

Slovakia-Taiwan Relations: Slovakia's Pragmatic Approach as a Model of Engagement with Taiwan

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of Slovakia-Taiwan relations, focusing on the early 2020s (specifically 2020–2023), a period marked by a shift toward closer ties. Despite adhering to the One China policy, Slovakia has strengthened its engagement with Taiwan, driven by both regional and domestic factors. Regionally, the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region's disillusionment with unmet Chinese economic promises has led to a pivot toward alternative partnerships, including Taiwan. Domestically, Slovakia's 2020 government shift introduced a more Taiwan-receptive policy, aligning with the EU and NATO's cautious approach to China. The analysis highlights Slovakia's adoption of a low-visibility, pragmatic model that contrasts with the high-profile symbolic approaches of fellow CEE 'vanguard' states (the most active players in political interactions with Taiwan) like Czechia and Lithuania. Slovakia's strategy involves pursuing a 'positive' agenda with Taiwan with minimal public attention, redirecting criticisms of China to parliamentary channels and conducting symbolic actions vis-à-vis China. While this approach reduces risks of Chinese backlash and minimises domestic politicisation, it also limits public awareness and

support. Nonetheless, the Slovakia-Taiwan relationship has seen tangible, durable gains. Slovakia's approach offers a viable blueprint for other states interested in engaging with Taiwan without provoking China.

Keywords: Slovakia-Taiwan relations, international relations, pragmatic approach

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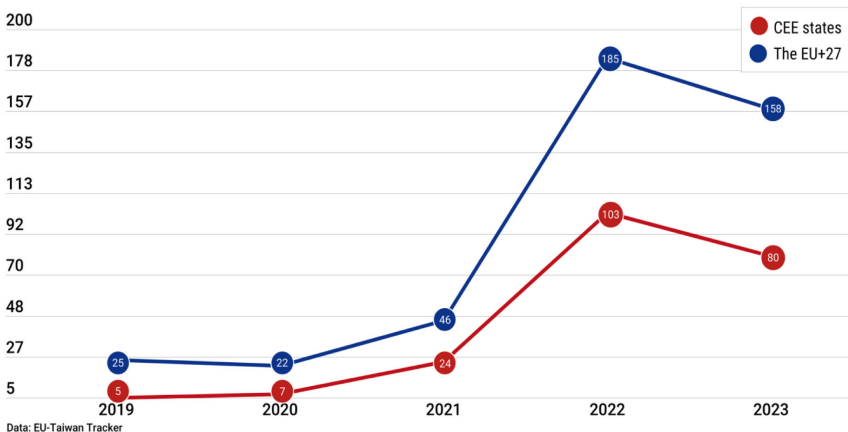
Introduction

In a world where most countries recognise the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the only representation of the whole of China, Taiwan's (officially the Republic of China, ROC) foreign policymaking is rather limited. Although the European Union (UN) and its member states do not formally recognise Taiwan, many actively pursue trade and economic relations with the island. In the early 2020s, EU-Taiwan relations, particularly between Taiwan and Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), reached an unprecedented level of cooperation. Data collected by the CEIAS EU-Taiwan Tracker, an online tool developed by the author in her capacity as a think-tank analyst, demonstrates a six-fold increase in various forms of EU-Taiwan interactions (governmental, economic, security and cultural engagements, along with mutual visits) between 2019 and 2023 (see Figure 1), with CEE countries accounting for over half of all engagements in 2022 and 2023 (Kironska et al. 2024).

What prompted such a significant shift in relations was the adoption of the EU-China Strategic Outlook in 2019 and the launch of the Indo-Pacific Strategy

Figure 1: EU-Taiwan interactions per year (2019–2023)

EU-Taiwan interactions per year (2019-2023)



Source: The figure adapted from Ličková & Kironska (2023)

in 2021. The Outlook marked a turning point in EU policy, defining China as both a partner and a systemic rival and advocating for ‘de-risking’ (rather than full ‘decoupling’). This shift emphasised reducing economic dependencies on China while upholding European standards in technology, human rights and sustainability. Importantly, the Outlook laid the groundwork for EU alignment with like-minded partners – including Taiwan – to enhance resilience and autonomy amid China’s growing global influence. Europe’s Indo-Pacific Strategy further supported this approach by promoting an open, rules-based order and strengthening ties with countries like Japan, India or Taiwan (Kironska et al. 2023). Additionally, in 2021, the European Parliament passed its first resolution on EU-Taiwan political relations, urging the European External Action Service, EU member states and the Commission to deepen political partnerships with Taiwan (Ličková & Kironska 2023). Zooming in on the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region, this strategic shift has been further supported by a growing skepticism toward China’s economic promises, leading many CEE countries to turn their attention to Taiwan, viewing it as the next East Asian cornucopia.

The CEE region is not monolithic, and the countries in particular leading the way in engagement with Taiwan were the so-called ‘vanguard countries’, a term introduced by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) in its publication *Beyond the Dumpling Alliance* (Šimalčík et al. 2023). This group – Slovakia, Poland, Czechia, and Lithuania – has emerged as the most active in fostering political and economic ties with Taiwan, particularly in trade, investment, and R&D. However, their approaches vary. Czechia and Lithuania have adopted high-profile strategies, such as symbolic actions that have accelerated their relations. Czechia made headlines in 2020 when Senate President Miloš Vystrčil addressed the Taiwanese Parliament, famously stating, ‘Wo Shi Taiwan Ren’ (‘I am a Taiwanese’) (EU-TW Tracker 2020). Following the 2024 elections in Taiwan, Czech President Petr Pavel was the first European leader to congratulate Lai Ching-te on his election victory, followed by Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis. These bold moves depart from the traditional European practice of congratulating the electorate without naming the president-elect, prioritizing stability in the Taiwan Strait and adherence to the One China policy. However, such visibility risks triggering Chinese coercion (as seen with Lithuania) or domestic politicization (as in Czechia), potentially slowing momentum during political transitions (Kironska 2024: 51–54). In contrast, Slovakia and, to some degree, Poland, have opted for a pragmatic path, avoiding grand gestures but still engaging meaningfully with Taiwan.

Despite the attention given to CEE-Taiwan relations in think-tank circles, scholarly exploration of these dynamics – especially Slovakia’s role – remains scarce. While scholars such as Fürst and Pleschová (2010) have explored Taiwan’s diplomatic efforts and soft power in the CEE region, their work predominantly

focuses on broader regional trends in connection to their relationship with China rather than offering a detailed analysis of Slovakia's specific interactions with Taiwan. Similarly, recent works by Parello-Plesner (2024) or Ferenczy (2024), while offering valuable insights into current EU-Taiwan relations, do not delve into country- or regional-level engagement with Taiwan. Tubilewicz's (2007) *Taiwan and Post-Communist Europe: Shopping for Allies* is crucial for understanding the development of CEE-Taiwan relations, providing foundational insights into the early stages of this relationship. Rejtoová (2019), in turn, focuses explicitly on Slovak-Taiwanese relations, and her article, 'Slovak-Taiwanese Relations under the One China policy, serves as a valuable source by tracing the history of Slovakia-Taiwan relations across various Slovak governments, with a particular focus on inter-parliamentary linkages. However, it concludes in 2018, leaving subsequent developments unexamined. In Rejtoová's (2022) book chapter on Slovak-Taiwanese relations, part of a Slovak-language book on Taiwan co-edited by the author of this article, she recounts the process of establishing ties between the two sides and provides insight into the strengthened relations after 2020. In contrast to the research on Taiwan-CEE, research on China-CEE relations is more extensive, with significant attention given to China's economic and political influence, particularly through initiatives such as the 16+1 framework. Alongside the abovementioned scholars, others, such as Turcsányi (2020) and Szczudlik-Tatar (2019), have provided in-depth analyses of China's strategic interests in the region, focusing on the diplomatic, economic and security implications of its engagements with CEE countries.

This article seeks to address the gap in the literature by examining Slovakia-Taiwan relations, with a particular focus on the early 2020s (2020–2023), a period marked by a shift toward closer ties, though characterised by a more pragmatic approach in Slovakia compared to the other 'vanguard' countries. The analysis explores the motivations behind Slovakia's increased engagement with Taiwan, asking 'What prompted Slovakia to become so active in this partnership?' It further outlines the advantages of a pragmatic approach to Taiwan, contrasting Slovakia's strategy with that of Czechia and Lithuania, and ultimately presents this as one of several models of engagement with Taiwan for other countries (not evaluating which one is better). In addressing these dynamics, the article seeks to fill a gap in academic literature, as CEE-Taiwan relations are frequently discussed in think-tank circles but rarely explored in scholarly research – and Slovakia's role even less so. This study, however, faces challenges due to the often-clandestine nature of interactions between the two countries, particularly from the Slovak side.

The article employs a qualitative, comparative case study methodology, supplemented by observation and (some) insider information, to examine the bilateral relations between Slovakia and Taiwan, using a neoliberal lens to frame the analysis. Through historical analysis, it explores key moments in the evolution of these relations, drawing on scholarly literature, policy reports and other secondary

sources. This approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of the diplomatic, economic and geopolitical factors shaping Slovakia's engagement with Taiwan, highlighting how pragmatic economic and diplomatic interests guide the relationship. The study contributes to a broader discourse on Central and Eastern European countries' relations with Taiwan, offering insights into how states pursue mutually beneficial interactions, consistent with neoliberal theory.

The article is structured chronologically as follows. To provide a comprehensive overview, the introduction is followed by an exploration of the establishment (in the early 2000s) and evolution of the official, though not formally diplomatic, relationship between Slovakia and Taiwan throughout the 2010s. This section is succeeded by an analysis of the factors driving the shift towards stronger relations in the 2020s, along with an examination of the resulting outcomes. Subsequently, an assessment of Slovakia's approach to Taiwan as a potential model of engagement for other countries is presented, leading to the conclusion.

Evolution and institutionalisation of Slovak-Taiwanese relations

The lack of official diplomatic relations between the EU and Taiwan does not leave Taiwan's foreign policy without strategic alternatives. 'If formal relationships are not possible, 'informal,' 'substantive,' or 'virtual' ties serve as an excellent substitute' (van Vranken Hickey 2007). Taiwan has employed methods like 'economic diplomacy', particularly in CEE since the 1990s. Post-communist nations were targeted with investment promises, humanitarian aid, grants and loans, which were welcomed in the region. By 1991, Taiwan shifted from seeking CEE diplomatic recognition to fostering substantive relationships, leading to the establishment of representative offices in Hungary (1990), Czechoslovakia (1991) and Poland (1992) (Tubilewicz 2007). By 1991, Taiwan shifted from seeking CEE diplomatic recognition to fostering substantive relationships, leading to the establishment of representative offices in Hungary (1990), Czechoslovakia (1991) and Poland (1992).

While these countries benefited from conducive economic conditions and supportive business infrastructure, Slovakia's situation diverged. Under Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, personal political motives drove policies that deepened economic distress, deterring international investors, including those from Taiwan, who prioritised stability and safety (Tubilewicz 2007). Consequently, Slovakia's economic engagement with Taiwan during the 1990s remained limited.

Following Czechoslovakia's dissolution in 1993, Czechia fostered friendly ties with Taiwan, with President Václav Havel openly advocating for its inclusion in the United Nations. In contrast, Slovakia prioritized political relations with China, limiting its interactions with Taiwan to trade-focused non-governmental organizations (Rejtoová 2019).

An obvious shift occurred following the 1998 elections that brought a democratic, pro-EU government to Slovakia, transforming its foreign policy and revit-

alising relations with Taiwan. Slovakia's efforts to attract foreign investment and narrow the gap with its neighbours led to an increased interest in partnerships with Taiwan. After three years of negotiations, the Taipei Representative Office in Bratislava (TROB) was inaugurated in August 2003, supporting trade, investment, education, science and culture. This was mirrored by the establishment of the Slovak Economic and Cultural Office Taipei (SECO) in November 2003, positioning Slovakia as the 19th European nation to establish such a presence in Taiwan. While these offices function similarly to embassies, there are distinctions in the accreditation level of their heads of mission compared to traditional ambassadors.

The institutionalisation of Slovak-Taiwanese relations can be seen as resulting from a 'convergence of economic interests', as noted by Tubilewicz (2007). The positive post-1998 power shift in Slovakia reinforced this trajectory, exemplified by the opening of representative offices. It is plausible to suggest that if similar conditions had existed in the early 1990s, Slovakia might have mirrored the regional trend and established mutual representative offices shortly after gaining independence.

Certain agreements preceded the establishment of representative offices. Slovakia signed its first agreement with Taiwan in 1996, focusing on scientific and technological cooperation. In 1998, key agreements followed, including a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Customs Cooperation and a cooperation agreement between the Slovak Chamber of Commerce and Industry and Taiwan's National Association of Industry and Trade, creating a structured framework for economic collaboration. Following the establishment of official missions, numerous agreements ensued. These include the MoU on cooperation between national associations of small and medium-sized enterprises and the agreement for the avoidance of double taxation (both in 2011) (2011 Income Tax Agreement 2011). Over the subsequent years, Taiwan and Slovakia forged cooperation in eGovernment, mutually recognised each other's drivers' licenses, and signed an MoU between the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Slovakia and the Institute of Foreign Service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the ROC (Šimalčík et al. 2020: 30). Notably, Slovakia emerged as one of the first EU countries to include Taiwan on its roster of safe countries during the pandemic, eliminating the need for mandatory quarantine upon arrival from Taiwan to Slovakia due to Taiwan's commendable success in disease prevention (OCAC 2020).

Numerous parliamentary delegations from Slovakia have visited Taiwan, often meeting with the Taiwanese president (MOFA ROC 2011). Former Prime Minister Iveta Radičová delivered a speech at the World Women Journalist and Writers Meeting in 2012 and was received by then-President Ma Ying-jeou. She returned to Taiwan in 2016 as part of a delegation representing the Holy See and 17 other European countries for the inauguration of President Tsai Ing-wen (MOFA ROC

2016). Parliamentarians and members of the European Parliament (MEPs), such as Peter Osuský, Ivan Štefanec, Eduard Kukan and Ján Budaj, have also made trips to Taiwan (MOFA ROC n.d.). Moreover, in 2020, Slovak MEPs expressed solidarity with Czech Senate President Miloš Vystrčil following his visit to Taiwan and the ensuing pressure from China, when Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that Vystrčil would 'pay a heavy price' for what Beijing considered a violation of the One China principle (Lexmann 2020). In this case, the threat ultimately remained unfulfilled (as the then-Czech government, which sets the foreign policy, distanced itself from the visit); however, the Chinese response highlights China's efforts to dissuade other countries from conducting similar high-level visits or expressing support for Taiwan.

To further facilitate concrete economic projects and investments between Slovakia and Taiwan, an MoU on economic cooperation was signed in 2019, which later evolved into a full-fledged economic dialogue (Taiwanese-Slovak Commission on Economic Cooperation) with a regular consultation mechanism. Initially, Taiwan's economic interest in Central Europe focused primarily on exports such as computers, bicycles, textiles, machinery and consumer goods. Today, cooperation between Taiwan and Slovakia involves the electrotechnical and automotive industries, with new collaborations emerging in IT, blockchain tech and waste management. Taiwan has also become a significant player in direct investment, ranking as the second-largest East Asian investor in Slovakia (after South Korea) (Kironska & Šimalčík 2023), with the largest Taiwanese investments being AU Optronics in Trenčín (since 2011),¹ Foxconn in Nitra (since 2010/2016)² and Delta Electronics in Dubnica nad Váhom (since 2007).³ Other notable investments include Eltek in Liptovský Hrádok, Darwin Precisions in Trenčín and BizLink (headquartered in the United States) in several locations across Slovakia.

Additionally, these economic ties are complemented by cooperation in other sectors. Academic collaboration has strengthened through the Taiwan Scholarship

- 1 *AU Optronics*, a producer of LCD modules, has been operating in Slovakia since 2011. Its 200,000-square-metre facility in Slovakia serves as the company's second European production site and is integral to the manufacturing and assembly of large LCD modules supplied to television manufacturers (Šimalčík et al. 2020: 33).
- 2 *Foxconn* manufactures TVs and related technologies in Slovakia and ranks among Europe's largest suppliers by volume. The operation originated as Sony Slovakia, which began in Trnava in 1996 and expanded to Nitra in 2007. A strategic partnership between Sony and Foxconn was established in 2010, and by 2016, Foxconn had acquired full ownership of the facilities (Šimalčík et al. 2020: 33).
- 3 *Delta Electronics* launched its production facility in 2007, though its presence in Slovakia dates back to 1994, when it set up a sales office in Bratislava and partnered with a local manufacturer in Nová Dubnica. The company specializes in producing power supplies for telecommunications, IT, industrial automation, and medical equipment. In 2015, Delta expanded its portfolio by acquiring Eltek, a provider of power solutions for telecom, industrial, and datacenter applications (Šimalčík et al. 2020: 33).

programme, bilateral MoUs between universities and the establishment of the Taiwan-Slovakia Exchange Association in 2020, which supports educational and cultural exchanges, including Slovak language courses at Soochow University (Taipei Times 2020). Tourism cooperation has involved joint participation at international travel fairs and the 2018 sister railway relationship between Alishan Forest Railway and Čierny Hron Forest Railway (Alishan Forest Railway 2019), though direct flights remain absent due to Vienna's nearby international airport. A working holiday scheme initiated in 2014 enables reciprocal year-long travel, while journalist and academic tours (on both sides) promote bilateral ties. Cultural ties are showcased through various performances, film festivals and book translations, with TROB in Bratislava fostering these relations via annual National Day receptions attended by supporters of Taiwan from various sectors including ministries, educational and cultural institutions, and members of the Slovak-Taiwanese Parliamentary Group (founded in 2006 by Ivan Štefanec, and later chaired by Peter Osuský and then Ondrej Dostál), and various donations to schools (interactive whiteboards, projectors, notebooks and WIFI connections) and hospitals (electro-coagulators, sterilizers, X-rays).

Overall, after a rather slow start in the 2000s, the relationship between Taiwan and Slovakia expanded across various domains of cooperation throughout the 2010s, including diplomacy, economics, academia, tourism and cultural exchange. A notable enhancement in relations, however, occurred with the advent of the 2020s.

Shift towards a strong relationship in the early 2020s

The shift towards stronger relations between Slovakia and Taiwan in the early 2020s was prompted by two major factors, one regional and the other domestic. Regionally, a trend emerged in which countries in the CEE region grew increasingly disillusioned with China. These countries had been part of the China-CEE multilateral regional cooperation framework, also known as 16+1 or later 17+1 (with Greece's inclusion) and which has now been reduced to 14+1 following the withdrawal of the Baltic states – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. According to Song and Fürst, these departures were largely driven by Beijing's failure to fulfil promised investment and trade commitments, coupled with a perception of an imbalanced leader-follower relationship, wherein China set the agenda and norms (Song & Fürst 2022). Pleschová (2022) observes that China's efforts to cultivate soft power through cultural initiatives, economic activities and political relationships with individual Central European countries have largely failed to convince these states to regard China as a benign power. Furthermore, public discourse in several of these states reflects concerns about the alliance between the authoritarian regimes of Russia and China (Bogoni 2024).

In response, the European mainstream approach has increasingly emphasised caution in cooperation with China, as articulated in the EU-China Strategic

Outlook. While not all countries have exited the China-CEE framework, many, including Slovakia, have pivoted toward other East Asian partners for economic cooperation that promises more substantial benefits. This shift, along with heightened attention at the European level to the Indo-Pacific region (Ferenczy 2023) – including rising tensions in the Taiwan Strait – has further influenced Slovakia's evolving stance on Taiwan.

Domestically, Slovakia underwent a political change after the elections in early 2020, which resulted in a government more receptive to engagement with Taiwan. After 12 years, Smer-Social Democracy (Smer), a left-wing populist and nationalist party, did not win the elections. Smer dominated Slovak politics from 2006 to 2020, leading two coalition governments and one single-party government, and was known for seeking stronger relations with China, driven by both economic and political considerations. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, the Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO) party, which had served as the parliamentary opposition during the 2012–2016 and 2016–2020 terms, secured victory and formed a ruling coalition with China-critical political parties from the centre-right and liberal-left. The approach to foreign policy has changed. For this new coalition, a close partnership with China was not compatible with their economic, geopolitical and normative priorities given their strong preferences for the EU and NATO. It's not that the new coalition rejected maintaining economic relations with China; rather, there was a willingness to also address critical topics, such as human rights violations in China or the security impacts of China's presence in Europe. An effort was made to balance two potentially opposing national interests – trade and overall security, especially in relation to dealings with authoritarian states. Consequently, Slovakia's relations with Taiwan deepened, resulting in several Taiwan-supportive parliamentary resolutions and an increase in reciprocal political visits.

Conversely, within the Slovak political spectrum, left-wing populist and far-right parties tend to have favourable views of China and therefore show limited interest in developing relations with Taiwan (Šimalčík 2021). This stance is primarily driven by economic opportunism (Fico said numerous times that China offers enormous trade opportunities and therefore cannot be overlooked), disregarding other aspects, such as for example cybersecurity risks associated with contracting Chinese firms for projects within Slovakia. This approach has been observed during previous Robert Fico-led governments, as well as with the new one following the 2023 general elections.

While the aforementioned factors were the necessary underlying requirements, the spark in Slovak-Taiwanese relations emerged with the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the two countries provided mutual aid. In the early phase of the pandemic, when Taiwan was internationally praised for its successful disease prevention, Taiwan donated masks and other protective equipment to Slova-

kia. One year later, as Taiwan encountered challenges in vaccine procurement, Slovakia reciprocated the generosity. Alongside other CEE countries, Slovakia donated 160,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, improving its positive image in Taiwan (Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic 2021). Slovakia was the second EU country, after Lithuania, to provide vaccines to Taiwan. Taiwan was very vocal in expressing gratitude to Slovakia. President Tsai Ing-wen repeatedly posted messages of thanks on Twitter,⁴ and a sign thanking Slovakia for the vaccines was even displayed on Taipei 101, the iconic Taiwanese skyscraper. From that moment onwards, relations between Slovakia and Taiwan entered a phase of increased attention, as stakeholders from political, business and civil society communities explored various cooperation opportunities.

These developments accelerated the number of mutual political visits. Notably, in 2021, a 43-member delegation led by Slovak Deputy Minister of Economy Karol Gálek made the country's highest-level executive visit to Taiwan since the opening of the SECO in Taipei (EU-TW Tracker 2021a). The purpose of the visit was to attend the first session of the Taiwanese-Slovak Commission on Economic Cooperation, which concluded with the signing of several MoUs, including cooperation in smart cities, electric vehicles and semiconductors (Šimalčík, Gerstl & Remžová 2023). In 2022, Slovak Deputy Speaker of Parliament Milan Laurenčík led a cross-party delegation of 10 parliamentarians to Taiwan (EU-TW Tracker 2022a). Slovak parliamentarians also participated in the most recent presidential inauguration of Lai Ching-te in May 2024 (Everington 2024). These visits were reciprocated by the Taiwanese side, with National Development Council chief Kung Ming-hsin leading a 60-member delegation to Slovakia in 2021 (EU-TW Tracker 2021b), Taiwanese Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Wu visiting that same year to attend a conference in Slovakia (EU-TW Tracker 2021c), and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Roy Lee visiting in 2023 (EU-TW Tracker 2023a).

Two important agreements were concluded. In 2021, the Extradition Treaty, the second such treaty in the EU after Poland, was signed (Šimalčík 2022). This type of treaty has a significant political element, as it addresses the sensitive subject of criminal policy. In 2022, the agreement on Judicial Cooperation in Civil and Commercial Matters, the first of its kind in the EU, was signed (EU-TW Tracker 2022b). This was a significant development, as it provides a rule of law infrastructure for private relations, such as those between businesses, thereby facilitating business relations between the two countries. Additionally, the Bratislava Region reached a sister-city agreement with Kaohsiung in 2022 (Sister, Friendly, and Partner City 2022).

4 See Tsai Ing-wen's Tweet from 16 July 2021 thanking Slovakia for the vaccine donations: <<https://x.com/iingwen/status/1416030647097860098?lang=en>>.

Taiwan-supportive resolutions have been adopted in several Slovak parliamentary committees, notably the Foreign Affairs Committee, as well as the Health Care and European Affairs Committees. Since the commencement of the 2020–2024 term (shortened to 2023 due to early parliamentary elections resulting from the government losing a no-confidence vote at the end of 2022), these committees have passed resolutions in support of Taiwan on at least five occasions. In September 2022, support was expressed for Taiwan's participation in the International Civil Aviation Organization (EU-TW Tracker 2022d). Several vocal parliamentarians also proposed a committee resolution supporting Taiwan's participation in INTERPOL but failed to gain the necessary support (Šimalčík, Gerstl & Remžová 2023). Moreover, a letter to the WHO president expressed support for Taiwan's participation at the 2020 World Health Assembly (EU-TW Tracker 2022c).

Although lacking full diplomatic recognition, the relationship was quite vibrant and extended beyond the mere signing of treaties and hosting dignitaries. In the economic realm, Slovakia received investments from Taiwan. The National Development Fund of the Executive Yuan of Taiwan established the CEE Investment Fund with a value of USD 200 million (EU-TW Tracker 2022e). The fund, managed by the Taiwan Capital, a national venture capital firm, targets crucial strategic sectors including semiconductors, biotechnology, aerospace, fintech, electric vehicle and laser optics across both Taiwan and the CEE region, with a particular focus on Lithuania, Slovakia and Czechia. In Slovakia, specific investments include a €8 million investment made in the Slovak technology firm Photoneo (EU-TW Tracker 2023b). This company collaborates with the automotive industry and robotics manufacturers in Germany, along with technology firms in Taiwan. Also in the same year (2023), a €6.2 million investment was made in the Slovak green tech company Sensoneo, which is a leading global provider of innovative and intelligent waste management solutions (EU-TW Tracker 2023c).

Slovakia's pragmatic approach to Taiwan

The mere threat of being shut out of China's market is often enough to deter the EU and its member states from entering into economic agreements with Taiwan (despite widespread support in the European Parliament for an investment agreement that could strengthen economic cooperation) (Parello-Plesner 2024). A notable example occurred in 2020, when Australia faced trade restrictions from China on its wine, lobsters, wheat and coal with one of China's objections being Australia's interference in Taiwan. However, in the early 2020s, the CEE region emerged as the most significant supporter of Taiwan in Europe. Slovakia charted a distinct course of engagement from the other 'vanguards' in the region. While Czechia and Lithuania opted for high-visibility, symbolic actions, Slovakia

(akin to Poland) adopted a more pragmatic stance (Šimalčík, Gerstl & Remžová 2023).

This pragmatic approach to Taiwan manifests in three primary forms. Firstly, it involves restricting governmental actions to pursue a 'positive' agenda with Taiwan without explicitly framing these activities in opposition to China. For instance, despite increasing engagement with Taiwan, Slovakia has maintained its participation in the China-CEE cooperation format. Moreover, engagements with Taiwan were conducted discreetly. For instance, members of Slovak delegations to Taiwan have been subject to social media bans. While Taiwanese media extensively cover these delegations, Slovak media scarcely report on such activities. This discreet approach aims to avoid provoking China, in contrast to Czechia and Lithuania's preference for high-profile activities. While this strategy aligns with China's preference to minimise public awareness of such gestures – and Chinese leaders are generally content to overlook acts of goodwill toward Taiwan as long as they remain out of the public eye – it also brings clear benefits from the partnership with Taiwan (in contrast to cooperation with China, which has yielded few positive outcomes for CEE countries).

Secondly, Taiwan-related criticism of China is shifted to the parliamentary level, thereby retaining a level of deniability by the government. Examples include two resolutions passed in 2022 in the Slovak parliament calling for Taiwan's inclusion in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Taiwan Today 2022) or the International Civil Aviation Organization (Chen 2022), both of which were blocked by China. The latter resolution was proposed by Miroslav Žiak, a parliamentarian who had visited Taiwan a month earlier and was reportedly impressed by the country's democratic, political and economic development. This also highlights the importance of mutual contact for Taiwan and demonstrates how economic and political relations complement each other. Moreover, the unanimous passage of the resolution underscores the strong support in the Slovak parliament during those years for Taiwan and Taiwan-related issues, such as the island's participation in international organisations.

Thirdly, Slovakia engages in some symbolic actions vis-à-vis China, such as actively participating in the unveiling of a commemorative postal envelope on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the China-CEE platform in Beijing in April 2022 (Kironka & Šimalčík 2023). This event served as a substitute for the formal summit and for the ambitious declarations that one might expect from Chinese policymakers on such an occasion. This anniversary attracted little attention and the envelope itself speaks volumes about the depth of the crisis facing China-led multilateral diplomacy in CEE (Kowalski 2022).

For Slovakia, this approach offers the advantage of reducing the risk of Chinese retaliation or coercion while promoting steady development of relations with Taiwan, which is crucial for attracting investments – a primary goal of Slovakia's engagement with Taiwan – alongside the values-based orientation of the ruling

coalition. According to a study by Fürst (2010), China rarely retaliates against CEE countries for their cooperation with Taiwan. In contrast, while this may have been true in the early years of the new millennium, it no longer holds. This was demonstrated when Vilnius opened a new Taiwan office in 2021. Typically, to avoid offending China, such representative offices are labelled 'Taipei', as seen with the Taipei Representative Office in Bratislava. However, Lithuania went a step further by allowing 'Taiwan' in the office's name. China viewed this as a violation of the One China policy and responded with coercive measures targeting Lithuania's economy, which effectively amounted to informal sanctions (in practice, trade stopped almost completely) that also impacted third parties (Hyndle-Hussein & Jakóbowski 2021). While this experience had significant negative impacts, especially for the affected businesses, it also opened new opportunities as Taiwan increased its support for Lithuania.

While Slovakia's approach may not garner the high-visibility publicity that Taiwan often desires, it still solidifies the foundation of the relationship. Significant agreements, such as the Extradition Treaty and the Judicial Cooperation Agreement described above, have been established and are not easily rescinded, even with a change in government. This was evident in Slovakia in 2023, when early parliamentary elections reinstated the Smer party, which led to a renewed inclination towards closer engagement with China. Since then, Slovakia-Taiwan ties have included only a handful of engagements, mostly in cultural cooperation, such as setting up the Taiwan Studies Center at the Comenius University in Bratislava in September 2024. However, a detailed examination of this shift lies beyond the scope of this paper and would warrant further dedicated research.

Another drawback of Slovakia's pragmatic approach to Taiwan is their limited knowledge and awareness of each other, as evidenced by Sinophone Borderlands Indo-Pacific Survey (2022) (Turcsányi et al. 2022). While there are positive trends in perceptions between Taiwan and Slovakia that both sides can leverage to enhance their mutual image, gaps remain (Turcsányi et al. 2023). Specifically, Slovakia is viewed favourably in Taiwan, though slightly less so than Czechia and significantly less so than Western countries. Conversely, Taiwan is perceived with neutrality in Slovakia; however, respondents with higher levels of political interest were more inclined to hold positive views of Taiwan. Partisan differences were also evident (albeit less pronounced than in the Czech context), with supporters of Progressive Slovakia (PS) and Sloboda a Solidarita (SaS) exhibiting the highest favourability toward Taiwan, whereas respondents aligned with Smer demonstrated the lowest levels of favourability.

In conclusion, Slovakia's pragmatic approach to Taiwan, marked by discreet diplomacy and limited public acknowledgment, strikes a strategic balance between fostering positive relations with Taiwan and mitigating potential backlash from China. Despite challenges, this approach has resulted in meaningful, albeit

low-profile, agreements that persist even through political transitions. Considering these dynamics, Slovakia's model – with its advantages and drawbacks – serves as a potential blueprint for other countries seeking to engage with Taiwan. Although it may not fully satisfy Taiwan's desire for high-profile recognition, it is often preferable to no engagement at all and can yield significant and enduring benefits over time.

Conclusion: Pragmatic engagement as a viable model for strengthening relations with Taiwan

The strengthened relationship between Slovakia and Taiwan in the early 2020s, shaped by both regional and domestic factors, underscores Slovakia's adeptness in balancing diplomatic pragmatism with meaningful engagement. Although Slovakia adheres to the One China policy (formally recognising Beijing as the sole representative of China), the relationship between Slovakia and Taiwan has deepened across various fronts in between 2020 and 2023. This shift reflects the broader disillusionment of the CEE region with China's unmet economic promises, prompting these countries to seek new partnerships in East Asia. Domestically, Slovakia's change of government in 2020 has introduced a foreign policy more receptive to Taiwan, aligning its economic and security interests within an EU and NATO-friendly framework.

Distinct from the high-visibility approaches adopted by Czechia and Lithuania – two other CEE countries pioneering relations with Taiwan (the so-called vanguards) – Slovakia (akin to Poland) has embraced a pragmatic stance. This approach focuses on pursuing a constructive, 'positive' agenda with Taiwan without directly positioning these actions in relation to China. It involves redirecting Taiwan-related criticisms of China to the parliamentary level, by which the government retains a level of deniability, and subtly engaging in symbolic actions vis-à-vis China. By keeping its diplomatic engagement with Taiwan out of the spotlight, Slovakia has minimised the risk of economic and political backlash from Beijing while advancing practical cooperation in areas such as economics, judicial collaboration and parliamentary exchanges. This approach shields Slovakia from potential retaliation and minimises domestic politicisation of the issue.

However, this pragmatic model also has its limitations. The low-visibility engagement with Taiwan reduces opportunities for mutual public awareness, lacking the public support that higher-profile approaches might cultivate. Nevertheless, Slovakia's pragmatic approach has proven effective, securing durable agreements (not easily undone by future governments), such as the Extradition Treaty (2021) and the Judicial Cooperation Agreement (2022), which underscore the substantive gains achieved in their bilateral relationship.

In sum, Slovakia's measured approach to Taiwan demonstrates how countries can build productive partnerships with Taiwan without backlash from China. This strategy, albeit a rather cautious one, could potentially serve as a blueprint for other nations that may hesitate to engage with Taiwan. Though Slovakia's model

may not fully satisfy Taiwan's aspirations for public recognition, it solidifies a foundation of sustainable, strategic cooperation.



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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available in the CEIAS EU-Taiwan Tracker at <https://eutwtracker.ceias.eu/tracker>. This online tool, developed by the author Kristina Kironska and her team at CEIAS, provides comprehensive information about the development of relations between Taiwan and the 27 EU member states from January 2019 onwards.

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