The new Slovak government intends to be a predictable partner in defence cooperation and to fulfil its promises to soldiers at home and the country's allies abroad. It announces an agreement on defence planning across the political spectrum and the intention to keep on increasing the defence budget to reach two percent of GDP despite the looming corona crisis.

The decline in popular support for the security forces and the army has been reflected in the manifesto of the new government led by Prime Minister Igor Matovič. The administration intends to work on increasing of the support primarily through transparent activities, but also by keeping the promises made by the Ministry of Defence to soldiers and Slovakia’s international allies.

In the sphere of defence, the new Slovak government confirms its unambiguous Euro-Atlantic orientation. The country regards its “responsible membership” to be the priority not only in NATO, but also in the EU, which has been increasingly active in the area of common defence in recent years. However, despite the potential of the EU to finance defence projects and to cooperate with Member States, the government manifesto of the new administration does not address this particular point in the defence section. The opportunities are only mentioned in the section dedicated to Foreign Policy, stating that the government will “support” capacity building within the Union, as “without it the Union cannot fulfil its ambition to be a respected global player in international relations”.

“Responsibility” of membership shall be realized mainly by increasing the “quality” of Slovak contributions to both organizations, which – according to the manifesto – “have no better alternative”.

However, the new Minister of Defence, Jaroslav Nadaš, does not rule out that Slovak commitments, which were made to the Allies by the former government could be re-discussed with the Alliance partners.

For the next four years, Slovakia is to build its trust not only with its NATO and EU partners, but also at home. Thus, purchases and public procurement, communication, or cooperation with non-governmental organizations, academia and the media should be more open, the manifesto states. The concept of annual comprehensive but also public evaluation of defence brought up by the new government promises better and more practical interconnection of goals, plans, implementation and control.

POLITICAL AGREEMENT ON THE FUTURE OF DEFENCE

Before the elections, Jaroslav Nadaš announced that he would be interested in making what he called a “defence agreement”. It was to connect all parliamentary parties and ensure “continuity and stability of defence spending”. In practice, Nadaš talked about an agreement on “what funds should be spent and how while implementing the modernization of the armed forces and the defence sector”.

The security pact “on the direction of state defence and its financing” across the political spectrum finally made it to the government manifesto. In this context, the document also speaks of an “active dialogue” with the National Council, the Slovak parliament.

Regarding the strategic documents that fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence, the ministry will first work on the Defence Strategy. The one that is currently in place is almost 15 years old and – according to experts – it no longer reflects Slovakia’s current security environment. Although there were attempts to update it during the previous administration, specifically in 2017, the government failed to advance the document to the National Council due to internal strife, particularly caused by the rejection by the nationalist SNS party.

Although it was a less controversial document when compared to the Security Strategy from the Foreign Ministry agenda, the two documents were significantly linked. In the new parliamentary term, this connection should continue as announced by the new heads of both ministries at their first meeting on Friday (April 17).

“As soon as the current emergency allows, we will put our teams together and we want the Slovak Republic to be clear about what are the threats, who are our partners,
and how we want to ensure the security and defence of our country,” said Ivan Korčok, the new Foreign Minister after the meeting.

In addition to the Defence Strategy, the Ministry of Defence also plans to create a “resource-realistic” medium-term development plan for the upcoming years until 2025 and also to formulate a longer-term vision until 2030. An overall and predictable armaments plan will also be put on the table.

THE 2% COMMITMENT FOR 2024 STILL ON

Slovakia also plans to honour its commitments to NATO with regards to defence financing. The new government pledged to meet the defence spending commitment of 2% of GDP by 2024, as had been promised by Slovakia already in 2014 under the Wales agreement. Last year, Slovakia spent 1.74 percent of GDP on defence, which was more than 1.66 billion euro, ranking the country as 12th in defence spending among NATO members. A year earlier, Slovakia spent 1.21%.

Defence budgets, which from NATO’s point of view consist of three elements (expenditure on personnel, equipment and operations) are divided at the discretion of each state. However, at least a quarter should be spent on key equipment. In this respect, Slovakia was the 2nd among NATO members last year with more than 41% of the defence budget spent on purchase of military equipment.

NATO also requires Bratislava to implement modernization projects and more intensive training: the new government intends to follow these premises. In particular, special operations forces as well as air forces should be developed in the near future, including the continued process of acquisition of military aircraft, with its budget likely to exceed 2 billion euro. According to the Minister of Defence, it would be difficult to bounce back from the purchase of 14 American-made F-16 C/D Block 70 fighters, as Slovakia has already paid almost a billion euro for them.

In addition to the demands of the Allies as well as the Slovak Armed Forces, the Zuzana howitzer has been recently procured for €172m. In the TV show Na Telo of TV Markíza (April 19), minister Nad confirmed that this was a problematic project, which “we already know will be late”.

The purchase of radars should continue too as the current ones available to Slovak armed forces have exceeded their service life. However, the Public Procurement Office has already cancelled the plan of the former government alongside with the purchase of 4 x 4 tactical vehicles. The new government will not renew the acquisition project just yet, despite the fact that tactical vehicles were a part of the OLaNO or SAS party manifestos in the election campaign.

The fate of the fifth major project, the purchase of 8 x 8 armoured vehicles, is yet to be debated by the Ministry. Both ruling parties, OLaNO and SAS, originally wanted to continue in it as well.

However, according to NATO, the key equipment of Member States will also include research and development. The Alliance considers it to be a “decisive indicator of the extent and pace of modernization”. For the last four years, Slovakia has set aside approximately five million euro per year in this field, which was well below 0.04 percent of the defence budget. The new Slovak government intends to spend up to one percent of the defence budget on research and development.

In the next four years, Slovakia should be also more actively involved in military exercises abroad. According to the government’s program, Slovaks should send a lot more soldiers to such endeavours. However, the government manifesto does not specify whether or not will Bratislava also send more personnel to international operations and missions, although it confirms that “Slovakia’s participation will be ensured in this regard”. 
INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT WITH THE HELP OF ALLIES

During the tenure of the previous administration, Slovakia was the only member state not to receive any money from Alliance funds for the development of infrastructure. The new head of the Defence Ministry would like to turn the situation around.

Under the leadership of Jaroslav Nad, the Ministry would like to make use of foreign aid more efficiently overall. The minister has been heard several times saying that he would gladly receive support from the allies for the development of military infrastructure, but “under the conditions set by the Slovak Republic”.

Also in the pre-election interview for EURACTIV, Naď as the then shadow Minister of Defence for OĽANO confirmed, that building of American bases in Slovakia, for example, was never the subject of negotiations of the Slovak government and – contrary to fake news – no one was interested in building them: “Neither the Americans nor the Slovak government”, Naď commented at the time, claiming that the news about American bases in Slovakia was “a delusion”.

Nevertheless, the United States “are considered the key ally (in defence) for the government”, recognizing that no European country can currently replace Washington’s capabilities.

Over the next four years, the Ministry of Defence aims to invest in overall development of military infrastructure, as well as in its maintenance, including increasing its energy efficiency.

CYBERSECURITY AS A DOMINANT FEATURE FOR THE MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR

The areas of cybersecurity and the fight against hybrid threats have long been underestimated in Slovakia despite the fact that the last government – including the Ministry of Defence, which identified cybersecurity as one of its top three priorities – has perceived it as a key component of state security.

The new government wants to appropriately respond to massive changes in the security environment outside the traditional combat theatres, but it does not specify exactly how to do so in the defensive part of the program. In the section on informatization, however, the manifesto mentions a “thorough audit of cyber- and information security and critical infrastructure”, and it is therefore expected that the audit results could set the direction for other ministries, including the Ministry of Defence.

Moreover, cyber security shall be addressed by the internal security components. The Ministry of Interior under the new administration even considers cybercrime to be “one of the most dangerous threats to society as a whole”. A specialized police unit should cooperate in fighting cybercrime primarily with the National Security Authority, the Slovak Information Service and the Military Intelligence.

DEFENCE AFTER THE CORONA CRISIS

In its manifesto, the new government also responds to the ongoing coronavirus crisis. Security forces, including soldiers, military physicians and police officers immediately became important actors on the front line. The Ministry of Defence has already informed that during April, it has more than 760 soldiers on standby mode every day. The armed forces transport, material and personnel assist in the sample collection process, disinfect premises, or participate in border patrols.

As one of its goals, the new administration has set the continuous readiness of the armed forces to respond to similar emergency scenarios. It also wants to replenish supplies of material and equipment for soldiers, but it also prepares to take care of its appropriate storage.

This article was written and translated by Lucia Yar.