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Slovakia's relations with Asia-Pacific in light of the snap election

The year 2023 was characterized by political entropy, resulting in the collapse of the government of prime minister Eduard Heger, the appointment of a caretaker government under prime minister Ľudovít Ódor, and subsequent snap parliamentary elections that ushered in the government of Prime Minister Robert Fico, his fourth non-consecutive term in office.

Naturally this fragmentation impacted all areas of political life, and foreign policy was no exception. Relations with East Asia have manifested in very different views among the political parties, ultimately resulting in yet another policy shift following the appointment of Robert Fico and his administration.

■ East Asia makes it into the election campaign¹

In Slovak politics, Asia-related topics tend to be ignored in election campaigns. The 2023 parliamentary election and preceding campaign are an exception to this rule. An analysis of the party manifestos revealed quite varied views of East Asian affairs in general and, more specifically, of China and Taiwan.

The political parties Smer–SSD, Hlas–SD, SNS, and Republika generally exhibited China-friendly positions, largely grounded in the perceived economic opportunities. On the other side of the spectrum, parties like the KDH, SaS,

¹ This section is adapted from M. Šimalčík, B. Pavlovičová, "Peking alebo Taipei? Politické strany nemajú zhodu," [Beijing or Taipei? Political parties are not aligned] CEIAS, September 27, 2023. Available online: <https://ceias.eu/peking-alebo-taipei-politicke-strany-nemaju-zhodu/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

Democrats, or Hnutie Slovensko (formerly OĽANO) expressed far more critical views of China in their election manifestos, and at times very positive views of Taiwan. Among the relevant political parties, SNS, Progressive Slovakia, and SaS failed to make proper mention of China, Taiwan, or the broader Asian region in their political programs.

Smer–SSD promoted its idea of a foreign policy aimed “in all four cardinal directions” and the “return of sovereignty” in practice. China is mentioned in the context of the growing conflict between the US, the European Union, and China as a result of the Chinese Communist Party’s close cooperation with Russia. The EU and US are blamed for the deterioration in relations. Smer–SSD also communicated China’s talking points about the Russian invasion of Ukraine during the election campaign, and applauded China for publishing a policy paper on a political settlement for the conflict (sometimes incorrectly labeled as “China’s peace plan”). The party’s position was not surprising, though. Smer–SSD representatives have long advocated a pragmatic policy toward China, while repeatedly spreading propaganda and disinformation in public discourse that has been taken from Chinese sources.

Hlas–SD made only cursory references to China in its election manifesto, calling for deeper economic ties with China.

The far-right Republika was another party wishing to promote economic ties with China. Its election manifesto uncritically adopted an image of China as a source of political and economic growth and promised to strengthen trade relations and increase the share of investments in Slovakia. On Taiwan, Republika explicitly subscribed to the one-China policy.

Regarding discussion of China, KDĽ’s program was the most comprehensive. The KDĽ saw China as a “long-term complex threat to the democratic world,” and it was the only party to draw attention to violations of international law and norms, the repressive policies against Taiwan, and human rights abuses inside and outside the country. The KDĽ was aiming at the protection of the “single market, together with the protection of critical infrastructure and intellectual property, as well as the protection of the digital sovereignty of citizens’ personal data from misuse,” and coordination of these policies at the European or global level.

OĽANO mentioned China in the context of economic and economic diplomacy, but also pointed to the potential risks of such cooperation. Economic relations should not override the Slovakia’s foreign and security policy values. Among other things, OĽANO was interested in strengthening cooperation with Taiwan in the field of technology, supporting “the conclusion of

a bilateral investment agreement at EU level and the establishment of chip production in Slovakia.”

The Democrats explicitly called for freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights to be strengthened around the world, including in China. They also called for deeper relations with Taiwan as a prospective partner.

■ Manifesto of the Government points to a new approach

Ultimately, the views of Smer–SSD and its partners in Hlas–SD and SNS became part of official governmental policy once the government took office in November 2023. The government’s manifesto noted the following:

The government views with concern the attempts to erect a new Iron Curtain between the West and the East. The Slovak Republic intends to pursue a sovereign foreign policy in all four cardinal directions under its membership of the European Union and NATO. Taking into account the shift of the geopolitical and economic center of gravity to the Indo-Pacific region, the government will deepen and significantly strengthen diplomatic and economic activities in this area. Emphasis will be placed on the countries of the Global South and particularly on areas with traditional political and economic ties to Slovakia.²

While the pledge to deepen relations with Indo–Pacific (or Asia–Pacific) countries is commendable in and of itself, it needs to be stressed that it must go hand in hand with a greater political understanding of the region and more attention being paid to the potential security implications, since the region is home to a number of authoritarian states.

While it is too soon to evaluate the approach of Fico’s fourth cabinet toward the region, the first few months in office provide indications on where it will be heading. Since the election we have seen a rapid decline in interactions

² “Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky 2023 – 2027: Lepšie, pokojnejšie a bezpečnejšie život,” [Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak Republic for 2023–2027. ‘A better, calmer, safer life’] Government of the Slovak Republic, November 13, 2023. Available online: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=535376> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

with Taiwan.³ On the other hand, Fico has already announced that he plans to visit China in order to foster economic ties. The visit is planned for June 2024.

Fico has also indicated that he would like to visit Vietnam (possibly on the same trip in June 2024). Should the visit happen, it would be an important milestone in the controversy-ridden relationship. Bilateral relations with Vietnam were frozen in 2018, following the kidnapping of Trinh Xuan Thanh in Germany and his transportation to Vietnam via Slovakia, allegedly using the Slovak government plane that was provided to the Vietnamese delegation visiting Slovakia at the same time. In response, Slovakia recalled its ambassador from Vietnam and its delegation in Hanoi is still headed by a chargé d'affaires.⁴ The visit of the Vietnamese cover delegation was supposedly organized by Quang Le Hong, Prime Minister Fico's former adviser and former chargé d'affaires in Hanoi.⁵ This course of events was confirmed by an investigation by the German authorities and a court ruling.⁶ A visit by the prime minister would be a significant shift in the relationship. That being said, the groundwork for a reset of the relationship was laid under Heger's administration in December 2022. At that time, Hanoi hosted Slovak–Vietnamese political consultations at Director-General level, confirming both parties' desire to improve mutual relations, both bilaterally and under the EU–Vietnam cooperation framework.⁷

³ Data collected by the CEIAS EU–Taiwan Tracker (for more see <https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker> (accessed on March 10, 2024)), no government or parliamentary interaction with Taiwan has been recorded between Slovakia and Taiwan since the appointment of Fico's administration. This applies to the early months of 2024 as well.

⁴ J. Debnár, "Premiér Fico sa chystá do Číny, dôvodom má byť veľká investícia," [Prime Minister Fico is going to China, the reason is thought to be a big investment] *Aktuality*, October 30, 2023. Available online: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/uwzQNVd/premier-fico-sa-chysta-do-ciny-dovodom-ma-byt-velka-investicia/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

⁵ M. Tódová, "Ani Žilinkovi sa nechce vyšetrovať únos Vietnamca. Viaceré podozrenia zostali nepreverené," [Even Žilinka doesn't want to investigate the kidnapping of the Vietnamese. Several suspicions remain] *Denník N*, March 8, 2021. Available online: <https://dennikn.sk/2301824/ani-zilinkovi-sa-nechce-vysetrovat-unos-vietnamca-viacere-podozrenia-zostali-nepreverenene/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

⁶ M. Tódová, "Únos Vietnamca sa stal, potvrdil znovu berlínsky súd. Aj druhý obžalovaný je vinný," [The Vietnamese man was abducted, a Berlin court has again confirmed. The second defendant is also guilty] *Denník N*, January 30, 2023. Available online: <https://dennikn.sk/3215587/unos-vietnamca-sa-stal-potvrdil-znovu-berlinsky-sud-aj-druhy-obzalovany-je-vinny/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

⁷ "Việt Nam coi trọng quan hệ hợp tác hữu nghị truyền thống và hợp tác nhiều mặt với Slovakia," [Vietnam values traditional friendly cooperation and multi-faceted cooperation with Slovakia] *Báo mới*, 3 December 2022. Available online: <https://baomoi.com/viet-nam-coi-trong-quan-he-hop-tac-huu-nghi-truyen-thong-va-hop-tac-nhieu-mat-voi-slovakia-c44446539.epi> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

■ Strategy still lacking

As in previous years, Slovakia's approach to the Asia–Pacific region continued to lack strategic coherence. The process of formulating and adopting an Asia–Pacific strategy, which was identified as a priority in the 2021 foreign-policy plan,⁸ was not completed in 2023.

The inability to finalize the strategic planning document can largely be attributed to the political chaos of 2023, and the substantially different views on the Asia–Pacific region among the subsequent administrations, the amount of attention paid to it, as well as differing views on the risks and opportunities for Slovakia. As can be seen in the views of the political parties outlined above.

Nevertheless, the ability (or lack thereof) to finalize and adopt the strategy remains an important litmus test for Slovak foreign policy, as it is an indicator of Slovakia's ability to respond to the changing geopolitical reality, and the Asia–Pacific region is at the forefront of global affairs.

■ V4+ framework underutilized

Between July 2022 and June 2023, Slovakia held the rotating presidency of the Visegrad Group (V4). As the previous Yearbook noted, the presidency program indicated the intention was to "continue cooperation with third partners such as Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Israel and will seek the possibility of establishing parallel cooperation with other interested countries (e.g., Singapore, India)."⁹

⁸ "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 during the pandemic] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovak Republic, 2021. Available online: <https://www.mzv.sk/documents/10182/4238286/2021-Zahrani%C4%8Dna--a-%20europska-politika-SR-v-roku-2021.pdf/063025ca-14fa-4298-b240-4ee01c50339b> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

⁹ "Programme of the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group (July 2022–June 2023)," Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovak Republic, 2022. Available online: <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=493> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

In the past, the V4+ format has proved helpful in promoting relations with Japan and South Korea, as it allowed for a more efficient arrangement of high-level ministerial and prime ministerial meetings.¹⁰

Neither prime minister Heger's government-in-demission, nor the caretaker cabinet of prime minister Ódor seized the opportunity to use the V4 platform to engage with East Asian counterparts. Consequently, the Asia-related plans of Slovakia's V4 presidency were not fulfilled in 2023.

■ New investment revitalizes economic relations

In economic relations, news of two large investments dominated relations with Asian states.

In early September 2023, a Slovak startup focused on battery development announced that the Chinese battery producer Gotion had purchased a 25 per cent stake in the Slovak company for an undisclosed sum. This move occurred a few months after the initial signing of an MOU to explore opportunities for EV battery development and production. Besides the equity purchase, the two sides formed a new joint venture to open an EV battery factory in the Slovak town Šurany. According to the November MOU signed with the Slovak government, construction on the factory is to commence in 2024 and begin operating in the second quarter of 2026, reaching full scale production in 2027.

The Gotion investment and expansion plans in Slovakia highlight two important points about relations with China.

First, even though the full scope of Gotion's plans was unveiled only in November, i.e. after the snap election and appointment of Fico's government, the bulk of the negotiations had already been undertaken by the previous administration, which followed a China-critical policy. This demonstrates that Chinese investments with added value that follow economic rather

¹⁰ K. Dubravčíková et al., "Prospects for developing the V4+China cooperation platform," CEIAS, 2019. Available online: <https://ceias.eu/prospects-for-developing-the-v4-china-cooperation-platform/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

than political principles are not substantially hindered by approaches that are critical of China, as is often claimed by China-accommodationist political representatives.

Second, the investment in the battery sector highlights some of the challenges faced by the Slovak automotive sector, which is already rather export-dependent on China. As European car producers are facing ever stiffer competition from Chinese EV producers, they need to transition to EV production to remain competitive. Batteries are of course a key input in this process. Relying on Chinese battery producers rather than alternatives will simply reinforce the automotive sector's existing dependency on China.

The second investment news worth looking at relates to the U.S. Steel plant in Košice, one of the largest employers in Slovakia. Although the American owners of the steel mill entertained the idea of selling the plant to the Chinese company Hesteel, in the end that did not happen. In December 2023, Japan's Nippon Steel offered to purchase the entire global operations of U.S. Steel, including the Slovak plant. Should the deal be finalized (there is growing opposition to it within the USA), it will raise questions about the Slovak plant's future, which requires further investment in production decarbonization.¹¹ This uncertainty motivated one of the highest level visits by a Slovak official to Japan: Economy Minister Denisa Saková and Environment Minister Tomáš Taraba visited in February 2024. The visit was largely interpreted as an attempt to save the steel mill in Košice.¹²

Smaller-scale Asian investments were also made in the startup sector. In 2022, Taiwania Capital, a Taiwanese venture capital fund, launched a CEE Fund aimed at investments in high-tech startups in the CEE region. The fund made two investments in Slovakia in 2023. In January, Taiwania Capital invested €8 million in a robotics company called Photoneo.¹³ Then in June, the

¹¹ "CEEasia Briefing #48: EU-China summit in December, arms deals between Poland and South Korea, Japan to buy US Steel, EU-India MoU on semiconductors," CEIAS, January 8, 2024. Available online: <https://ceias.eu/ceeasia-briefing-48/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

¹² "Saková s Tarabom boli zachraňovať U.S. Steel Košice v Japonsku. Čo sa im podarilo vyjednať?" [Saková and Taraba were rescuing U.S. Steel Košice in Japan. What did they manage to negotiate?] *Pravda*, February 11, 2024. Available online: <https://ekonomika.pravda.sk/firmy-a-trhy/clanok/699207-sakova-s-tarabom-boli-zachranovat-u-s-steel-kosice-v-japonsku-co-sa-im-podari-lo-vyjednat/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

¹³ K. Kironaska, et al, "Taiwan's Central and Eastern Europe Investment Fund Taiwania Capital approved..." EU-TW Tracker by CEIAS, January 4, 2023. Available online: <https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/287> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

company finalized a second deal and invested €6.2 in Sensoneo, a smart waste management company.¹⁴

■ Defense cooperation trend continues

The 2022 Yearbook identified a new trend in Slovakia's relations with the Asia-Pacific region in defense cooperation, which emerged as a consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The trend continued throughout 2023 as well.

Turning to exports, cooperation with Malaysia, India, and potentially Indonesia, seems to be viable. Throughout 2022 and 2023, Slovak SOE Konštrukta Defense submitted a bid to a Malaysian procurement tender (via a private sector intermediary) for 16 to 24 155 mm self-propelled howitzers. In March 2024, Slovak EVA howitzers became one of the frontrunners in the tender.¹⁵

Should the sale materialize, it will be an important milestone in the internationalization of the Slovak defense industry and a potential entry point into the Southeast-Asian region, which has historically been largely dependent on weapons supplies from Russia, demand for which has plummeted since the invasion of Ukraine.¹⁶

India is potentially another country interested in defense technology cooperation. In order to foster mutual ties and present the capabilities of Slovak producers, the Slovak Embassy in New Delhi hosted Slovak Defense Technology Day in March 2023, which was opened by the foreign minister, Rastislav

¹⁴ K. Kironka, et al, "Taiwan Capital announced its 4th investment worth €6.2 million in...", EU-TW Tracker by CEIAS, June 8, 2023. Available online: <https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/359> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

¹⁵ "Suddenly, We're Discussing Slovakia's 155 mm 'EVA' SPH System," *Defence Security Asia*, 28 February 2024. Available online: <https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/suddenly-were-discussing-slovakias-155-mm-eva-sph-system/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

¹⁶ I. Storey, "The Russia-Ukraine war and its potential impact on Russia's arms sales to Southeast Asia," ISEAS, May 5, 2022, Available online: <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-47-the-russia-ukraine-war-and-its-potential-impact-on-russias-arms-sales-to-southeast-asia-by-ian-storey/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

Káčer, during his visit to India.¹⁷ In a follow-up, the Slovak and Indian embassies cohosted a webinar on defense industry cooperation in September 2023.¹⁸

Defense cooperation with South Korea is taking shape. After Slovakia donated its Soviet-era S-300 missile defense system to Ukraine in 2022, there were discussions about procuring replacement systems. In September 2023, the Slovak government formally opened the process of procuring new systems. By March 2024, South Korea, together with Israel, and a Norwegian-American consortium were the frontrunners for supplying a new mid-range anti-aircraft defense system.¹⁹

■ Visits back on the agenda

In contrast to 2022, there were several prominent visits in 2023 to the Asia-Pacific region by high-ranking public officials, who travelled to China, Japan, India, and Taiwan. These were all connected to the Eduard Heger or *Ludovít Ódor* administrations. As Prime Minister Fico and his cabinet took office only in late October, trips to Asia were not yet on the agenda for 2023. Nonetheless, high profile visits to the region have already taken place or are planned for the first half of 2024, as illustrated above.

In China's case, there were two subsequent visits in 2023. First, in April, Speaker of the National Council Boris Kollár traveled to China, then deputy foreign minister Ingrid Brocková visited in May. The two visits could not be more dissimilar. During his visit, Kollár focused largely on economic cooperation,

¹⁷ "Minister Káčer in Delhi: Growing Indian economy ranks among the global leaders, promoting cooperation and ongoing political dialogue are in our interest," Embassy of Slovakia in New Delhi, March 4, 2023. Available online: https://www.mzv.sk/en/web/dilli/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=16920305 (accessed on March 10, 2024).

¹⁸ "Webinár o možnostiach slovensko-indickej spolupráci v obrannom priemysle," [Webinar on opportunities for Slovak-Indian cooperation in the defense industry] Embassy of Slovakia in New Delhi, 23 September 2023. Available online: https://mzv.sk/web/dilli/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19209074 (accessed on March 10, 2024).

¹⁹ "Ministerstvo obrany očakáva rozhodnutie o obstaraní systémov protivzdušnej obrany v priebehu niekoľkých týždňov," [The Ministry of Defense expects a decision on the procurement of air defense systems within a few weeks] *Denník N*, March 25, 2024. Available online: <https://dennik.sk/minuta/3904364/?ref=ampm> (accessed on March 25, 2024).

as well as developing ties in tourism, science, technology, and innovation. He also touted the potential for China to develop railway infrastructure projects in Slovakia, a highly problematic endeavor. Nevertheless, while Kollar's agenda originally included a meeting with Huawei representatives, it was scrapped from the final plans, indicating that security considerations had weighed more heavily in preparations for the visit.²⁰

The second visit to China — by deputy foreign minister Ingrid Brocková — was much more critical in tone. While economic cooperation was still on the agenda, Brocková did not shy away from raising contentious issues.²¹ During the political consultations with Deng Li, Brocková raised topics like China's position on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, human rights in China, and on Taiwan and the need to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. Among the contentious issues in bilateral relations, Brocková objected to Chinese sanctions against Members of the European Parliament, including Slovak MEP Miriam Lexmann, as well as the presence of an illegal, extraterritorial Chinese police station in Bratislava.

On the second leg of her trip to Asia, Ingrid Brocková visited Japan, where bilateral economic relations, as well as the provision of aid to Ukraine, were the top topics of discussion with Japanese partners.²²

June 2023 saw a visit by the deputy minister of economy Peter Švec to Taiwan, on the occasion of the third meeting of the Taiwanese–Slovak Commission on Economic Cooperation. The result was eight MOUs and an agreement to

deepen partnership in the fields of culture, economy and trade, academic exchanges, healthcare, and semiconductors.²³ The deputy minister was accompanied by a business delegation that attended a mutual investment forum,²⁴ and there was also an investment deal between Taiwan Capital and Slovak startup Sensoneo.²⁵

Foreign minister Rastislav Káčer and economy minister Karel Hirman both visited India in March (on separate occasions). Káčer visited India to attend the Raisina Dialogue 2023, a prominent regional conference on matters of international relations and global security. At the conference, Káčer discussed the impact of Russia's war against Ukraine on the architecture of the international order. During the visit, he also engaged in bilateral talks with the Indian Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and Defense Secretary Shri Giridhar Aramane at the Indian Ministry of Defense²⁶

Karel Hirman traveled to India a few weeks after Káčer's trip, where he attended and opened the Smart Cities India Expo 2023, alongside Indian Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari. He also had talks with the Indian Economy Minister Piyush Goyal. The talks were not just about bilateral cooperation, but also touched upon the negotiations for the EU–India Free Trade Agreement, relaunched in 2022, which Slovakia supports.²⁷ The prospects for Slovakia–India economic relations were further debated at the 11th meeting of the Slovak–Indian Joint Commission for Economic Cooperation, which took place in Bratislava in June, four years after the last session.²⁸

²⁰ Kern, M. "Boris Kollár je v Číne, zrušil plánovanú návštevu Huawei a verí, že Peking nepošle zbrane Rusku," [Boris Kollár is in China, he cancels planned visit to Huawei and believes Beijing will not send weapons to Russia] *Denník N*, April 18, 2023. Available online: <https://dennikn.sk/3332472/boris-kollar-je-v-cine-zrusil-planovanu-navstevu-huawei-a-veri-ze-pekings-neposle-zbrane-rusku/> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

²¹ "I. Brocková v Pekingu: Čína by ako zástanca Charty OSN a stály člen Bezpečnostnej rady mala odsúdiť ruskú agresiu proti Ukrajine," [I. Brocková in Beijing: as a supporter of the UN Charter and a permanent member of the Security Council, China should condemn Russia's aggression against Ukraine] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovakia, May 22, 2023. Available online: https://mzv.sk/web/peking/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=17960879 (accessed on March 10, 2024).

²² "Ingrid Brocková v Tokiu: Aj napriek geografickej vzdialenosti sme si s Japonskom hodnotovo, politicky i ekonomicky veľmi blízki," [Ingrid Brocková in Tokyo: Despite the geographical distance, we are very close to Japan in terms of values, politics and the economy] Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovakia, May 24, 2023. Available online: https://mzv.sk/web/tokio/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=17992630 (accessed on March 10, 2024).

²³ K. Kirovská, et al, "Attended by Taiwan and Slovak diplomatic representatives, David Lee and...", EU–TW Tracker by CEIAS, June 6, 2023. Available online: <https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/358> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

²⁴ K. Kirovská, et al, "Led by Slovakia's Deputy Minister of Economy Peter Svec, a...", EU–TW Tracker by CEIAS, June 5, 2023. Available online: <https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker/357> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

²⁵ K. Kirovská, et al, "Taiwan Capital announced its 4th investment worth €6.2 million in...", op. cit.

²⁶ "Minister Káčer in Delhi: Growing Indian economy ranks among the global leaders, promoting cooperation and ongoing political dialogue are in our interest," op. cit.

²⁷ "Karel Hirman otvoril Smart Cities India Expo 2023 v Naí Dillí a stretol sa s indickým ministrom pre obchod a priemysel Piyushom Goyalom" [Karel Hirman opened Smart Cities India Expo 2023 in New Delhi and met with India's Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal] Ministry of Economy of Slovakia, March 28, 2023. Available online: <https://www.mhsr.sk/top/karel-hirman-otvoril-smart-cities-india-expo-2023-v-nai-dilli-a-stretol-sa-s-indickym-ministrom-pre-obchod-a-priemysel-piyushom-goyalom-1> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

²⁸ "11. zasadnutie Zmiešanej slovensko-indickej komisie pre hospodársku spoluprácu," [11th Session of the Slovak-Indian Joint Commission for Economic Cooperation] Ministry of Economy of Slovakia, June 23, 2023. Available online: <https://www.mhsr.sk/press/11-zasadnutie-zmiesanej-slovensko-indickej-komisie-pre-hospodarsku-spolupracu> (accessed on March 10, 2024).

■ Conclusion

Events within Slovakia–Asia relationships in 2023 confirm the ongoing malaise in Slovakia’s relationship with the region. On one hand, there were clear declarations of interest in pursuing relations with the region. On the other hand the actors failed to adopt a coherent approach to relations and look beyond individual bilateral relations to take note of the broader regional intricacies.

Slovakia’s Asia–Pacific strategy, under preparation since 2021, has the potential to close this gap and provide the country with a blueprint on how to navigate the complex and complicated relations with countries in the Asia–Pacific region. But until that has been adopted, Slovakia will have to improvise in its approach to the region.

To some extent the political chaos of 2023 highlighted the drawbacks of the current framework for relations. Still, the fact that an unusually high number of political parties commented on various aspects of relations with the Asia–Pacific region shows that the region’s importance in global affairs and for Slovakia is starting to seep in.

Ultimately, the vision of an economic pragmatic approach presented by SMER–SSD and allies has won out. Given that Robert Fico’s cabinet was only appointed toward the end of the year, there has not been sufficient opportunity to fully realize this vision on relations with Asia–Pacific. Nonetheless, the steps the government takes will need to be closely observed and evaluated, as pure economic pragmatism carries the risk of running afoul of the EU’s overall approach to the region, which has recently been framed within the concept of “de-risking.”

