



Slovakia's China pivot: Economic pragmatism or political subservience?

A briefing on Robert Fico's visit to China in November 2024

Matej Šimalčík • Filip Šebok

Key takeaways:

- 1** By elevating ties with China to a “strategic partnership,” Beijing and Bratislava were brought politically closer, as evidenced by shared views on Ukraine or human rights relativism.
- 2** Even though the visit was framed as an exercise in economic diplomacy, its economic outcomes remain underwhelming, as no new major projects were announced.
- 3** The statements by Prime Minister Fico as well as the content of signed memoranda of understanding indicate a clear dismissal of economic security considerations in Slovakia's approach to China.

Prime Minister of Slovakia, Robert Fico, led a government and business delegation in an official visit to China between October 31 and November 5. The visit, originally scheduled for June, was postponed due to the attempt to assassinate PM Fico. The delegation included 8 cabinet ministers, 2 deputy ministers, and 77 representatives of 56 companies and business associations.¹ Government officials claimed it was the largest business delegation in the history of Slovak diplomacy.

This was the first visit by a Slovak Prime Minister to China since 2007 and the most important bilateral engagement since the visit of Chinese President, Hu Jintao, to Slovakia in 2009.² The visit came after several minister-level visits to China over the past year, including by Ministers of Economy, Finance, and Transport, underscoring frequent political contacts under the new Fico government that came to power in October 2023.

¹ For a full list of participating companies, see Annex 1.

² During the previous parliamentary term, in 2023, Speaker of Parliament Boris Kollár visited China. While this is protocolary a higher level of engagement, its practical importance is significantly lower compared to a visit by the Prime Minister.

Robert Fico's trip to China can be characterized by three main descriptions:

- **MEGALOMANIAC:** With half the cabinet accompanying the PM, such a foreign trip of Slovak government members never took place before.
- **NON-TRANSPARENT:** No Slovak journalists were permitted to travel with the Prime Minister and only very little information about the agenda and delegation members was released prior to the trip.
- **PROBLEMATIC:** While economic results are underwhelming, the visit led to Bratislava and Beijing growing closer politically, in a marked departure from the EU position and Slovakia's own strategic documents.

The visit fits into the larger context of the foreign policy of the Fico government which promotes "all-azimuth diplomacy" that supposedly transcends geopolitical divisions and under which Fico has also advocated for resuming ties with Russia. The government has repeatedly claimed it is pursuing a "sovereign Slovak foreign policy", explicitly pronouncing that it will not be influenced by the EU's or other allies' concerns.

Moreover, the new government has stressed it will focus more on economic diplomacy, by searching for new opportunities for Slovak businesses and attracting new investments, especially outside of the "traditional" markets. As a part of this focus, Slovakia has recently reorganized its diplomatic representation around the world, opening new missions in Asia and Africa, and closing some in Europe. Moreover, Slovakia has significantly increased the number of economic diplomats. While Fico presented the China visit as the "most significant visit of 2024", it was also put in the larger context of his economic diplomacy-focused travel, including the preceding visit to South Korea and upcoming visits to South America or Vietnam.

Itinerary

The visit comprised of three stops—in Beijing, Hefei, and Shanghai. In Beijing, the itinerary included meetings with the highest PRC representatives, including President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Qiang, and Chairman of the Standing Committee of National People's Congress Zhao Leji. The two sides issued a statement on establishing a Strategic Partnership and signed 13 further documents on cooperation in various areas.³ In Beijing, PM Fico also opened a Slovak-China Business Forum. The second stop of the itinerary, Hefei in China's Anhui province, included meetings with the local provincial leadership and a visit to the headquarters of the Gotion company. Fico also gave a lecture at the Anhui University. Finally, the delegation participated in the opening of the China International Import Expo in Shanghai.

Political outcomes

In terms of political outcomes, the elevation of the relationship to a strategic partnership was the most significant. From China's perspective, the official designation of ties reflects the status of the relationship. Up until now, Slovakia remained one of the few EU countries (now only 6) without such a designation, and the last among the V4 countries. However, most of the strategic relationships in the

³ For the list of documents and link to a CEIAS digital repository, see Annex 2.

EU were signed in the 2000s and 2010s, in a different geopolitical context, and some of them, such as the one between Czechia and China, are now largely symbolic without meaningful cooperation ongoing.

The provisions of the strategic relationship establish the framework for more intensive political and economic ties. The partnership establishes a mechanism for intergovernmental cooperation on the level of the foreign minister. While most of the content is standard, embedding the bilateral ties into the wider context of EU-China relations, there are some noteworthy deviations.

First of all, the document states that “The participants firmly oppose the politicization and instrumentalization of human rights issues, and firmly oppose any country interfering in the internal affairs of other countries in the name of democracy and human rights.” Such language directly echoes China’s rhetoric that denies the universality of human rights but also reflects the principles of Slovak foreign policy under Fico, which explicitly neglects value considerations.

Second, the document includes strong wording on the One China Policy, stating that “Slovakia opposes any attempts to interfere in China’s internal affairs, sovereignty and territorial integrity, including Taiwan.” Slovakia’s official designation of the One China Policy has also previously been very closely aligned with China’s stance, as defined by the 2003 joint communique. However, the explicit reiteration by the current government comes after the previous government developed intensive contacts with Taiwan, despite the 2003 formulation of the One China Policy.

Therefore, the inclusion of the clause in the strategic partnership document can be seen as a reassurance by the Slovak government that it will refrain from taking further steps towards developing governmental relations with Taiwan, which China would oppose. However, the previously achieved developments in the relationship with Taiwan will most likely not be undone. A major litmus test for this will be the continuation (and accompanying level of medialization) of the Joint Economic Affairs Commission, which has been held semi-annually since 2021, and accompanying meetings typically held at the deputy ministerial level.

On international issues, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia was also on the agenda during the high-level meetings. Slovakia praised China’s stance on the issue as “fair, objective and constructive” and expressed its support for the China-Brazil joint peace plan on Ukraine and their Friends of Peace initiative at the UN. Slovakia thus joined Hungary as the second EU country to support the initiative which Ukraine has previously criticized as contradictory to its vision of just peace. Fico supported China’s position already since the time in opposition, then in the form of China’s 12-point “peace plan”. The issue is likely to continue to feature in the Slovak approach towards China due to its importance in Fico’s domestic messaging as he can claim Slovak position on peace in Ukraine is echoed by key international players.

Economic outcomes

Official communication from the Prime Minister’s Office highlighted particularly two outcomes as key deliverables of the visit: the extension of China’s visa-free regime to Slovakia (see below) and investment by China’s privately owned battery maker Gotion into battery production in Slovakia. Beyond these two outcomes, other initiatives were touched upon during the visit, such as cooperation on transport and energy infrastructure development in Slovakia, but very few specifics are available for now. Some of the proposed projects, like the power plant on the Ipeľ river and the direct flight connection between Bratislava and Beijing, are mainstays of the Slovak proposals to China, with Beijing showing only little interest in picking them up through the past decade.

As far as Gotion battery plan is concerned, Fico's government already signed an MoU with Gotion about its investment plans back in November 2023, less than a month after the government was formed. Thus, focusing on this project highlights that Fico's trip did not have very specific aims and that its outcomes are rather underwhelming.

Gotion's plans to establish a battery factory in Slovakia as currently a point of controversy. Local inhabitants have mobilized to voice concerns over a mix of issues, ranging from legitimate environmental concerns to downright xenophobia. In an attempt to alleviate the concerns, several inhabitants of the Šurany township were invited to visit Gotion's headquarters in Hefei just a few days prior to the Prime Minister's visit. Despite initially positive reactions from the participants, the issue is far from settled, as the project is increasingly instrumentalized by local and national-level actors on the far right side of the political spectrum.

The Gotion project, together with another big Chinese investment, the Volvo (Geely) EV plant in Košice, was in fact negotiated already during previous administrations, which maintained a much more critical approach to China. This actually underscores that a wary approach to China, conscious of security considerations and political values, is not necessarily detrimental to economic cooperation, especially on projects that follow economic logic, rather than political wishes.

Interestingly, official communication barely mentioned the topic of EU tariffs on China-made EVs, which Fico has been vocally opposing at home. In Fico's view, the tariffs are part of a 'nonsensical trade war pursued by the European Commission' with 'devastating effects for the European economy.' Despite previous warnings by Fico of the major impact of China's retaliatory automotive tariffs (targeting luxury vehicles—a dominant item in Slovak exports to China) on Slovakia, it seems that the topic was not a significant point in discussion with Chinese counterparts. Neither did Fico comment on Beijing's push for locating Chinese EV investments in Europe only into those countries that opposed tariffs as a success of his policy.

As the other documents signed during the visit were memoranda of understanding (MOU), they have an inherent vagueness to them. The language and topics covered are indicative of broader views of China in the current Slovak administration and its potential interests vis-à-vis China. Overall, the signed documents show a clear dismissal of economic security concerns in relations with China:

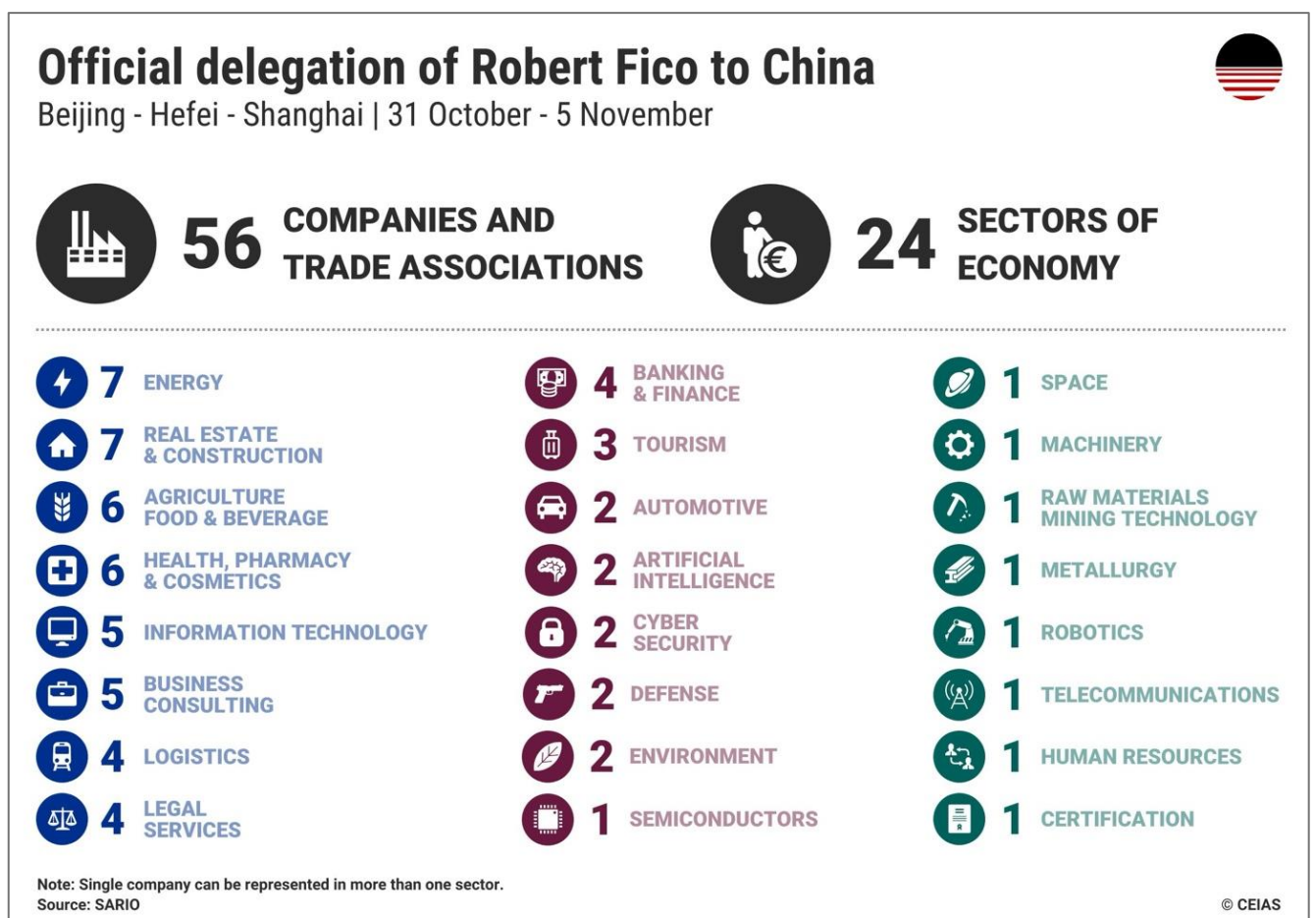
Cooperation on the digital economy spells a departure from Slovakia's wary views of Chinese tech firms. Areas of cooperation mentioned in the respective MoU include 5G, cloud computing, satellite navigation, data centers, AI, the Internet of Things, and others. This is in stark contrast to the past approach. In 2020 Slovakia signed a Clean Networks Memorandum with the US and accordingly updated its cybersecurity legal regime. In 2021, the Slovak Intelligence Service warned about Chinese attempts to penetrate critical technological infrastructure.

Green tech will be a major platform for more economic cooperation with China. Besides EVs and batteries, other sectors of focus include energy (solar, wind, nuclear, hydrogen, etc.) or green finance. Interestingly, the Slovak Ministry of Economy sees this also as a way to fulfill the EU-funded Slovak Reconstruction and Resilience. This could result in allocating EU funds in a way that is not consistent with the EU Economic Security Strategy and broader de-risking goals.

Among the 56 businesses accompanying PM Fico on the trip, several are active in sectors considered sensitive or strategically important. The delegation included, among others, several companies active in nuclear energy, defense, semiconductors, telecommunications, cybersecurity, or artificial intelligence. These are also some of the fields in which Slovakia and China pledged to deepen research

cooperation, which would lead to increased exposure of the Slovak academia to China, while the appetite to implement a robust research security framework has all but stalled.

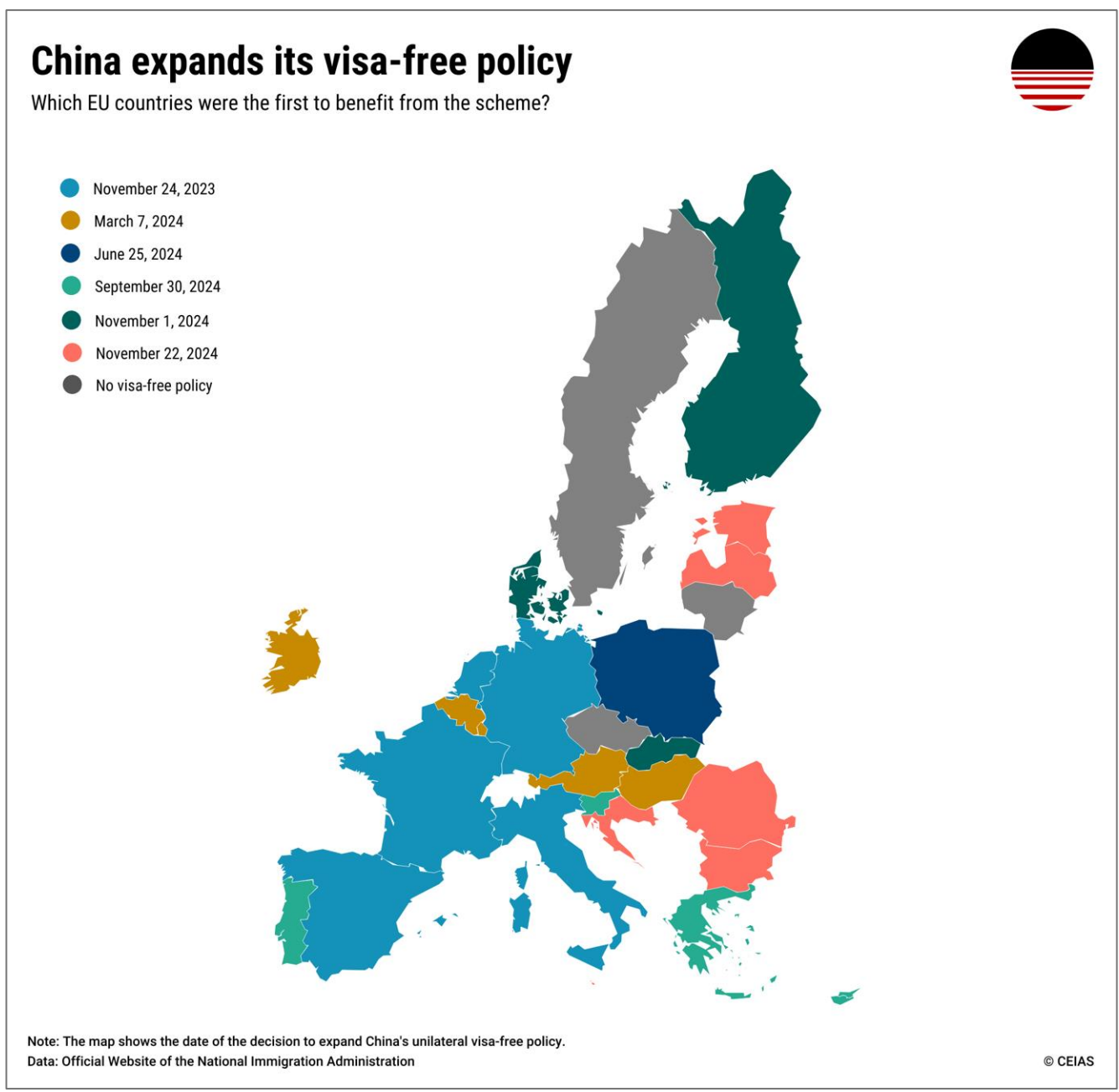
When it comes to infrastructure projects that the Fico government has been promoting as one of the key priorities in cooperation with China, the construction of the *Karpaty* highway tunnel seems the most probable to happen. This can be inferred from the list of cabinet-approved [list](#) of follow-up tasks, under which the Ministry of Transport is obliged to negotiate a memorandum of understanding on the construction of the tunnel with the PRC National Development and Reform Commission by the end of March 2025. Little details are available about the project for now though, beyond a cursory mention on the Ministry's social media that infrastructure cooperation with China could take the form of "intergovernmental projects." This suggests that inter-governmental agreements might be used in order to skirt public procurement processes and various transparency requirements, creating an environment susceptible to corruption, conflict of interests or other forms of poor governance.



Other issues

The key deliverable from the visit presented by the government was the extension of visa-free travel to for up to 15 days China for Slovak citizens. However, the importance of the move was exaggerated by Fico, as Slovakia was included in a batch of other countries, and 17 European countries had already received the same beneficial treatment over the past year as part of China's effort to boost domestic tourism and improve ties with Europe. After new announcements, as of early December, only three EU countries (Sweden, Lithuania and Czechia) have not yet received the visa-free treatment, which was in the meantime extended from 15 to 30 days.

Chinese media also reported that an MoU on cooperation was signed between the Slovak Press Agency TASR and China's state-owned China Media Group, establishing a mechanism for cooperation in areas including content sharing. Such agreements, signed by China and many media outlets around the world,



create a potential conduit for the transmission of China's propaganda into foreign information spaces. This is especially important as TASR content is often reused by other Slovak media.

In his public pronouncements before and during the visit, including an interview for China's CCTV, Fico continued in an established highly laudatory rhetoric on China, commending its economic and technological development, praising its positive role in ensuring global peace and stability, and discounting any criticism of China as illegitimate. Fico's public presentation of the visit also featured attacks on the opposition politicians that criticized the trip, with Fico calling them "barking dogs".

Outlook

Overall, Fico's approach to China is largely a departure from the pre-existing approach, espoused by the governments formed by the rival parties between 2020-2023 which tended to follow the EU's policy of seeing China simultaneously as a partner, competitor, and systemic rival. This was enshrined also in the 2021 National Security Strategy, a document that viewed China largely through the prism of economic security: *"China is significantly increasing its power potential and political influence underpinned by rapidly growing military capabilities, which, combined with economic power and strategic investments, it is assertively using to advance its interests."*

Through two large investments (Volvo and Gotion), China has significantly increased its economic involvement in Slovakia. As further Chinese companies involved in EV supply chains are looking for new investment sites in the EU, Slovakia might receive more Chinese capital, especially if Beijing pushes its companies to only invest in countries that oppose the tariffs. The recent announcement that Chinese Leapmotors will scrap its plans to produce cars with its JV partner Stellantis in Poland and is considering moving the production to the existing Stellantis plant in Trnava in Western Slovakia is the first indication. Attracting new Chinese investments that create job opportunities might further support the government's friendly approach to China and lead to closer economic but also political cooperation, that might follow the example of neighboring Hungary.

One issue to look out for is how the Slovak government will act in various international forums where China-related topics might come up for discussion. For instance, in the previous parliamentary term, Slovakia tended to support the adoption of resolutions critical of China over its human rights abuses. Given Slovakia's new pledge to refrain from using human rights as a tool for "interfering in China's domestic affairs," it seems very unlikely that such activities would continue during Fico's tenure as the Prime Minister.

While Prime Minister Robert Fico's policies reflect a significant pivot towards China, labeling him a "vassal" of Beijing oversimplifies the dynamics at play. For now, we have not observed any behavior that would undermine the adoption of China-focused positions at the EU Council level—which has been a modus operandi repeatedly shown by Hungary in the past. While Slovakia did vote against the EV tariffs, it should not be taken as evidence of such an approach as it did so along Germany and three other member states and 12 more abstained. Nevertheless, this needs to be monitored for indications of changes in approach. At this stage, however, Fico's actions toward China are better described as a "convergence of interests", motivated by Fico's domestic agenda and general anti-West posturing.

Annex 1: List of delegation participants

SENIOR GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS:

- **Robert Fico**, Prime Minister
- **Denisa Saková**, Deputy Prime Minister & Minister of Economy
- **Tomáš Taraba**, Deputy Prime Minister & Minister of Environment
- **Juraj Blanár**, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs
- **Jozef Ráž**, Minister of Transport
- **Martina Šimkovičová**, Minister of Culture
- **Dušan Keketi**, Minister of Tourism and Sports
- **Richard Takáč**, Minister of Agriculture and Regional Development
- **Ladislav Kamenický**, Minister of Finance
- **Pavol Pavlis**, President of the Slovak Office of Standards, Metrology and Testing
- **Radovan Majerský**, Deputy Minister of Finance
- **Igor Choma**, Deputy Minister of Transport

COMPANIES AND BUSINESS ASSOCIATIONS:

- 5.0 TECHNOLOGIES, J.S.A. / TWINZO
- A.N.J.DISTRIBUTION S. R. O.
- A1ATTACK S. R. O.
- AEN RAW MATERIALS SLOVAKIA S. R. O.
- AIR SLOVAK TRANSPORT, S. R. O.
- ANTIK TELECOM S.R.O.
- ANYTM S.R.O.
- ASSOCIATION FOR THE USE OF RENEWABLE AND ALTERNATIVE SOURCES (AVBAZ)
- BPS KAMENICA S. R. O.
- CASHPAY, S.R.O.
- CBRE S.R.O.
- CREDIS LAW S.R.O.
- CTP INVEST SK, SPOL. S R.O.
- DAITABLE, S. R. O.
- DECENT CYBERSECURITY S. R. O.
- ECC INVEST S. R. O.
- EDGAR BAKER S. R. O.
- EROBOT, J.S.A.
- EXIMA, SPOL. S R.O.
- EXIMBANKA (EXPORT – IMPORT BANK OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC)
- FUERGY INDUSTRIES J. S. A.
- FURBIFY S.R.O.
- GAMO A.S.
- HELGEHEIM A. S.
- I.I.A.G., S.R.O.
- ICS ICE CLEANING SYSTEMS S. R. O.
- INOBAT AUTO J.S.A.
- INTERMODAL LOGISTICS SOLUTION S. R. O.
- INTUON S.R.O.
- IPEC - FOH, S. R. O.
- IPM GROUP HOLDINGS LIMITED
- JADROVÁ ENERGETICKÁ SPOLOČNOSŤ SLOVENSKA, A. S. (JESS)
- LANSKY, GANZGER, JACKO & PARTNER, S. R. O.
- MAERSK SLOVAKIA S.R.O.
- MATYSAK EXPORT S. R. O.
- NADACON S.R.O.
- NORRIV S. R. O.
- OUZHONG CONSULTING S. R. O.
- PROMA, S.R.O.
- REAVIA, A.S.
- REFORM PRODUCTS & SERVICES S. R. O.
- ROKOVIA, S.R.O. (ROKOSAN S.R.O.)
- SANACLIS S.R.O.
- SATUR TRAVEL A.S.
- SILK ROAD SLOVAKIA, S.R.O.
- SLOVENSKÁ ASOCIÁCIA CESTOVNÝCH KANCELÁRIÍ A CESTOVNÝCH AGENTÚR (SACKA)
- ST. NICOLAUS GROUP A.S.
- TACHYUM S.R.O.
- TECHNICKÝ SKÚŠOBNÝ ÚSTAV PIEŠŤANY, A. S. (TECHNICAL TESTING INSTITUTE PIEŠŤANY, LTD.)
- TRADEMEDICAL, A.S.
- TRAINING & CONSULTING, S.R.O.
- V4 LEGAL, S.R.O.
- VIRTUAL MEDICINE, S. R. O.
- CS VFL-TEC WATER TREATMENT TECHNOLOGY CO.,LTD
- YINGKE W&P SLOVAKIA AND CZECH REPUBLIC S.R.O.
- ŽELEZIARNE PODBREZOVÁ A.S

Annex 2: List of agreements and memorandums

- Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership
- Memorandum of Understanding on the Establishment of a Working Group for Investment and Economic Cooperation
- Joint Declaration on Strengthening Economic Cooperation
- Memorandum of Understanding on Support for Investment Cooperation in the Field of Green Development
- Memorandum on Joint Support for Industrial and Investment Cooperation
- Memorandum on Understanding and Strengthening Investment Cooperation in the Field of Digital Economy (for MIRRI)
- Memorandum of Understanding and deepening cooperation on the China-Europe Railway Express project
- Program of Cooperation in the Field of Culture between the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic and the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China for the years 2024-2028
- Memorandum of Cooperation in the field of green and low-carbon development
- Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation in the field of tourism
- Memorandum of Understanding between the ÚNMS of the Slovak Republic and the Standardization Administration of the People's Republic of China and the Cooperation Action Plan for the years 2024-2028
- Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation in the Prevention and Control of the Spread of BSE
- Protocol on bumblebee exports
- Memorandum of Cooperation between China Media Group and Slovak News Agency

Digital document repository:

The signed documents, with the exception of the Joint Declaration on Strategic Partnership, are not publicly available. CEIAS has filed several Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests with the relevant Slovak authorities to gain access to the documents. Per FOIA §3(5) documents obtained upon FOIA request can be freely shared. We are making all the obtained documents freely available in a [digital repository](#), where they can be viewed and further analyzed.



Authors

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Matej Šimalčík is the Executive Director of the Central European Institute of Asian Studies, a think tank that focuses on foreign and security policy issues related to East Asia. Matej's research looks at China's economic and political presence and influence in Central Europe, elite relations, corrosive capital, and the role of European legal instruments in mitigating risks posed by China. In 2022, he founded the China-Europe Academic Engagement Tracker project, which aims to bring transparency to research collaborations with Chinese entities. He has a background in Law (Masaryk University, 2015) and International Relations (University of Groningen, 2016). He is also a senior associate at the Slovakia-based law firm Nechala and partners. Before that, Matej gained experience as an in-house legal counsel for the Slovak branch of Transparency International, a global anti-corruption watchdog, and several Slovak and Czech law firms. In 2021, he was listed on the Forbes 30 Under 30 list in the Governance and Social Innovation category. He is also a member of the Expert Pool at the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE); European Think-tank Network on China; and a country reporter at the CELIS Institute, a think tank focused on investment and economic law.



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Filip's research primarily looks at Chinese domestic and foreign policy, especially relations between China and Central and Eastern European countries and China's propaganda and disinformation. He graduated in International Relations and Chinese Cultural Studies at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, and Renmin University in Beijing, studying in a full-time program taught in Mandarin. He is currently pursuing his PhD. at the Asian Studies Department of the Palacký University in Olomouc. Between 2019 and 2024, Filip worked as a China Research Fellow and Project Manager on the MapInfluenCE and China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe (CHOICE) projects at the Association for International Affairs (AMO), including as the editor of all CHOICE publications. He was already affiliated with CEIAS between 2014 and 2019 and also previously worked for Stratpol (now Adapt Institute). Filip was a Fall 2022 CEPA James S. Denton Fellow in Washington, D.C. and is an individual member of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) Expert Pool. Filip is the author of several reports, analyses and book chapters, including in the Routledge volume 'Contemporary China: A New Superpower?'



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Authors: Matej Šimalčík, Filip Šebok

Cite as: Šimalčík, Matej, Šebok, Filip. *Slovakia's China pivot: Economic pragmatism or political subservience? A briefing on Robert Fico's visit to China in November 2024*. Bratislava: CEIAS, 2024

Cover photo: Úrad vlády SR, 2024

Published by:

Central European Institute of Asian Studies
Murgašova 2, 811 04 Bratislava, Slovakia
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This briefing paper was prepared in cooperation with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung representative office in Bratislava.

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