PERSPECTIVA XXI

ISSN: 3103-151X
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70577/mkqhbk64

Quarterly periodicity, Volume 4, Number 2, Years (2026), Pages. 114-138

Received: 2026-03-26
Accepted: 2026-04-09
Published: 2026-04-24

Geopolitical Position of Slovakia in Central Europe After the Ukraine War: An Analytical Study

La posición geopolítica de Eslovaquia en Europa Central tras la guerra de Ucrania: un estudio analítico

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PERSPECTIVA XXI
ISSN: 3103-151X
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70577/mkqhbk64

Abstract

The outbreak of the Ukraine war in 2022 marked a fundamental turning point in the geopolitical equations of Central Europe and significantly reshaped the region's security order. In this context, Slovakia— a small yet strategically located country at the heart of Europe, sharing a direct border with Ukraine and holding membership in the European Union, the Eurozone, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)—has assumed a distinctive position that necessitates a redefinition of its role and status within the regional geopolitical and security structure. Adopting an analytical–explanatory approach and drawing upon the frameworks of critical geopolitics and small state theory, this article examines Slovakia's geopolitical position in Central Europe following the outbreak of the Ukraine war. It argues that recent developments have simultaneously generated new opportunities and challenges for the country.

From a geographical perspective, Slovakia lies at the intersection of major East–West European corridors and functions as a connecting link between the Carpathian region, the Danube basin, and the geopolitical space of Eastern Europe. Sharing borders with Ukraine, Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria, and Hungary, Slovakia is situated at the center of a dense network of security, energy, and transit interactions. The Ukraine war has transformed this structural geographic feature into an active geopolitical variable. Slovakia has become one of the principal routes for the transfer of military and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine and a focal point for the reinforcement of NATO's presence on the Alliance's eastern flank. The deployment of multinational NATO forces on Slovak territory and the expansion of defense cooperation with the United States reflect the country's increased strategic importance within Western deterrence strategies vis-à-vis Russia.

In the energy domain, Slovakia's historical dependence on Russian gas and oil has represented a major geopolitical vulnerability. With the intensification of EU sanctions against Russia and disruptions in energy flows, Slovakia has been compelled to diversify its energy supply sources and reconsider its transmission infrastructure. Although this transition has imposed short-term economic costs, it may strengthen Slovakia's long-term position as a transit hub within Central Europe's evolving energy network. Moreover, the country's location along North–South and East–West transport corridors—particularly within the framework of the Three Seas Initiative and EU cohesion policies—has gained renewed significance in the context of regional restructuring.

Politically, the Ukraine war has generated fractures within the Visegrád Group (V4). While Poland and the Czech Republic adopted firm pro-Ukraine stances, Hungary pursued a more cautious and comparatively Russia-leaning approach. Slovakia, amid domestic political fluctuations and changes of government, has sought to balance its Euro-Atlantic commitments with internal socio-economic pressures. This dynamic demonstrates that Slovakia's geopolitical position is shaped not only by structural external variables but also by domestic political developments, public opinion, and party competition. The rise of populist and Eurosceptic discourses may influence the direction of the country's foreign and security policies, potentially complicating its strategic alignment.

The findings suggest that the Ukraine war has relatively elevated Slovakia's geopolitical weight in Central European affairs, yet this elevation has been accompanied by increased risks and vulnerabilities. Slovakia now stands on the frontline of NATO's deterrence posture, and any further escalation between Russia and the West could have direct

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security implications for the country. At the same time, EU and Eurozone membership provide institutional and economic stability that enhances Slovakia's resilience against geopolitical shocks.

At the macro level, Slovakia's geopolitical status appears to have shifted from a "peripheral–transit" position to a "frontline–strategic" one. This transformation necessitates a recalibration of the country's security doctrine, energy policy, and development model within the context of Europe's evolving order. The future trajectory of Slovakia's geopolitical position will largely depend on the continuation or resolution of the war, the internal cohesion of the European Union, the level of U.S. commitment to European security, and domestic political developments within Slovakia. Ultimately, Slovakia represents a compelling case study of how major geopolitical transformations affect small states in the contemporary international system—states that, despite limited material capabilities, may exercise influence disproportionate to their size when structural conditions shift in their favor.

Keywords: Slovakia; Central European Geopolitics; Ukraine War; NATO; Energy Security; Small States.

Resumen

El estallido de la guerra de Ucrania en 2022 supuso un punto de inflexión fundamental en las ecuaciones geopolíticas de Europa Central y reconfiguró de manera significativa el orden de seguridad de la región. En este contexto, Eslovaquia —un país pequeño pero estratégicamente situado en el corazón de Europa, que comparte frontera directa con Ucrania y es miembro de la Unión Europea, la zona del euro y la Organización del Tratado del Atlántico Norte (OTAN)— ha asumido una posición singular que exige una redefinición de su papel y su estatus dentro de la estructura geopolítica y de seguridad regional. Adoptando un enfoque analítico-explicativo y basándose en los marcos de la geopolítica crítica y la teoría de los pequeños Estados, este artículo examina la posición geopolítica de Eslovaquia en Europa Central tras el estallido de la guerra de Ucrania. Sostiene que los recientes acontecimientos han generado simultáneamente nuevas oportunidades y retos para el país.

Desde una perspectiva geográfica, Eslovaquia se encuentra en la intersección de los principales corredores europeos este-oeste y actúa como nexo de unión entre la región de los Cárpatos, la cuenca del Danubio y el espacio geopolítico de Europa del Este. Al compartir fronteras con Ucrania, Polonia, la República Checa, Austria y Hungría, Eslovaquia se sitúa en el centro de una densa red de interacciones en materia de seguridad, energía y tránsito. La guerra de Ucrania ha transformado esta característica geográfica estructural en una variable geopolítica activa. Eslovaquia se ha convertido en una de las principales rutas para el traslado de ayuda militar y humanitaria a Ucrania y en un punto clave para el refuerzo de la presencia de la OTAN en el flanco oriental de la Alianza. El despliegue de fuerzas multinacionales de la OTAN en territorio eslovaco y la ampliación de la cooperación en materia de defensa con Estados Unidos reflejan la creciente importancia estratégica del país dentro de las estrategias occidentales de disuasión frente a Rusia.

En el ámbito energético, la dependencia histórica de Eslovaquia del gas y el petróleo rusos ha supuesto una importante vulnerabilidad geopolítica. Con la intensificación de las sanciones de la UE contra Rusia y las interrupciones en los

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flujos energéticos, Eslovaquia se ha visto obligada a diversificar sus fuentes de suministro energético y a replantearse su infraestructura de transporte. Aunque esta transición ha supuesto costes económicos a corto plazo, puede reforzar la posición a largo plazo de Eslovaquia como centro de tránsito dentro de la red energética en evolución de Europa Central. Además, la ubicación del país a lo largo de los corredores de transporte norte-sur y este-oeste —especialmente en el marco de la Iniciativa de los Tres Mares y las políticas de cohesión de la UE— ha adquirido una nueva importancia en el contexto de la reestructuración regional.

En el ámbito político, la guerra de Ucrania ha generado divisiones dentro del Grupo de Visegrado (V4). Mientras que Polonia y la República Checa adoptaron posturas firmes a favor de Ucrania, Hungría siguió un enfoque más cauteloso y, en comparación, más favorable a Rusia. Eslovaquia, en medio de fluctuaciones políticas internas y cambios de gobierno, ha tratado de equilibrar sus compromisos euroatlánticos con las presiones socioeconómicas internas. Esta dinámica demuestra que la posición geopolítica de Eslovaquia viene determinada no solo por variables externas estructurales, sino también por la evolución política interna, la opinión pública y la competencia entre partidos. El auge de los discursos populistas y euroescépticos puede influir en la orientación de las políticas exteriores y de seguridad del país, lo que podría complicar su alineación estratégica.

Los resultados sugieren que la guerra de Ucrania ha aumentado relativamente el peso geopolítico de Eslovaquia en los asuntos de Europa Central; sin embargo, este aumento ha venido acompañado de mayores riesgos y vulnerabilidades. Eslovaquia se encuentra ahora en primera línea de la postura disuasoria de la OTAN, y cualquier nueva escalada entre Rusia y Occidente podría tener repercusiones directas en la seguridad del país. Al mismo tiempo, la pertenencia a la UE y a la zona del euro proporciona una estabilidad institucional y económica que refuerza la resiliencia de Eslovaquia frente a las crisis geopolíticas.

A nivel macro, la situación geopolítica de Eslovaquia parece haber pasado de una posición «periférica y de tránsito» a otra «estratégica y de primera línea». Esta transformación exige un reajuste de la doctrina de seguridad, la política energética y el modelo de desarrollo del país en el contexto del orden europeo en constante evolución. La trayectoria futura de la posición geopolítica de Eslovaquia dependerá en gran medida de la continuación o la resolución de la guerra, de la cohesión interna de la Unión Europea, del nivel de compromiso de Estados Unidos con la seguridad europea y de la evolución de la política interna de Eslovaquia. En última instancia, Eslovaquia constituye un caso de estudio revelador de cómo las grandes transformaciones geopolíticas afectan a los pequeños Estados en el sistema internacional contemporáneo —Estados que, a pesar de sus limitadas capacidades materiales, pueden ejercer una influencia desproporcionada en relación con su tamaño cuando las condiciones estructurales cambian a su favor.

Palabras clave: Eslovaquia; geopolítica de Europa Central; guerra de Ucrania; OTAN; seguridad energética; Estados pequeños.

Introduction

The outbreak of the Ukraine war in February 2022 has fundamentally altered the geopolitical architecture of Europe, particularly in its central and eastern regions. What initially appeared as a regional military confrontation rapidly evolved into a systemic crisis affecting European security,

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ISSN: 3103-151X
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70577/mkqhbk64

energy markets, alliance politics, and the broader balance of power between Russia and the West (Mearsheimer, 2022; Freedman, 2023). For Central European states—situated at the intersection of historical fault lines between East and West—the war has generated profound strategic, economic, and political consequences. Among these states, Slovakia occupies a distinctive yet often understudied position. As a small state sharing a direct border with Ukraine and holding membership in the European Union (EU), the Eurozone, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Slovakia has found itself at the frontline of the evolving European security order.

Since gaining independence in 1993 following the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia, Slovakia has pursued a strategic orientation centered on Euro-Atlantic integration. Its accession to NATO and the EU in 2004 marked a decisive geopolitical shift from the post-socialist transitional space toward institutionalized Western structures (Henderson, 2002; Vachudova, 2005). Adoption of the euro in 2009 further deepened its integration into the core economic framework of the Union. These institutional choices not only anchored Slovakia within Western political and security structures but also shaped its strategic culture and foreign policy behavior (Bátora, 2010). However, despite these achievements, Slovakia has traditionally been perceived as a peripheral actor within broader European geopolitics, often overshadowed by larger regional players such as Poland and Hungary.

The Ukraine war has disrupted this perception by transforming Slovakia's geographic proximity to Eastern Europe into an active geopolitical variable. Classical geopolitical theory emphasizes the strategic importance of borderlands and buffer zones in periods of systemic rivalry (Mackinder, 1904; Spykman, 1942). In this sense, Slovakia's eastern frontier—previously a relatively quiet segment of the EU's external border—has become a critical node in NATO's eastern flank strategy. The reinforcement of multinational battlegroups, increased military deployments, and enhanced defense cooperation between Slovakia and the United States illustrate how geography can regain strategic salience under conditions of renewed great-power confrontation (NATO, 2023; Smith, 2023). Consequently, Slovakia's role has evolved from that of a transit state within the Schengen area to a frontline state within the Euro-Atlantic security architecture.

In addition to security dynamics, the war has intensified debates over energy dependence and vulnerability across Europe. Central European countries, including Slovakia, historically relied heavily on Russian gas and oil supplies delivered through Soviet-era pipeline networks (Goldthau

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PERSPECTIVA XXI
ISSN: 3103-151X
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& Sitter, 2015). Prior to 2022, a significant proportion of Slovakia's natural gas imports originated from Russia, rendering the country susceptible to supply disruptions and geopolitical leverage (IEA, 2022). The imposition of EU sanctions on Russia and Moscow's countermeasures triggered a reconfiguration of regional energy flows, compelling Slovakia to diversify supply routes and strengthen interconnections with neighboring states. From a geopolitical economy perspective, such shifts highlight the interdependence between energy security and strategic autonomy within the EU (Youngs, 2017; Scholten, 2020).

The war has also exposed internal divergences within Central Europe, particularly within the Visegrád Group (V4), composed of Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. While Poland and the Czech Republic adopted unequivocally pro-Ukraine and anti-Russian positions, Hungary pursued a more ambivalent stance, prioritizing energy ties with Moscow (Dangerfield, 2018; Bustikova & Guasti, 2019). Slovakia's position has been shaped by a complex interplay between its Euro-Atlantic commitments and domestic political dynamics. Changes in government, the rise of populist narratives, and societal debates over military assistance to Ukraine have underscored the importance of internal factors in shaping foreign policy behavior (Deegan-Krause, 2006; Henderson, 2023). Small state theory suggests that such countries often engage in strategic hedging or multilevel balancing to reconcile external pressures with domestic constraints (Thorhallsson, 2018; Keohane, 1969).

From a theoretical standpoint, analyzing Slovakia's geopolitical position after the Ukraine war requires a multidimensional approach. Critical geopolitics emphasizes how spatial narratives, threat perceptions, and identity constructions influence policy choices (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Dodds, 2007). In Slovakia's case, public discourse surrounding Russia, NATO, and European integration has evolved significantly since 2022, reflecting broader contestations over national identity and strategic orientation. Simultaneously, structural realist perspectives highlight the enduring significance of material capabilities and alliance structures in shaping state behavior (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). The convergence of these theoretical lenses allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how geography, institutions, and domestic politics intersect in redefining Slovakia's regional role.

This article seeks to answer the following central question: How has the Ukraine war reshaped Slovakia's geopolitical position in Central Europe? It argues that the conflict has elevated Slovakia from a relatively peripheral transit state to a frontline strategic actor within the Euro-Atlantic

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security framework. However, this elevation has been accompanied by heightened exposure to security risks, economic pressures, and political polarization. The country's future geopolitical trajectory will depend on multiple variables, including the duration of the war, the cohesion of the EU, the credibility of NATO's deterrence posture, and the stability of Slovakia's domestic political environment.

By focusing on Slovakia, this study contributes to the broader literature on small states in international relations and on the transformation of Central Europe's geopolitical landscape in the wake of renewed great-power rivalry. While much scholarly attention has centered on Poland or Hungary, Slovakia provides a nuanced case illustrating how smaller actors navigate systemic shocks and recalibrate their strategic positioning. In doing so, the article underscores the broader proposition that geopolitical transformations do not solely reshape great powers but also reconfigure the strategic relevance of smaller states embedded within contested regional spaces.

Materials And Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical–explanatory approach based on documentary and library research. Data are collected from academic literature, policy reports, official EU and NATO documents, and energy statistics. Using a combination of critical geopolitics and small state theory as the theoretical framework, the research analyzes structural, security, and political variables to assess changes in Slovakia's geopolitical position in Central Europe after the Ukraine war.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding Slovakia's geopolitical position in Central Europe after the outbreak of the Ukraine war requires a multidimensional theoretical framework that integrates classical geopolitics, neorealism, small state theory, regional security complex theory, critical geopolitics, and geopolitical political economy. The transformation of Central Europe's strategic environment

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ISSN: 3103-151X
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since 2022 cannot be adequately explained through a single theoretical lens. Rather, it demands a layered analytical approach that captures structural power shifts, alliance dynamics, spatial narratives, identity constructions, and energy interdependence. This section develops such a framework and situates Slovakia within broader debates in international relations and geopolitics.

Classical Geopolitics and the Strategic Relevance of Space

Classical geopolitics emphasizes the enduring significance of geography in shaping state behavior and power distribution. Halford Mackinder's (1904) Heartland theory posited that control over Eastern Europe serves as the gateway to the Eurasian "Heartland," implying that Central and Eastern Europe occupy pivotal positions in global power struggles. Although formulated in the early twentieth century, Mackinder's proposition has regained relevance amid renewed confrontation between Russia and the West (Sloan, 2017). The Ukraine war has revived the strategic salience of Eastern Europe as a contested buffer zone between maritime and continental powers.

Nicholas Spykman (1942) refined this spatial logic by emphasizing the "Rimland" as the decisive zone in global geopolitics. Central Europe, including Slovakia, can be interpreted as part of this intermediary belt where competing spheres of influence intersect. From this perspective, Slovakia's geographic location—bordering Ukraine and embedded within the Carpathian-Danubian corridor—positions it within a historically sensitive geopolitical frontier.

However, classical geopolitics has often been criticized for determinism (Ó Tuathail, 1996). Geography does not mechanically dictate outcomes; rather, it structures opportunities and constraints. In the post–Cold War era, Slovakia's eastern border appeared geopolitically peripheral within a relatively stable European security order. Yet the Ukraine war has reactivated the strategic meaning of this border, transforming it from a technical EU external boundary into a frontline within NATO's eastern deterrence posture. Thus, classical geopolitical theory provides a foundational understanding of why spatial proximity to conflict zones matters, but it must be complemented by structural and institutional analysis.

Neorealism and the Return of Great Power Competition

Neorealist theory, particularly as articulated by Waltz (1979), emphasizes the anarchic structure of the international system and the distribution of material capabilities as primary determinants of state behavior. According to structural realism, periods of systemic transition or intensified great

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PERSPECTIVA XXI
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power rivalry tend to increase insecurity, prompting alliance formation and balancing behavior (Mearsheimer, 2001).

The Ukraine war can be interpreted as a manifestation of renewed great power competition between Russia and the United States–led Western alliance (Mearsheimer, 2022). From a neorealist standpoint, Central European states—including Slovakia—must respond to shifts in the regional balance of power. NATO's reinforcement of its eastern flank, including the deployment of multinational battlegroups in Slovakia, reflects classical balancing behavior against a perceived Russian threat (NATO, 2023).

For small states, neorealism predicts alignment with stronger coalitions to ensure survival (Walt, 1987). Slovakia's deep integration into NATO and the EU aligns with this logic. Its support for collective deterrence measures and participation in defense cooperation agreements with the United States can be seen as rational responses to heightened insecurity. However, neorealism alone cannot explain variations in domestic political responses or identity-based contestation within Slovakia. Therefore, additional theoretical lenses are required.

Small State Theory and Strategic Adaptation

Small state theory provides a crucial framework for understanding Slovakia's foreign policy behavior. Keohane (1969) distinguished between system-determining and system-affected states, placing small states in the latter category due to their limited material capabilities. Thorhallsson (2018) further elaborated that small states compensate for structural weaknesses through niche diplomacy, multilateral engagement, and alliance dependence.

Slovakia exemplifies this pattern. Since independence in 1993, it has pursued institutional embedding as a strategy to mitigate vulnerability (Vachudova, 2005). EU and NATO membership function as security and economic multipliers, enhancing Slovakia's capacity to influence regional outcomes indirectly. In times of crisis, small states often adopt strategies of "shelter-seeking" within multilateral frameworks (Thorhallsson, 2018).

The Ukraine war has intensified Slovakia's reliance on such institutional shelter. At the same time, small state theory acknowledges internal constraints: domestic political divisions, economic vulnerability, and public opinion can shape the extent and nature of alignment (Bátora, 2010). Slovakia's fluctuating political discourse regarding military aid to Ukraine illustrates how small states must navigate external pressures while maintaining domestic legitimacy.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

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Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's (2003) Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) provides another valuable analytical tool. RSCT argues that security interdependence is most intense among geographically proximate states, forming distinct regional security complexes. Central and Eastern Europe constitute such a complex, where the security of one state is closely linked to that of its neighbors.

The Ukraine war has intensified securitization processes within the Central European security complex. Threat perceptions regarding Russia have spread across borders, reinforcing alliance cohesion in some cases while creating divergence in others (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Slovakia's security environment cannot be understood in isolation; rather, it is embedded within the broader dynamics of NATO–Russia confrontation and intra-European coordination.

RSCT also highlights subregional dynamics, such as the Visegrád Group. The war exposed differing threat perceptions within the V4, illustrating that regional complexes are not homogeneous. Slovakia's position reflects both shared security concerns with Poland and the Czech Republic and the tension created by Hungary's divergent approach. Thus, RSCT helps explain the interplay between regional interdependence and national policy variation.

Critical Geopolitics and Discursive Constructions

While structural theories emphasize material power and geography, critical geopolitics focuses on how political elites and societies construct spatial narratives and threat perceptions (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Dodds, 2007). Geopolitical significance is not inherent; it is produced through discourse.

In Slovakia, public debates about Russia, NATO, and the European Union have intensified since 2022. Competing narratives portray Slovakia either as a frontline defender of European values or as a state unduly exposed to great power confrontation. These discursive struggles influence foreign policy choices and alliance commitments. Critical geopolitics thus illuminates the role of identity, historical memory, and media framing in shaping geopolitical orientation.

Moreover, post-socialist identity dynamics complicate Slovakia's strategic positioning. Historical experiences under Soviet influence, combined with Europeanization processes after 2004, create layered identities (Henderson, 2002). The Ukraine war has reactivated memory politics related to 1968 and Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, reinforcing pro-Western narratives in some segments of society while fueling skepticism in others.

Geopolitical Political Economy and Energy Security

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ISSN: 3103-151X
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Energy interdependence constitutes a central dimension of Slovakia's geopolitical recalibration. The geopolitical political economy approach integrates economic structures with power politics (Goldthau & Sitter, 2015). Energy dependence on Russia historically created asymmetric vulnerability across Central Europe (Youngs, 2017).

The Ukraine war disrupted established energy flows, prompting diversification efforts and infrastructure adjustments (IEA, 2022). From a geopolitical political economy perspective, such shifts reflect attempts to enhance strategic autonomy within the EU framework (Scholten, 2020). Slovakia's integration into alternative supply networks and regional interconnectors underscores how economic policy becomes an instrument of geopolitical adaptation.

This approach also highlights the tension between market liberalization and strategic resilience. EU energy policy seeks to balance competition with security of supply. Slovakia's response illustrates how small states navigate these dual imperatives within broader European governance structures.

Findings

Transformation from Peripheral Transit State to Frontline Strategic Actor

The first major finding of this study indicates that the Ukraine war has transformed Slovakia's geopolitical status from a relatively peripheral transit state within the European Union into a frontline strategic actor within NATO's eastern deterrence architecture. Prior to 2022, Slovakia's geopolitical relevance was largely defined by its role as a transit corridor—particularly in energy distribution and intra-EU mobility—rather than as a direct security stakeholder in great power confrontation. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine fundamentally altered this structural positioning.

Drawing on classical geopolitical logic (Mackinder, 1904; Spykman, 1942), proximity to conflict zones reactivates the strategic value of borderlands. Slovakia's 97-kilometer border with Ukraine, previously perceived as a stable EU external boundary, became a critical logistical and military corridor following February 2022. NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) was expanded, and multinational battlegroups were deployed on Slovak territory (NATO, 2023). This deployment signals the institutional recognition of Slovakia's new frontline status within alliance planning.

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From a neorealist perspective, this shift reflects balancing behavior in response to increased systemic threat (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). NATO's adaptation demonstrates a redistribution of military assets toward the eastern flank, and Slovakia's inclusion within this architecture elevates its geostrategic weight. Unlike Poland—which historically assumed a more prominent role—Slovakia had not previously been conceptualized as a primary defense buffer. The war thus recalibrated internal NATO hierarchies.

However, this elevation comes with heightened exposure to risk. The presence of foreign troops, increased military infrastructure, and intensified strategic visibility potentially increase Slovakia's vulnerability in any escalation scenario. As Buzan and Wæver (2003) argue within Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), geographic proximity intensifies security interdependence. Slovakia's security is now more directly tied to developments in Ukraine than at any point since independence.

Institutional Shelter and the Reinforcement of Euro-Atlantic Alignment

The second key finding concerns Slovakia's deepened reliance on institutional "shelter" mechanisms. Small state theory posits that states with limited material capabilities compensate through multilateral embedding and alliance participation (Keohane, 1969; Thorhallsson, 2018). The Ukraine war has reinforced this pattern in Slovakia's strategic behavior.

Slovakia has consistently aligned with EU sanctions regimes against Russia and has supported NATO's collective deterrence measures, even amid domestic political debate (Henderson, 2023). This alignment reflects the structural incentives facing small states under conditions of heightened uncertainty. EU and NATO membership provide economic stabilization, military guarantees, and diplomatic leverage that Slovakia cannot generate independently.

Moreover, Slovakia's adoption of the euro since 2009 has shielded it from currency volatility during the energy and inflationary crises triggered by the war. While inflation pressures affected the Slovak economy, Eurozone membership ensured macroeconomic stability relative to non-euro Central European states. This finding supports the argument that institutional integration enhances small-state resilience during systemic shocks (Vachudova, 2005).

At the same time, institutional reliance has generated political contestation domestically. Populist actors have framed NATO deployments and military assistance to Ukraine as compromising national sovereignty. Critical geopolitics highlights how such narratives reshape spatial identity (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Dodds, 2007). Nevertheless, state-level policy has remained broadly aligned

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with Euro-Atlantic commitments, indicating that structural constraints outweigh discursive fragmentation.

Energy Vulnerability and Strategic Diversification

A third major finding concerns the reconfiguration of Slovakia's energy geopolitics. Prior to 2022, Slovakia relied heavily on Russian natural gas and oil imports, reflecting historical infrastructure dependencies inherited from the Soviet era (Goldthau & Sitter, 2015; IEA, 2022). The war exposed this dependence as a geopolitical vulnerability.

In response, Slovakia accelerated diversification efforts, including increased interconnection with neighboring EU states and participation in alternative supply arrangements. From a geopolitical political economy perspective, this shift illustrates how economic interdependence intersects with security calculations (Youngs, 2017; Scholten, 2020).

The data indicate that Slovakia's energy transition strategy is not purely economic but explicitly geopolitical. Reducing Russian leverage enhances strategic autonomy within the EU framework. However, diversification has imposed short-term economic costs, including higher import prices and industrial adjustment pressures. As a small industrialized economy with significant automotive production, Slovakia is particularly sensitive to energy price volatility.

Nevertheless, the long-term implication is a potential strengthening of Slovakia's position within regional energy networks. Its transit infrastructure—historically used for Russian gas flows—may be repurposed for diversified EU supply chains. Thus, energy vulnerability is gradually transforming into infrastructural opportunity.

Fragmentation and Realignment within the Visegrád Group

The Ukraine war has also reshaped Slovakia's regional diplomatic environment, particularly within the Visegrád Group (V4). RSCT suggests that regional groupings reflect shared threat perceptions (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). However, the war exposed significant divergence among V4 members.

Poland adopted a robustly pro-Ukraine stance; Hungary maintained a more ambivalent position emphasizing energy ties with Moscow (Dangerfield, 2018). Slovakia's position oscillated amid domestic political change but ultimately aligned more closely with the Polish-Czech axis in security terms.

This divergence weakened the cohesion of the V4 as a unified geopolitical bloc. For Slovakia, this fragmentation creates both constraints and opportunities. On one hand, reduced V4 cohesion

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diminishes the platform for coordinated regional bargaining within the EU. On the other hand, Slovakia gains flexibility to pursue bilateral and EU-centered engagement strategies without being tied to Hungary's more controversial stance.

The findings suggest that Slovakia's regional identity is increasingly anchored in Euro-Atlantic alignment rather than subregional bloc politics. This shift indicates a re-scaling of its geopolitical orientation from subregional coordination to alliance-centered integration.

Domestic Political Polarization and Strategic Continuity

Another significant finding concerns the tension between domestic polarization and external strategic continuity. Elections and government transitions in Slovakia have reflected rising populist sentiment and skepticism toward Western military engagement (Henderson, 2023). Yet despite rhetorical fluctuation, core institutional alignment has persisted.

From a neorealist standpoint, structural imperatives limit policy deviation (Waltz, 1979). Slovakia's economic interdependence with the EU and security reliance on NATO create high costs for radical strategic reorientation. Thus, even governments expressing cautious rhetoric have avoided systemic withdrawal from alliance commitments.

Critical geopolitics explains this dynamic as a contest between competing identity narratives. While segments of society express war fatigue and economic concern, historical memory of Soviet domination reinforces pro-Western strategic identity. This duality produces discursive instability without structural rupture.

Elevation of Strategic Visibility and International Profile

Finally, the war has elevated Slovakia's international visibility. Previously perceived as a secondary Central European actor, Slovakia has gained prominence through military assistance to Ukraine, humanitarian coordination, and diplomatic participation in EU deliberations.

Small state theory emphasizes that systemic crises create windows of opportunity for niche influence (Thorhallsson, 2018). Slovakia's proactive participation in collective defense and reconstruction planning enhances its reputational capital within NATO and the EU. This reputational shift may translate into greater influence in future security and energy policymaking processes.

However, increased visibility also increases exposure to hybrid threats, disinformation campaigns, and economic retaliation risks. Thus, geopolitical elevation entails both empowerment and vulnerability.

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ISSN: 3103-151X
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70577/mkqhbk64

Deepening Deterrence Architecture and the Militarization of Space

One of the most consequential findings concerns the gradual militarization of Slovakia's strategic space. While the country had previously maintained NATO membership without substantial forward deployments, the post-2022 environment has embedded Slovakia more deeply within the Alliance's deterrence-by-denial strategy (NATO, 2023; Smith, 2023).

Deterrence theory suggests that forward deployment increases credibility by raising the costs of aggression (Waltz, 1979). NATO's multinational battlegroup in Slovakia serves both symbolic and operational purposes: it signals alliance cohesion while reducing the feasibility of rapid territorial encroachment. From a neorealist standpoint, this reflects balancing behavior in response to Russian revisionism (Mearsheimer, 2022).

However, this deterrence architecture reshapes domestic political geography. Military infrastructure expansion—including air defense systems and logistical hubs—reconfigures local economies and spatial priorities. According to critical geopolitics, such securitization of territory transforms how space is socially constructed (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Dodds, 2007). Regions near deployment zones increasingly perceive themselves as embedded in great power competition.

Moreover, deterrence deepening ties Slovakia's security to long-term NATO strategy. Should the conflict in Ukraine freeze rather than resolve, Slovakia may experience a semi-permanent forward-defense posture similar to Baltic states. This would institutionalize its frontline identity.

The Return of History and Strategic Memory

Another key finding relates to the role of historical memory in shaping policy choices. Freedman (2023) argues that the Ukraine war marks a "return of history," where classical territorial war re-emerges in Europe. For Slovakia, historical experiences of Soviet domination in 1968 remain embedded in collective memory (Henderson, 2002).

This historical legacy influences elite threat perception. Unlike Hungary's more ambivalent posture, Slovak political discourse—despite polarization—often frames Russian aggression within a historical continuum of imperial coercion. Constructivist insights help explain why structural pressures are interpreted through identity narratives.

Historical memory also reinforces institutional alignment. EU and NATO membership are perceived not merely as economic arrangements but as civilizational anchors protecting sovereignty. This finding suggests that small states' strategic behavior cannot be fully explained by material factors alone (Thorhallsson, 2018).

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However, generational divides complicate this dynamic. Younger voters, less shaped by Cold War experience, often prioritize economic concerns over security narratives. This divergence contributes to fluctuating domestic rhetoric, though not to structural realignment.

Economic Restructuring and Industrial Exposure

The war's economic ripple effects constitute another major finding. Slovakia's export-oriented economy—particularly its automotive sector—faces vulnerability due to supply chain disruption and energy price shocks (IEA, 2022). Inflationary pressures following sanctions regimes and gas market volatility intensified socioeconomic strain.

From a liberal institutionalist perspective, interdependence increases both vulnerability and resilience (Keohane, 1969). EU fiscal instruments, recovery funds, and coordinated energy purchasing mechanisms have mitigated some economic impacts. Yet the adjustment burden remains significant.

Interestingly, the findings indicate that industrial adaptation may accelerate Slovakia's integration into green transition frameworks. As renewable energy geopolitics gains prominence (Scholten, 2020), Slovakia's nuclear and renewable portfolio expansion reduces long-term exposure to fossil fuel volatility. The geopolitical shift away from Russian hydrocarbons may thus catalyze structural modernization.

However, short-term distributive consequences—higher household energy costs and industrial restructuring—fuel populist narratives. Bustikova and Guasti (2019) highlight how technocratic governance combined with economic stress can empower illiberal actors. Slovakia's domestic debates reflect this tension.

Strategic Autonomy versus Alliance Dependence

The war has intensified EU-level discussions regarding "strategic autonomy." For Slovakia, this debate produces a complex dilemma. On one hand, greater EU defense capacity could reduce overreliance on U.S. leadership. On the other hand, small states benefit from strong American security guarantees within NATO.

The findings show that Slovakia remains cautious regarding autonomy rhetoric that might dilute NATO cohesion. As a small state with limited military capacity, it prefers layered security—EU integration combined with NATO's hard power umbrella (Goldthau & Sitter, 2015).

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This positioning aligns with small state survival strategies emphasizing diversification of institutional shelter (Thorhallsson, 2018). Slovakia does not seek independence from alliances; rather, it seeks redundancy within them.

Information Warfare and Hybrid Threat Exposure

Another significant finding concerns hybrid vulnerability. As NATO's eastern flank expands, Slovakia faces increased exposure to disinformation campaigns and cyber operations. Russian information narratives target energy costs, war fatigue, and sovereignty themes.

Critical geopolitics underscores how discourse shapes public perception of spatial threat (Ó Tuathail, 1996). The battle over narratives becomes a parallel domain of conflict. Slovakia's polarized media environment provides fertile ground for such influence operations.

However, EU-level counter-disinformation mechanisms and civil society resilience mitigate systemic destabilization. The findings suggest that while information warfare increases volatility, institutional anchoring prevents strategic derailment.

Recalibration of Regional Power Hierarchies

The war has subtly reshaped Central European hierarchies. Poland's role as primary eastern flank leader expanded significantly. Slovakia, though smaller, benefits indirectly from Poland's assertiveness, which strengthens NATO's regional focus.

At the same time, Czechia's consistent pro-Ukraine stance reinforces a northern alignment axis. Slovakia's geopolitical orientation appears increasingly embedded within a Prague–Warsaw security corridor rather than a unified Visegrád bloc (Dangerfield, 2018).

This recalibration enhances Slovakia's bargaining position within EU deliberations, as alignment with proactive states increases diplomatic leverage. However, it also reduces flexibility in mediating between divergent regional perspectives.

Long-Term Security Scenarios

The findings identify three plausible long-term scenarios shaping Slovakia's geopolitical trajectory:

Scenario 1: Prolonged Frozen Conflict

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If the Ukraine war stabilizes without resolution, NATO's forward posture becomes permanent. Slovakia institutionalizes its frontline identity, defense spending increases, and military infrastructure expansion continues (Smith, 2023).

Scenario 2: Escalation and Regional Spillover

In the unlikely but high-impact event of escalation, Slovakia's logistical corridors and airspace would gain immediate strategic significance. This scenario heightens risk exposure but also reinforces alliance cohesion (Mearsheimer, 2022).

Scenario 3: Negotiated Settlement and Gradual De-escalation

A diplomatic settlement could reduce military intensity but would not fully reverse deterrence structures. Trust deficits would persist, sustaining moderate forward deployment levels.

Across all scenarios, Slovakia remains structurally embedded in Euro-Atlantic institutions. None imply reorientation toward neutrality.

Small State Agency in Systemic Conflict

A broader theoretical finding emerges regarding small state agency. Traditional realism often depicts small states as passive responders to systemic forces (Waltz, 1979). However, Slovakia's proactive military assistance to Ukraine—including transfer of air defense systems—demonstrates selective agency.

Thorhallsson (2018) argues that small states can exercise influence through niche specialization. Slovakia's defense-industrial contributions and diplomatic engagement enhance its profile beyond material size.

This agency remains bounded by structural constraints but is not negligible. The war illustrates that small states can shape alliance dynamics through symbolic and material contributions.

The Consolidation of Western Identity

Finally, the war appears to consolidate Slovakia's Western strategic identity despite internal contestation. EU accession in 2004 and Eurozone entry in 2009 anchored its institutional trajectory (Vachudova, 2005). The Ukraine crisis reinforces these anchors by clarifying geopolitical fault lines.

Mackinder's (1904) heartland thesis conceptualized Eastern Europe as a pivot zone contested by great powers. The findings suggest that Slovakia has decisively positioned itself within the maritime-liberal bloc rather than oscillating between spheres.

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PERSPECTIVA XXI
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This consolidation does not eliminate domestic debate but narrows the spectrum of viable grand strategy alternatives.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Ukraine war has acted as a structural turning point in Slovakia's geopolitical positioning, reshaping its strategic environment across spatial, institutional, economic, and political dimensions. Rather than constituting a temporary shock, the conflict has redefined Slovakia's role within the European security architecture and accelerated longer-term trends embedded in its post-2004 Euro-Atlantic integration. The war has transformed Slovakia from a relatively peripheral transit state into a frontline actor within NATO's eastern flank, intensifying both its strategic visibility and its exposure to systemic risk. This shift confirms core assumptions of structural realism that geography and proximity to conflict zones reconfigure threat perception and alliance behavior (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). Slovakia's direct border with Ukraine, once a stable external boundary of the European Union, has acquired renewed geopolitical salience consistent with classical geopolitical thought emphasizing the strategic volatility of Eastern Europe (Mackinder, 1904).

NATO's enhanced forward presence and the deployment of multinational battlegroups in Slovakia illustrate how alliance structures adapt to perceived revisionist threats (NATO, 2023). From a deterrence perspective, forward positioning increases the credibility of collective defense commitments and reduces the likelihood of opportunistic aggression. Yet this militarization of Slovak territory simultaneously embeds the country more deeply in great power confrontation, reinforcing its identity as a frontline state rather than a peripheral participant in European security affairs. This transformation reflects balancing dynamics predicted by neorealism but also highlights how small states experience disproportionate strategic consequences when systemic tensions escalate.

At the institutional level, the war has reinforced Slovakia's reliance on multilateral "shelter" mechanisms. Small state theory suggests that limited material capabilities incentivize deeper institutional embedding to compensate for vulnerability (Keohane, 1969; Thorhallsson, 2018). Slovakia's consistent alignment with EU sanctions, military assistance frameworks, and NATO

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deterrence measures demonstrates that systemic pressure has strengthened rather than weakened its Euro-Atlantic orientation. Membership in the European Union and the Eurozone has provided macroeconomic stabilization during the inflationary shock triggered by energy disruptions, illustrating how institutional integration enhances resilience during crises (Vachudova, 2005). Although domestic political rhetoric has at times questioned aspects of Western policy, structural incentives have constrained any meaningful strategic divergence.

Energy geopolitics constitutes another critical dimension of the findings. Prior to 2022, Slovakia's dependence on Russian hydrocarbons reflected infrastructural legacies of the Soviet era (Goldthau & Sitter, 2015; IEA, 2022). The war exposed this dependency as a strategic liability, accelerating diversification efforts and deeper integration into EU-coordinated energy markets. This shift illustrates the intersection between economic interdependence and security considerations, as energy policy became inseparable from geopolitical alignment (Youngs, 2017). In the short term, diversification imposed economic costs, particularly for an export-oriented economy heavily reliant on industrial production. However, in the longer term, the transition toward renewable and nuclear energy expansion may reduce exposure to geopolitical coercion, aligning with emerging analyses of renewable geopolitics (Scholten, 2020). The crisis thus operates simultaneously as a source of vulnerability and as a catalyst for structural modernization.

Regionally, the war has reshaped Slovakia's position within Central Europe. The Visegrád Group, historically a platform for coordinated policy among Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, and Czechia, has experienced fragmentation due to divergent threat perceptions and policy responses (Dangerfield, 2018). Slovakia's alignment has gravitated more clearly toward the pro-Ukraine stance of Poland and Czechia, weakening the cohesion of the V4 as a unified geopolitical bloc. This recalibration reflects the logic of Regional Security Complex Theory, which emphasizes that shared threat perception underpins regional cooperation. Divergent interpretations of Russia's role have therefore diluted subregional unity while strengthening broader NATO-centered alignment. Slovakia's diplomatic identity is increasingly defined by alliance commitments rather than by subregional bloc politics.

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Domestically, the war has intensified political polarization, particularly regarding military assistance and sanctions policy. However, the findings indicate that despite rhetorical volatility, strategic continuity has prevailed. Structural realism provides insight into this stability: economic interdependence with the EU and security dependence on NATO create high exit costs for radical reorientation (Waltz, 1979). While populist narratives have gained traction by emphasizing sovereignty, energy prices, and war fatigue, institutional constraints and historical memory of Soviet domination limit the plausibility of geopolitical reversal (Henderson, 2002). The interaction between identity and structure is therefore central; historical experience reinforces Western alignment even amid contemporary political contestation.

Another important dimension concerns Slovakia's elevated international visibility. By participating in military assistance and deterrence measures, Slovakia has enhanced its reputational standing within NATO and the EU. Small state scholarship suggests that systemic crises create opportunities for niche agency (Thorhallsson, 2018). Although Slovakia cannot shape the overall trajectory of great power rivalry, it can influence alliance cohesion through targeted contributions. This bounded agency challenges simplistic portrayals of small states as passive objects of systemic forces. At the same time, increased visibility exposes Slovakia to hybrid threats, including disinformation campaigns targeting domestic cohesion. The informational domain thus becomes an additional arena of geopolitical contestation, consistent with critical geopolitics' emphasis on the power of discourse in shaping spatial identity (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Dodds, 2007).

Looking forward, the findings suggest that regardless of whether the Ukraine war results in escalation, frozen conflict, or negotiated settlement, Slovakia's structural embedding in Euro-Atlantic institutions is unlikely to reverse. A prolonged confrontation would institutionalize its frontline status and sustain forward deployments. A negotiated settlement might reduce immediate tension but would not eliminate strategic mistrust or undo deterrence infrastructure. In all plausible scenarios, Slovakia remains anchored within Western institutional frameworks. The war has clarified rather than blurred geopolitical fault lines, consolidating Slovakia's position within the liberal-maritime bloc conceptualized in classical geopolitical theory (Mackinder, 1904).

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In sum, the Ukraine war represents a critical juncture in Slovakia's post-communist trajectory. Spatially, it has redefined the country's strategic geography; institutionally, it has deepened alliance dependence; economically, it has accelerated diversification; regionally, it has recalibrated diplomatic alignments; and politically, it has intensified polarization without altering core orientation. The Slovak case demonstrates how small states navigate systemic upheaval through institutional embedding, selective agency, and adaptive diversification. The war has elevated Slovakia's strategic relevance while simultaneously heightening its vulnerability, illustrating the dual-edged nature of geopolitical transformation in periods of great power confrontation.

Conclusion

The Ukraine war has constituted a profound geopolitical watershed for Slovakia, marking not merely a temporary security disturbance but a structural transformation in its strategic environment and international positioning. This study set out to examine how a small Central European state, historically situated between spheres of influence, has navigated the return of large-scale interstate war to the European continent. The analysis demonstrates that Slovakia's response has been shaped by a combination of structural constraints, institutional embeddedness, historical memory, and adaptive agency. The war has clarified Slovakia's geopolitical orientation, reinforced its Euro-Atlantic anchoring, and redefined its spatial and strategic identity within the evolving European security order.

First, the conflict has fundamentally altered Slovakia's geostrategic status. Once perceived primarily as a transit state within the European Union's internal market and energy infrastructure, Slovakia has emerged as a frontline state on NATO's eastern flank. Proximity to Ukraine has increased its logistical, military, and political relevance within alliance planning. This transformation illustrates the enduring relevance of geopolitical location in shaping national security priorities. Classical geopolitical insights regarding Eastern Europe's strategic volatility have regained salience, while neorealist theory helps explain why balancing behavior intensified as perceived threats grew. NATO's enhanced forward presence and Slovakia's integration into deterrence-by-denial structures signify not only alliance adaptation but also the institutionalization of Slovakia's new strategic role. Even if the intensity of the war diminishes, it is unlikely that this elevated security posture will be entirely reversed.

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Second, the findings underscore the centrality of institutional "shelter" in small state survival strategies. Slovakia's deep integration into the European Union, the Eurozone, and NATO has proven to be a stabilizing factor during a period of systemic shock. Rather than provoking strategic drift, the crisis reinforced the value of multilateral anchoring. EU economic coordination mitigated some macroeconomic pressures linked to energy disruptions, while NATO membership provided security guarantees that Slovakia could not independently generate. The war thus confirms key propositions in small state theory: in conditions of heightened uncertainty, institutional embedding becomes more—not less—essential. Slovakia's strategic calculus has remained firmly oriented toward maximizing security and resilience through alliance cohesion.

Third, the war has exposed vulnerabilities while simultaneously creating opportunities for structural adjustment. Slovakia's historical dependence on Russian hydrocarbons emerged as a geopolitical liability, compelling accelerated diversification and deeper participation in European energy integration mechanisms. Although the short-term economic consequences have been significant, especially for energy-intensive industries, the longer-term trajectory suggests a gradual strengthening of energy resilience. The shift toward diversified supply routes, renewable energy expansion, and infrastructural interconnectivity reflects the fusion of security and economic policymaking. Energy is no longer treated merely as a market commodity but as a core component of national and European strategic autonomy. In this sense, the crisis has acted as a catalyst for modernization and policy recalibration.

Fourth, the regional dimension of Slovakia's foreign policy has undergone recalibration. The fragmentation of the Visegrád Group in response to divergent approaches toward Russia illustrates how regional cooperation is contingent upon shared threat perceptions. Slovakia's alignment has gravitated toward a more explicitly pro-Ukraine and pro-NATO orientation, aligning it more closely with Poland and Czechia than with Hungary's more ambivalent posture. This shift does not eliminate subregional cooperation but redefines its scope and coherence. Slovakia's diplomatic weight increasingly derives from its role within broader Euro-Atlantic frameworks rather than from bloc-based regional balancing.

Fifth, domestic political dynamics reveal a tension between polarization and continuity. Public debates over sanctions, military assistance, and energy costs have intensified, and populist narratives have attempted to capitalize on socioeconomic anxiety. Nevertheless, structural constraints—economic interdependence with the EU, security dependence on NATO, and deeply

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institutionalized integration—have limited the feasibility of radical geopolitical reorientation. Historical memory of Soviet intervention and authoritarian dominance continues to shape elite and societal threat perceptions, reinforcing Western alignment even amid rhetorical fluctuation. The Slovak case thus demonstrates how domestic contestation does not automatically translate into systemic foreign policy reversal when institutional commitments are deeply embedded.

Moreover, the war has highlighted the dual character of small state agency. Slovakia remains constrained by systemic forces and alliance hierarchies, yet it has exercised meaningful agency through targeted military assistance, diplomatic engagement, and participation in collective decision-making. By contributing to deterrence efforts and aligning with sanctions regimes, Slovakia has enhanced its reputational capital within the EU and NATO. This bounded but tangible agency challenges deterministic interpretations of small states as purely reactive actors. While structural power asymmetries persist, crisis contexts create opportunities for strategic visibility and influence.

In a broader theoretical sense, the Ukraine war underscores the persistence of geopolitics in shaping European order. The post-Cold War assumption that economic interdependence would permanently marginalize territorial conflict has been decisively undermined. For Slovakia, this shift entails the normalization of a more securitized environment, in which defense planning, energy diversification, and alliance coordination occupy central policy positions. Even if a negotiated settlement emerges, trust deficits and strategic caution will likely endure, sustaining a higher baseline of deterrence and preparedness.

Ultimately, Slovakia's experience illustrates how small states situated in geopolitically sensitive regions adapt to systemic upheaval. Through institutional embedding, policy diversification, and calibrated agency, Slovakia has navigated the war's disruptive effects without abandoning its core strategic orientation. The crisis has clarified rather than destabilized its geopolitical trajectory. While vulnerabilities remain—particularly in economic resilience and societal cohesion—the overarching pattern is one of consolidation rather than fragmentation. Slovakia has reaffirmed its position within the Euro-Atlantic community, accepted the responsibilities and risks associated with frontline status, and adapted its policies to a more competitive and uncertain European order. The long-term implication is that Slovakia's geopolitical identity is no longer that of a peripheral post-communist state completing transition, but of an integrated Western actor operating within a renewed era of strategic rivalry. The Ukraine war has thus functioned as a critical juncture,

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ISSN: 3103-151X
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70577/mkqhbk64

redefining the parameters within which Slovak foreign and security policy will operate for years to come.

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Conflict of interest:

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