
SLOVAKIA'S FUTURE IS WITH CORE EU, NOT EUROSCEPTIC EASTERN NATIONS - PM

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Slovakia should be part of a deeply integrated 'core' European Union driven by Germany and France, its prime minister said on Tuesday, backtracking from previous eurosceptic positions and distancing himself from some other east European states.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron agreed in May to outline a roadmap for deeper EU integration, even as nationalist governments in Hungary and Poland earned rebukes from Brussels over their challenges to media freedom and liberal democracy.

"The fundamentals of my policy are being close to the (EU) core, close to France, to Germany," Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico told a news conference.

"I am very much interested in regional cooperation within the Visegrad Four but Slovakia's vital interest is the EU," he said, referring to the regional grouping that also includes the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary.

A three-term, left-leaning prime minister, Fico oversaw Slovakia's adoption of the euro in 2009. It remains the only Visegrad member to be in the common currency.

Fico, who once said Brussels bureaucrats were "detached from reality", has warmed towards the EU after Britain's 2016 vote to exit the bloc and the election of Emmanuel Macron, a pro-EU centrist, as president of France in May.

Analysts say sticking to the EU core makes sense for Slovakia's small economy, which is driven by exports of cars and electronics to other EU member states, especially Germany.

"Slovakia is being pragmatic, its interests are better served by sticking with the core EU," said Otilia Dhand, an analyst at New York-based Teneo Intelligence.

Dhand said the Visegrad grouping had become associated with the nationalist thinking of Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban and the leader of Poland's governing party, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, adding: "(this) carries only limited value in advancing Slovakia's own interests".

Despite making common cause with other Visegrad states in refusing EU quotas on accepting migrants, Fico later made a compromise offer to accept 100 asylum seekers from Greece and Italy, thereby avoiding the legal action the EU instigated against Warsaw, Budapest and Prague.

Last week Fico said Slovakia was ready for greater military cooperation in the EU and asked the

defence minister to pick "European solutions" for the Slovak army, which is seeking to replace its outdated Russian Mig-29 fighter jets.

But in his region Fico cuts a lonely figure in his pro-EU stance. Even in the neighbouring Czech Republic, the pro-EU Social Democrats are expected to lose an election in October.

Kaynak/Source: