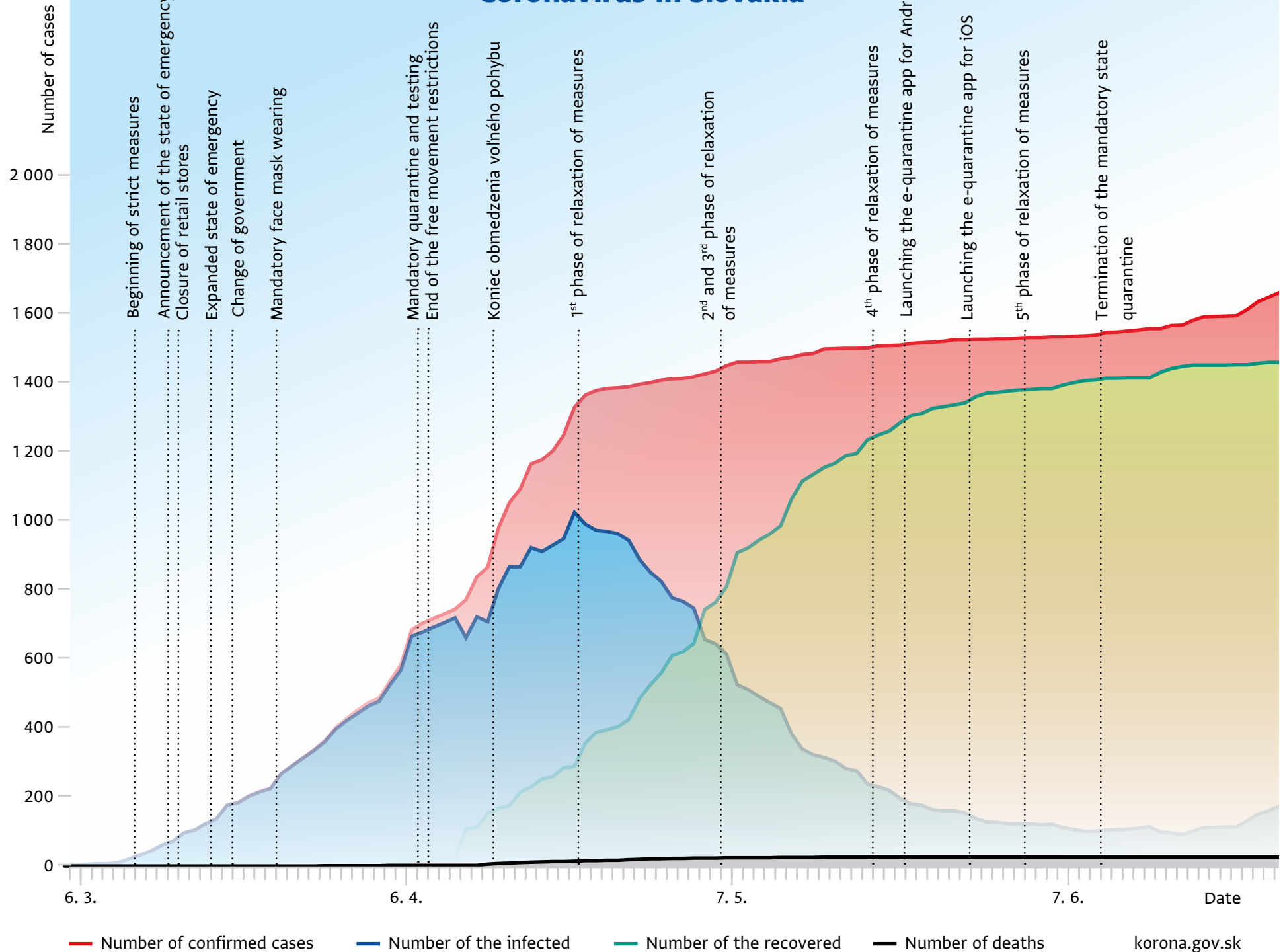




# Slovak Diplomacy in the Time of Corona Crisis

Pavol Demeš and František Ružička

# Coronavirus in Slovakia



**T**he COVID-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented situation for the whole international community. The spread of the novel coronavirus, therefore, impacted international relations and institutions since the beginning of 2020 and did not spare the Slovak Republic either. In the successful fight against the infection, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic (MFEA SR) played an important role. This publication offers a brief overview of its activities in the fight against the pandemic since the inception of its outbreak in China through drastic measures taken after the outbreak in the Slovak Republic in March to the termination of the state of emergency and opening of the borders in mid-June. It is based on the data and photographic material of the ministry and embassies of the Slovak Republic around the world.

Revealing of this crisis period was a substantial reduction or rather interruption of traditional diplomacy, the essence of which resides in direct contacts, meetings, negotiations, and conferences. Exacting consular diplomacy and online communication were pushed to the forefront. The staff of the ministry focused primarily on:

- gradual adaptation of the functioning of MFEA SR in the crisis regime also in line with the guidance of the Central Crisis Committee;
- monitoring pandemic situation abroad and gathering data on the fight against the <
- informing our citizens at home and abroad about the pandemic;
- assistance in the repatriation of our citizens home, and foreign nationals from the territory of the Slovak Republic;
- assistance to cross-border workers and communication with neighbouring countries;
- assistance in the procurement of medical equipment from abroad;
- assistance in the gradual opening of the borders and organizing first foreign travels of the official (government) representatives;
- online communication of the representatives of the Slovak Republic within the European Union that has progressively developed coronavirus crisis-related assistance programmes;
- maintaining the highest possible level of economic, political, and other activities as the situation permitted.





## The reaction to the corona crisis and the functioning of the MFEA SR in the crisis regime

*President Zuzana Čaputová appointed  
Ivan Korčok to the position of  
(foreign) minister  
Presidential Palace, 8 April 2020  
Photo: Tomáš Bokor*

The first information on the novel disease was published on the MFEA SR website on 22 January 2020 as “Outbreak of the viral pneumonia in the city of Wuhan”. As early as on 3 February 2020 the crisis committee meeting was convened under the leadership of the State Secretary František Ružička (who was replaced by the

new State Secretary Martin Klus on 21 March 2020). On 5 February 2020, the ministry published a travel advisory “reconsider travel” for the People’s Republic of China. Since then the crisis committee was in session almost permanently as it was necessary to react operatively to new, previously unprecedented situations.



**on 27 February**  
was adopted  
the first pandemic  
countermeasures  
package

In the meetings of the Central Crisis Committee, the ministry was represented by the State Secretary and the chair of the crisis committee of the MFEA SR (František Ružička until 14 March 2020 and Martin Klus as of 21 March 2020). The first pandemic countermeasures package was adopted by the government of Peter Pellegrini on 27 February 2020, a mere two days after the meeting of EU ministers on the corona crisis in Brussels where Slovakia was represented by František Ružička.

As of 14 March 2020, all in-person activities and receiving foreign delegations at the MFAE were suspended, the method of work shifted to diplomacy through videoconferences or electronic communication, and all foreign travels were cancelled. Departments of the ministry started functioning in the "home office" mode, which lasted with step-by-step relaxing until 1 June 2020. Throughout the whole period, the ministry maintained its full functionality.

During the period covered, changes in the leadership of the government and the ministry took place. Three weeks after the parliamentary elections that were held on 29 February 2020 the government of Peter Pellegrini submitted its resignation and on 21 March 2020 was replaced by the government led by Igor Matovič. In the role of Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák was replaced by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy Richard Sulík, chairman of the Freedom and Solidarity (Sloboda a solidarita – SaS) party, who was appointed as acting foreign minister. Day-to-day operations of the ministry were overseen by his State Secretary Martin Klus (SaS, former Deputy Speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic) who was appointed



*Meeting of the crisis committee of the MFEA SR led by Minister Miroslav Lajčák, 17 March 2020. Photo: Tomáš Bokor*

*Minister Miroslav Lajčák (centre right) handed over the baton to the Acting Minister Richard Sulík (centre left) and to State Secretary Martin Klus (rear left), office of the minister, 21 March 2020.*

*Photo: Tomáš Bokor*



*Handing over ceremony at MFEA SR – left to right: Richard Sulík, Acting Minister, departing minister Miroslav Lajčák and incoming State Secretary Martin Klus, 21 March 2020. Photo: Tomáš Bokor*



*The whole new leadership taking over the ministry on 9 April 2020 – left to right: State Secretary Martin Klus, Minister Ivan Korčok, State Secretary Ingrid Brocková. Photo: Tomáš Bokor*

*State Secretary Martin Klus and Ambassador František Ružička after the meeting of the Crisis Committee of the MFEA SR, May 2020. Photo: Martin Klus*







*During the General Affairs Council meeting on 25 February 2020 COVID-19 pandemic was discussed for the first time. Pictured here is Vice-Chairman of the European Commission Maroš Šefčovič and State Secretary of MFEA SR František Ružička Photo: EU*

on 21 March 2020. Five days later, on 26 March 2020, the designated Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok (independent, nominated by SaS) returned from Washington where he served as the ambassador of the Slovak Republic to the USA and he went into mandatory quarantine. He was appointed as Foreign Minister by President Zuzana Čaputová on 8 April 2020. One day later, on 9 April 2020 Ingrid Brocková (independent) returning from Paris, where she served as ambassador of the Slovak Republic to OECD, was appointed State Secretary of the MFEA SR.

Diplomatic missions of the Slovak Republic progressively introduced a specific mode of work whereas it was necessary to take into consideration local circumstances, compliance with the measures adopted by the host countries and incessantly dynamic developments, provision of essential consular tasks for our citizens in need and related suspension of other activities, such as temporary suspension of visa applications. Naturally, it was important to ensure the safety and security of our representatives posted abroad while maintaining the



functioning of the missions.

During the corona crisis the Crisis Management Department, dealing with crisis situations in the world ranging from terrorist attacks to natural disasters that affect citizens of the Slovak Republic, was strengthened. The department was led by Vladimír Fraňo. As of 16 March 2020 a repatriation task force started working in parallel with the Crisis Management Department through the expansion by six staff members from other departments. The team dealt with the realization of repatriations and providing of information to Slovak citizens and diplomatic missions. On a daily basis, they had to cope with an unprecedented increase in the number of phone calls and logistics of the repatriations in coordination with the Ministries of Defense and Interior, diplomatic missions of the Slovak Republic, as well as with the foreign Embassies accredited in Slovakia. Representatives of the MFEA SR also participated in regular videoconferences of the EU Member States under the auspices of the European External Action Service (EEAS) during which Member States exchanged information on repatriation flights planned from outside EU with the aim of sharing and using the capacities efficiently.

**4 531**

**Slovak citizens  
repatriated as of  
21 June 2020**



*Crisis Management Department and the repatriation Task Force of the MFEA SR - bottom left to right: Jana Sisáková, Vladimír Fraňo (Director), Martin Klus (State Secretary), Alexandra Janečková; top left to right: Patrik Rexa, Juraj Privits, Martin Cimerman, Patrik Turošík, Roman Bogdan, Zuzana Košťáliková. Photo: MFEA SR Archive*



## Online Diplomacy



Foreign visits were suspended from March until the termination of the state of emergency on 13 June 2020, and communication shifted almost exclusively to the online sphere.

The last meetings of Foreign Affairs Ministers of the (27) EU Member States held in the traditional form and attended by Minister Miroslav Lajčák, were an extraordinary Foreign Affairs Council dealing with Turkey, Syria and migration (9 March 2020), and meeting of the so-called Bucharest format in Vilnius (10 March 2020). The subsequent meeting in the Visegrad Group (V4)+ format on 13 March with the German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas showcased

already the beginning of the “face mask diplomacy” and videoconferencing.

Foreign Minister-designate Ivan Korčok stepped into his role during this period, starting with a series of telephone calls or video teleconference calls with his partners. A whole series of video teleconferences of EU Foreign Affairs Ministers (FAC) followed: 23 March (COVID-19, disinformation), 3 April (COVID-19, measures coordination, repatriation of almost 700 000 EU citizens stranded abroad), 22 April (focus on the assistance to Ukraine, support for the Team Europe programme, assistance to third countries and countering disinformation), 15 May (situation in the Middle

*Prime Minister Igor Matovič (centre) during the videoconference of V4 Prime Ministers; State Secretary Martin Klus wearing a face mask (right).*

**13 March**  
“Facial mask”  
diplomacy and time  
of videoconferencing  
has started





*Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini getting ready for the videoconference of the European leaders together with Miroslav Lajčák, 17 March 2020.  
Photo: Tomáš Bokor*

East, relations with Israel and developments in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood) and 29 May (relations with China in light of the events in Hong Kong). Thereafter a videoconference of EU (27) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) Foreign Affairs Ministers was held on 11 June and a videoconference dedicated to transatlantic relations in presence of the United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on 15 June.

At the same time, ministers or state secretaries of European affairs were working hard as well. In the format of General Affairs Council (GAC), where Slovakia is represented by State Secretary Martin Klus, they met (virtually) on 24 March (decision on opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia), 22 April (assessment of the fallout of the pandemic on the functioning of the EU, rights of the citizens and rule of law, coordination of measures), 26 May (ways of restarting the EU economy), and 16 June (European Recovery plan - New Generation EU, multiannual budget for the upcoming seven-year period and progress in negotiations on Brexit).

The EU has dealt with the issues of assistance to foreign partners/third countries. During the meeting of ministers for development on 8 April 2020 a package of 20 billion EUR for the fight against coronavirus in the third countries was adopted. On 8 June 2020, ministers for development cooperation conducted the assessment of the first outcomes of the work of the Team Europe global group for the fight against coronavirus in partner countries.

Since 10 March 2020, six videoconference meetings of the European Council (EUCO) at the heads of states or governments took place. The first two meetings were attended by Peter Pellegrini, the next four meetings by Igor Matovič. The new prime minister participated in his first videoconference of leaders on 26 March 2020. On 6 May, an important videoconference focused on cooperation between the EU and Western Balkan countries was organized. To date, the latest videoconference was held on 19 June 2020. Slovak diplomatic representatives participated in all the abovementioned summits.

*Prime Minister Igor Matovič (left) arriving at the MFEA SR is welcomed by Minister Ivan Korčok. Due to the situation, the V4 and Germany summit (19 May 2020), was organized as a videoconference.  
Photo: Tomáš Bokor*





Besides the regular EUCO meetings and ministerial meetings (in the format of GAC, FAC, ministers for development), several important videoconferences, especially with regional partners such as Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Poland, but also Croatia and Slovenia were organized, either on the level of ministers or state secretaries. Among these was the first videoconference attended by the minister-designate Korčok, a conference with V4 partners held on 25 March 2020.

The new dynamics, perspective, and possibly a new sense of purpose were given to cooperation among Slovakia, Austria, and the Czech Republic in the so-called Slavkov format (S3). Between 17 March 2020 and 25 May 2020 eight videoconferences took place – four on the level of foreign affairs ministers (Lajčák, Korčok) and four on the level of state secretaries (Klus). Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary Péter Szijjártó was invited to seven of these. Videoconferences did have a concrete impact on the lives and work of people during the COVID-19 crisis as they dealt with the issues of cross-border workers, cross-border regional measures, repatriation mechanism coordination, and border-opening procedures.

Current developments and cooperation were regularly discussed by state secretaries for European Affairs and so-called sherpas (František Ružička until 19 March and Martin Klus as of 21 March), either in the V4 format (21 April) or V4+ format (2 June, together with State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France Amélie de Montchalin).

*Videoconference attended by Minister Miroslav Lajčák and partners from the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Germany focused on the coordination of measures and border cooperation, 13 March 2020. Photo: Tomáš Bokor*



*Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini during the videoconference with European leaders, 17 March 2020. Photo: Tomáš Bokor*

*Minister Miroslav Lajčák in discussion with European partners, 17 March 2020. Photo: Tomáš Bokor*







Prime Minister Igor Matovič (left) and Minister Ivan Korčok in preparation for the videoconference of the prime ministers of V4 countries, 19 May 2020. Photo: Tomáš Bokor

Prime Minister Igor Matovič getting ready for the first intervention at the European Council meeting together with the State Secretary and Sherpa Martin Klus, 26 March 2020. Photo: Tomáš Bokor



Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivan Korčok (left) during the Foreign Affairs Council videoconference assessing the developments in the Europe's neighbourhood and the Middle East, 15 May 2020. Photo: Tomáš Bokor

During the videoconference summit on 5 June 2020, leaders of the EU (27) unanimously expressed support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans. Left to right: State Secretary Martin Klus, Prime Minister Igor Matovič, Minister Ivan Korčok. Photo: Tomáš Bokor





## First foreign visits and meetings



Minister Ivan Korčok made his first foreign visits to the Czech Republic on 25 May (Valtice) and Hungary on 2 June. In Vienna, on 16 June he held meetings with counterparts from Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovenia.

Minister Ivan Korčok accompanied Prime Minister Igor Matovič during his official visits to the Czech Republic on 3 June and Hungary on 12 June. State Secretary Martin Klus accompanied Igor Matovič during meetings of the V4 Prime Ministers in Lednice on 11 June.

The MFEA SR and Slovak diplomatic missions assisted in telephone conversations of the President of the Slovak Republic Zuzana Čaputová with presidents of the Czech Republic, Germany, Estonia, Poland, Georgia, Ukraine and with Pope Francis.

The first foreign visit to the Slovak Republic after the relaxation of epidemic counter-measures was the visit by Polish Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz on 5 June.

*The first foreign guest after the relaxation of measures was the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Jacek Czaputowicz who visited Bratislava upon invitation by Minister Ivan Korčok on 5 June 2020. Photo: Tomáš Bokor*



• The first foreign visit of Minister of Foreign  
 • Affairs Ivan Korčok led traditionally to the Czech  
 • Republic (25 May 2020). In Valtice he met his  
 • counterpart Tomáš Petříček (left).

Photo: Juraj Tomaga



• Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivan Korčok  
 • at a press conference with the Hungarian  
 • partner Péter Szijjártó during the official  
 • visit in Budapest on 2 June.

Photo: MFEA SR Archive



• The meeting of Foreign Ministers of the  
 • Slovak Republic Ivan Korčok and Poland  
 • Jacek Czaputowicz was dominated by  
 • the current international issues, including  
 • broader circumstances related to  
 • overcoming the fallout of the COVID-19  
 • pandemic crisis.

Photo: Tomáš Bokor



# Keeping the public informed

Since the outbreak of the novel disease COVID-19, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic issued more than 850 travel advisories and pre-travel notifications. It has used (and still uses) the specific subsection on COVID-19 of its website [www.mzv.sk](http://www.mzv.sk) created on 4 February 2020. Information is also provided by multiple Slovak embassies, on their Facebook pages.

In keeping the citizens of the Slovak Republic abroad informed, the role of the emergency SMS messages that the Ministry issues in cooperation with mobile network operators, has been essential. In total, 11 SMS messages were sent.

First two such messages “alerted” / “rang” in the phones on 27 February 2020 and reached 356 200 SIM cards abroad. Citizens of the Slovak Republic that were in Austria and Italy (59 315 SMS messages) were delivered the following message:

Given the outbreak of coronavirus in Europe, MFEA SR alerts citizens of the Slovak Republic that upon their return to Slovakia delays on border crossings of the Slovak Republic are possible.

On the same day, the following SMS message was sent to all our citizens that were at that time abroad (299 804 SMS messages):

Due to the outbreak of coronavirus, MFEA SR recommends to follow one’s health upon return to the Slovak Republic during the 14-day period. Notify your doctor on any signs of infection.



Through SMS messages our citizens abroad were informed on the gradual introduction of quarantine measures. First on the quarantine at home, when the following SMS message was sent to 291 500 SIM cards abroad on 9 March 2020:

Alert! Coronavirus: Upon return from Italy, China, South Korea, and Iran, a 14-day quarantine is mandatory. Contact your doctor by telephone.

Subsequently, on 12 March 2020, all the citizens of the Slovak Republic that were abroad (206 700 SMS) were sent two other messages:

ALERT! Coronavirus – As of 13 March 2020, 7:00 a.m., all persons arriving from abroad to the Slovak Republic are obliged to quarantine for 14 days. More information: [www.uvzs.sk](http://www.uvzs.sk)

Alert! Coronavirus – As of 13 March 2020, international airports in the Slovak Republic are closed, restrictions

in international railway and bus transport transiting the Slovak Republic are in place.

On 17 April 2020, all Slovaks across the world were sent the following guidance:

ALERT! Registration before the arrival to the Slovak Republic on the [navraty.mzv.sk](http://navraty.mzv.sk) website no later than 72 hours prior to planned arrival at the border crossing is necessary as of 20 April 2020.

The latest SMS message sent on 1 May 2020 alerted on the full quarantine facilities and was sent to users present in the EU countries and Ukraine:

Due to full capacities in the state-run quarantine facilities reconsider travelling to the Slovak Republic.

This mode of communication proved effective and useful and we have to also give credit to mobile operators for their constructive cooperation.



Since 16 March 2020, the Ministry has been publishing on its website information on restrictions at the borders in different countries. This information has been updated for over 1050 times to date and has been based on input from Slovak diplomatic missions. The Ministry regularly provides information on changes in travel conditions (in March – April it provided information on repatriation flights) on its Facebook and Instagram

The travel advisories published on the MFEA SR website is being published also on the korona.gov.sk website. Results of the cooperation with the Ministry of Interior are presented on the Facebook page of the Police of the Slovak Republic.

Embassies accredited in Slovakia have been informed regularly through circular notes, whereas the Ministry sent out 13 notes verbales in total since 13 March 2020.

After the outbreak of the corona crisis, the interest of the media in the activities of MFEA SR increased

enormously. Especially Minister Korčok and State Secretary Klus provided dozens of interviews for all the relevant electronic and print media and their Facebook profiles have also recorded an exceptional visitors' traffic.

During the corona crisis, the Ministry's website became one of the primary sources of information for tens of thousands of Slovak citizens at home and abroad that demonstrated itself in the radical increase in the website traffic. In total, between 4 February 2020 and 15 June 2020, MFEA SR website had over 6 million visitors. That is almost six times more compared to the traffic in the same period in the previous year. At the same time, the number of users of the www.mzv.sk website increased: 1 438 394 in contrast to 272 384.

The information most requested by users related to border crossing restrictions (757 000 visitors/hits) or basic COVID-19 data (over 400 000 visitors/hits). The highest daily website traffic of the website was recorded on 13 – 15 March 2020, i.e. in the time before

the introduction of the border-crossing and mandatory quarantine measures. On a single day, the website was visited by 500 000 users. Besides visitors based in Slovakia (67%), users in the Czech Republic, Germany, and Austria, United Kingdom (approx. 3%), USA (1,38%), as well as in Hungary, Poland, and other countries.

Between 4 February  
2020 and 15 June 2020  
MFEA SR website had

**6 million  
visitors**

### The highest daily website traffic (number of users) in 2020





• The first visit by the President Zuzana Čaputová at the MFEA SR on 5 June 2020. Photo: Tomáš Bokor

• Meeting of the Ambassador of the Republic of India in the Slovak Republic Vanlalhuma (left) with State Secretary of MFEA SR Martin Klus, 20 May 2020. Photo: Tomáš Bokor



• Discussion between Minister Ivan Korčok (left) and the United States Ambassador Bridget Brink focused on the state of transatlantic relations and other important topics of cooperation in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, 4 June 2020. Photo: Tomáš Bokor



• State Secretary of the MFEA SR Martin Klus received Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Turkey in the Slovak Republic Asligul Ugdu. Photo: Tomáš Bokor



• Minister of Defense of the Slovak Republic Jaroslav Nad' and Minister Ivan Korčok, 17 April 2020. Excellent cooperation between ministries was shown in the process of repatriating Slovaks back home too, whereas flight capabilities of the Ministry of Defense – Spartan aircraft – were used. Photo: Tomáš Bokor







Meeting between Minister Ivan Korčok (right) and Robert Mistrík, scientist and member of permanent Crisis Committee, attested the importance, role and potential of Slovakia's science in the fight against COVID-19, 27 April 2020.

Photo: Tomáš Bokor

On 19 May 2020, State Secretary of the MFEA SR Ingrid Brocková visited the company MultiplexDX. Its Managing Director Pavol Čekan together with the scientist Robert Mistrík presented a unique test for early diagnostics of COVID-19.

Photo: MFEA SR Archive



State Secretary of the MFEA SR Ingrid Brocková met a team of young scientists of the Q-Vent project on 12 May 2020, with the goal to support the development of their project and thereby assist countries hit by the novel coronavirus pandemic. Photo: Kristína Spišáková



During the meeting with the President of the Economic Chamber of the Czech Republic Vladimír Dlouhý at the MFEA SR on 1 June 2020, current issues, including the contribution of his organization in the global fight against COVID-19, were discussed. Left to right: Vladimír Dlouhý, State Secretary Ingrid Brocková, Minister Ivan Korčok. Photo: Tomáš Bokor





## Repatriations

The first repatriation of Slovak citizens was organized on 1 February 2020, that is even before the outbreak of the pandemic in Europe. It was repatriation from China via a French aircraft. On 17 March the MFEA SR arranged the first repatriation by bus, from Zurich to Bratislava, and on 19 March another one from Italy. On 20 March a commercial charter company brought our citizens home from Great Britain. In total, between 17 March

and 21 June, 179 repatriations by bus and 26 repatriation flights were realized.

As of 30 June 2020, the MFEA SR repatriate 4531 persons and diplomatic missions assisted 1 935 persons with their individual returns. In total, over 6 440 persons returned to Slovakia from 110 countries. According to our diplomatic missions at that time there were around



# 27

repatriation  
flights



Nicosia

248 citizens of the Slovak Republic in Europe and 52 citizens outside Europe who were seeking repatriation or an assisted return home, and none of them were in a critical / an emergency situation.

Repatriations of the Slovak citizens were made possible by the close coordination with the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic (Mi SR) and Ministry of Defense of the SR (MD SR).

The MI SR offered a government special aircraft for several (8 in total) repatriation flights, among others from Ireland, Finland, Norway, Afghanistan, United Kingdom, and Tunisia, and also assisted with the return of Slovak citizens home by buses from Austria, Hungary, and Czech Republic. It made sure that the border crossing transit was smooth and accompanied the repatriated persons to intake facilities.

The MI SR also assisted in flight arrangements in the framework of the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) on 1 May 2020 from Iraq (Baghdad), when it brought back home 69 citizens of 18 different nationalities, and on 14 May 2020 from Tunisia (Tunis), when it carried 19 citizens of 5 nationalities. Slovakia thus effectively participated in joint EU operations.

The ministry likewise perceived the extraordinary challenge of the coronavirus pandemic and took part in total in 7 flights organized in order to bring back home citizens from e.g. Ireland, the United Kingdom, Lebanon, or Cyprus.

In Brussels, during the period covered dozens of videoconference calls of various formats were held – ranging from

Beirut



Rome



# 186

repatriation  
buses



the meetings of the committee of permanent representatives (COREPER) to working groups in presence of Slovak diplomats and experts. The key format was the EU integrated political crisis response (IPCR) that was fully activated on 2 March 2020. The Working Party on Consular Affairs (COCON) played an important role with respect to repatriations as well. It prepared overviews of measures and travel and transit restrictions in third countries – the so-called Traffic light, travel advisories, and assisted in the logistic of the repatriation by air.

## London



*Travelers boarding the special flight of the Ministry of Interior in London on 19 April 2020 have their temperature measured. Photo: Marcela Matúšková*



*The Embassy of the Slovak Republic in the United Kingdom assisted hundreds of Slovaks in their return home, also thanks to excellent cooperation with the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic. London, 30 March 2020. Photo: Slovak Embassy London*



## Bratislava





Dublin



Skopje



Madrid



Athens



## Washington



20 March 2020 – the first repatriation departure from the Arc de Triomphe, Bratislava Street (rue de Presbourg); 18 April 2020 – second and the last repatriation, from the same place. Photo: Csaba Póda, Slovak Embassy Paris (While the first bus carries a non-violent Chinese symbol, the second carries a French one...)

## Oslo

Dakujeme veľmi pekne všetkým, ktorí sa podielali na repatriácii z Norska. Videli sme, koľko je za tým práce aby sa to cele zorganizovalo. Celá repatriácia od odletu z Osla až po odvoz do karanténneho strediska prebehla hladko a bez problémov, inštrukcie boli podané jasne a zrozumiteľne. Dakujeme za ľudský prístup všetkým, s ktorými sme komunikovali, či už písomne alebo telefonicky z Velvyslanectva SR v Ose a MZVEZ. (Spravu môžete zverejniť, takú istú som poslala aj na facebook messenger MZVEZ)

5 minutes ago

25. MARCA 2020

Sedíme 5:40

Anoo, práve sme pristali 5:47

Písala som vám, ale asi sa už neodoslala správa 5:47

Tak ste už v Európe, veľa šťastia v ďalšom.... 6:31 ✓✓

Ďakujeme krásne za podporu, mail, čo ste mi včera písal... Tak v tej zúfalej situácii včera sme zapojilo všetkých do akcie. Preto asi prišla k vám info z rôznych strán 7:26

Držite sa aj vy! Som zvedavá, ako dopadne Mexiko 7:26

26. MARCA 2020

Dobry deň prajem, ešte som vás chcela informovať, že sme v domácej karanténe, nie v Rakúsku 11:18

Tak aj ostatní ľudia išli domov 11:18

Napište správu.

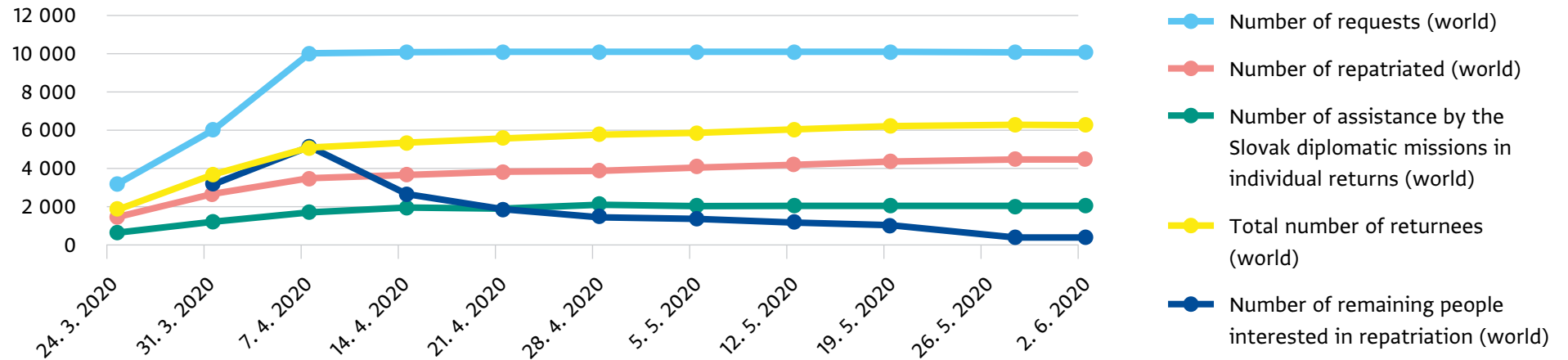
## Mexico



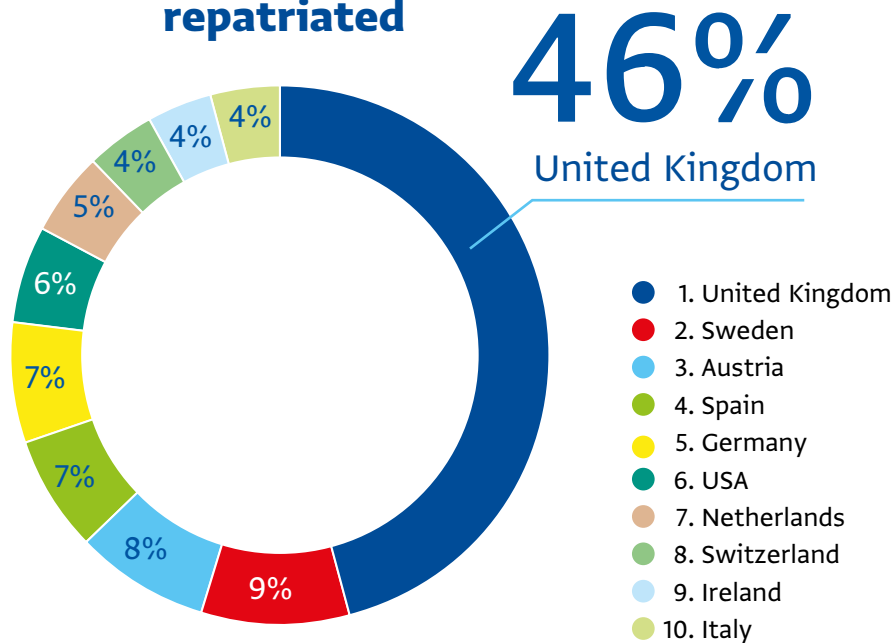
## Paris



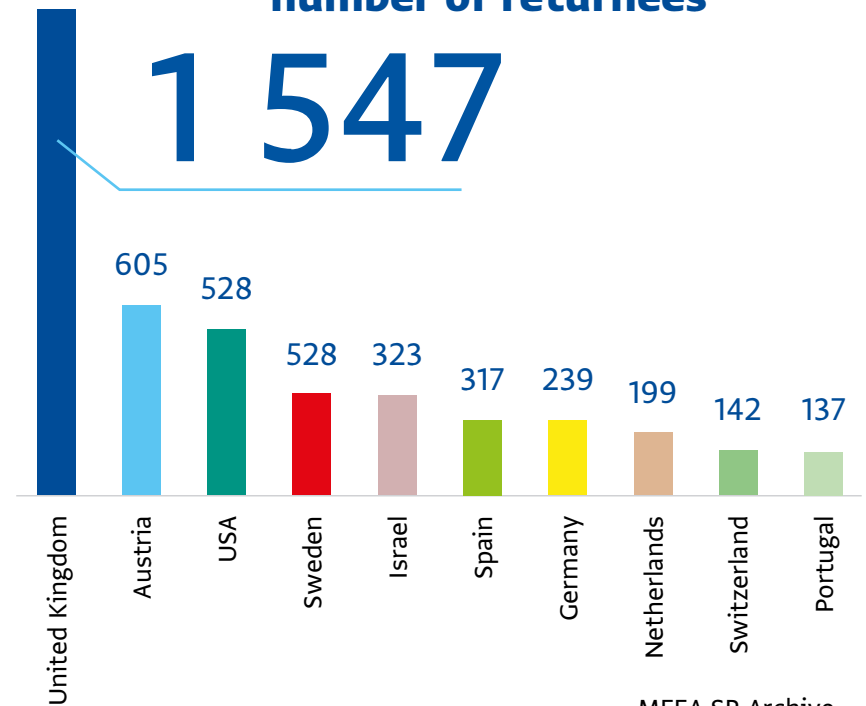
## Evolution of repatriations



## Countries by the number of repatriated



## Countries by the total number of returnees







## International solidarity and assistance from the Slovak Republic

*Handing over of a symbolic check to Italy for the fight against COVID-19, Bratislava M. R. Štefánik Airport, 20 April 2020. Left to right: Italian Ambassador Gabriele Meucci, Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivan Korčok, Minister of Interior Roman Mikulec. Photo: Tomáš Bohor*

Slovakia reacted to the developments immediately at the beginning of February 2020 and provided a financial contribution to the World Health Organization, amounting to 200 000 EUR.. On 4 May 2020 the Slovak Republic pledged to provide 750 000 EUR to the multilateral Coronavirus Global Response mechanism.

Financial contributions were provided to the International Committee of the Red Cross - ICRC (50 000 EUR for the activities in Ukraine), Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees - UNHCR (also 50 000 EUR for the activities in Ukraine) and to the UN Multi-partner Trust Fund (50 000 EUR).

On 7 February 2020, the first humanitarian aid shipment was dispatched to China. After the outbreak of the pandemic, the Slovak Republic provided humanitarian aid to Italy (316 000 EUR on 20 April 2020), Moldova (50 000 EUR and funds for micro-grants), Ukraine (107 000 EUR in the form of medical equipment and three emergency vehicles for almost 80 000 EUR on 22 May 2020), Serbia (50 000 EUR), Montenegro (30 000 EUR), Georgia (45 177 EUR), Bosnia and Herzegovina (30 000 EUR), and Ethiopia (20 000 EUR).

As part of the Visegrad Group (V4) contribution to the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa for the 2nd phase of the “Integrated Border and Migration Management in Libya” project, 20 million EUR (out of 35 million EUR in total) will be used for activities in the fight against COVID-19. The Slovak Republic contributed 5 million EUR to this 20 million tranche.

Slovakia earmarked further 600 000 EUR for the so-called micro-grants – financial contributions up to 10 000 EUR provided through the diplomatic missions of the Slovak Republic.

The crisis mobilized Slovak scientific, innovation, and economic potential as well. In the framework of the innovation and economic diplomacy support, the MFEA SR met many Slovak companies bringing to the table different technological ideas with both humanitarian and export potential. Such was the mechanical ventilator Q-Vent project developed by a team of young Slovak researchers from the Faculty of Natural Sciences of Comenius University. The respirators got clinically tested in Brazil during the state of emergency thanks to the Slovak Embassy initiative. Another example was the diagnostic tests for COVID-19 by MultiplexDX that are expected to be part of our humanitarian aid to Kenya.



### Assistance in medical equipment imports from abroad

The MFEA SR assisted in medical equipment air shipments from China (e.g. respirators, medical grade masks, safety glasses and shoe covers) and eleven truck shipments of protective equipment from Turkey.

*Material humanitarian assistance convoy for the people of Ukraine for the fight against COVID-19 dispatched on 22 May 2020 from the logistics hub of the Ministry of Interior in the presence of the State Secretary Ingrid Brocková.  
Photo: MFEA SR Archive*



## Helping in Need

Kiev



Rome



## Importing medical equipment

Istanbul



Beijing





## Border regime and tourism

The first meeting of the Crisis Committee of the MFEA SR on travel advisories took place on 3 February 2020. The Government adopted the first measures restricting the movement of citizens at the beginning of March. On 12 March 2020, borders were closed, and travel guidance advising against travelling abroad was issued. Shortly after that, on 14 March 2020, border controls were introduced, and the mandatory quarantine announced. Minister Ivan Korčok and State Secretary Martin Klus regularly communicated with their partners from neighbouring countries to discuss border regimes and arrangements for cross-border workers.

The European Commission adopted a package on tourism and transport on 14 May 2020. As of 15 June 2020, most EU Member States started gradually

relaxing controls on internal borders (especially with neighbors) and in tourist destinations/attractions.

On 10 June 2020, the Slovak Republic eased the restrictions on border crossings for persons returning from Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Croatia, Iceland, Lichtenstein, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Malta, Germany, Norway, Austria, Slovenia, and Switzerland. On 20 June 2020, the regime expanded to include Montenegro (for Slovak citizens), Denmark (including the self-governing Faroe Islands), Monaco, and mainly Poland (with a specific warning issued for the Silesian Voivodeship / Silesia Province region). Further easing in coordination with other Schengen countries as well as towards the so-called third countries is expected after 1 July 2020.



Upon invitation by the Federal Minister for European and International Affairs of Austria Alexander Schallenberg, Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivan Korčok visited Vienna on 16 June 2020. It was the first in-person meeting of ministers of Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia after the reopening of borders and easing epidemic counter-measures. Left to right: ministers Tomáš Petříček (Czech Republic), Ivan Korčok (Slovak Republic), Alexander Schallenberg (Austria), Péter Szijjártó (Hungary), Anže Logar (Slovenia). Photo: Michael Gruber



# European Leaders' Meetings on-fight against pandemic and economic recovery



Between March and June 2020, six video teleconference meetings of the European Council on the level of the head of state and government are held.

While on **10 March 2020**, the Council discussed general development of the situation, inadequate medical equipment and coordination issues, subsequent meetings focused on economic consequences of the crisis, and cooperation in the domain of free movement, research or tourism.

*Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini during the video teleconference with European leaders, 17 March 2020*  
*Photo: Tomáš Bokor*

# March

On **17 March 2020**, the meeting of European leaders emphasized the containment of the spread of coronavirus, on making sure medical equipment, especially face masks and respirators, is available, as well on the support of research including vaccine research, tackling the socio-economic consequences and assistance to citizens stranded in third countries.

On **26 March 2020**, heads of states and governments agreed to continue to work along the five following strands: limiting the spread of the virus, providing medical equipment, especially face masks and respirators, promoting research including vaccine research, tackling socio-economic consequences, and assisting citizens stranded in third countries.

On **1 April 2020**, the European Commission adopted the first package of legislative proposals to release financial resources from the EU budget for tackling the current crisis. Rules for using the structural and investment funds were amended, and the scope of the EU Solidarity Fund was expanded.

Subsequently, on **2 April 2020**, the European Commission presented a new package of measures titled Corona Response Investment Initiative (CRII) that provided for more flexible spending of unused European funds.

On **April 15, 2020**, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and the President of the European Council Charles Michel put forward a joint European roadmap to gradually phase-out the containment measures due to the coronavirus outbreak, the so-called exit strategy.

On **21 April 2020**, the European Commission approved a 2-billion EUR Slovak aid scheme for preserving employment and support the self-employed during the coronavirus outbreak. It is expected that thanks to this measure more than 400 000 employees and 300 000 self-employed will get assistance.

On **23 April 2020**, European leaders endorsed the agreement by the Eurogroup on three important safety nets for workers, businesses, and sovereigns/Member States, in total amounting to a package worth 540 billion EUR. During the video teleconference of European Council members on 23 April, its President Charles Michel presented a Joint Roadmap for Recovery defining four key areas for action: a Single Market, an unprecedented investment effort, acting globally, and a functioning system of governance.

On **24 April 2020**, a Corona Response Investment Initiative+ (CRII+) package of proposals provided the member states with an unprecedented flexibility in spending the unused EU funds in their national budgets for the fight against COVID-19.



# May

On **19 May 2020**, the EU Council adopted a new instrument for alleviating the risks of unemployment in the state of emergency, the so-called SURE scheme. SURE is one of the three safety nets, worth 540 billion EUR, agreed by Eurogroup on 9 April 2020 and endorsed by EU leaders on 23 April 2020.

On **27 May 2020**, the European Commission put forward a proposal for recovery plan including the revised Multiannual Financial Framework – MFF) for 2021 – 2027 worth 1 100 billion EUR and a temporary increase of 750 billion EUR (Next Generation EU). These elements complement the three safety nets worth 540 billion EUR that the EU introduced for workers, businesses, and sovereigns/ Member States.

The mechanism should provide financial resources by temporarily increased the EU's resources ceiling that would allow the EU to use its strong credit rating to borrow 750 billion EUR on the financial markets. These supplemental financial resources will be provided through EU programmes and will be repaid throughout the future EU budgets, and not before 2028.

On **19 June 2020**, EU leaders held a virtual political discussion on the revised proposal for the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021 – 2027 and the proposal for recovery Next Generation EU. They agreed to work on a recovery plan for Europe to support citizens, businesses, and EU Member States in the recovery from an economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first “live” / “in-person” EU27 leaders’ summit of EU27 took place on **17 – 21 July 2020** and it ranked as the second historically from the perspective of the duration of the meeting. Leaders discussed the new European budget and the EU recovery instrument for four days. The new agreement will provide Slovakia with EUR 18.1 billion over 2021-2027.

*Prime Minister Igor Matovič during the EU (27) Member States leaders’ summit with President of the European Council Charles Michel.*

*Photo: Tomáš Bokor*







*The concert of Katarína Máliková, the recent holder of the Radio Head Awards for the Album of 2019 in Bratislava's Nova Cvernovka, was broadcast on Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020 in cooperation with the Slovak Institute in Paris, the platform "To make culture Live" and Dennik N. Photo: Slovak Institute in Paris*

## Culture in online space

The pandemic had a substantial impact on cultural diplomacy, as well. Slovak institutes and embassies responded to the new situation promptly and innovatively. At first, live stream music presentation has found its way into the virtual world. Later on, an online presentation of literary, fine, and film art followed. A dance performance was also not missing.

Since the first half of March, all eight Slovak institutes abroad (Berlin, Budapest, Moscow, Paris, Prague, Rome, Warsaw, and Vienna) have presented interesting facts about Slovak culture, art, science, and education via the Internet and social networks.

The most significant cultural project was a series of concerts in cooperation with Slovak institutes. The festival "One Day Jazz Festival" with Martin Valihora and his guests from 8 countries began on April 30, 2020, and it was officially opened by Minister Ivan Korčok (MFEA SR) directly from the studio "Pod lampou" (in English, Under the Lamp).

From mid-March, all Slovak institutes and some embassies began publishing bilingual eBulletins having a uniform design. The content was current information and interesting facts from the cultural and artistic field in Slovakia. This periodical was, and it still is sent to a number of addresses.

Besides sending information about the possibilities to look into Slovak culture and art, some Slovak institutes also responded to the teaching of the Slovak language. They continued to meet their students in a virtual school.



The eBulletin workshop of the Slovak Institute in Warsaw focused on the presentation of the exhibition of the Theater Institute "THEATER.SK". All other eBulletins are available on the websites of individual Slovak institutes: [https://www.mzv.sk/ministerstvo/kulturna\\_diplomacia-slovenske\\_instituty](https://www.mzv.sk/ministerstvo/kulturna_diplomacia-slovenske_instituty)  
Photo: Slovak Institute in Warsaw

The One Day Jazz Festival project with Martin Valihora and his guests presents a series of 8 online concerts. The first of the concert series took place in cooperation with the Slovak Institute in Rome. The concert was watched by 5,460 spectators. The design of the invitation was the same as the one shown, and it presents the cooperation with the Slovak Institute in Moscow and special guest Anton Davidyants, a Russian bassist. Photo: Martin Valihora Agency





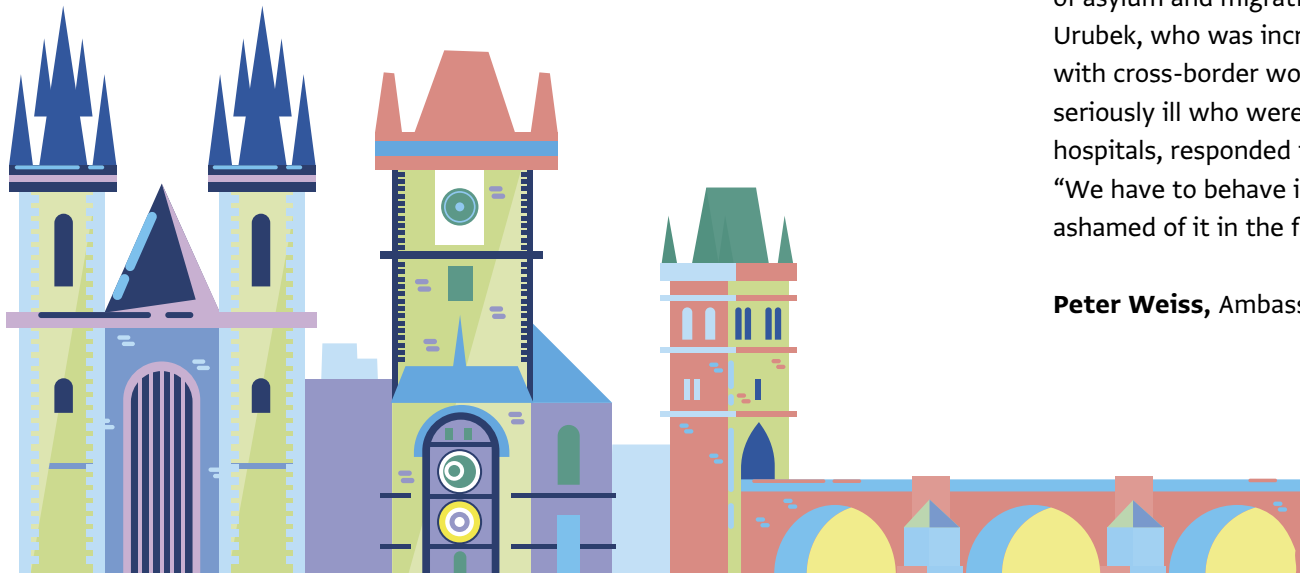
# Stories by the diplomats in the first line of contact

## Prague

Tough pandemic countermeasures adopted in parallel by the Slovak and Czech governments led me together with my deputy Marek Bartko on Saturday, 14 March 2020, to call a crisis meeting of all the employees. From day to the next, we introduced crisis management with the aim to provide consular assistance to the perplexed 200 000 citizens of the Slovak Republic working in the Czech Republic and 22 000 Slovak students studying at Czech universities. I witnessed with my own eyes the functioning of the ethos of the public service as diplomats and administrative workers, who took on a substantial part of the consular

agenda, got involved practically without any protective equipment with the repatriation of Slovak citizens through the Václav Havel Airport, responding to countless email and telephone inquiries, processing thousands of transit notes, dealing with various exemptions for border crossing for our citizens stressed out by difficult family situations or concerns regarding the loss of employment. I will never forget two moments: First, when the COVID-19 results of an excellent crisis manager Marek Bartko were delayed by two days, as he was going to the airport to pick-up the repatriated citizens, and had to encourage other employees while he presented himself symptoms of a respiratory infection. In the case of positive test results, not only his health was endangered, but also the whole diplomatic mission would subsequently need to quarantine. And second, when an extremely helpful and active director of the Department of asylum and migration policy of the Czech Ministry of Interior Tomáš Urubek, who was incredibly helpful in dealing with serious problems with cross-border workers, essential / critical infrastructure workers and seriously ill who were supposed to arrive for their surgeries in the Czech hospitals, responded to our message of gratitude by the following SMS: “We have to behave in this situation in such manner that we would not be ashamed of it in the future.”

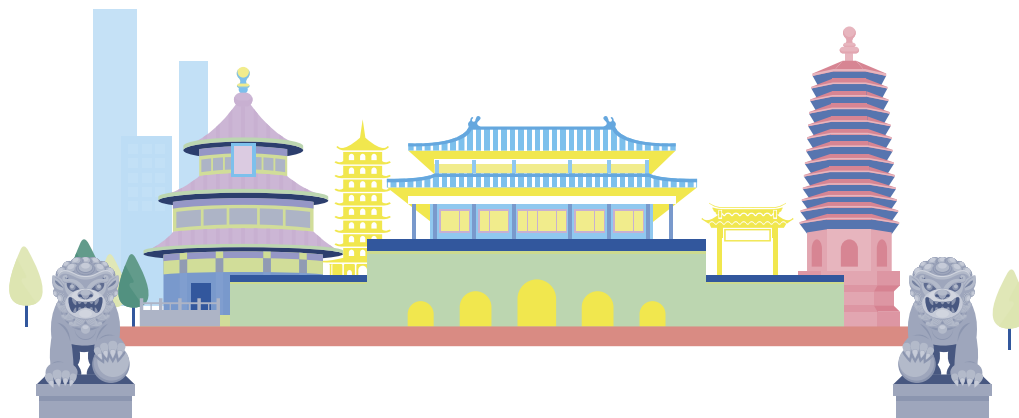
**Peter Weiss**, Ambassador



## Beijing

Towards the end of the Year of the Pig (January 2020), the novel coronavirus caused an epidemiologic crisis in China that substantively altered the day-to-day work of our diplomatic mission in Beijing. A successful evacuation of citizens of the Slovak Republic from the epicentre of the outbreak – the locked down Hubei province – at the beginning of February 2020, as well as active assistance by the Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Beijing in the establishment of the humanitarian air bridge between the People's Republic of China and the Slovak Republic and subsequent delivery of 13 cargo / freight flights with medical equipment, was a true trial by fire with a happy ending for all the embassy staff. The psychological difficulty of the given period is best illustrated by the destiny of divided families, which can be gradually reunited after six months of separation. The Chinese Year of the Rat is still waiting for its putative harmony and happiness, and that is also why the commitment by all the personnel of the diplomatic mission in Beijing as bearers of the historical legacy of Ancient Greek proxenos – to help and to serve – still lasts.

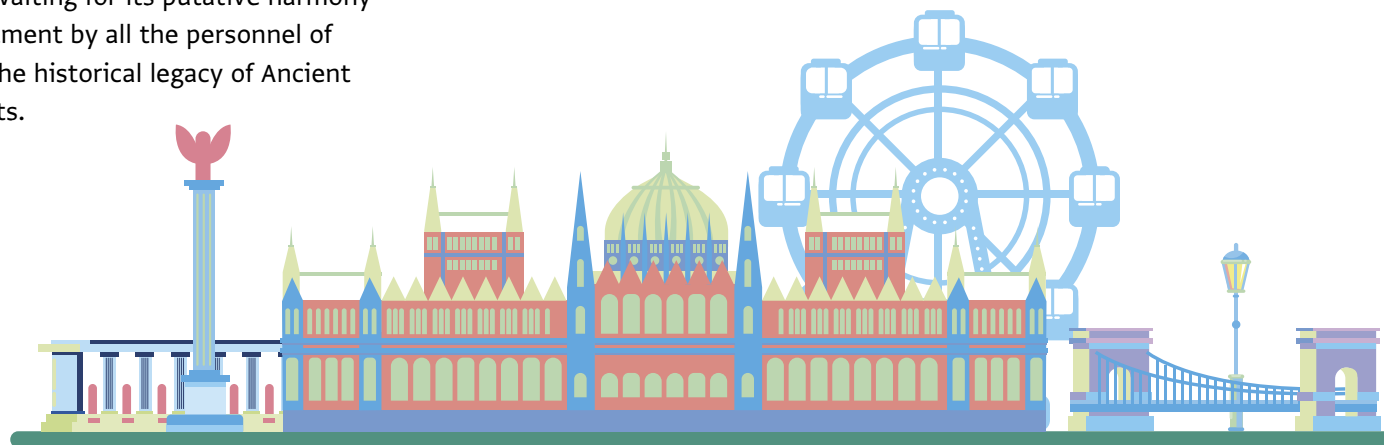
**Dušan Bella**, Ambassador



## Budapest

The work of the embassy filtered down to a mainly consular agenda, with a reduced number of employees. Day and night, its central mission was the repatriation of our citizens through the airport in Budapest and transit arrangements through Hungary from Romania, Serbia, Macedonia, and other states. The workload increased due to concerns faced by cross-border workers and Slovak citizens living in border regions of Hungary. The procedures got automatic with time, cooperation with the Hungarian authorities was exemplary. Although Budapest is nearby, we were able to return home only after almost four months. The cohesion of the team, as well as cooperation of the embassy with our diplomatic missions in the neighbouring countries and with the capital, was also exemplary. In a crisis and at full steam, everyone was doing their best.

**Pavol Hamžík**, Ambassador





## Vienna

“Corona” represented a milestone, a serious hit for the daily life of the diplomatic mission. All the planned events and agreed schedules were cancelled from one day to the next. Visits and social functions were suspended, discussions and consultations were conducted via video teleconferences. The mission and its personnel transitioned literally from one hour to the next to an emergency regime, to the regime of crisis management. That meant thousands of telephone call inquiries by our citizens, a great number of open questions, and oftentimes very difficult human fortunes. Every day in the morning we held crisis staff meetings so that we could share the information and agree on the next steps. After the change of the border regime, it was necessary to deal with the issue of our citizens commuting for work in Austria. Austrian counterparts asked to maintain the possibility of access to work in Austria for social workers, health care workers, or Slovak cross-border workers in the border regions. Telephone calls did not cease during the night. At the same time, we needed to deal with the problems of citizens that relied on repatriation assistance. In the case of Austria, this was mainly hundreds of our citizens who got stuck in Tyrol hit by the pandemic and under the quarantine. That required hundreds of telephone calls and emails with Austrian federal and local authorities, as well as a great effort on the Slovak side and within our own ministry with respect to the coordination of the repatriation of our citizens.

Moreover, our diplomatic mission in coordination with the capital assisted in the transport of our citizens from the (Vienna) Schwechat

airport, while complying with the restrictions imposed by security measures and under the imposed “home office” regime.

Changes to operations in the pandemic circumstances announced by Austrian, as well as our institutions led to an increase of telephone and email inquiries by Slovak and Austrian citizens, which meant, for the consular division, but also the whole mission, a truly extreme workload. The relaxation of measures and border opening brought about some relief for our mission and the possibility to return to a standard mode of work. Only in retrospect of the developments of the past months we realize how fragile and precious are privileges of our way of life in a free and democratic Europe. We need to be vigilant as the contagion is still here to stay, and the opening of borders along with the (summer) holidays represents a risk of return of the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

**Peter Mišík**, Ambassador



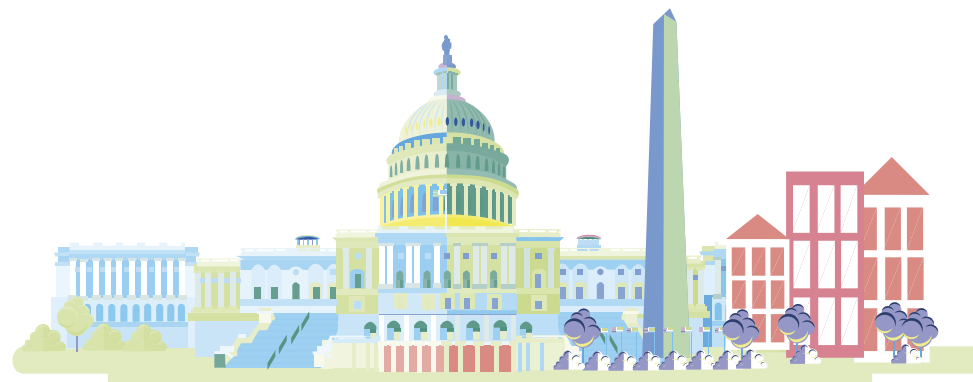
## Washington

If I am to return in my memory to the 2020 corona crisis sometime in the future, it will be a brief memory of an episode that ended as quickly as it began. An image of our embassy in Washington will probably emerge, this improvised call centre where colleagues, without preparation or requalification, took on to themselves an uneasy task to provide countless inquiring Slovaks with a response to the main question of those days: How to return back home in the fastest and safest way? Reports on the deepening pandemic along with the cancellation of flight connections across the Atlantic, border closures in Europe or the introduction of strict quarantine measures, and most importantly, the great uncertainty as to what will happen next, brought into this communication extremely intense emotions.

An anecdote (a little overexposed, but even more so popular) about the joy of a diplomat when he hears the sound of the engine of the special departing flight with the government delegation, got recycled in a new form. The joy, really genuine, authentic and legitimate, was then brought by every single aircraft – commercial or charter one co-organized by the Ministry or partners from other European countries – that carried repatriated Slovaks.

A telephone call to one of the hotlines of the embassy available 24/7 will also probably emerge in my memory. It came in a moment when the kerosene of one of such flights had barely fully evaporated. A very talkative woman whom we managed to get back to Slovakia in safety not long ago, (called again to say that she) wanted to return back to the USA. As the coffee shop where she had worked was reopened, she asked whether we could get her back on board of one of our special flights. Corona or not, life must go on.

**Jozef Polakovič,**  
CDA Slovak Embassy Washington



## Sarajevo

The Embassy of the Slovak Republic in Sarajevo is one of the so-called low-cost as to the number of personnel and budget. That is why one of the priorities on the ground was and still is cooperation with the military contingent of the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic in the framework of the EU peace-(keeping/stabilization) operation EUFOR Althea where approximately 40 service members are based on the Slovak parliament mandate. A specific challenge under the epidemic circumstances was the force protection of the operating personnel and prevention at the Butmir base, which is the logistical evacuation hub for all the embassies of the countries contributing their troops to the mission. Aligning different evacuation plans and procedures (joint protocol) in the framework of the quarantine of persons susceptible to the virus, especially in the case of necessary evacuation of personnel with a high susceptibility for the coronavirus infection, was the most difficult task. However, we succeeded in this together.

**Martin Kačo,** Ambassador





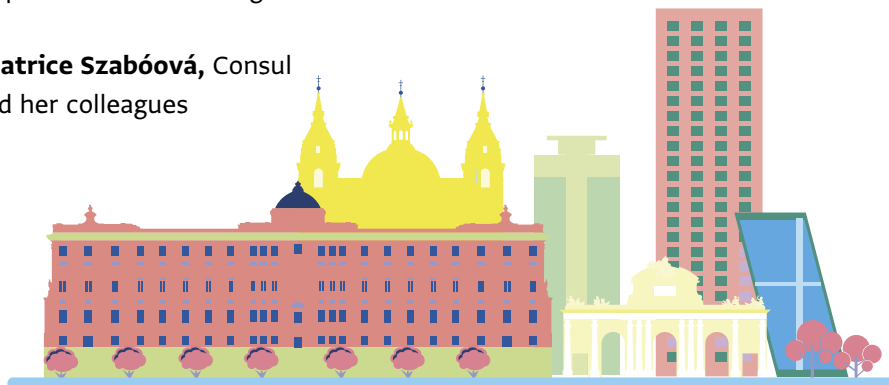
## Madrid

That moment, when from evening until morning, three telephones started ringing incessantly, and they would not stop during the night, for several weeks, all the while you are swamped with a number of emails, requests and continually changing conditions and you are learning things that you had never done before on the go... That is a situation, for which no training or pre-deployment preparation or 30 years of foreign service experience could get you prepared. And so you either give in, or, in a situation when almost without warning the country shuts down, you convince yourself that this is the situation to stay on the course and use all the reserves that you've got.

Simply to help those who need it from you although your own life and health, and that of your relatives is in danger. To do your job as well as you can and as is possible under this extreme situation. To accept the challenge, to be part of the effort, to conquer something unprecedented, that you will see with pride with the passage of time. We did not witness tragedy, but certainly a very intense drama.

Short circuit / stressed-out reactions by some of those that we strived to help in every possible way, did not discourage us either. It all assured us that even a small team could function efficiently and cohesively, and although you are not saving the world, by our approach and hard work, you are convincing citizens that foreign service has a reason and its sense of purpose and that you care about them. And this is the greatest reward – to be part of it and to recognize this.

**Beatrice Szabóová**, Consul  
and her colleagues



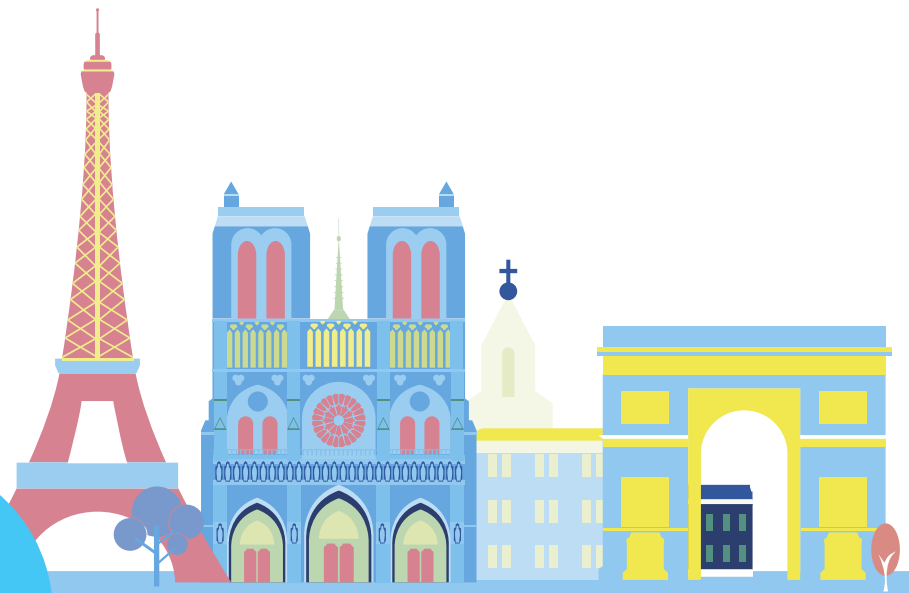
## Bern

Over a few days, we had to learn how to function in a completely different way. Switzerland was per capita one of the most infected countries in the world. On the one hand, we had to protect ourselves, decrease the in-person contacts to the minimum, communicate mainly through all possible means of information and communication technology, work in separate teams, wearing face masks, gloves, in shifts, from home... all those things unrepresentative of diplomacy 😊.

All our energy was directed mainly to helping our citizens as there are around 20 000 expats in Switzerland. For weeks, especially after the border closures, but also after the relaxation of the regime, our telephone lines, emails, but first of all, the emergency diplomatic mobile phone fully strained, 24/7. People stranded in airports, hundreds of citizens in need to get back home, organizing repatriation buses, separated families, stories of people in difficult situations... The all were seeking advice and help. I will not forget the great enthusiasm of the whole Embassy team, psychological stress, pressure, emotions, and at the same time, the feeling that it all made sense, and we in the “first line” of the foreign service made it!

**Andrea Elscheková Matisová**, Ambassador

## Paris



We strive not to cumulate remarks provided by other embassies, that is those regarding (as we know) the ephemeral increase in the sense of companionship/fellowship under the “aegis” of the hashtag #spolutozvladneme (#wewillmakeittogether / we will make it together), concerns about the previously (for at least the past century) and to this extent unprecedented phenomenon, increase of the collective self-appreciation of the Slovak society (let’s believe in this case not so fleeting, but reflective of the exemplary response to the crisis itself and its “limbs” abroad) or the suddenly discovered unbelievable lightness of video teleconferencing...

The corona (virus) crisis tried to build up a barrier between us and regular consular work, but there were returns, more prosaic repatriations of Slovak expats and citizens of the Slovak Republic stuck in France – at that moment, despite the predominance of women, the whole mission fought “to the last man” as one great consular division – and with them came, in poet’s words the “new excitement”,

and naturally, for most of us experience known hitherto mainly to non-European colleagues.

The communication, oftentimes fragmented, with the understandably stressed-out people asking to be returned to Slovakia, albeit demanding and difficult, was many times amusing, and laughter often served as a vent / valve of the accumulating and suppressed anxiety, tension and repressed fatigue.

A group of almost twenty Slovak carpenters – please no names, not to speak of addresses ☺ to be mentioned – pushed hard and urgently for their return to their families; there were however certain “cracks” discovered in their unceasing desire for repatriation brought about by the following salary/paycheck of their French employer: *comme il faut*, they all celebrated the unanticipated generosity of the bread giver as one would expect from the Slovaks, and so, during the following three days, the Embassy tried with the same urgency and intensity to get in touch with the scattered souls, bruised, well, by the inclement circumstances, and to bring them back (one would write from the “Alpine meadows”) to one sheepfold ...

We have established personal relations during the preparation of returns not only with the groups, but also with many individuals, and they endured in some cases until today; they established such an unshakeable trust towards us, they would now often reach out for advice with such plain problems as the moth in the closet or a moth in the salad, bringing up teenage girls in France, selection or separation from life partner...

Lest it be worse!

**Igor Slobodník**, Ambassador





## Rome

I have not known in my private or professional life a more bizarre situation than the COVID-19 Thursday in Italy! In March, life in this country stopped, the streets of Rome got entirely deserted, and I had a feeling that perhaps only embassies, despite the fact that most of the personnel were teleworking, are heating up their telephones and emails. These media were our only connection to the world, with local partners, with our headquarters in Bratislava, and with hundreds of Slovaks stranded in Italy after the borders were shut. Their repatriation, information on the developments in the country, and preparation for the humanitarian aid for struggling Italy were our core agenda day and night. Until today I have that anxious feeling of surprise and humility recognizing how much we all are vulnerable globally even without our “man-made petty wars”. At the same time, I will never forget the compassion, endurance, and solidarity of all who could, to a greater or lesser extent, assist in this struggle. That fills me with the hope that there is a strong sense of self-preservation in humanity...

**Ján Šoth**, Ambassador

## Chisinau

Due to a combination of different factors, the Republic of Moldova has been one of the states in Europe most severely hit by corona(virus), both with respect to the number of cases and number of deaths per 100 000 inhabitants, and the duration of the state of emergency (17 March – 15 July 2020) and related restrictions.

The situation naturally impacts negatively all the diplomatic engagement and representation activity of diplomatic missions as in a crisis epidemiologic situation, it is limited to an essential minimum. Yet, in the crisis period, the diplomatic mission Chisinau reacted not only professionally, but also flexibly, thanks to which the Slovak Republic was one of the first countries that provided concrete assistance to Moldova in fighting COVID-19. Restrictions to the functioning of the state and public institutions and the freedom of cross-border movement unfortunately still last and with them negative consequences to the operation of the diplomatic mission.

**Dušan Dacho**, Ambassador



## Jakarta

In retrospect, although we are still dealing with repatriations, one can say that it was the first real test of the capacity to provide assistance to our citizens. From the beginning, we were focusing on resolving practical problems and did not care about what were the reasons that people found themselves in a complicated situation. On a daily basis, our diplomatic mission Jakarta provided assistance to more than 200 persons located at different places in Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, but also in East Timor or Bhutan.

What proved valuable was the creation of interest groups on WhatsApp through which all the important information was shared, and we could thus to a significant extent, compensate for the face to face contact. It goes without saying that it was a 24/7 service.

Most of the diplomatic mission personnel participated in the effort that means not only those whose job description it formally was. Sleep deprivation was abundant, however, numerous reactions of gratitude from our citizens whom we assisted in returning back home provided redress. It is possible that the ideas of some of our compatriots, did not correspond with the real capacities of our diplomatic mission, but we communicated with them constructively and without creating conflict, which also deserves recognition. Another positive experience was the close cooperation and assistance from EU partner countries, mainly the Czech Republic, Austria, France, or Germany. The willingness to help each other certainly contributed to strengthening solidarity among the EU Member States.

**Jaroslav Chlebo**, Ambassador





## London

Our embassy was one of the first in London that adopted strict health protection measures for both visitors and employees. Most of my colleagues were temporarily authorized to telework / work from home through Internet so that non-essential commuting between their residence and Embassy was limited. Pandemic countermeasures impacted consular agenda the most – during the crisis, the Embassy suspended the application registration system and replaced it with ad hoc services for resolving urgent requests by Slovak citizens. I was pleasantly surprised by the professionalism, responsible and selfless approach of my colleagues during repatriations. In the beginning, we worked every day of the week, weekends included. In total, we assisted 1 440 citizens of the Slovak Republic to return home from the United Kingdom, and we responded to thousands of inquiries by our citizens and expats through emails, telephone calls, and communication through our social media.

**Ľubomír Rehák**, Ambassador





## Conclusion

The corona crisis has not yet been conquered in Europe or the world. The pandemic is raging in many countries with full speed and is taking its toll on human lives. Moreover, experience from Asia shows that with the opening of borders further waves of the COVID-19 virus outbreaks pose a threat even in countries, which managed to contain and control the infection. Slovak epidemiologists are warning that we should not slacken our efforts either, and we should remain vigilant until an effective treatment of the disease is available.

It is clear already that the economic and social effects of the pandemic will be dramatic and will require an enormous effort in overcoming them. Close cooperation and international solidarity will become inevitable. The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, together with the Government of the Slovak Republic and other actors, acquired lots of valuable experience during the past months, and these will be used further on in the fight against this insidious infection and its effects. In the last years we faced multiple challenges, and we succeeded in finding the (right) response. Therefore, we take the liberty to hope that we will overcome this period too and will come out of it stronger and more knowledgeable.



**Front Cover:** President Zuzana Čaputová appointed Ivan Korčok as Foreign Minister, Presidential Palace, 8 April 2020. Photo: Tomáš Bokor

**Back Cover:** The arrival of repatriated citizens by the government special flight to the Milan Rastislav Štefánik Airport in Bratislava, 30 March 2020. Photo: Tomáš Bokor

The authors express their gratitude for valuable cooperation to Tomáš Bokor, Alexandra Janečková, Kristína Spišáková and Patrik Turošík and several other diplomats.

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MINISTRY  
OF FOREIGN  
AND EUROPEAN AFFAIRS  
OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY DEPARTMENT