

Bratislava hosts EU's latest 'crucial' summit

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IT WAS just a few days after the people of the UK voted to leave the EU and two days before Slovakia took over its first-ever presidency that Prime Minister Robert Fico announced he was thinking of summoning an informal meeting in Bratislava.

The leaders needed to launch "a principal discussion over the functioning of the EU and the eurozone," Fico said before the European Council summit in Brussels on that day, as quoted by the Euractiv.sk website.

An opportunity for Slovakia

Vladimír Bilčík, an analyst with the Slovak Foreign Policy Association think tank, opines that the Brexit has paradoxically meant a political opportunity for Slovakia in the shape of the summit.

"Because nobody counted on this, nobody was planning a summit," Bilčík told *The Slovak Spectator*. "Slovakia, like every other presidency, tried to have some summit at the top political level – and now it has that."

For Slovakia and its presidency, the summit is "an important opening ceremony", as Yann-Sven Rittelmeyer, a policy analyst from the Brussels-based European Policy Centre (EPC), sees it.

Outside Brussels after years

It is also the first time heads of state and government have met outside Brussels since 2010.

"The possibility to host such a summit has become a rarity in the EU as all European Council meetings now need to take place in Brussels," Rittelmeyer told *The Slovak Spectator*. Previously, the summits taking place in the respective presiding countries would increase public awareness about the EU within the country, and bring more attention and prestige to the host country.

"Slovakia can hope to benefit from these elements," Rittelmeyer said.

He strictly divides the role of the host from the role of the driving force or chair of the summit, which Slovakia is not, he noted. In this position, Slovakia "will benefit from the limelight of this summit but is unlikely to be held responsible for its success or failures".

Slovakia is the host country of the Bratislava meeting, but the European Council that convenes on September 16 in



Security is one of the issues the EU leaders will discuss in Bratislava.

Photo: Sme

Bratislava is presided over by its permanent president, currently Donald Tusk. Meanwhile, Slovakia presides over the Council of the EU, or the so-called Council of Ministers.

Politically the preparation of the summit is in the hands of the European Council president Tusk and his team, Radovan Geist, analyst and CEO of the Euractiv.sk news portal about the EU, noted.

"Obviously, as the host country and the country that presides over the Council of the EU, we can and we should contribute to finding compromises and common solutions," Geist said, but warned that Slovakia should not expect "to be at the centre of the negotiations".

Expectations

In terms of informal summits that take place in the EU, this summit could be groundbreaking in terms of "how we will discuss the future common functioning of the union with 27 countries", Bilčík opines.

At the same time he says that to some extent the success of the summit depends on the presidency and the prime minister of the presiding country. A summit is not expected to result in concrete decisions, but rather in some joint declaration.

"If that declaration should resonate so that many will remember it, as the Bratislava declaration, then the summit must take place in a friendly, open atmosphere, where the message will be communicated relatively clearly," Bilčík said.

The 27 leaders will have to discuss the long-term vision for the EU in Bratislava, Fico said in early July in the European Parliament, during a speech to inaugurate the presidency of Slovakia. He warned against a "business as usual"

statement coming out of the Bratislava summit, which would only prove eurosceptics right.

Future, Brexit, migration

The main issues to be discussed at the summit will be migration and its economic dimension, and the EU's future following Brexit.

"I originally expected that there would be an ordinary summit in Bratislava in September, but on seeing such lively diplomatic activity preceding the informal European Council meeting in Bratislava, I began to sense a huge amount of respect for the summit," said Fico in Warsaw on August 26 following a meeting of the prime ministers of the Visegrad Group countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, as quoted by the TASR newswire.

Fico wants to raise the issue of the relationship between EU member states and European bodies at the Bratislava summit. He would like to see the EU strengthen and become a global player. The summit should serve as the beginning of a deeper debate on the community's future.

There is no need to expect miraculous plans.

Ivan Korčok

Less ambitious than before

What the summit should bring is self-reflection and diagnosis of the union's problems, according to Fico.

The EU is only at the beginning of the debate about what actually happened in the UK and what it means for the

future of the entire block, Foreign Ministry State Secretary Ivan Korčok said. He opined that though the opening of such a critical discussion at the Bratislava meeting is surely a great success, there is "no need to expect quick and easy solutions and miraculous plans".

Moreover, representatives of EU members will discuss openly the question of why people have lost confidence in the EU.

"Bratislava will surely be remembered as the moment when the EU poured pure wine," (i.e. placed all its cards on the table) Korčok said, as quoted by TASR.

A historic meeting or just a brainstorming session?

Geist, by contrast, prefers to call the meeting "a potentially important brainstorming". He draws an optimistic scenario, where the summit would lead, in the course of a year to 18 months, to solutions that would help the EU cope with the current crises, including eurozone problems, sluggish economic growth, migration, and security issues.

In the more realistic scenario Geist expects the Bratislava summit to be seen in hindsight as "a mixture of partial results and missed opportunities", and "another one of the meetings of leaders that proved that searching for common solutions in a group of 28 countries (or 27, given that the UK is leaving), is complicated or even impossible".

Rittelmeyer on the other hand believes the meeting might be remembered as the start of a process, although concrete results are not to be expected for now.

"The idea is to demonstrate that there is a working and forward-looking EU of 27, without the United Kingdom," he said.

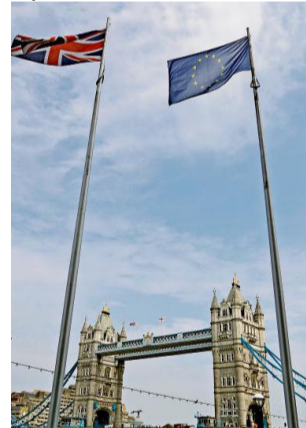
Presidency not all about Brexit so far

WILL Brexit hijack Slovakia's presidency? That was the main question analysts in Slovakia were discussing when people of the UK voted to leave the EU just a few days before Slovakia took over its first-ever presidency.

Two months into the presidency, and just before the informal meeting of heads of states and governments in Bratislava, it seems that Slovakia has managed to deal with other topics that are currently on the EU's table. Brexit, however, still takes the lead as it affects most if not all the future decisions of the club, analysts say.

"The official beginning of Slovakia's EU presidency has been overshadowed by the crisis management of the post Brexit vote," Yann-Sven Rittelmeyer, a policy analyst from the Brussels-based non-governmental European Policy Centre (EPC), told *The Slovak Spectator*. "This unexpected responsibility felt more in the hands of the European leaders and of the heads of state and government of the largest member states."

Observers however agree that despite that Slovakia has played an active role, for instance, in closing the negotiations about the budget for the next year and in progressing in EU enlargement talks, as the presiding country.



UK still has not asked for leaving the EU. Photo: AP/SITA

Not only Brexit

After the UK vote, the general concern in Slovakia was that Brexit and the preparations for it might overshadow any other topics that Slovakia listed among its presidency priorities.

Local analysts now say this has not happened, except in the early days of the presidency when the topic of Brexit was still new and widely discussed in the media.

"In the early days after the referendum it was definitely so," Radovan Geist, analyst and CEO of the Euractiv.sk news portal about the EU, told *The Slovak Spectator*.

At the same time, however, it was clear that the British decision to leave was not the end of the EU and that

the union would have to carry on with its agenda, with regard to both the technical issues as well as highly political ones, he added.

It is also clear now that the UK will take a relatively long time to leave the EU. The British government hasn't started the formal departure process, and it is unlikely to do so during the Slovak presidency, Geist noted.

"Brexit definitely is a factor that is present in all the ongoing decision-making of the EU, technically speaking, however, it is not a topic for the presidency as such," Geist said.

Schedule changed

Brexit is affecting the whole agenda and functioning of the EU, including the presidency. But until the UK triggers article 50 (to launch the exit procedure), "the EU needs to focus on trying to continue to conduct its usual business and find solutions to tackle the current challenges", Rittelmeyer noted.

The Slovak presidency has managed to cope with the issue to some extent, mostly because the process of Brexit hasn't been formally launched yet "so the presidency is not overwhelmed by managing this process", added Vladimír Bilčík, an analyst with the Slovak Foreign Policy Association think tank.

On the other hand, several technicalities have been solved already that are connected with Brexit, such as the shift in the calendar of presidencies.

"The Brits were to have the presidency next year, but they will not," Bilčík told *The Slovak Spectator*.

These are "little issues" that the presidency has to deal with, he added.

"The perspective of a state leaving the EU is a new one for the EU whose motto has, until now, always been to move forward towards more integration and to integrate more members," Rittelmeyer said, adding that this new situation could "push the European project towards disintegration".

Yet EU leaders will not only deal with the exit of the UK at the summit, but also with the new path that the EU is to take afterwards.

"For this, it is not possible to use the institutional architecture and work strictly according to the treaties," Rittelmeyer explained. "This is not something problematic as the EU has always used such kind of ad hoc structures. It needs to be flexible in times of crises."

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