishes between the various Chinese-speaking communities, as public perceptions of Hong Kong and Taiwan are less negative compared to mainland China. As much as 42.3 per cent of Slovak respondents perceived China either negatively or very negatively. Whereas perceptions of both Taiwan and Hong Kong, were less negative by approximately 10 percentage points.³

Past research on the perceptions of East Asian countries among Slovak politicians has focused exclusively on China. Yet, based on the politicians' opinions on China we can obtain some insights into their views on other East Asian countries.

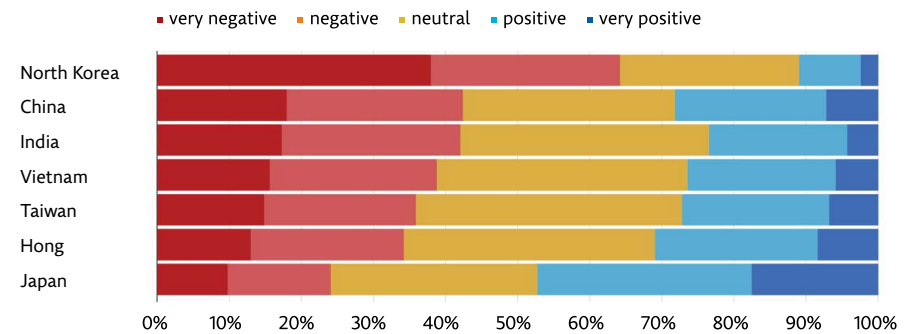
Slovak political parties can be grouped into three clusters according to their perceptions of China: pragmatic supporters (*Smer-SD*, *Hlas-SD* [Voice-Social Democracy], *SNS* [Slovak National Party]); ideological supporters (selected *Smer-SD* politicians, *ĽSNS* [People's Party Our Slovakia]); and ideological opponents (*SaS* [Freedom and Solidarity], *OĽANO*, *Progresívne Slovensko* (*PS*))

² M. Šimalčík et al., "Slovak public opinion on China in the age of Covid-19: caught between values and conspiracies," Central European Institute of Asian Studies 2020. Available online: https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/SK-poll-report_FINAL.pdf (accessed on February 25, 2021).

³ Ibid

[Progressive Slovakia], etc.).⁴ Before the 2020 general elections, Slovak policy towards China (and East Asia) was determined by a group of pragmatic and ideological supporters.

Figure 1. Slovak public perceptions of selected East Asian countries



Source: M. Šimalčík et al., "Slovak public opinion on China in the age of Covid-19: caught between values and conspiracies," op. cit

Following the elections, the new government consisted of "ideological opponents" to China. Their views of China are mainly informed by their support for democracy and human rights. As China is neither democratic nor keen on human rights, they tend to view China in a negative light.⁵ This dynamic can also be observed among the voters of these parties, as voters of parties with negative views of China tend to have a more negative view of China. Even though no political party has a majority of voters with a positive attitude towards China, the two pro-China parties, *Smer-SD* and *Hlas-SD*, have the highest share of supporters with a positive perception of China. On the other hand, *PS* has the lowest share of supporters that are positive about China.

This is inversely mirrored in voters' attitudes towards Taiwan and Hong Kong. Supporters of *Smer-SD* are among those with the least favorable views of

⁴ M. Šimalčík, "Image of China in Slovakia: ambivalence, adoration, and fake news," *Asia Europe Journal*, March 3, 2021. Available online: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10308-021-00597-4> (accessed on March 3, 2021).

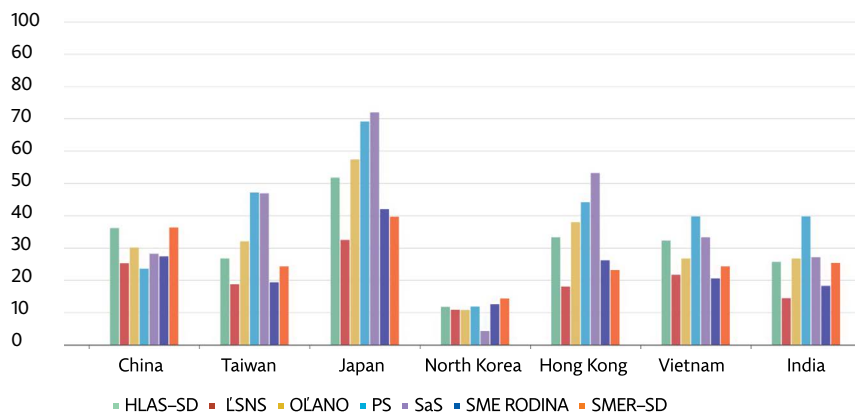
⁵ Ibid

both Taiwan and Hong Kong, while *SaS* and *PS* supporters have the highest share of supporters with favorable views of both.

Even though Japan is the most positively perceived country across all parties, this support is lowest among supporters of *ĽSNS*, *Sme rodina* [We are family], and *Smer-SD*.

A notable case is the neo-Nazi *ĽSNS* party, which has a low share of supporters with a positive perception of any of the countries included in the poll. It is also interesting to note the difference between voters of *Hlas-SD* and *Smer-SD*. While supporters of these two parties have similar views of China and India, supporters of *Hlas-SD* have more positive views on the remaining countries/territories (except for North Korea). This suggests that after the split of the *Smer-SD* party in 2020, *Hlas-SD* attracted the more internationalist portion of *Smer-SD*'s electorate.⁶

Figure 2. Perceptions of East Asian countries among voters of political parties polling over 5 per cent (share of respondents with positive and very positive perceptions)



⁶ R. Q. Turcsányi et al., "Sinophone Borderlands Europe Survey," [dataset] Palacký University Olomouc, 2020.

■ Economic relations

When it comes to economic relations with East Asia, the most important players for Slovakia are South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and China, as well as several ASEAN countries.

In bilateral trade, Slovakia maintained a negative trade balance with all major East Asian economies in 2020. The largest trade deficit was recorded with Vietnam, followed by South Korea, and China.

Despite the high trade imbalance, China remained Slovakia's largest trading partner from among the East Asian economies, both in terms of imports and exports. In 2020, imports from China accounted for 6.7 per cent of overall imports (€4.9 bn). Exports accounted for 2.7 per cent of Slovakia's overall exports (€2.1 bn). South Korea accounted for 4.9 per cent of Slovak imports (€3.5 bn) and 0.5 per cent of Slovak exports (€334 m). Imports from Vietnam were also high, accounting for 5 per cent of overall imports (€3.6 bn), but Slovak exports to Vietnam remained marginal (€36.7 m).⁷

It should be noted, though, that the actual exposure of Slovakia towards East Asian economies is likely to be higher than the bilateral trade data suggest if the re-export of goods is accounted for. Slovakia is firmly integrated within global value chains. This means that a proportion of the products imported by or produced in Slovakia is exported elsewhere (mainly EU markets) and from there they are again exported to their final destination. Previous research on economic exposure to China has shown that when these re-exports are accounted for, the real economic exposure to China is approximately

⁷ "Total import and Total export by continents and economic groupings," Statistical Office of Slovakia, March 11, 2021. Available online: [http://statdat.statistics.sk/cognosex/cgi-bin/cognos.cgi?b_action=cognosViewer&ui.action=run&ui.object=storeID\(%22i10B2CB52FFF44B-319DA31F65A3FFE155%22\)&ui.name=Celkov%20dovoz%20a%20celkov%20v%20v%20pod%20pod%20c4%bea%20kontinentov%20a%20ekonomick%20zozoskupen%20kraj%20v%20roku%202014%20%5bzo0002ms%5d&run.outputFormat=&run.prompt=true&cv.header=false&ui.backURL=%2fcognosex%2fcps4%2fport-lets%2fcommon%2fclose.html&run.outputLocale=en](http://statdat.statistics.sk/cognosex/cgi-bin/cognos.cgi?b_action=cognosViewer&ui.action=run&ui.object=storeID(%22i10B2CB52FFF44B-319DA31F65A3FFE155%22)&ui.name=Celkov%20dovoz%20a%20celkov%20v%20v%20pod%20pod%20c4%bea%20kontinentov%20a%20ekonomick%20zozoskupen%20kraj%20v%20roku%202014%20%5bzo0002ms%5d&run.outputFormat=&run.prompt=true&cv.header=false&ui.backURL=%2fcognosex%2fcps4%2fport-lets%2fcommon%2fclose.html&run.outputLocale=en) (accessed on February 28, 2021).

3.5 times higher.⁸ A similar trend is most likely to apply to other East Asian countries as well.

Naturally, the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted bilateral trade with East Asian countries as well. Among the seven countries for which the Statistical Office records data, all but one saw their exports shrink in 2020 compared to the previous year. The largest decrease was in Japanese exports to Slovakia, which in 2020 reached only 75 per cent of their 2019 value. On the other hand, Slovak exports to East Asia were not impacted by the pandemic. Slovak exports to five out of the seven monitored countries have increased. The rise was most significant in the case of China, Japan, Taiwan, and Malaysia.

The pandemic has also opened up new avenues of trade cooperation. Throughout 2020, trade in personal protective equipment (PPE) and other pandemic-related articles (e.g. testing kits) became a regular part of Slovakia–East Asia trade. Antigen testing kits were largely supplied from South Korea, which were used to identify people infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus, as part of efforts to suppress the spread of Covid-19 in Slovakia.⁹ Face masks and other protective equipment were supplied from China in the main, but also from other East Asian countries. The adverse side of this is that dependency on a single supplying country can pose a security risk in a time of crisis.

However, trade is only one part of the whole picture of economic relations between Slovakia and East Asia. Equally important, if not more so, are investments. As the available data on foreign direct investment stocks by East Asian countries differ significantly according to the methodology used, the official statistics may not provide a full picture of how Slovakia is benefiting from the presence of various East Asian investors. This is mostly due to the fact that some methodologies take into account reverse flows of capital, while others do not take indirect investments into account.

⁸ “German-Central European supply chain-cluster report,” *Country Report* No. 13/263, International Monetary Fund, 2013. Available online: <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2016/12/31/German-Central-European-Supply-Chain-Cluster-Report-Staff-Report-First-Background-Note-40881> (accessed on February 25, 2021). M. Šebeňa. “Chinese trade and investment in the Visegrad countries: mapping increased exposure and volatility,” *China-CEE Institute Working Paper*, No. 11, 2018. Available online: <https://ceias.eu/chinese-trade-and-investment-in-the-visegrad-countries-2/> (accessed on February 25, 2021).

⁹ M. Šimalčík et al., “Slovakia and the democracies of Northeast Asia: Partnerships rooted in values,” *Central European Institute of Asian Studies*, 2020. Available online: <https://ceias.eu/slovakia-and-the-democracies-of-northeast-asia/> (accessed on February 25, 2021).

Table 1. Trade relations with selected East Asian economies

	■ imports (€m)	■ share of overall imports (%)	■ imports index 2020/2019	■ exports (€m)	■ share of overall exports (%)	■ exports index 2020/2019	■ trade balance (€m)
China	4853.4	6.7	96.2	2054.1	2.7	121.1	-2799.3
India	271.4	0.4	97.9	85.2	0.1	85.2	-186.2
Japan	414.2	0.6	74.5	199.2	0.3	114.8	-215.0
Malaysia	587.1	0.8	120.0	15.7	0.0	113.4	-571.4
South Korea	3535.9	4.9	82.6	334.2	0.4	94.0	-3201.7
Taiwan	349.0	0.5	85.6	33.4	0.0	113.6	-315.5
Vietnam	3638.1	5.0	89.5	36.7	0.0	107.2	-3601.3

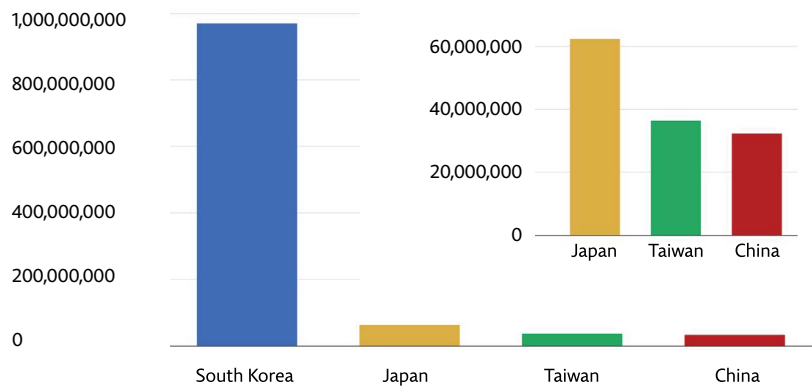
Source: “Total import and Total export by continents and economic groupings,” op. cit.

To overcome these methodological conundrums, income tax payments are used in this paper as a proxy measure.

Comparing investors from four Northeast Asian countries – South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and China – we can observe that over the past ten years, Slovakia has reaped the most benefits from the presence of South Korean investors. Between 2010 and 2019, South Korean companies paid almost €1 billion in income taxes. The remaining three countries pale in comparison. Japanese companies generated approximately €62 million in income taxes, followed by Taiwan (€36 m), and China (€32 m).¹⁰ Over the past ten years, income tax payments by Korean, Taiwanese, and Chinese companies operating in Slovakia have risen. However, the trend is stagnant for Japan. Overall, the amount of taxes paid by Northeast investors tripled between 2010 (€51.5 m) and 2019 (€144.3 m).

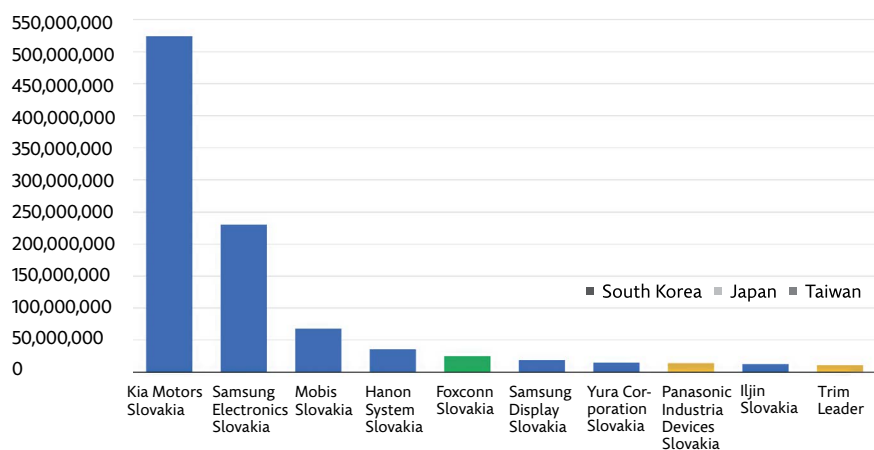
¹⁰ Data available online: www.finstat.sk. The lists of companies/investors from South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan were obtained from the respective embassies in Slovakia. As the Chinese embassy did not provide such a list, one was compiled by the author from open sources.

Figure 3. Income tax payments by Northeast Asian investors in Slovakia (2010–2019; in €)



As far as individual investors go, the largest taxpayers are the Korean companies Kia Motors Slovakia and Samsung Electronics Slovakia. Kia Motors Slovakia accounts for 47.6 per cent of all income taxes paid by East Asian companies in the past ten years, while Samsung Electronics Slovakia accounts for 20.9 per cent. The list of the top 10 taxpayers in the past ten years includes seven companies from South Korea, one Taiwanese company, and two Japanese companies. No Chinese companies feature in the top 10 list.

Figure 4. Investors from Northeast Asia in Slovakia – top 10 income taxpayers (2010–2019, in €).



Another useful proxy measure for calculating the economic benefits of the presence of Northeast Asian investors in Slovakia is employment data.¹¹

Rather unsurprisingly, in 2020, South Korean companies employed the most people (between 11.5–19.7 thousand workers), closely followed by Japanese companies (between 7 and 13.5 thousand workers). Next are Chinese companies (between 4 and 7.8 thousand workers). Then companies from Taiwan with the lowest number of employees (between 2.1 and 4.2 thousand workers).¹²

Among the companies that employ at least 1,000 workers, four are from South Korea, three from Japan, one from China, and one from Taiwan.

It is worth noting the different contributions by Japanese companies in terms of taxes and in terms of employment. While tax contributions by Japanese companies were equivalent to only 6 per cent of the South Korean contributions, in terms of employment, Japanese companies are close behind the Korean ones.

This is partially due to the fact that many Japanese companies operating in Slovakia are embedded into the Kia Motors value chain, producing and supplying parts that are installed into Kia-produced cars. While these products can be similarly labor-intensive, the added value of these intermediate products is much lower.

A specific issue in 2020, relating to the crossover point in economic and political relations, was the negotiation of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) between the EU and China. After several years of negotiations, the finalization of the talks was rushed through the EU Council in the final weeks of December by the German presidency.¹³ The compromise negotiated by the EU Commission has already been criticized by several MEPs

¹¹ As the Statistical Office records categories of employers according to size only (e.g. a company with 1,000–1,999 workers), and does not provide precise figures, the following data are an estimation only.

¹² Data available online: www.finstat.sk. The lists of companies/investors from South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, were obtained from the respective embassies in Slovakia. As the Chinese embassy did not provide such a list, one was compiled by the author from open sources.

¹³ J. Carafano, A. Gupta, J. Smith. "The pitfalls of the China-EU Comprehensive Agreement on Investment," *The Diplomat*, January 22, 2021. Available online: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/the-pitfalls-of-the-china-eu-comprehensive-agreement-on-investment/> (accessed on February 25, 2021).

(including Slovak ones) and think-tank experts,¹⁴ on the grounds that it does not sufficiently deal with forced labor in China, and does not provide for equal market access to crucial sectors, for example, the media industry.¹⁵

If the treaty is ratified, it will impact on all aspects of relations with China. Despite this, there has been no public debate in Slovakia, suggesting that relations with China are not a priority for Slovak representatives in the EU institutions.

■ Political relations and security policy

Political change and the Covid-19 pandemic caused significant disruption in political relations with East Asian countries as well.

As was already outlined, following the 2020 general elections, a government coalition with a more value-based approach to foreign policy took power. Naturally, this has impacted on the government's approach to East Asia, especially China.

In the past, human rights issues in China were treated as merely a foreign policy addendum at best and a useless distraction from economic cooperation at worst. Any form of dissent on the part of domestic political actors was met with stern criticism. But after years of ignoring human rights in its foreign policy toward China, Slovakia became a vocal critic of China in 2020.

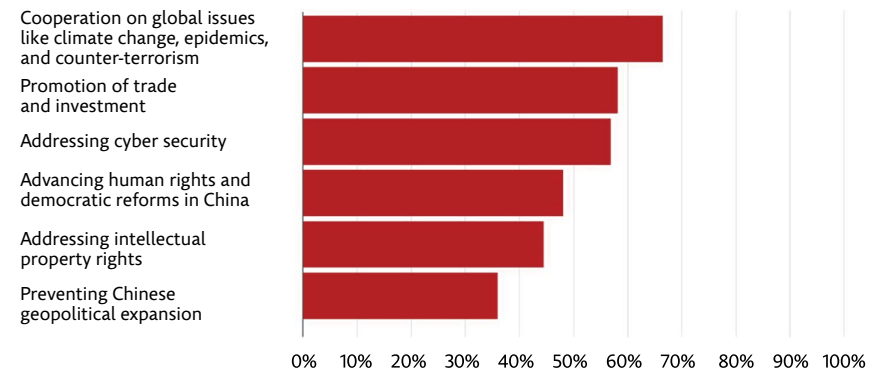
Notable actions on human rights in China included a call for the release of Panchen Lama and other political prisoners, decrying the unilateral imposition of security legislation on Hong Kong and the dismantling of its electoral system, and atrocities committed against the Uyghur population of Xinjiang.

¹⁴ E.g. F. Godement et al., "EU should not rush investment deal with China," *EU Observer*, December 18, 2020. Available online: <https://euobserver.com/opinion/150432> (accessed on February 25, 2021).

¹⁵ S. Lau, J. Hanke Vela, "EU deal cements China's advantage in media war," *Politico*, March 13, 2021. Available online: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-trade-deal-china-media-war-industry-soft-power/> (accessed on March 14, 2021).

Concerning the Covid-19 pandemic, Slovak representatives have objected to Chinese misinformation and mask diplomacy, and voiced support for Taiwan's accession to the World Health Organization (WHO).¹⁶

Figure 5. Slovak public's foreign policy preferences on China



Source: M. Šimalčík et al., "Slovak public opinion on China in the age of Covid-19: Caught between values and conspiracies," Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2020. Available online: https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/SK-poll-report_FINAL.pdf (accessed on February 25, 2021).

However, it should be noted that most of these activities were carried out by legislators within the Slovak parliament and/or the European Parliament rather than the executive branch. Executive action was notable in October 2020, when Slovakia co-signed a joint statement alongside 39 other countries on the mistreatment of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities and objecting to the adoption of the National Security Law for Hong Kong. Slovakia was the only V4 country to sign the statement.¹⁷ When a similar statement was presented

¹⁶ M. Šimalčík, "Slovakia: a new challenger of China's human rights record?," *The Diplomat*, August 17, 2020. Available online: <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/slovakia-a-new-challenger-of-chinas-human-rights-record/> (accessed on February 25, 2021).

¹⁷ "Joint statement on the human rights situation in Xinjiang and the recent developments in Hong Kong, delivered by Germany on behalf of 39 countries," October 6, 2020. Available online: <https://usun.usmission.gov/joint-statement-on-the-human-rights-situation-in-xinjiang-and-the-recent-developments-in-hong-kong-delivered-by-germany-on-behalf-of-39-countries/> (accessed on February 25, 2021).

a year earlier, Slovakia was among the absentees, which confirms that the domestic political change has impacted on Slovakia's official position on Xinjiang.¹⁸

A public opinion survey has shown that almost 50 per cent of the Slovak population believes that addressing human rights and democratic reforms in China should be one of the priorities of Slovak foreign policy on China. Voters of *SaS*, *PS*, and *OLaNO* are most strongly in favor of this, from among the relevant political parties. On the other hand, voters of *ĽSNS* and *Smer-SD* consider this policy option least desirable.

Other policy options are deemed even more desirable, even among those who recognize the necessity for a human-rights dimension in foreign policy. Almost 70 per cent of the Slovak population favor cooperation on global issues like climate change, epidemics, and counter-terrorism, followed by the promotion of trade and investment (almost 60 per cent of respondents). This suggests a preference for a pragmatic engagement alongside a strong human-rights foreign policy dimension.¹⁹

Human rights are not the only dimension of political relations with East Asia that changed during 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic interrupted the steadily developing interaction with many East Asian democracies. To illustrate, Slovakia and Japan were supposed to celebrate the centennial of their mutual relations in 2020. This was to be accompanied by cultural and other events which, however, were largely put on hold due to the pandemic.²⁰

Security policy was also impacted by the pandemic. Besides recognizing the interplay between public health and national security, we came to realize that dependence on a single source of strategic inputs is a security risk. During the pandemic, dependence on supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) from China illustrated this problem. Before the pandemic, China

had been responsible for half the global production of PPE. While this was enough to satisfy demand under normal circumstances, during the period of heightened demand in the first half of 2020, the lack of production facilities outside of China, especially in Europe, proved highly problematic.²¹

A similar problem caused by the pandemic became visible in March 2021, when a global shortage of semiconductors (imported – directly or indirectly – from Taiwan, China, and other East Asian countries) caused disruptions in Slovak automotive production.²² Since vehicle exports account for almost 27 per cent of Slovakia's overall exports,²³ prolonged disruption in the supply of semiconductors from East Asia could prove devastating for this crucial sector of the economy.

Slovak political representation and the expert community began to recognize that China and its behavior posed other security risks, beyond those related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Several official documents point to this, especially the newly adopted Security Strategy. Reflecting the positions of the European Union, it describes China as a partner to cooperate with on global challenges, an economic and technological competitor, and a systemic rival. The key passage in the Security Strategy reads:

China is significantly increasing its power potential and political influence, based on rapidly growing military capabilities, which, combined with economic strength and strategic investment, are assertively used to

¹⁸ Z. Basu. "More countries join condemnation of China over Xinjiang abuses," *AXIOS*, October 8, 2020. Available online: <https://www.axios.com/un-statement-china-uighurs-xinjiang-6b29dbf5-b93c-4c70-bd4c-333e1c23471f.html> (accessed on February 25, 2021).

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ M. Šimalčík et al., "Slovakia and the democracies of Northeast Asia: Partnerships rooted in values," Central European Institute of Asian Studies, 2020. Available online: <https://ceias.eu/slovakia-and-the-democracies-of-northeast-asia/> (accessed on February 25, 2021).

²¹ M. Šimalčík. "Ako pandémie odhalila rozsah celosvetovej závislosti zdravotníctva od Číny," [How the pandemic revealed the extent of global healthcare dependence on China] *DenníkN*, March 27, 2020. Available online: <https://dennikn.sk/1824806/ako-pandemia-odhalila-rozsah-celosvetovej-zavislosti-zdravotnictva-od-ciny/?ref=list> (accessed on February 28, 2021).

²² R. Tomek, "Problém s čipmi dorazil zatiaľ len do Trnavy, výroba v ďalších automobilkách je bez problémov," [The problem with chips has so far only reached Trnava, production at other car manufacturers is problem free] *DenníkE*, March 15, 2021. Available online: <https://e.dennikn.sk/2311843/problem-s-cipmi-dorazil-zatial-len-do-trnavy-vyroba-v-dalsich-automobilkach-je-bez-problemov/?ref=mwat> (accessed on March 15, 2021); "Nedostatok polovodičov vo výrobe pocítil aj bratislavský Volkswagen," [The lack of semiconductors also affected Volkswagen in Bratislava] *Živé*, March 18, 2021. Available online: <https://zive.aktuality.sk/clanok/151672/nedostatok-polovodicov-vo-vyrobe-pocitil-aj-bratislavsky-volkswagen/> (accessed on March 18, 2021).

²³ Data as of 2018, see Atlas of Economic Complexity. Available online: <https://atlas.cid.harvard.edu/explore?country=206&product=undefined&year=2018&productClass=HS&target=Product&partner=undefined&startYear=1995> (accessed on February 28, 2021).

advance Chinese interests. China promotes its own style of governance and a different understanding of human rights and freedoms; the Slovak Republic will take this into account in mutual relations, as well as its positions within international organizations.²⁴

Besides this discussion on China, the new Security Strategy also deals with some of the security risks which apply to China. These include the threat of authoritarian states represent to democracy, the spread of disinformation and propaganda, and the impact of corrosive capital on security.

■ Way forward

Despite the developments outlined above, Slovakia still lacks a clear strategy on how to deal with the East Asian region in its entirety, and the individual countries. Previous attempts to develop policy guidelines for relations with China were inherently flawed, as they focused only on economic relations, while altogether ignoring the political, security, and human rights dimensions. Compared to the past, we can say that Slovakia is no longer naive about its dealings with East Asia, especially with China, but it is still not fully committed to developing relations with the countries in the region.

There are indications that this may change soon, as the 2021 annual foreign policy plan lists starting work on Slovakia's Asia-Pacific Strategy as one of the tasks for the year.²⁵

For effective and beneficial relations with East Asian countries, this new policy should as a minimum focus on the following aspects:

- Slovak economic relations with South Korea and Japan are already on a high level, while interaction on a political level has been neglected in the past. Catching up in this realm should be a top priority, which grows ever more urgent as the global geopolitical and geo-economic centers of gravity move steadily towards the Indo-Pacific region. Improving political relations could also provide a new boost for economic relations;
- future engagements with China should be based on a rigorous cost-benefit analysis which takes into account not only the potential economic benefits but also the impact on national security, as well as possible reputational costs;
- to deal with the new security challenges posed by China, Slovakia does not need to "re-invent the wheel." Many Slovak allies and partners among the East Asian democracies have long-term experience of countering hybrid threats posed by China. Slovakia should therefore exchange lessons learned and best practices with these countries. NGO sectors could act as an intermediary in this dialogue;
- Slovakia is not an active player in South East Asia when it comes to official development aid. Slovakia's experience of economic and political transition, as well as the adoption of good governance reforms, could be one of the signature aspects of Slovak ODA in South East Asia;
- as Slovakia does not recognize Taiwan, but nevertheless maintains beneficial relations with it, the new Asia-Pacific Strategy should be used to set out Slovakia's own view of the "One China Policy" and suitable levels of engagement with the island. This will make Slovak engagement with Taiwan more predictable, and provide bureaucrats across governmental agencies with guidelines on how to deal with Taiwan in the future.

The lack of personnel to deal with East Asia remains a challenge for Slovakia.²⁶ As the pandemic has chipped away at disposable financial resources, the prospects of successfully dealing with this challenge remain bleak.

²⁴ "Bezpečnosť stratégie Slovenskej republiky," [Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic] Government of the Slovak Republic, 2021. Available online: https://www.vlada.gov.sk/data/files/8048_bezpecnostna-strategia-sr-2021.pdf (accessed on February 28, 2021).

²⁵ "Zahraničná a európska politika Slovenskej republiky v roku 2021: Slovensko a svet v čase pandémie," [Foreign and European policy of the Slovak Republic in 2021: Slovakia and the world in the pandemic era] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovakia, February 2021. Available online: <https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/4238286/2021-Zahrani%C4%8Dna-a-europ-ska-politika-SR-v-roku-2021.pdf> (accessed on March 3, 2021).

²⁶ M. Šimalčík, "Slovak relations with East Asia: A lost decade?" in P. Brezáni (ed.), *Yearbook of Slovakia's Foreign Policy 2019*. Bratislava: Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, 2020. Available online: http://www.sfpa.sk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Rocenka_2019_web.pdf (accessed on March 3, 2021).

This makes anchoring Slovakia's approach to East Asia within the common EU approach all the more important. Nonetheless the 2021 foreign policy plans rightly note that Slovak policy towards the region needs to be embedded in the common EU position. However, it is necessary to recognize the Slovakia must act as co-creator and co-owner of the common EU approach, and not put itself in the role of a mere follower. Successful engagement with East Asia can only be achieved if Slovakia manages to actively shape EU policy with the aim of ensuring that it reflects Slovak interests as much as possible. Cooperation on this with other smaller member states with similar interests will be crucial.

