

Beyond pragmatism? The risks of Slovakia's embrace of China

Filip Šebok



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
STIFTUNG** Für die Freiheit.

Mitteuropa

Publikáciu finančne podporila Friedrich Naumann Stiftung für die Freiheit.

Friedrich Naumann Stiftung für die Freiheit nezodpovedá za obsah tejto publikácie ani za jej akékoľvek následné uplatnenie. Názory, ktoré sú v nej vyjadrené, sú výlučne názormi autora a nutne neodrážajú postoje Friedrich Naumann Stiftung für die Freiheit.

The publication is supported by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom is not responsible for the content of this publication, or for any use that may be made of it. The views expressed herein are those of the author alone. These views do not necessarily reflect those of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.

Abstract

This study examines Slovakia's accelerated political and economic alignment with the People's Republic of China (PRC) under the fourth government of Robert Fico, highlighting the strategic, security, and governance risks associated with this shift. Since 2023, Slovakia has transformed from a cautious EU member into one of China's most vocal supporters in Europe, marked by the establishment of a Strategic Partnership in 2024 and a series of high-level political exchanges. The paper argues that while cooperation with China is not inherently problematic with proper guardrails, the Slovak government's dismissal of security concerns and its departure from the EU's "de-risking" approach create vulnerabilities at multiple levels.

China's interest in Slovakia is driven less by bilateral economic potential and more by geopolitical calculus: Slovakia's EU and NATO membership offers Beijing potential leverage within Western institutions and symbolic legitimacy for China's global agenda. Economically, Slovakia's automotive sector has attracted substantial Chinese investments in electric vehicle and battery production; however, these projects raise concerns about limited technology transfer, supply-chain risks—including links to forced labor—and long-term dependency on Chinese inputs. In infrastructure, proposed cooperation on large-scale transport projects may bypass transparency mechanisms and expose Slovakia to unfavourable financing models, echoing problematic cases in other countries.

The paper further identifies significant risks in expanding technological and academic cooperation, especially in areas involving digital infrastructure, artificial intelligence, telecommunications, and research partnerships with institutions linked to China's military-industrial complex. Chinese involvement in Slovakia's information environment remains modest but strategically aligned with domestic illiberal narratives promoted by the Fico government, enhancing Beijing's discourse power and reinforcing Slovakia's political drift away from liberal democratic norms.

Finally, the analysis assesses the broader foreign-policy consequences of Slovakia's China pivot, including weakened alignment with EU derisking policies, growing intelligence-sharing concerns among NATO partners, and the deterioration of previously robust informal relations with Taiwan. The study concludes that Slovakia's approach to China, framed as pragmatic economic engagement, in fact risks undermining its security posture and traditional Western orientation. The paper calls for a balanced, risk-aware policy framework that preserves economic opportunities while safeguarding national and European security interests.

Executive summary

Since 2023 under the Robert Fico government, Slovakia has rapidly become one of China's most vocal supporters in the EU, marked by the Strategic Partnership signed in November 2024. This pivot involves actively pursuing economic, technological, and political cooperation while dismissing security risks, diverging from the EU's strategy of "derisking" from China.

China's primary interest in Slovakia stems from its membership in the EU and NATO, which offers Beijing a platform to gain influence, access sensitive information, and legitimize its political regime and geopolitical aims. Economically, Slovakia's robust automotive sector has become a key target for Chinese electric vehicle and battery manufacturers seeking to establish a production base within the EU to circumvent tariffs. While promoting a narrative of "mutually beneficial" cooperation, China's strategic goals include undermining the transatlantic alliance and leveraging its close partnership with Russia, which poses a direct security threat to Central and Eastern Europe, including Slovakia. To achieve its objectives, China employs a range of tools, including cultivating political and business relationships, employing a whole-of-society approach, and using its economic power as both an incentive and a potential coercive instrument.

Cooperation with China does not have to be problematic with proper guardrails in place, but the Fico government does not seem to take any risks into account. Major Chinese investments in Slovakia's automotive sector, such as by Volvo and Gotion can spur Slovakia's industrial upgrading, but Slovakia lacks a broader strategy for conditioning investment by technology transfer and Chinese investments also present supply chain vulnerabilities linked to forced labor. In infrastructure, involvement of Chinese companies in PPP projects can be blocked by new EU regulations, while the government's hinted intentions of cooperating through intergovernmental agreements creates concerns about avoiding transparency standards and financial risks. Proposed technology and academic partnerships with China create risks of surveillance, data security and technology leakage. The government's pro-China rhetoric aligns with China's own information activities, feeding into Fico government's own domestic illiberal agenda and its effort to reposition Slovakia away from its traditional Western orientation. This embrace of China ultimately impacts Slovakia's foreign policy direction and position as an EU and NATO ally, potentially exposing the bloc to intelligence vulnerabilities and dependencies.

INTRODUCTION

Under the fourth premiership of Robert Fico since 2023, the Slovak government has manifested a strong intention to develop closer relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC or China). This has been substantiated by the largest-ever high-level political delegation to China in November 2024, during which a Strategic Partnership and 13 other agreements were signed between the two sides.¹ Fico met with the Chinese President two more times, during his controversial visits to Moscow in May 2025 and Beijing in September 2025, as the only EU/NATO leader, on the occasion of the military parades commemorating the 80th anniversary of victory in WWII. Frequent political contacts between the two sides were also held on other levels.

The Fico government has consistently expressed an interest in expanding cooperation in economic, technological, cultural, academic, and other areas with the PRC. The growing relationship with the PRC is embedded in the broader framework of the Fico government's "all-azimuth foreign policy" under which Slovakia has sought to rebuild the relationship with Russia, and expand new directions in Slovak foreign policy towards the non-Western states and regions (besides China, prominent targets include Vietnam and Brazil). Besides the geopolitical positioning of the new government, the engagement with China can be seen as an effort by Fico to boost his domestic position by demonstrating the international respect that Slovakia enjoys among key non-EU global actors, which includes the Trump administration in Washington.

Under Fico, Slovakia has become one of the most pro-China countries in the EU, at least if judged by the government's rhetoric. The government has denied the relevance of any security risks stemming from cooperation with China (at times contradicting the Slovak security apparatus), expressed support for China on geopolitical issues and alignment on some political principles, and has shifted away from the emerging (and admittedly contested) EU policy of derisking.

The following paper analyzes the main features of the Slovak-China relationship and the related risks for Slovakia and its position in the EU and NATO. The paper will first dissect China's interests in Slovakia and the tools employed by China to pursue them, followed by an analysis of risks in the areas of Chinese investment, infrastructure development, technology and academic cooperation, and foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). Finally, the paper will analyze the impact of the close relationship on Slovakia's foreign policy orientation and its position in the EU and NATO.

¹ The copies of agreements, acquired by CEIAS through FOIA requests, are available here: https://chasingcorrosivecapital.substack.com/p/new-insights-on-robert-ficos-trip?utm_source=share&utm_medium=android&r=22xct&triedRedirect=true.

1. CHINA'S INTERESTS IN SLOVAKIA

Slovakia lacks the political and economic weight, geographic location, or sizable Chinese diaspora that would make it stand out from China's perspective. As everywhere, China is interested in gaining support for its so-called "core interests", including territorial integrity (including the issue of Taiwan and territorial disputes), regime security (support/lack of criticism for CCP rule, domestic policies and non-democratic norms) and development interests (i.e economic interests of unhampered trade and access to technology). Slovak political representation has challenged China on these issues in the past, notably through engagement of former President Kiska and Čaputová on the issues of Tibet and human rights and the previous government's cooperation with Taiwan.² Under the current Fico government and also President Peter Pellegrini, these issues have been removed from the agenda.

China is mainly interested in Slovakia due to its role as an EU and NATO member. A close relationship with the Slovak government can potentially give China access to sensitive information about the EU and NATO and their decision-making. This is supported by the 2024 Report on Cybersecurity in the Slovak Republic, which notes the Chinese hacker groups' efforts to compromise the Slovak national institutions as part of larger EU and NATO-targeted operations.³ China can also leverage a friendly government to influence the EU and NATO position on policies relevant to China, although due to the small weight and weak coalition-building capacity of Slovakia, the potential is more relevant for issues requiring unanimity. Finally, support on symbolic political issues from an EU/NATO member carries more value to China as it imbues it with certain legitimacy.

Economically, Slovakia has, until recently, not been of any special interest to China, which was reflected in a lack of investments. However, this has changed with the growing expansion of Chinese electric vehicle and battery makers abroad. Due to its well-developed automotive industry, skilled and cheap workforce, inclusion into Germany-centered supply chains and close geographical distance from Western European markets, Slovakia is attractive for Chinese investors, as are many of its neighbors.⁴ By producing in the EU for the local market, Chinese producers can avoid tariffs and other emerging protectionist measures. Moreover, while countries like Slovakia are interested in attracting investments and ready to support them with state aid, they are generally unable or

² Kapitán, Peter. "Stretnutie Kisku s dalajlámom podľa Lajčáka Slovensko poškodí." SME, October 19, 2016. <https://www.sme.sk/domov/c/stretnutie-kisku-s-dalajlamom-podla-lajcaka-slovensko-poskodi>; "Čaputovej stanovisko k Číne je nemenné, pozvanie Danko rešpektuje." SME, August 13, 2019. <https://www.sme.sk/domov/c/caputovej-stanovisko-k-cine-je-nemenne-pozvanie-danka-respektuje>.

³ Národný bezpečnostný úrad (NBÚ). "Annual Report on Cybersecurity of the Slovak Republic 2024." 2025. <https://www.nbu.gov.sk/data/att/3434.pdf>.

⁴ Šebeňa, Martin, et al. "Central Europe-East Asia EV Nexus: Tracking Chinese, South Korean and Japanese Electric Vehicle and Battery Investment in the V4 Countries." CEIAS, May 2025. <https://ceias.eu/central-europe-east-asia-ev-nexus/>.

unwilling to condition them with strong requirements, which gives Chinese investors a stronger hand than in bigger EU member states.⁵

In broader strategic terms, China's main interest in Europe is to support the development of policies that undermine the Transatlantic relationship between Europe and the US, and lead the EU to develop an independent and more China-friendly policy. Europe is seen as a potential China-aligned pole in a new multipolar order, i.e., a world where the US is no longer the preeminent power and where the relevance of universal liberal norms and values is eroded. The EU also remains important as a relatively open market which does not see China predominantly as a geopolitical peer challenger⁶, as is the case with the US, is able to absorb redirected Chinese exports, and continue providing key technological inputs where China still relies on imports. This is why Beijing continues to promote a positive narrative of the ties with the EU, denying a conflict of interest between the two sides.⁷

However, China's overall strategic interest in blunting the global role of the US is superior to the interest of developing an amicable relationship with the EU. This is most clearly evidenced by the increasingly close relationship between China and Russia since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As has been claimed openly by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi in talks with EU representatives, China does not want to see Russia lose in its war against Ukraine, as this would mean the US could turn its full attention to China.⁸ Apart from China's support for the Russian economy and dual-use technology exports, new reports indicate cooperation on drone production and the provision of satellite imagery to Russia.⁹ The support goes beyond Ukraine, however. In the "Olympic" communique" issued by Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in February 2022 (just days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine started), China unprecedentedly pledged its support for Russian strategic aims in Europe, which in effect include the desire to rebuild European security

⁵ Šebeňa, Martin, et al. "Central Europe-East Asia EV Nexus: Tracking Chinese, South Korean and Japanese Electric Vehicle and Battery Investment in the V4 Countries." CEIAS, May 2025. <https://ceias.eu/central-europe-east-asia-ev-nexus/>.

⁶ The EU's China policy continues to be guided by 2019 Joint Communication's trifecta definition of China as a negotiating partner, economic competitor, and systemic rival. The von der Leyen Commission has pushed for more emphasis on the "rival" element in the relationship, but there is a lack of consensus among the member states.

⁷ Wang Yi. "Wang Yi Has a Group Meeting with Diplomatic Envoys from the European Union and Its Member States to China." Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, June 25, 2025. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjzbzd/202506/t20250627_11660036.html.

⁸ Bermingham, Finbarr. "China Tells EU It Does Not Want to See Russia Lose Its War in Ukraine: Sources." South China Morning Post, July 4, 2025.

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3316875/china-tells-eu-it-cannot-afford-russian-loss-ukraine-war-sources-say>.

⁹ Reuters. "China Provides Intelligence to Russia on Ukraine Targets, Ukrainian Intelligence Says." *Reuters*, October 4, 2025.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-provides-intelligence-russia-ukraine-targets-ukrainian-intelligence-says-2025-10-04/>; Reuters. "Chinese Drone Experts Worked with Sanctioned Russian Arms Maker, Sources Say." *Reuters*, September 25, 2025.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/chinese-drone-experts-worked-with-sanctioned-russian-arms-maker-sources-say-2025-09-25/>.

architecture and pull back the borders of NATO to pre-1997 status.¹⁰ China's relationship with Russia thus presents a direct threat to Europe, and even more so to Central and Eastern European countries, including Slovakia.¹¹ Any cooperation with China should be informed by the awareness of this strategic threat. However, driven by its own desire to deepen cooperation with Russia, the Fico government may instead see a relationship with China as a way to reinforce its broader geopolitical aims.

2. TOOLS OF CHINESE INFLUENCE

One of the main vectors of China's influence is the establishment of personal, business, and political relationships with persons and groups of interest. Using exchange of tangible and intangible favors, such as prestige, China cultivates China-friendly elements in the target country's society that can be utilized to promote China's interests, deflect criticism on sensitive issues and disseminate China-positive narratives, or prevent moves seen as detrimental to China. An example is that of the neighboring Czechia, where a closely interlinked network of political and business relationships surrounding President Zeman, the Social Democratic Party, the private PPF Group on the Czech side, and the company CEFC on the Chinese side, supported a shift away from a previously China-skeptical stance between 2013-2017.¹²

China uses a whole-of-society approach to achieve its foreign policy goals. Chinese companies, media, academic institutions, local governments, diaspora organizations, individuals, and other actors can be utilized to achieve the party-state goals. In practice, actual government and party control over different subjects varies greatly, and they cannot be automatically seen as agents of the Chinese government without any agency of their own. However, the government has legal powers and other tools available to demand their compliance, such as under China's National Intelligence Law.

China's main source of attraction, but increasingly also coercion, lies in its economic power. China presents itself as an actor interested first and foremost in mutually beneficial economic cooperation. Using the rapid rise in its economic and technological power, China positions itself as an attractive partner for other countries' development, both as a source of investments and opportunities presented by the Chinese market. The overall goal of Chinese efforts is to form a China-centric economic system. China is actively trying to mitigate its own dependency on other economies, especially the US and the broader West, while

¹⁰ Russian Federation and the PRC. "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development." February 4, 2022. <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

¹¹ Šimalčík, Matej. "Central Europe Cannot Ignore Indo-Pacific Tensions." Visegrad Insight, November 21, 2024. <https://visegradinsight.eu/central-europe-cannot-ignore-indo-pacific-tensions/>.

¹² Šimalčík, Matej. "Oligarchs and Party Folks: Chinese Corrosive Capital in Slovakia and Czechia." CEIAS, July 2021. <https://ceias.eu/chinese-corrosive-capital-sk-cz/>.

cultivating one-directional dependencies on itself.¹³ China is increasingly prepared to leverage such dependencies for political ends. This is reflected in its expanding use of export controls on critical raw materials and strategically important technologies in which it holds a competitive advantage—measures that have already affected the EU¹⁴—and in its instrumentalization of the EU single market as part of its coercive campaign against Lithuania.¹⁵

In political terms, China promotes its image as a highly successful political and economic model that presents an alternative to the Western-promoted liberal democracy. Relatedly, China promotes its vision of international affairs, which is to be based on respect for international law, primacy of multilateralism, focus on economic cooperation and development, negation of alliance politics, and focus on sovereignty, i.e. in defining its own political values and norms and opposition to universal values. China's political and international visions are actively promoted to audiences in the West that dispute liberal democracy and seek alternative geopolitical positioning.

3. SPECIFIC AREAS OF SLOVAKIA-CHINA COOPERATION

Despite the risks, not all cooperation with China is inherently problematic. All Western states remain deeply interconnected with China, and Slovakia, in fact, lags behind in the development of ties with China behind many other EU countries. Due to undisputed technological leadership in many areas, including the crucial green transition, it is not desirable to ignore opportunities to engage with China. In areas that do not entail strategic and security risks, cooperation can be promoted. At the same time, save for total decoupling with China in case of extreme geopolitical scenarios such as war, some risk will need to be tolerated in the relationship. Finally, maintaining dialogue with China as a major global player that plays an important role in a host of issues of interest to Slovakia is necessary.

However, under the Fico government, any awareness of risks, which are shaping the EU and NATO debate on relations with China, remains missing. What is more, the relationship with China is used by the government to construct a rationale for a foreign policy that seeks to deviate from the interests of Slovakia's embeddedness in Western integration structures and for a domestic policy that follows the footsteps of illiberal reconstruction of

¹³ Center for Strategic and International Studies. "Will the Dual Circulation Strategy Enable China to Compete in a Post-Pandemic World?". December 15, 2021.

<https://chinapower.csis.org/china-covid-dual-circulation-economic-strategy/>.

¹⁴ Arcesati, Rebecca, and Jacob Gunter. "China's Multi-Purpose Export Controls Raise Pressure on Europe to Derisk." MERICS, October 1, 2025.

<https://merics.org/en/comment/chinas-multi-purpose-export-controls-raise-pressure-europe-derisk>.

¹⁵ Cutler, Wendy, and Shay Wester. "Resilience and Resolve: Lessons from Lithuania's Experience with Chinese Economic Coercion." Asia Society Policy Institute, April 17, 2024.

<https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/resilience-resolve-lessons-lithuanias-experience-chinese-economic-coercion>.

democracy in neighboring Hungary. In this context, Slovakia's deepening relationship with the PRC presents risks in several issue areas.

3.1 Chinese investment and bilateral trade

Chinese investors have shown increased interest in Slovakia in the automotive sector in recent years. Slovakia currently hosts two major Chinese investments under implementation: the €1.2 billion investment of Geely-owned Volvo in constructing a battery electric vehicle plant near Košice and a €1.2 billion investment by joint venture Gotion Inobat Batteries (GIB, 80% owned by China's Gotion) set to produce EV batteries in Šurany. Both investments predate the Fico government, which underscores that an outwardly friendly policy towards China is not a precondition for economic ties. After coming to power, the Fico government has not managed to negotiate another investment of similar scale, showing the limited role of China-friendly policy. However, the two investments can serve as anchors for further Chinese involvement, as evidenced by the €23.5 million investment by Shenzhen Unicomm Technology, Volvo's battery parts supplier, in Košice.¹⁶

The government has lent political and practical support to Chinese investments. The two investments have received the two highest amounts of state aid ever from the Slovak government for an investment project, with €267 million in direct grant to Volvo and €150 million in direct grant to GIB, with an additional €135 million in tax allowance.¹⁷ The Slovak government also supported the Chinese investments by the introduction of new national visas (annual quota of 1,000) for Chinese nationals employed by companies implementing projects designated as "important investments."¹⁸

The attraction of investors in the rapidly developing areas of EV and battery production is crucial for Slovakia, where the automotive sector underpins the economy. It also supports the overall goals of boosting the EU's role in these strategic sectors, and lessening the dependence on imports. Incentivization of Chinese investment is not unique to Slovakia, and is also pursued by Western European countries.

However, there is a need to ensure such investment does not lock Slovakia into the lower-value-added segments of the supply chain, without an opportunity for industrial upgrading.¹⁹ The EU policy toolbox in this field is still developing, with the direction towards putting down local-content requirements in terms of sourcing from European suppliers and

¹⁶ The Slovak Spectator. "Slovakia Has Attracted a New Chinese Investor to the East." September 26, 2025. <https://spectator.sme.sk/business/c/slovakia-has-attracted-a-new-chinese-investor-to-the-east>.

¹⁷ European Commission. "State Aid Transparency: Public Search." DG Competition. <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/competition/transparency/public/search/results?>

¹⁸ Slovenská republika. Zákon č. 160/2025 Z. z. Zbierka zákonov SR.

https://www.slov-lex.sk/ezbierky/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2025/160/vyhlasene_znenie.html.

¹⁹ Šebeňa, Martin, et al. "Central Europe-East Asia EV Nexus: Tracking Chinese, South Korean and Japanese Electric Vehicle and Battery Investment in the V4 Countries." CEIAS, May 2025.

<https://ceias.eu/central-europe-east-asia-ev-nexus/>.

creating conditions for technology transfer (e.g., state aid conditionality).²⁰ The Chinese companies are likely to adapt to these emerging requirements, although they might be pushed by the Chinese government not to transfer their technology under new technology export controls, which the Chinese government is putting in place.²¹ Cooperation with South Korean companies, especially in the battery sector, provides a potential alternative of cooperation with a like-minded partner, and remains untapped when considering the large South Korean footprint in Hungary and Poland.²²

In the Slovak case, as the conditions of the GIB joint venture are not public, it is not clear what kind of potential for technology transfer is embedded. The investment is also set to include an R&D component, which is a positive sign, but the positive spillover for the local economy will need to be observed. The GIB representatives have been putting stress on their intention to cooperate with local education institutions, develop the local workforce and address the local discontent over the potential environmental impact, which has also accompanied battery projects (both by China and South Korea) in Hungary.²³ The company's efforts included the invitation of local citizens, including elected representatives, from Šurany to a full-expenses-covered tour to the company's plant in China. One of the elected representatives reportedly changed his previous negative opinion on the investment and voted in favor of selling the land for the investment, which raises concerns of potential corrupt practices.²⁴

Another risk with Chinese investments stems from the connection to human rights abuses. Gotion has been implicated in the allegations of the use of forced labor in its supply chains in Xinjiang, where the PRC government has been engaged in systematic human rights violations under the nominal efforts to eradicate extremism and terrorism. In November 2024, two of Gotion's suppliers were put on the US forced labor entity list, banning goods from those companies from entering the US.²⁵ In 2021, the EU sanctioned the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, which has been alleged to have indirect links to the

²⁰ Cutler, Wendy, and Shay Wester. "Resilience and Resolve: Lessons from Lithuania's Experience with Chinese Economic Coercion." Asia Society Policy Institute, April 17, 2024. <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/resilience-resolve-lessons-lithuanias-experience-chinese-economic-coercion>.

²¹ Brown, Alexander. "Chinese Restrictions Threaten Europe's Hopes of Absorbing Battery Tech." MERICS, October 2, 2025. <https://merics.org/en/comment/chinese-restrictions-threaten-europes-hopes-absorbing-battery-tech>.

²² Šebeňa, Martin, et al. "Central Europe-East Asia EV Nexus: Tracking Chinese, South Korean and Japanese Electric Vehicle and Battery Investment in the V4 Countries." CEIAS, May 2025. <https://ceias.eu/central-europe-east-asia-ev-nexus/>.

²³ Business and Human Rights Resource Centre. "Hungary: Chinese and South Korean Battery Companies Criticised over Pollution and Worker Safety Breaches." March 1, 2023. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/hungary-chinese-and-south-korean-battery-companies-criticised-over-pollution-and-worker-safety-breaches/>.

²⁴ Šimalčík, Matej. "Nástroje predchádzania rizík vyplývajúcich z čínskej investície do výroby batérií." 2025 (unpublished).

²⁵ Moolenaar, John. "Gotion's Suppliers Blacklisted for Using Forced Labor." November 22, 2024. <https://moolenaar.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/gotions-suppliers-blacklisted-using-forced-labor>.

Gotion supply chain as well.²⁶ Furthermore, the EU adopted a Regulation prohibiting products made with forced labour in the Union market in November 2024, set to come into effect in December 2027. Under the Regulation, any products made with forced labour are prohibited from being introduced to the EU market or exported from the EU.²⁷ The sourcing of Gotion from suppliers engaged in forced labor in Xinjiang, if also employed in the GIB plant in Slovakia, would present a major human rights issue and would also impact the operation of the plant as its products could face bans.²⁸ However, Gotion and other Chinese suppliers are likely to use the time before the legislation comes into effect to adapt their supply chains.

The investments might also affect the structure of the Slovak-China trade. The export of cars to China has long been the main article of Slovak exports, accounting for 67 percent of Slovak exports to China in 2023.²⁹ Coupled with the high unit-value of these exports, this has allowed Slovakia to keep a relatively low negative trade balance with China among the EU countries.³⁰ However, the long-term ability of Slovak-based carmakers to supply the Chinese market is under question, both because of the rising competition from Chinese brands but also because of the better manufacturing conditions within China, which could mean shifting of production for the Chinese market to China. On the contrary, with the new Chinese investments in Slovakia, the trade deficit with China could rise, as the plans will require imports of raw materials, which might be, at least initially, sourced from China.³¹

This discussion underscores that the Slovak government has only limited power to influence the overall Slovakia-China bilateral trade, which is impacted by structural factors. Slovakia remains exposed to potential trade shocks in relations with China, due to the higher indirect exposure to China's final demand, mostly due to re-exports through Germany.³² Meanwhile, efforts to increase the export of Slovak agricultural products, supported by successive Slovak governments, are unlikely to significantly alter the structure of the trade relationship. The process of granting the necessary import licenses for Slovak exporters has been notoriously lengthy, with China leveraging it as a political tool. In 2021, the then Prime Minister Igor Matovič decided to attend the summit of China's 16+1 platform

²⁶ Uyghur Human Rights Project. "New Report Details Growth of XPCC's Prisons and Internment Camps." July 26, 2022.

<https://uhrp.org/statement/new-report-details-growth-of-xpccs-prisons-and-internment-camps/>.

²⁷ European Parliament and Council of the European Union. "Regulation (EU) 2024/3015 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 November 2024 on Prohibiting Products Made with Forced Labour on the Union Market and Amending Directive (EU) 2019/1937." December 12, 2024. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/3015/oj/eng>.

²⁸ Šimalčík, Matej. "Nástroje predchádzania rizík vyplývajúcich z čínskej investície do výroby batérii." 2025 (unpublished).

²⁹ Observatory of Economic Complexity. "China (CHN) and Slovakia (SVK) Trade." <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/svk>.

³⁰ Eurostat. "China-EU — International Trade in Goods Statistics." https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=China-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics.

³¹ Šebeňa, Martin, Thomas Chan, and Matej Šimalčík. "Hidden Links: V4's Final Demand Exposure toward the Chinese Market." CEIAS, October 2023.

https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/V4-exposures-paper_FINAL.pdf.

³² Ibid.

despite his earlier intention to skip it after China confirmed a signing of a protocol on the export of Slovak goat and sheep meat.³³

3.2 Infrastructure cooperation

One of the major areas of cooperation of interest to the Fico government has been in infrastructure. Involvement of Chinese companies in public-private partnership (PPP) projects of building and reconstructing highways and railroads has been mentioned several times by the government. After initial unsuccessful attempts, such as the infamous A2 highway project in Poland over a decade ago,³⁴ Chinese companies now routinely participate in bidding consortia in the EU, including the consortium that built the Petržalka tram extension in Bratislava.³⁵ However, the exact nature of how the Slovak government wishes to include Chinese companies in such tenders has not been clarified by the government.

A potential bid of a Chinese company for infrastructure projects in Slovakia could be investigated by the European Commission under the new Foreign Subsidies Regulation (FSR) which targets non-EU participants in EU tenders benefiting from their home government's aid. FSR was first utilized in the case of Bulgaria, where an investigated Chinese company voluntarily withdrew from a bid for 20 “push-pull” trains, including their maintenance over 15 years and the education of staff.³⁶

A separate issue is the Karpaty highway tunnel north of Bratislava, where the Slovak Minister of Transport Jozef Ráž has mentioned the possibility of a government-to-government project with China to construct the tunnel.³⁷ This suggests that inter-governmental agreement might be used in order to avoid public procurement processes and related transparency requirements, as has been the case in Serbia and

³³ CEIAS. "CEEAsia Briefing – Special Issue: The 17+1 Online Summit." February 15, 2021. <https://ceias.eu/ceeasia-briefing-special-issue>.

³⁴ Construction Briefing. "Poland's A2 Road Opened Just in Time." June 11, 2012. <https://www.constructionbriefing.com/contracts-tenders/news/poland%E2%80%99s-a2-road-opened-just-in-time/1074833.article>.

³⁵ China's CRCC purchased a 75% stake in the Spanish construction company Aldessa, a member of the consortium, in 2020. In 2024, CRCC increased its share to 99%. See: El Confidencial. "China Railway blinda la toma de control de Aldesa y diluye a la familia Fernández Rubio." November 6, 2024. https://www.elconfidencial.com/empresas/2024-11-06/china-railway-blinda-toma-control-aldesa_3998256/.

³⁶ CMS Law. "EC Closes First Investigation in Bulgaria under New EU Foreign Subsidies Regulation." April 2024. <https://cms-lawnow.com/en/ealerts/2024/04/ec-closes-first-investigation-in-bulgaria-under-new-eu-foreign-subsidies-regulation>.

³⁷ Bodická, Jolana. "Minister Ráž otvára dvere obchodu s Čínou, šancu má prístav Bratislava aj karpatský tunel." RailTarget, November 12, 2024. <https://www.railtarget.cz/rozhovory-a-eventy/minister-raz-otvara-dvere-obchodu-s-cinou-sancu-ma-pristav-bratislava-aj-karpatsky-tunel-9586.html>.

Hungary on similar projects, the details of which are often confidential.³⁸ The contract could thus also be directly awarded to a Chinese company.

A particularly problematic part would be a link of the project with Chinese financing.

While China is willing to finance projects without strict conditions on economic viability, which is often favored by the host government, the parameters of the loan are often not as favourable as other financing options. Lack of economic considerations by the host government often causes debt unsustainability issues, such as in the case of Montenegro³⁹. While the notion of China's "debt trap" where China deliberately commits countries to risky loans, has been largely dismissed by experts,⁴⁰ any similar cooperation based on unsustainable financing with China could entail risks for Slovakia.

3.3 Technology and academic cooperation

The Fico government has expressed interest in fostering closer cooperation with China in the field of digital economy, technology and communications, leading to concerns related to data security, integrity of critical systems, as well as exports of Chinese norms and standards embedded in the infrastructure. Following the conclusion of an MoU between the two sides during the November 2024 visit of the Fico delegation to China, in September 2025, the Slovak Ministry of Investment, Regional Development and Informatics hosted a delegation led by Zhuang Rongwen, the Director of the Cyberspace Administration of China. According to the Ministry, the meeting revolved around digital policy and new technologies.⁴¹ Another MoU on developing cooperation in AI with China is in the works.⁴² Slovak representatives have repeatedly engaged in discussions with China's technology company Huawei during their visits to China, expressing interest in deepening

³⁸ Business and Human Rights Resource Centre. "Serbia: Gov't criticised for lack of transparency and accountability in Chinese Consortium's railway project following the roof collapse." February 6, 2025. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/serbia-chinese-consortiums-involvement-in-railway-project-where-roof-collapse-incident-broke-out-remains-opaque-govt-criticized-for-failing-to-secure-transparency-for-chinese-invested-projec>.; Reuters. "Hungary Classifies Budapest-Belgrade Chinese Rail Project." April 2020.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/hungary-classifies-budapest-belgrade-chinese-rail-project-idUSL8N2D14V2/>.

³⁹ Euractiv. "Montenegro Learns True Cost of China-Backed \$1 Billion Road to Nowhere." May 27, 2021. <https://www.euractiv.com/news/montenegro-learns-true-cost-of-china-backed-1-billion-road-to-nowhere/>.

⁴⁰ Singh, Abhijit. "The Myth of 'Debt-Trap Diplomacy' and Realities of Chinese Development Finance." *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2020): 239–253.

⁴¹ Aktuality.sk. "Šéf čínskej cenzúry rokoval na slovenskom ministerstve, rezort hovorí o bežnej diplomacii."

<https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/CWXALpA/sef-cinskej-cenzury-rokoval-na-slovenskom-ministerstve-rezort-hovori-o-beznej-diplomacii/>.

⁴² Ministerstvo investícií, regionálneho rozvoja a informatizácie SR (MIRRI). "Štátny tajomník MIRRI SR Štefánek prijal čínsku delegáciu: rokovali o umelej inteligencii a spolupráci medzi podnikmi a akademickými inštitúciami." September 24, 2025.

<https://mirri.gov.sk/aktuality/digitalna-agenda/statny-tajomnik-mirri-sr-stefanek-prijal-cinsku-delegaci-u-rokovali-o-umelej-inteligencii-a-spolupraci-medzi-podnikmi-a-akademickymi-instituciami/>.

cooperation in electromobility and other areas.⁴³ Under the EU 5G Toolbox, the EU recommended restriction or prohibition of high-risk suppliers from core 5G networks, with the criteria tailored to encompass Chinese vendors Huawei and ZTE. However, as opposed to some other member states, Slovakia has not moved to directly prohibit the involvement of Chinese suppliers. The share of Chinese companies in Slovak 5G Radio Access Networks remains relatively low in comparison with other EU countries, at 15%, according to Strand Consult.⁴⁴

The increased cooperation with China in the digital sphere directly contravenes long-term efforts by Slovak security institutions.⁴⁵ The Slovak Security Service has repeatedly warned about the leveraging of Chinese companies for PRC intelligence-gathering operations and the covert lobbying activities by Chinese telecom companies.⁴⁶ The warnings have even been issued by Slovak institutions under the Fico government. In January 2025, NSA(NBÚ) released a warning against the use of China's AI LLM DeepSeek, focusing on the broad gathering of personal data which lacks protection under China's legal regime and censorship of results.⁴⁷ Similar concerns are, however, relevant to the use of Chinese technology products, both hardware and software, in many other applications, from surveillance cameras,⁴⁸ to connected vehicles, to solar panel inverters. In neighboring Czechia, NÚKIB issued a general warning in September 2025 against the transfer of system and user data to the PRC and affiliated entities and the remote administration of technical assets from PRC and affiliated entities. Under the Fico government, Slovakia is unlikely to follow a similar approach and is instead likely to deepen links to China in critical technology areas, exposing Slovakia to surveillance risks.

⁴³ Jung, Saskia. "Denisa Saková a Ladislav Kamenický predstavili Číne možnosti podnikateľskej spolupráce." No Comment, April 9, 2025. <https://nocomment.sk/2025/04/09/denisa-sakova-a-ladislav-kamenicky-predstavili-cine-moznosti-podnikatelskej-spoluprace/>; Embassy of the PRC in Slovakia. "駐斯洛伐克大使蔡革出席華為斯洛伐克信息通信技術日活動 [Chinese Ambassador to Slovakia Cai Ge Attends Huawei Slovakia ICT Day]." Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, April 2, 2025.

https://www.mfa.gov.cn/qjhdq_676201/qj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679714/1206x2_679734/202504/t20250403_11587927.shtml; Saková, Denisa. "Elektromobilita prináša zmeny aj pre Slovensko." Facebook post. April 9, 2025. <https://www.facebook.com/denisa.sakova/posts/1060646418763523>.

⁴⁴ Strand Consult. "The Market for 5G RAN in Europe: Share of Chinese and Non-Chinese Vendors in 31 European Countries." 2022. <https://strandconsult.dk/the-market-for-5g-ran-in-europe-share-of-chinese-and-non-chinese-vendors-in-31-european-countries/>.

⁴⁵ Šimalčík, Matej, and Filip Šebok. "Slovakia's China Pivot: Economic Pragmatism or Political Subservience? A Briefing on Robert Fico's Visit to China in November 2024." CEIAS, December 20, 2024. <https://ceias.eu/slovakias-china-pivot-economic-pragmatism-or-political-subservience-a-briefing-on-robert-ficos-visit-to-china-in-november-2024/>.

⁴⁶ Slovenská informačná služba (SIS). "Správa o činnosti SIS." <https://www.sis.gov.sk/pre-vas/sprava-o-cinnosti-2020.html>.

⁴⁷ Národný bezpečnostný úrad (NBÚ). "Upozornenie na AI model." January 30, 2025. <https://www.nbu.gov.sk/upozornenie-na-ai-model/>.

⁴⁸ Denník N. "Problém Hikvision: Ako Slovensko púšťa rizikovú čínsku firmu do bezpečnostnej infraštruktúry." November 19, 2020. <https://dennikn.sk/2149583/problem-hikvision-ako-slovensko-pusta-rizikovu-cinsku-firmu-do-bezpecnostnej-infrastruktury/>.

Under the Fico government, the Slovak government has also incentivized expanding cooperation with China in the academic sphere. In June 2025, the Chinese Ambassador Cai Ge visited the Slovak Academy of Science (SAV).⁴⁹ According to the Chinese readout, SAV “praised China's achievements in scientific innovation and was “looking forward to strengthening ties with Chinese scientific research institutions and universities.” Cooperation with China presents risks in terms of technology leakage, including dual-use technology and products, links to human rights abuses, or interference in curricula in social science programs. According to the research by CEIAS, there were 136 formal links between Slovak universities and Chinese entities as of 2022.⁵⁰ 38 of these cooperation links were with Chinese universities that have links to China’s People’s Liberation Army or Chinese defense-industrial complex, led by the Slovak Academy of Science and Slovak Technological University. Chinese companies are also actively cooperating with Slovak academic institutions. For example, Huawei has supported the establishment of a research center on safe cities, procured materials science research, and has been placing Slovak students into its young talent program, the Seeds for Future.

Not all cooperation with China in academia contains risks. Even in sensitive areas, cooperation can be undertaken if necessary safeguards are employed. However, the awareness of any risks involved in the cooperation remains low in Slovakia and governmental initiatives to implement research security started during the previous election cycle appear to be dormant under Fico’s premiership.

3.4 China’s information activities

China seeks to promote a positive image in Slovakia and deflect criticism. Chinese activities in the information space remain relatively limited, however, with a small footprint on social media through accounts of the Chinese embassy and Chinese state affiliated media.⁵¹

China is relatively more successful in inserting its narrative into the media space. Chinese ambassador has published “interviews” and articles mostly in “alternative” media, such as Zem a Vek⁵² and Hlavný Denník.⁵³ Among mainstream publications, Trend magazine

⁴⁹ Embassy of the PRC in Slovakia. "Ambassador Cai Ge Paid a Courtesy Visit to the New President of the Slovak Academy of Sciences." June 25, 2025.

https://sk.china-embassy.gov.cn/slo/sqxx/xwtdt/202506/t20250625_11658187.htm.

⁵⁰ Kalivoda, Adam, and Matej Šimalčík. "Slovakia: Tech-Focused Cooperation with Hints of Thought Work." CEIAS, June 2022.

<https://ceias.eu/slovakia-tech-focused-cooperation-with-hints-of-thought-work/>.

⁵¹ Šebok, Filip et al. "Echoes and Resistance: China's Discourse Power and Public Perceptions in Central Europe." CEIAS, July 2025.

<https://ceias.eu/echoes-and-resistance-chinas-discourse-power-and-public-perceptions-in-central-europe/>.

⁵² Cai Ge. "Prenášajme múdrosť histórie a vytvorme lepšiu budúcnosť: Pripomenutie si 70. výročia vyhlásenia Piatich princípov mierového spoluzitia." Embassy of the PRC in Slovakia, July 19, 2024.

https://sk.china-embassy.gov.cn/slo/sqxx/xwtdt/202407/t20240719_11456970.htm.

⁵³ Cai Ge. "Spravodlivosť zvíťazí, mier zvíťazí a ľudia zvíťazia." Embassy of the PRC in Slovakia, September 18, 2025.

https://sk.china-embassy.gov.cn/slo/sqxx/xwtdt/202509/t20250918_11710969.htm.

is the most open to promoting Chinese views, as it has repeatedly provided space for Chinese ambassadors.⁵⁴ In August 2025, Trend published an “interview” with the Chinese Ambassador, which was apparently provided by the Chinese Embassy, including both the questions and answers.⁵⁵ The content published by the Chinese media and diplomats is highly formulaic, and rarely addresses the Slovak context in more detail, showing a rather passive communication strategy. Only some 3.6 percent of Slovak respondents indicated they frequently follow Chinese media or social media accounts, while 25.9 percent do so occasionally, according to a recent CEIAS poll. This was broadly in line with other V4 countries.⁵⁶ The opening of the Chinese Cultural Institute in Bratislava, which has been discussed by the two sides, could serve to bolster China’s information activities in the country.⁵⁷

Public opinion polls undertaken by CEIAS in February-March 2025 show that the perception of China in Slovakia is the most positive among the V4 countries, even if the share of negative views still outweighs positive ones. Slovaks also saw the US as a bigger threat than China as the only V4 country.⁵⁸ The polling also reveals that SMER-SD and HLAS-SD have one of the most pro-China electorates among the major political parties in the V4.⁵⁹ China is broadly seen more positively by conservative and left-leaning parts of the population and those who see themselves as part of the global East.⁶⁰ While only 16 percent of Slovaks believed it would be beneficial for Slovakia to learn from China in terms of its political system, 49 percent believed Slovakia should learn from China in the management of its economy. Slovaks also have the highest level of support in the V4 for China-supported conspiracy theories linking the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic to the US military, or accusing the US of running biological weapons labs in Ukraine.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Šimalčík, Matej. "In the Service of China's Interests." CEIAS, August 15, 2025.

<https://ceias.eu/in-the-service-of-chinas-interests/>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Šebok, Filip et al. "Echoes and Resistance: China's Discourse Power and Public Perceptions in Central Europe." CEIAS, July 2025.

<https://ceias.eu/echoes-and-resistance-chinas-discourse-power-and-public-perceptions-in-central-europe/>.

⁵⁷ Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky. "Predseda vlády SR Robert Fico rokoval v Moskve s prezidentom Čínskej ľudovej republiky." May 9, 2025.

<https://www.vlada.gov.sk/tlacove-spravy/predseda-vlady-sr-robert-fico-rokoval-v-moskve-s-prezidentom-cinskej-ludovej-republiky/>.

⁵⁸ Šimalčík, Matej, and Filip Šebok. "Navigating Uncertainty: Central European Public Opinion on Geopolitics in 2025." CEIAS, April 2025.

https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/EMIF_Report1_Print.pdf.

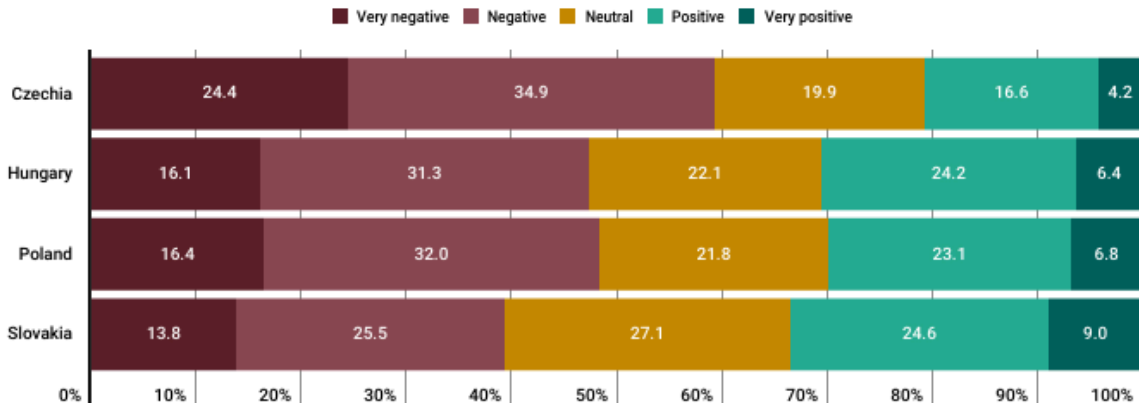
⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Šebok, Filip et al. "Echoes and Resistance: China's Discourse Power and Public Perceptions in Central Europe." CEIAS, July 2025.

<https://ceias.eu/echoes-and-resistance-chinas-discourse-power-and-public-perceptions-in-central-europe/>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Public opinion about China in the V4

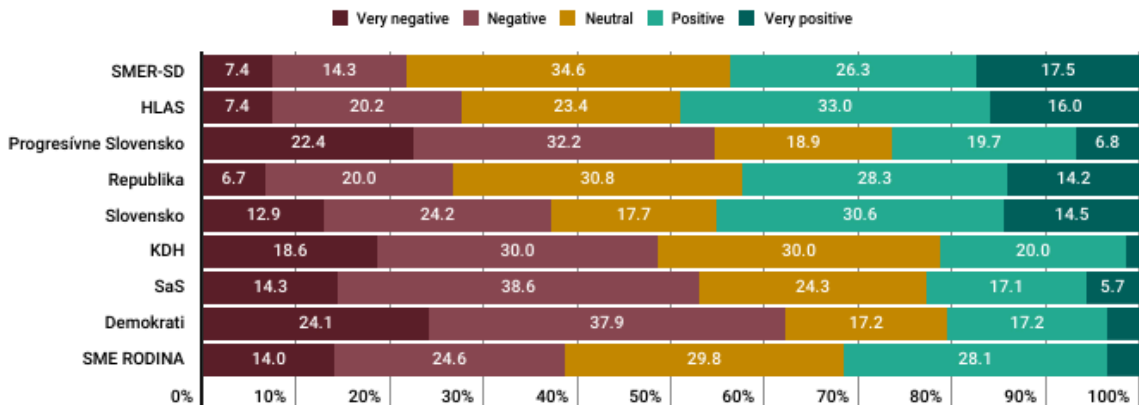


Note: Feelings towards countries/entities have been measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale. The responses were coded as "very negative" (0-20); "negative" (21-45); "neutral" (46-54); "positive" (55-79); "very positive" (80-100).

Data: Survey - Public opinion in Visegrad Four countries on global affairs (CEIAS)

© CEIAS

Views of China according to voting preferences



Note: Feelings towards countries/entities have been measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale. The responses were coded as "very negative" (0-20); "negative" (21-45); "neutral" (46-54); "positive" (55-79); "very positive" (80-100).

Data: Survey - Public opinion in Visegrad Four countries on global affairs (CEIAS)

© CEIAS

As has been argued by studies of Chinese information activities in the V4, China's propaganda can be most effective when it corresponds with the pre-existing domestic narratives.⁶² This is the case of the rhetoric of the current government, which aligns on many issues with China's views. This is exemplified by the Strategic Partnership document, which notes that the two sides "respect the independent choices made by the people of each country on the paths for the development of democracy and social and political systems that suit their national conditions" and also "firmly oppose the politicization and instrumentalization of human rights issues, and firmly oppose any country interfering in

⁶² Šebok, Filip et al. "Echoes and Resistance: China's Discourse Power and Public Perceptions in Central Europe." CEIAS, July 2025.

<https://ceias.eu/echoes-and-resistance-chinas-discourse-power-and-public-perceptions-in-central-europe/>.

the internal affairs of other countries in the name of democracy and human rights.” This language indirectly reflects China’s opposition to universal values, which is also a cornerstone of Fico’s ideology and foreign policy. The Slovak PM has noted interest in sharing “governance” experience with China,⁶³ and Slovakia has also been a target of CCP party diplomacy initiatives, which are developed in parallel to state level diplomacy. In May 2025, a delegation of the CCP International Liaison Department headed by vice-minister Chen Zhou visited Slovakia, meeting with Fico as well as SMER-SD and Hlas-SD representatives, with the agenda focused on “in-depth promotion of Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”.⁶⁴ In May, Chinese Ambassador Cai Ge gave a lecture to SMER-SD’s youth organization on China’s elimination of poverty.⁶⁵ The government party representatives have continued to directly replicate PRC talking points, e.g., lauding China as a stabilizing force in the world.⁶⁶ Continued engagement with China is likely to be used by the Fico government to further distance itself from liberal values and prop up alternative forms of governance.

China’s propaganda is also linked with intelligence-gathering activities. In January 2026, Yang Yiming, a correspondent of Chinese state media, Guangming Daily, was arrested in the Czech Republic and indicted on espionage charges. Yang was also active in Slovakia, where he cultivated ties with China-friendly political figures who have provided interviews later published in Chinese media, including MEP Ľuboš Blaha (SMER-SD), Speaker of the National Council, Richard Raši (Hlas-SD), and MP Michal Bartek (Hlas-SD).⁶⁷ Intelligence gathering is an inherent role of the Chinese state media and reflects their structural operation, rather than being limited to this particular case. Moreover, reports featuring China-friendly statements by foreign politicians (published in Chinese for the Chinese

⁶³ Permanent Mission of the PRC to the United Nations. "President Xi Jinping Meets with Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico." September 4, 2025.

https://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/zgyw/202509/t20250904_11702300.htm

⁶⁴ Embassy of the PRC in Slovakia. "中共代表团访问斯洛伐克 [CPC Delegation Visits Slovakia]." May 20, 2025. https://sk.china-embassy.gov.cn/zsjw/202505/t20250520_11628600.htm.

⁶⁵ Embassy of the PRC in Slovakia. "30. mája 2025 predstavil čínsky veľvyslanec na Slovensku Cai Ge mládežníckej organizácii strany Smer veľké úspechy Číny v boji proti chudobe a odstránení absolútnej chudoby." Facebook post. 2025 .

<https://www.facebook.com/ChinaEmbSVK/posts/30-m%C3%A1ja-2025-predstavil-%C4%8D%C3%ADnsky-ve%C4%BEvyslanec-na-slovensku-cai-ge-ml%C3%A1de%C5%BEn%C3%ADckej-orga/1028921696098261/>.

⁶⁶ Bartek, Michal. "Spolupráca a dialóg sú zárukou prosperity pre budúce generácie". Facebook post. 2025. <https://www.facebook.com/michalbartekHLASsd/posts/1109264474670411>.

⁶⁷ Yang, Yiming. "四中全会成果进一步坚定了中国的自信——访斯洛伐克议会国防和安全委员会副主席米哈尔·巴尔泰克 [The Outcomes of the Fourth Plenary Session Have Further Strengthened China's Confidence: An Interview with Michal Bartek, Deputy Chair of the Defence and Security Committee of the Slovak Parliament]." Guangming Daily, October 26, 2025.

<https://www.theorychina.org.cn/c/2025-10-26/1534461.shtml>; "中斯关系发展进入'快车道'——访斯洛伐克国民议会议长里哈德·莱希 [China-Slovakia Relations Enter the Fast Lane: An Interview with Richard Raši, Speaker of the Slovak National Council]." Guangming Daily, December 4, 2025.

https://news.gmw.cn/2025-12/04/content_38456639.htm; Yang, Yiming. "历史烛照未来 合作共启新篇——欧洲议员布拉哈谈中欧关系'和合之道' [History Illuminates the Future, Cooperation Opens a New Chapter: MEP Blaha on the 'Path of Harmony' in China-EU Relations]." Guangming Daily, April 26, 2025. https://news.gmw.cn/2025-04/26/content_37991161.htm.

audience) are an example of foreign propaganda for domestic use (wai xuan nei yong), a common tool designed to highlight the prestige and legitimacy of the Chinese government abroad. However, contacts gained through such engagement could also be leveraged in other contexts to support China's interests.

4. IMPACT ON SLOVAK FOREIGN POLICY DIRECTION

The close relationship with the PRC has ramifications for wider Slovak foreign policy, including its role in the EU. The current Slovak government's outlook on relations with China explicitly denies any risks of deepened economic cooperation and instead advocates for closer links with the PRC across all areas. In contrast, since 2023, the European Commission has subsumed its China policy under the framework of derisking.⁶⁸ The goal of this policy is to limit the negative aspects of dependency on China in critical sectors, address the absence of a level-playing field in the economic relationship, better protect the European economy and industry and seek alternative partnerships beyond China. As a part of this approach, the European Commission has adopted new legal instruments and developed recommendations in a number of policy areas and increased the use of trade defense mechanisms against China.

However, with the derisking policy remaining vaguely defined and porous, Slovakia has significant leeway to expand cooperation with China even if it contradicts derisking. Neighboring Hungary provides a clear precedent. The derisking framework does not enjoy unanimous support by all member states (not just Slovakia, but prominently also Hungary, Spain, Portugal and others) and its key tenets have also been put under question in the context of the worsening EU-US relationship under Trump 2.0. While the EU can directly embed derisking through areas where it has exclusive competence, such as trade and competition, it only has limited and indirect powers to influence member states' policies in areas pertaining to national security.

Close political relations with China also lead to the question of China leveraging them for support on voting in the Council and blocking EU-wide moves. This has been the case for Hungary over the years, but previously also Greece.⁶⁹ Slovakia voted against the imposition of countervailing duties against China-manufactured battery electric vehicles in

⁶⁸ Von der Leyen, Ursula. "Speech by President von der Leyen on EU-China Relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre." European Commission, March 30, 2023. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_2063.

⁶⁹ RFE/RL. "Hungary Criticized for Blocking EU Statements on China, Middle East." June 4, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/hungary-criticized-eu-statements-china/31290741.html>; Smith, Helena, and Jennifer Rankin. "Greece Blocks EU's Criticism at UN of China's Human Rights Record." The Guardian, June 18, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/18/greece-eu-criticism-un-china-human-rights-record>; Fallon, Theresa. "The EU, the South China Sea, and China's Successful Wedge Strategy." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, CSIS, October 13, 2016. <https://amti.csis.org/eu-south-china-sea-chinas-successful-wedge-strategy/>.

October 2024, together with Germany, Hungary, and Slovenia, while 12 more abstained.⁷⁰ This was, however, a case of a highly contested topic, with diverging views across the EU, which cannot be solely explained as succumbing to China's pressure. Apart from the vote, no other case of Slovakia voting against the EU majority or blocking China-specific measures has been recorded.

The openness of Slovakia to cooperation with Russia and deepening ties with China (to a lesser extent) also give rise to security concerns that may impact cooperation with allies in NATO. Slovakia is likely to be partly cut off from intelligence sharing by partners wary of leaks, as has already been suggested by some sources knowledgeable on the matter.⁷¹ The liberal visa policies for Chinese citizens linked to strategic investments may increase concerns about intelligence activities. Considering the increasing security cooperation between Russia and China, vigilance is also needed in terms of Beijing's support for Russia's intensifying effort to probe the alliance. Employment of Chinese technologies in critical sectors could be exploited by the Chinese state to conduct cyber espionage, siphon off sensitive data, or monitor communications, including those potentially related to NATO assets or operations in the country. Such fears are, however, not unique to Slovakia, due to the prevalence of Chinese technology.

The Fico government's stress on developing relations with China has also impacted ties with the Republic of China (further referred to as Taiwan). While Slovakia, under its One-China Policy, does not officially recognize Taiwan, it has developed a relatively intensive informal relationship with Taiwan, supported by the representative offices functioning on both sides. Under the 2020-2023 governments, Slovakia has become one of the leading proponents of a closer relationship with Taiwan in the EU and stepped up political engagement in the form of political visits.⁷² It is likely that Beijing has required the Fico government to reiterate its stance on respecting the One China Policy as a political precondition for further developing relations. In the Strategic Partnership, the Slovak side "reaffirmed its firm commitment to the one-China policy, that there is but one China in the world, and that the Government of the People's Republic of China is the sole legal government representing the whole of China. Slovakia opposes any attempts to interfere in China's internal affairs, sovereignty and territorial integrity, including Taiwan." While the statement was a relatively strong support for China's position in Taiwan, it did not go beyond

⁷⁰ Reuters. "How EU Governments Plan to Vote on Chinese EV Tariffs." October 4, 2024.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/how-eu-governments-plan-vote-chinese-ev-tariffs-2024-10-04/>.

⁷¹ Deník N. "Západní země už filtrují tajné informace pro Slovensko, Češi Ficovi nevěřili od začátku." April 24, 2024.

<https://denikn.cz/1409750/zapadni-zeme-uz-filtruji-tajne-informace-pro-slovensko-cesi-ficovi-neverili-od-zacatku/>.

⁷² Šimalčík, Matej, Alfred Gerstl, and Dominika Remžová (eds). "Beyond the Dumpling Alliance: Tracking Taiwan's Relations with Central and Eastern Europe." CEIAS, March 2023.

<https://ceias.eu/beyond-the-dumpling-alliance/>.

precedent, as Slovakia's One-China Policy was defined in terms very close to China's own interpretation already in 2003.⁷³

In practical terms, the Fico government has apparently suspended the Taiwanese-Slovak Commission on Economic Cooperation with Taiwan, as the planned meeting of the Commission in Slovakia was not held in 2024, nor in Taiwan in 2025. Despite the withdrawal of high-level support for the relationship, the roots of the Taiwan-Slovakia relationship remain resilient, as they are built on long-standing civil society, political party, city and region-level and company links. Still, the lack of political support might mean less opportunity for Slovakia to benefit from cooperation with Taiwan in the semiconductor field, which has been the most promising field of cooperation for many countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Taiwan. In the neighboring Czechia, Taiwan opened three centers for cooperation on semiconductors in 2023-2024, partly due to the high-level political support by the ruling government.⁷⁴

Given the fluctuation in the Slovak-China policy in the past, the development of bilateral ties can be significantly affected by the departure of the current government.

After the elections planned for 2027, a government formed by the current mainstream opposition parties (Progressive Slovakia, SAS, KDĽ, Demokrati), which have been critical of engagement with China, could steer Slovakia again to a more skeptical stance that pays attention to economic security. Meanwhile, the Fico government can be expected to continue in its course on China policy, with the main focus being attraction of further Chinese investments.

⁷³ Xinhua News Agency. "China, Slovakia Sign Joint Statement." China.org.cn, January 7, 2003. <http://www.china.org.cn/english/international/52905.htm>.

⁷⁴ Sedlák, Jan. "Češi zabrali, takže u nás startuje evropské čipové centrum. A další tři platí Tchaj-wan." Lupa.cz, April 7, 2025. <https://www.lupa.cz/clanky/cesi-zabrali-takze-u-nas-startuje-evropske-cipove-centrum-a-dalsi-tri-plati-tchaj-wan/>.