

PRESS AVAILABILITY WITH SLOVAK FOREIGN MINISTER MIROSLAV LAJCAK

Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bratislava, Slovakia

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MODERATOR: (Via interpreter) Very good afternoon to everybody. I would like to welcome you at today's press briefing of the ministers of foreign affairs, Mr. Lajcak and his counterpart, the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who has come here for a visit. And I'd like to ask both ministers for his introductory words, and now over to Mr. Lajcak.

FOREIGN MINISTER LAJCAK: (Via interpreter) A very warm welcome to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, and I am very glad to welcome my colleague, the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, here today. And I'm pleased that at a time when much is said about transatlantic disputes, our American partners are showing true interest in developments in EU and discuss with us and listen to our opinions on the developments in the EU and neighboring countries, and – such as Ukraine or the Western Balkans or Eastern Partnership.

The visit of Mike Pompeo has multiple historic dimensions. It is happening in the year when we are celebrating the 30th anniversary of the events, of principal historic events, and also it is organized 20 years after the first and only visit of the U.S. secretary of state to Slovakia when Madeleine Albright was visiting in Bratislava. We have agreed that 20 years is a long time, but at the same time we need to say that our dialogue is not limited only to the visits of the U.S. secretary of state to the Slovak Republic. We meet on regular basis in other forums. I visited Mr. Pompeo in November in Washington. We are meeting at NATO meetings or UN meetings, and in April we should again meet on the occasion of the ministerial summit or meeting in Washington, D.C. So our dialogue is very intense, but at the same time the quality of the dialogue is totally different in comparison to 1999. We are allies and we are partners. And the scope of our discussions and the content and the quality cannot be compared to what it used to be back in 1999.

I also want to say that the U.S. is an extremely important trade partner to us. About 600 Slovak companies export its products to the U.S. We do have about 120 American companies in Slovakia that employ almost 50,000 Slovaks, our citizens. So this is a very solid ground for our mutual relations.

We can say that 1999 was a turning point or a new chapter, was the start of a new chapter of our relations, the partnership, the alliance, and really profound content. We discussed those issues, we analyzed bilateral cooperation, especially in defense and security because the U.S. is a very significant contributor to the modernizing of our defense forces and increasing its preparedness for coping with the current safety and defense challenges.

I used this opportunity to inform my partner on – about our priorities during our chairmanship of the OSCE. I have informed him how we can cooperate, what we can achieve throughout this year, especially when it comes to Ukraine, the countries of Eastern Partnership, or the Western Balkans. We also paid attention to the developments in this – in those countries. We focused on dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. And we were also talking about the developments in Venezuela, Middle and Near East, and also discussions with Korea.

Mr. Pompeo has repeatedly heard appeals to maintain the transatlantic bond the U.S. and Europe – and Slovakia as its part – when it comes to NATO or the U.S.-EU platform, remain the closest of partners and key allies. Not only we are close to each other from historical and values perspective, we are also each other's biggest trading partners and investors. And with this really well developed partnership, of course there are questions or there are topics we disagree on, but what really matters is that we discuss in order to reach or to identify common ground knowing and realizing that together we are stronger.

So once again, Slovakia and the U.S. cooperate in many areas, starting for our cooperation under NATO. I want to mention and underline the long-term cooperation of our defense forces with the Indiana National Guard. I want to mention that we develop joint projects when it – under developmental and transition aid, and especially in regions that are priority regions for our foreign policy, such as Ukraine, Moldova, the Western Balkans.

But we also cooperate in other key areas for our country, be it the energy sector, investment, trade, security, or fight against terrorism. Therefore, I am very glad that we have had the opportunity to really discuss those topics. And I would like to thank the U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo for his visit, for his very successful and good visit to Slovakia.

SECRETARY POMPEO: Thank you, Foreign Minister Lajcak. I'd also like to thank President Kiska and Prime Minister Pellegrini for their warm welcome here today. It's an honor to be in Slovakia for the first time as Secretary of State. It's especially meaningful to be here just as your country is celebrating 30 years – three decades – since the fall of the Iron Curtain and the restoration of your freedom.

I had a chance to reflect on that today, on Slovakia's courage to be free, as I visited the Gate of Freedom Memorial. Right after this I'll have a chance to be with some wonderful young Slovaks who are committed to keeping the flame of freedom alive and take their questions. I'm very much looking forward to that.

The U.S. is proud to have been a part of this country's success through support for your political transition, economic development and opening to trade, and of course through our defense partnership in NATO.

Today I had very productive conversations with Slovakia's leaders how we could continue growing our collaboration both bilaterally and through our NATO alliance. And of course, it certainly begins with our shared defense priorities.

Slovakia's history and experience under Soviet domination, your geographic location in Central Europe, and your democracy gives your country a special appreciation for the aggressive role Russia continues to play in the region. We see this now very clearly in Ukraine, where Russia's illegal annexation continues and its war in the east is at almost the five-year mark.

Slovakia recognizes that NATO is most effective when all member-states contribute their fair share, and I had the opportunity to thank foreign minister for Slovakia's pledge to meet its NATO defense spending commitment of 2 percent of GDP by the year 2024.

Russia is not the only nation that seeks to erode sovereignty and freedom in Europe. I raised in my meeting with the foreign minister the need to guard against China's economic and other efforts to create dependence and manipulate your political system. The Slovak Government realizes it must have a strong and modern defense force to protect its sovereignty. Last year, Slovakia took a major step towards this goal by purchasing 14 of the most modern F-16 fighter jets from the United States to replace its aging fleet of Soviet aircraft. It was the largest defense purchase in Slovak history. And I want to especially thank the prime minister, foreign minister, and speaker of parliament for helping to make that happen. That follows on the heels of Slovakia's purchase of nine Black Hawk helicopters in 2015, delivery of which will be completed next year.

These moves to reduce Slovakia's reliance on outdated and inferior Soviet equipment, they open the door to expanded defense cooperation with the United States and they promote interoperability all throughout NATO. In addition, the United States and Slovakia are currently negotiating a defense cooperation agreement that would facilitate the use of European defense initiative funds to upgrade Slovak military infrastructure and further improve the ties, the military ties between our two nations.

Of course, the close bilateral relationship between our nations goes well beyond defense. We have a robust trade relationship, which the foreign minister referred to, and which President Trump and I both hope will expand. We think there's tremendous economic potential, especially given Slovakia's strong economic growth.

The promise of 1989 is as alive today as it was 30 years ago. The United States has always believed in freedom for Slovakia, and we have been proud to contribute to your success through an array of economic and other assistance programs, as well as through our mutual defense relationship. America's commitment, our commitment to your freedom and independence will not waver. We urge you to continue down the path of liberty and democracy for which so many of your compatriots have sacrificed their lives.

Thank you, Mr. Foreign Minister, for hosting me.

FOREIGN MINISTER LAJCAK: Thank you very much.

MODERATOR: (Via interpreter) A couple of technical issues. Immediately after the end of the press briefing, the American journalists are leaving together with the U.S. Secretary of State Mr. Pompeo, and the other Slovak journalists, please stay in the hall and leave only five minutes afterwards. And there's one question from each side, and Slovak Television, Ivan Janko, has the opportunity to ask.

QUESTION: (Via interpreter) Ivan Janko, Slovak Television. I have a question to both gentlemen.

Let's see, I would like to ask Mr. Pompeo: What kind of policy is the U.S. going to lead and promote when we are talking about the times that – we are talking about China technological boom, and China is reaching its climax. Huawei is one of the example, and Huawei is a problematic issue for the U.S. We are talking about the times when the United Kingdom is

leaving most probably without a deal. And what kind of cooperation are you going to promote when the President Donald Trump keeps the theory “America First”? You are talking about different custom, fines, and tariffs.

And the second question I want to ask: That Slovakia is a chairing country in OECD. How Slovakia can help to soothe the tension in the relations between the U.S. and Russia, and the U.S. and EU? How we could help as Slovakia?

SECRETARY POMPEO: I’ll take the first one. So your first question had an awful lot in it. Let me try to unpack it just a bit. America wants to partner with your country. America wants to partner with the EU. We want to operate in a free and fair system where trade is reciprocal and where we can all compete and our economies can grow, much the way our economy is growing and your economy is growing. And so the work that we do with the EU and with Slovakia is important. We want to make sure that all of the competitors who participate in any of these economies do so in that same way. And so you mentioned Huawei and China. We’re fine with companies competing, but they’ve got to do so in a way that’s fair and open and transparent, and they can’t do so with anything other than an economic motive.

And so our task, the American task, is if we’re concerned about that we will share information, we will provide resources, we’ll help others understand so that they know what they’re getting into. If there are security risks associated with the procurement of some country’s goods, China’s goods, we want to make sure that our friends and allies, our NATO partners, those who are inside of the EU, we want to make sure they’re aware of those risks, and that’s our task. Our task is to make them aware of the concerns and risks and show them the data. They don’t have to take our word for it. And when they see those, I’m confident they’ll make good decisions for their own nation. They’ll “Slovakia first,” they’ll look out for their own sovereignty, they’ll make good decisions for themselves and we have great respect for that

FOREIGN MINISTER LAJCAK: (Via interpreter) For our chairmanship in the OSCE, we have outlined very ambitious goals. You know that the slogan is dialogue and stability for people, and the priorities include prevention of conflicts or solving of existing conflicts, safe future, and dealing with the vision of the future, an effective materialism and cooperation with other international organizations. We do expect, and we need, the assistance and the help of the U.S. We were talking about specific things, what we could achieve, and outside of OECD, of course, there is a very intense dialogue between the EU and the U.S. The Secretary of State is going to visit Brussels as well, and of course, the United States of America do have its – their channels of communication with Russia. The thing what matters is goodwill and constructive results.

QUESTION: Thank you. Secretary Pompeo, how confident are you that the Slovaks will heed your message on supporting other governments in transition such as Venezuela? And looking ahead to Warsaw, Germany, France, and the European Union have all said they’re not going to send their foreign ministers there to the Middle East conference. Do you think you can achieve anything significant, have any meeting of the minds on Iran or anything else when the major European powers are not sending someone of your level?

And Mr. Prime Minister – excuse me, Mr. Foreign Minister – your president, President Kiska, said that he wanted to talk with Secretary Pompeo about the challenges – great challenges like climate change. Were you – do you think the Americans will listen to what you want to warn

them about, given that President Trump does not even acknowledge the existence of climate change? Thank you.

SECRETARY POMPEO: So we had good, candid discussion across a broad range of topics. We certainly spoke about Venezuela too. I think we're now to 20 European countries which are supporting Interim President Guaido. We hope that all nations will see it that way. We believe this is the right thing for freedom and democracy inside of Venezuela. The humanitarian conditions, Carol, as you well know, are catastrophically bad. We're aiming to deliver humanitarian assistance into that country. None of those things can happen – none of those things could happen with Maduro in charge of that country. It is what has driven the devastation. It's what's driven three million people to leave Venezuela, another two million anticipated to leave in 2019. And so yes, we're very optimistic that the world – the community of nations will rally support away from Maduro and towards the Venezuelan people. We think we'll be part of a very successful effort to ultimately lead to an outcome which is delivered for the Venezuelan people.

As for the ministerial that's coming up in Warsaw, I think we're going to deliver really good outcomes. Some countries are having their foreign ministers come. Other countries are not. That's their choice. But this is going to be a serious concrete discussion about a broad range of topics that range from counterterrorism to the malign influence that Iran has played in the Middle East towards its instability. Mr. Kushner will speak about the Middle East peace plan. The Vice President will speak on a broad range of Middle East topics. I'll talk about America's path forward in Syria. We think we will make real progress. We think there'll be dozens of nations there seriously working towards a better, more stable Middle East, and I'm hoping by the time we leave on Thursday we'll have achieved that.

FOREIGN MINISTER LAJCAK: There was a long list of issues to cover in Secretary Pompeo's meetings with President Kiska, Prime Minister Pellegrini, and in our meeting. And we did not get as far as to discuss climate change. We were discussing so many other issues. But obviously, as I said, this is not the only platform for our dialogue, and we are also discussing within the EU, U.S. or NATO meetings a number of issues. The purpose is not necessarily to agree 100 percent on everything, but to listen to each other to try to understand each other, and obviously to work together whatever and whenever possible. And I – and this is happening and we are very happy about it.

MODERATOR: (Via interpreter) Thank you very much for coming. Have a very good day, and once again, please, the American journalists leaving first and the Slovak journalists please stay in the hall.

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