

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM GHNÓTHAÍ AN AONTAIS EORPAIGH

### JOINT COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN UNION AFFAIRS

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*Dé Céadaoin, 23 Márta 2022*

*Wednesday, 23 March 2022*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

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The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
John Brady,	Lisa Chambers.
Francis Noel Duffy,	
Marian Harkin,	
Seán Haughey,	
Brendan Howlin,	
Ruairí Ó Murchú.	

Teachta / Deputy Joe McHugh sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

*The joint committee met in private session until 9.56 a.m.*

## **EU Response to the Humanitarian Situation in Ukraine: Engagement with Ambassador of Slovakia**

**Chairman:** The purpose of today's meeting is to continue our discussion on the European Union's response to the humanitarian crisis that has been brought on by the war in Ukraine.

Ar son an choiste, cuirim fáilte roimh ambasadóir na Slóvaice chun na hÉireann,

H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný. No doubt the ambassador would have been interested in and listening to the contributions to last week's meeting. We had a marathon five-hour meeting and I thank the Vice Chairman, Deputy Howlin, for chairing it. We want to create a better understanding of what is happening in the ambassador's country and we are looking forward to this discussion today.

Before we begin, I have a note on privilege to read and some housekeeping matters. All witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if the witness's statements are potentially defamatory in respect of an identifiable person or entity, the witness will be directed to discontinue his remarks. It is imperative the witness complies with any such direction.

For witnesses attending remotely outside of the Leinster House campus, there are limitations to parliamentary privilege, and as such they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness physically present does. Witnesses participating in the committee session from a jurisdiction outside of the State are advised that they should be mindful of the domestic law and how it may apply to the evidence they give.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside of the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I remind members of the constitutional requirements that members must be physically present within the confines of the Leinster House complex to participate in public meetings. I will not permit members to participate where they are not adhering to this constitutional requirement. Therefore, any member who attempts to participate from outside the precincts will be asked to leave the meeting. In this regard, I would ask members partaking by MS teams prior to making their contribution to the meeting to confirm they are in the grounds of the Leinster House campus.

I call on the ambassador to make his opening statement.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** I thank the Chair and members of the joint committee. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Union Affairs the Slovak Republic's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

This unjustified Russian military aggression on Ukraine is a clear violation of Ukraine's

sovereignty and territorial integrity and of international law. It is an extremely difficult time for Ukraine as well as for all of Europe, especially in these days when the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia eight years ago was marked on 18 March. Ukraine needs universal political support, including the possibility of EU membership as well as financial and humanitarian aid from the international community. Slovakia has repeatedly proven by its deeds that it stands with Ukraine. Slovakia strongly supports the prospect of Ukraine's possible EU membership.

With partners from Europe and beyond the Atlantic, it was agreed that it is necessary to isolate Russia further to end Putin's military aggression and return peace to the European Continent. The Russian Federation and Belarus will bear responsibility for this unprecedented violation of international law. Slovakia is ready to support anything that will make the Russian and Belarusian regimes change their behaviour and end the invasion of Ukraine.

As a clear situation of immediate and serious humanitarian urgency has emerged in Ukraine, Slovak authorities make extensive use of the option provided by Article 6 of the Schengen borders code and allow for the entry into Slovak territory of persons who do not otherwise fulfil the usual entry requirements, such as being in possession of visas. Documents allowing for the identification of the travellers are being accepted even if they are expired or damaged. Information about the options available to persons incoming from Ukraine is available and frequently updated at *ua.gov.sk*.

Slovakia, as a neighbouring country with Ukraine, has opened its border and has so far received more than 270,000 refugees, mostly women and children. It is estimated that an average of up to 10,000 refugees are entering Slovakia each day. Since Slovakia is a small country of 5 million people and its border with Ukraine is only 100 km long, measures are being deployed to handle this large influx of people fleeing war. Since not only nationals of Ukraine are fleeing war, Slovakia, alongside other relevant countries, has thus far organised 15 repatriation flights to India, China, Egypt and Morocco with more than 2,000 refugees on board. Thirty-four special humanitarian trains with almost 3,000 refugees were organised from the Slovak-Ukrainian border to the Czech Republic.

The so-called Lex Ukraine Bill adopted by the Slovak Parliament addresses the issues of health and social insurance for asylum seekers, their employment and the presence of NATO troops on our territory. Refugees who wish to stay in Slovakia can either request asylum or temporary protection, which is a new legal status approved by the Slovak Parliament after Russia invaded Ukraine. The fastest way for refugees to receive support is to ask for temporary protection, which allows people to not only stay in Slovakia but also to receive accommodation, food, healthcare and work permits. If a refugee has temporary protection, his or her healthcare fee is covered by the state. This includes emergencies as well as further medical examinations and treatment. It is possible to ask for temporary protection at the Slovak borders or at the departments of the alien police. These currently operate non-stop and are dedicated solely to Ukrainians fleeing their country.

Refugees who cross the border are met by volunteers and state institutions offering humanitarian aid. There are heated tents where people can sit and rest, and volunteers provide food and warm drinks. Diverse collections of donations assembled by Slovaks are freely available on the spot, comprising items such as nappies, toiletries, durable foods, clothes and toys.

Transport from the border crossing to temporary accommodation is co-ordinated on the spot. There are buses, taxi services and even volunteers who come with their cars offer to drive people. Some municipalities and bus services provide free shuttle services. Free of charge are

also buses used to transport people from villages near the Ukrainian border to bigger Slovak cities with better infrastructure. Furthermore, free transport is available for Ukrainian refugees on the trains run by the national carrier, which is the vast majority of trains in Slovakia.

A refugee child can register for a kindergarten or school. More than 1,000 Ukrainian children have been enrolled in Slovak kindergartens, primary and secondary schools since the war in Ukraine began. The ministry of education has been preparing a one-off financial contribution for schools to cover the increased costs. Slovak schools are also working on employing teachers from Ukraine.

There is a dedicated website created for refugees from Ukraine, where they can register and apply for jobs.

With thousands of Ukrainian refugees arriving in Slovakia every day, the burden on the Slovak healthcare system will increase and some patients will have to be relocated to other countries in the near future due to an overload. We consider the lack of staff, medicines and medical supplies to be the main problems for the future.

For Slovakia, as part of the EU and NATO, it is of key importance to note that since the very beginning we have had clear plans on how to strengthen our defence, especially along the eastern wing of the EU and alliance. There is an airport in the western Ukrainian city of Uzghorod that can be attacked. The runway of this airport ends just 50 m from the border with Slovakia. This as an example of why it is vital for Slovakia to enhance the defence of our eastern border.

Last week, the Slovak Parliament approved the NATO enhanced forward presence in Slovakia, allowing the presence of up to 2,100 NATO soldiers. The NATO unit consists of Czech, Dutch, Polish, Slovenian, American and German soldiers. This unit brings some important capabilities that Slovakia lacks at the moment, notably the Patriot air defence system. The defence of Slovakia and the eastern flank of NATO was discussed during last week's visit of the US Defence Secretary, Lloyd Austin, to Slovakia. He met with President Zuzana Aputová, Prime Minister Eduard Heger and Defence Minister Jaroslav Na. They declared both countries' readiness to help Ukraine defend itself.

Based on the evaluation of the Slovak intelligence services, the Slovak Republic expelled three diplomats and workers from the Russian embassy for their activities in violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.

It is essential to continue to provide war-torn Ukraine with many forms of aid, especially humanitarian assistance. It is important that providing such aid be sustainable in the long term. Hundreds of thousands of people fleeing the war are coming to Slovakia. I would like to highlight the exceptional wave of solidarity with refugees which Slovaks and many other nations, including Ireland, are showing. I also thank the European Commission and EU member countries that have positively responded and shown interest in helping us in this difficult situation. We will continue to widely support Ukraine. It is not alone. I thank the committee members for their attention and am open to any questions they may have.

**Senator Lisa Chambers:** I thank the ambassador for his presentation and for coming to meet us at such short notice. I wish to ask about two issues in particular. The scale of the humanitarian crisis is obviously very large and the numbers entering Slovakia on a daily basis are phenomenal. We are having discussions about that issue here. We are probably getting that influx of refugees a little later because Slovakia borders Ukraine and is much closer to the war.

How is Slovakia managing the accommodation situation? What did Slovakia do to find extra accommodation. What types of venues, if I can put it that way, is Slovakia using? Has the ambassador any useful tips on how we can prepare and best help those people who are coming to the country?

Has the ambassador any concerns? I have heard some unverified reports. I cannot attest to the correctness of what I am about to say. Because of the scale of the numbers of people moving from Ukraine to its neighbouring countries, there is *ad hoc* transportation to bring people to different locations and perhaps to ferry them to other transportation links or other countries. I would ask this question of a representative of any country, but how is Slovakia verifying that transportation and has the ambassador any concerns about the trafficking of, in particular, vulnerable women? I ask that question without accusing Slovakia of anything. I have heard some stories. Because of the necessity for transportation, it is difficult to vet people and carry out background checks. Many people are offering their services for free. It is a panicked situation because we need to get people away from the borders and reception centres and deliver them to other locations. There is no way of checking individuals who are providing those services, most of whom, I am sure, are doing the best of work. However, as with any crisis, one or two people are looking to do the wrong thing, if I can put it that way.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** I thank the Senator. We are using everything we have for accommodation. It was very difficult at the beginning. We are now using hotels and any other accommodation that is available and not in use. It is not only state property. Private property is also being used. As I mentioned, the Lex Ukrainian Bill provides for how these people should be accommodated and how to help the people who are providing the accommodation. We are using everything available. The committee will understand that we did not have time to think it over beforehand. On the way, issues are arising which are challenging and we are resolving them. The answer is that we are using everything we have because we are a very small country. Compared to Ireland, we are 5 million people. The committee can imagine that it is really a huge influx of people.

Regarding transport and how we can secure transport, first of all, it should be noted that most of the transport is provided by the state and municipalities. This transport is safe. The other point is that usually with the transport provided for refugees, there are also some security measures taken.

I am not sure if I mentioned, for example, that people are entering even without valid documents or without visas. I am talking about the other side, people entering Slovakia. It does not mean that we are not checking all these people. If there are people who have no documentation, they are not forced to stay out of Slovakia. They are welcome in Slovakia. Nevertheless, they are going to special centres where they are provided with humanitarian aid as well as go through the registration the process. We know who is entering and we know mostly where they are going or where they are staying but at times it is difficult to say. For example, I know many Ukrainians are arriving in Ireland on flights, especially from Poland, and I was approached by some Irish friends and colleagues. Since the Slovak language and the Ukrainian language are very similar, I was asked to approach our community to ask if people had somewhere people could stay, especially during the St. Patrick's Day week because accommodation was all booked out. What I am saying is that like here and like every country where there is a huge influx of refugees, Slovakia is doing practically everything to accommodate them and it is manageable so far.

**Deputy Francis Noel Duffy:** I thank the ambassador. I have been trying to write down this

question. In advance, I apologise if the question is offensive or if it is naive. I suppose I am asking to be educated somewhat in respect of Slovakia. My understanding is that Slovakia is an independent country but in the past, if I am not mistaken, it was within, or part of, the Soviet Union, whether it was forced to be or not.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** It was not part of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, we are-----

**Deputy Francis Noel Duffy:** Behind the Iron Curtain.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** We were behind it - boarded up and sweated in. As part of Czechoslovakia, we were within the Warsaw Pact treaty.

**Deputy Francis Noel Duffy:** I suppose my curiosity is raised by the fact Slovakia is independent. Has Ukraine been fighting for independence since the wall fell? What I saw over the past decade was that there was a struggle there. There was unrest, although it was quite silent. I have sometimes talked to my friends about this. There was not much noise about the Ukrainian struggle a decade ago but now it is where it is at. I am interested in the Slovak perspective. Have the Ukrainians faced a similar struggle for independence since the wall fell? Has Russia been trying to pull them in?

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** Does the Deputy mean Ukraine?

**Deputy Francis Noel Duffy:** Yes. Have Ukrainians been looking for independence since the wall fell? Has there always been that sense of Russia saying, "No, you are not going"? I apologise for my question.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** I will try to explain it through the history of Czechoslovakia. The Deputy will be aware that we are quite a young country. Like Ireland, Slovakia is 100 years old. In 2018, we celebrated 100 years since the establishment of Czechoslovakia, by which I mean the first independent state of Czechs and Slovaks. As Slovakia, we are independent from 1993.

If the Deputy remembers 1968, Czechoslovakia was an independent country. During the Second World War, it was liberated by the Soviet army. Until 1947, Czechoslovakia was not a communist or socialist country but then there were elections and Czechoslovakia became some kind of communist country at the time. Nevertheless, Czechoslovakia tried to get out from under the influence of the Soviet Union in 1968 and we were invaded by Soviet troops and by troops from the Warsaw Pact. I am saying this only to explain that we are really very sensitive to what is going on now in Ukraine. We are not alone in having experienced this. For example, in 1956, Hungary was in the same situation. Poland was also in this situation. The struggle to get out from under the influence of the former Soviet Union was experienced by all countries and this applies to Ukraine as well.

We were in a better situation after 1989, following the fall of communism in central and eastern Europe. Ukraine was not so fortunate because Ukraine stayed under the influence of Russia. This resulted in the annexation of Crimea and of Abkhazia. One can see there are spots, or countries, that Russia has invaded or that are under Russian influence - to check on or control what is going on in these countries. I am talking not only about Ukraine but about Georgia and the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic, which, in English, is called Transnistria. One can see that these attempts by Russia or some forces in Russia to control or to check neighbouring countries is still going on and these countries are trying to get rid of this influence.

I could not believe Russia would do something like this - a military invasion to bomb a



neighbouring country - especially as Russians and Ukrainians fought for freedom together in the Second World War. Czechoslovakia was liberated not only by the Russian army. It was the Soviet army consisting of soldiers from all the former Soviet republics - the Baltic states, Ukraine, Georgia.

I am not sure if this is enough.

**Deputy Francis Noel Duffy:** It is. It is very interesting. I thank the ambassador.

**Chairman:** I thank the ambassador. This helps us in developing a deeper understanding as well. We will continue on this rich vein of thought as well in the time ahead and try to develop that understanding to see how we can help. I call Deputy Ó Murchú.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I thank the ambassador for coming in here. As much as this is becoming more real for us, it is much closer to Slovakia. Slovakia is physically much closer to Ukraine and there is a particular relationship there. I appreciate just how real it is.

In his opening statement, the ambassador spoke about the expulsion of three diplomats and workers from the Russian embassy for their activities. I do not know how much detail the ambassador could go into, but could he give us some information in relation to that? We have our own relationship with the Russian Embassy here. A number of us would like to see considerable movement, if the ambassador knows what I mean, in respect of diplomats and possibly others.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** How deep can I go and what do I know? It is a similar situation to that in Ireland. It is the same in Slovakia. It is the same in the Czech Republic. To explain, usually when diplomats are expelled from a country there is no information except the usual statement that it was a violation of the Vienna Convention on diplomatic relations. This time a video was released in Slovakia and published. There was a Russian diplomat - if I am not mistaken it was a deputy military attaché - who bribed and was giving money to a Slovak national for getting some secret information and getting access to other people with this secret information. This is a laugh video. It is quite long. Personally, I was surprised that it was published but I fully understand why it was published. Especially now, in this situation people should know why such steps are taken. If you watch the video, you hear the discussion between the Russian diplomat and the Slovak national about what secret information and to what people with such information they would like to get access, and giving money. It is all on the video. There is no need to explain further. This is the best explanation.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** That is grand. My follow-up relates to what has Slovakia been dealing with in relation to Russia over the past period. We have a better notion now of hybrid and cyberattacks, etc., and even the relationship between the Russian state and some of its technical subcontractors that it can employ from time to time. Given the situation, we would have our own fears now but Slovakia, as I said, is much closer. Slovakia has a relationship with them that was not necessarily perfect. I suppose my question is what has Slovakia done in relation to that.

Where does Slovakia sit in relation to this? We are all guessing where Vladimir Putin is going. We are not entirely sure. We hope he opts for a way out of this and we end this disastrous war, but my question is where the Slovakian people are and where the Slovakian Government regarding the fears of what are the long-term plans of the present Russian regime.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** The fears are understandable among people because the war is

going on in a neighbouring country and we can see people fleeing war and how it is. In our region, we have also experienced in recent history war in the Balkans. Unfortunately, this part of Europe is not immune to such violent issues.

As for our relationship with Russia, like everyone else, we really want correct relations. Slovakia is very dependent on, for example, Russian raw materials such as oil and gas. It is also for the economy very important to have good relations with Russia, and also with Ukraine. We import a lot of raw materials from Ukraine. Not only for our country, Slovakia, but for all of Europe - Germany as well - it is important to have very good relations, but not only good relations that “you are my boss and I will say do everything you will ask”.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Tip the hat.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** To have correct relations like equal partners, this is what is important for us. It does not matter if we are a nation of 5 million people or if we are a nation of a few hundred million people. It is not about this. It is about real equality and how we consider the other person - if he is our partner or not.

The Deputy mentioned the hybrid war and cyberattacks. The central and eastern European countries are very exposed to cyberwar, but especially to disinformation campaigns. There are huge disinformation campaigns. At the beginning, sometimes you could read two opposite forms of information on the website.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** What social media platforms were being used there for those disinformation campaigns? I can probably guess.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** Especially Facebook and Twitter.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** That is what I thought the ambassador would say.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** I mentioned the Slovak national the Russian diplomat was bribing. He was working for an information website. They were reaching out, not only to mainstream newspapers and television but also to very small so-called “independent” sources of journalism. It was not only social media, but news websites as well.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Basically, any media that was open to them.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** Absolutely any media. Our Government has closed some of these media because of the disinformation campaign.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I suppose it is down to the fact that Facebook, in particular, provides a platform. All you need is connected networks.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** Yes, definitely. In Slovakia, Facebook is used widely. Here there is more use of Twitter but, in Slovakia, Facebook is used widely. There are a lot of WhatsApp groups and you see it does not mean only social media. It means also other communication media such as WhatsApp.

**Chairman:** I thank the ambassador. The Deputy can contribute again. We will have plenty of time. The Deputy is on his fifth supplementary at this stage. I call Deputy Howlin.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I thank the ambassador for his presentation. First, the idea of a model “Lex Ukraine” is one we might have a look at - codifying what refugees are entitled to



in a legal framework - because part of the issue we have now is how, in a co-ordinated way, to provide information to people arriving here. I am conscious that in his presentation, the ambassador tells us that 10,000 refugees a day are crossing into Slovakia. We have had 10,000 in total so far and the scale is of an entirely different order.

I have two questions. Slovakia provides, within this Lex Ukraine, the provision for people to work in Slovakia. The information we seem to be getting is that many people, particularly moving as far as the neighbouring countries of Ukraine, in their mind at least have the notion that they will return home over the next few weeks or, at most, months. Is Slovakia making provision for a long-term hosting of significant numbers? Has the ambassador any notion how long refugees will stay in Slovakia? There have been 270,000 refugees to date. If the bombardment of Kyiv increases, there will be probably a great deal more. How many will be long-stay residents of Slovakia?

In that context, is Slovakia working at a trans-European level to share the number of refugees across European countries on any structured basis? I am conscious that the focus has to be on the wishes of the refugees themselves. They cannot simply be transported to a country they know nothing about if they are unwilling to move but at the same time there is limited capacity, if we are talking about 10 million displaced people right now, for neighbouring countries to cope on their own.

What is the ambassador's expectation in terms of duration of stay? Is it possible to have one? Second, what level of co-ordination on a trans-European level is there for a sharing of accommodation across all member states and, indeed, beyond the member states of the European Union?

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** I thank the Deputy. It is a really good question. I would like to know the answer as well as to how long it will last. Unfortunately, we have to be prepared for everything. This is why we are trying to provide refugees with everything - not just with accommodation but also with jobs. For example, as I mentioned, children are enrolled in Slovak schools. It looks like Mr. Putin's plan to have a very fast blitzkrieg invasion of Ukraine to change the regime and that everything would be fine has not worked out. It looks like it will take longer than the Russian regime would like. It will be long term and unfortunately we need to be prepared for this.

Not all the people who are entering Slovakia are staying in Slovakia. Many of these refugees are going to other countries. Most of the first wave of refugees were Ukrainians who had relatives in Europe.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** How many of the 270,000 are actually staying?

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** According to our estimates, it is about 10%. However, we do not know because once refugees enter Slovakia, they are cleared and they may go. If they apply for asylum or temporary protection, we know that they are there and we take care of them. However, many are just registering and going to Germany or other countries, even to Ireland. We do not know, but we are preparing for everything. At the EU level there was the activation of the temporary protection, which is a really historic step. I am trying to find answers to how long it will be; there is no answer yet. We hope it will be not so long, not only for our sake but especially for the sake of refugees.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** The core of my question is as follows. The immediate neigh-

bours have finite capacity. Right now, the biggest burden is on Poland. The ambassador can talk about providing school places, but it is not possible to provide infinite school places for millions of refugees. While I hate the phrase, there will need to be burden sharing - a sharing of welcome across Europe. How can we do that consistent with ensuring that people are allowed to move to countries they choose to move to? Is that a challenge?

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** It definitely is a challenge. All European countries are working on something that will be permanent. Following the General Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council there will be an EU summit. We do not know the answer yet but we are working it. European countries answered very swiftly and I am really happy that they are sharing the burden. We do not have the problems we had with the migration process in 2015 and 2016. No country has opted out and refused to take any refugees. The response at the EU level is great and the burden is being shared. Special humanitarian logistics hubs have been opened in countries neighbouring Ukraine - in Poland and Romania. Two hubs have also opened in Slovakia recently. This is one of the ways EU help is provided to Slovakia.

**Deputy Seán Haughey:** I thank the ambassador for his presentation. His country faces an extraordinary challenge with the refugee crisis. A country with a population of 5 million has already received more than 270,000 displaced people. This morning's exchange has been useful to understand the practical and logistical problems because we are just suddenly experiencing those ourselves with the refugees who have come here. We have challenges with accommodation, health, education and employment - all the issues the ambassador has just raised. This morning's exchange is very useful to examine how Slovakia is dealing with these issues.

Obviously, the Slovak Republic is part of NATO. How important is Slovakia's NATO membership for its security and defence? The ambassador was earlier asked how fearful he was about the Russian Federation's intentions. I would be interested to hear his views on that.

In his presentation, the ambassador rightly points out that the EU has provided financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine and that it needs to examine Ukraine's membership of the EU. The EU has obviously provided lethal weapons and non-lethal equipment to Ukraine through the European peace facility. Does the ambassador believe the EU is doing enough for Ukraine? Similar to my question about NATO, how important is EU membership to the Slovak Republic? Does the ambassador see this entire conflict in terms of a battle for the survival of liberal democratic values and the threat to democracy? How big an issue is that? Is it a factor in what is happening in the ambassador's region at this time?

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** NATO is very important to us. We are a small nation. We have had a violent experience and we are very sensitive. The ambassadors of Poland or Romania also appeared before the committee. I think they also mentioned they look with some discomfort to the history of their relationship with the former Soviet Union. In this regard NATO is our main guarantee of security. I am talking about Slovakia now. We were really struggling to get into NATO as soon as possible and we are quite happy that we are there. We are a small landlocked country neighbouring Ukraine with Russia not so far away. We would be unable to defend ourselves by our own means. For us, NATO membership is very important. It is our crucial guarantee of security.

I mentioned the deployment of the enhanced NATO forces into Slovakia - the 2,100 NATO soldiers. The deployment of this NATO unit into Slovakia is not only important for Slovakia's defence, but it is important as a signal to other countries, especially to Russia, that Slovakia is not alone just as other NATO countries are not alone. If there is any aggression towards Slova-

kia, it will be aggression towards all of NATO. It is very important to us to have this feeling of security and that we are not alone.

Our feelings are even stronger regarding our EU membership. I have often compared Ireland to Slovakia. We are two small countries, both with open economies. We struggled for our independence. We have spent approximately 100 years as independent countries. There are many similarities. It is good to be in good company with friends who can help us or we can help them. Being an EU member is very important to us and it has helped us. Slovakia improved in economic and social aspects. It was a very good step for Slovakia to enter the EU.

**Chairman:** A follow-up to that question - and I know the answer is going to be “Yes” - concerns whether diplomatic channels are good between all the small countries, and not just between Ireland and Slovakia. Is there a common understanding in this context that enables a support system for small countries of similar size in the EU?

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** What I like about the EU is that it is not a matter of how big a country is or how many people it has. Instead, we are all equal partners, with the same vote as Germany or France. Slovakia has only a few million people, so we cannot compare based on the number of inhabitants, but we have the same vote. We can vote on what we like and what we do not, and our vote counts equally. Regarding other small countries, and there has been no similar opportunity, more than a year ago, in February 2021, the Ireland-Slovakia Parliamentary Friendship Group was established in the Oireachtas. The only contact we had at the time was during the video conferences. This is the first time I have entered the Oireachtas buildings since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. I am happy to be here. This is an example of our good relations because even during Covid-19, we were able to establish the Ireland-Slovakia Parliamentary Friendship Group. Let us imagine that. It was a time when everything was closed, but we managed it. That means there are very good relations between countries, including between Slovakia and Ireland and with other countries as well.

**Chairman:** I thank the ambassador and apologise for piggybacking on Deputy Haughey’s question. The Deputy looks like he wishes to come in again.

**Deputy Seán Haughey:** Yes, I have a brief supplementary query. It is fine, though, if His Excellency chooses not to answer. Is the EU doing enough in respect of Ukraine? Would the ambassador’s view be that NATO looks after defence and the EU looks after all other issues? I hope this question is clear.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** There is much discussion about the strategic compass at EU level and it is all about the defence of the EU and how that will work. Ireland is a neutral country and it is providing great help to Ukraine, but not any lethal weapons. We fully understand the position of each country. For us, however, it is important to be part of NATO. The situation in Ukraine has demonstrated to other European countries that co-operation between different organisations is important, such as between NATO and the EU. It is important that we work together. I am aware there are different views on why we are trying to build military capabilities in the EU when we already have NATO. We must, however, still co-operate, because we never know what will happen next. The situation in Ukraine has shown this very clearly. Nobody expected it.

**Chairman:** I thank Deputy Haughey and the ambassador. I call Deputy Harkin.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I confirm that I am on the campus. I thank the ambassador for

the presentation. He clearly conveyed the immediacy and reality of what is happening and that 10,000 refugees are crossing the border into Slovakia daily. It says much about the humanity of Slovakian, Polish and Irish people that we are willing to take in so many refugees amidst all this horror. If just one positive thing has come out of this situation, it is this aspect.

I have two questions, but I will make a general comment first which relates to the last few questions and comments from Deputy Haughey and the Chair. The ambassador spoke about Slovakia's struggle to escape from the influence of Russia. I spent 15 years in the European Parliament, and it was not until I met people from Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Hungary and, indeed, Ukraine that I was able to gain some sense of their histories and why they jealously guard their independence, in just the same way we do ours. I refer to the histories of those countries and the context from which they are coming. I have come across some people who, certainly before this war started, had some sense that Ukraine was perhaps slightly ambivalent about Russian control. The people I met did not understand, as the ambassador said, that countries wanted an equal partnership with Russia. There is a feeling of being sisters and brothers, but that it must be an equal partnership. Certainly, there has been a lack of understanding here about why countries like Slovakia are part of NATO and why they need to be part of that organisation. I was taken by the ambassador's comments to the effect that he fully understands our neutrality. It is extremely important to us, but it is also important that we fully understand Slovakia's situation and why it is part of NATO, and needs to be, for its security.

The subject of my first question was referred to by Senator Chambers when she spoke about human trafficking. Commissioner Johansson said yesterday that the European Commission had activated a network of anti-trafficking co-ordinators. I wonder if they have started to work. With 10,000 people coming into Slovakia daily, it is extremely difficult, if not almost impossible, to manage that process and to put other structures in place at the same time. We must, however, do our very best to protect people, and women and children in particular. Has that process started? Is anything happening in that regard?

My second question concerns what was said about employing teachers. How is that initiative working? Are there issues with language, etc.? I refer to healthcare staff, because many of those will be coming into Slovakia as well. Is the country in any way managing to integrate those people into its healthcare systems? The ambassador almost mentioned that some of the main issues being faced relate to a lack of staff and medical supplies. That is crucial. Is any European mechanism in place, or being put in place, to try to ensure the availability of adequate supplies for countries such as Slovakia, Poland, etc., that are on the front line in receiving Ukrainian refugees?

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** I thank the Deputy for her kind words and for understanding our mutual positions. Regarding human trafficking, frankly, I am not able say much now because I do not have information from on the ground. Therefore, I am unable to comment on this topic. I am sorry, but I do not wish to just make up something to tell the Deputy. I do know that security is important to us and that we have experience with human trafficking. As I mentioned, I worked as a consul in the UK, and we had many cases of human trafficking there at that time. Therefore, I understand the problem and I know what the Deputy is talking about, but I am unable to say how the situation stands in respect to refugees now. However, precautions are being taken because we are well aware of this issue and we have previous experience of it.

I turn now to the topic of employing teachers and what the Slovakian Ministry of Education is trying to do in this regard. The Slovakian and Ukrainian languages are not the same; they are different. It sounds like they are practically similar, but they are really different. In the eastern

part of Slovakia, however, people speak a language similar to Ukrainian. Therefore, even before the war, we had some Ukrainian cultural institutions, such as Ukrainian theatre. We had it before in Slovakia, especially in the eastern part. This is nothing new for us. The minister of education is working hard to have a mechanism as soon as possible. You have to find these teachers because when such a huge influx of people enters a country and you are registering them, the first questions are “Are you well?” and “Do you need any help?” The emotional situation of these people is very bad. They just fled their own country. They left everything behind. It takes several days for them to realise where they are and to look at how they can help their countrymen.

We experience lack of medical staff. As yet, we are just starting to experience it but it will be a problem for us. That is why it was discussed at EU level during the recent meeting of ministers of health. They discussed what to do and how to do it. People will have to be transported to other countries for medical services or surgery. This is being discussed now. We have and will have this problem. Not only us, but all front-line countries will come across this problem.

**Deputy Marian Harkin:** I asked about medical supplies. That is something that can move. It is to do with supply and logistics. Is there anything in place at European level to try to ensure the medical supplies that are needed can move from one place to another? If not, does the ambassador think there should be?

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** Yes, there are. I mentioned the logistics hubs or humanitarian hubs that have been established in Poland, Romania and, now, Slovakia. We have two hubs, one of which was opened just yesterday. It is for the humanitarian route not only to Slovakia but also to Ukraine. Ukraine is still living and a big part of it is still free. Our consulate general in Ukraine left Kyiv but is still working in the eastern part of the country. It is not only our diplomats, but diplomats from other countries as well. We are working on delivering humanitarian aid to Ukraine. There are such mechanisms at EU level.

**Deputy John Brady:** I thank the ambassador for meeting with us and for his opening statement and his responses to some good questions. I commend his country and Government on their response. It is obviously very challenging because 270,000 refugees going into any country, fleeing war and persecution, is an awful lot. An increase of about 5.5% in the population over four weeks can be expected to put huge pressures on systems. The ambassador touched on how much pressure his country’s health service is under at this point and into the future. Does the ambassador have a figure for how many of the 270,000 refugees are still in the country? How many have moved on to other countries? I know it is very fluid when we are dealing with up to 10,000 additional refugees arriving every day.

Deputy Harkin touched on the major concern highlighted by the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs, Yvonne Johansson, when she spoke about the potential for human trafficking, particularly of children. An estimated figure has been given for Romania of 500 unaccompanied minors or children having arrived there. Does the ambassador have a figure for children or unaccompanied minors who have arrived in Slovakia? I appreciate he did not have the full information as to what response is being taken or whether the actions that have been announced have been implemented yet, but he might have a rough figure.

Last week we had the ambassador’s colleagues from a number of countries before the committee, including the Moldovan ambassador. One thing she said that struck me was that they were only starting the conversations with some of the NGOs and international humanitarian groups, the likes of the Red Cross. What action on the ground have those NGOs undertaken?



Is more assistance required from the humanitarian perspective?

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** Regarding how many refugees are still in Slovakia, we only have an estimation of about 10%. We do not have the exact figure.

Regarding accompanied or unaccompanied minors, I do not have any information. I believe there is such information but I do not have it right now so I cannot help with that. There was a photo of a boy of about 10 years of age, who was unaccompanied. It went through Twitter all over the world. He had only a phone number and his name written on his hand. He was received by Slovakia and, in a few days, the Slovak authorities were able to find his family living in Europe. They are already together. That is not an answer to the question. There are such issues. There are many unaccompanied minors but we are doing what we can. The good thing is that the registering process is a good one. No one can enter without us knowing who he or she is or where he or she is going, but I do not know the exact figure.

Regarding NGOs, crisis management is working in every country. We had plans with crisis management from day one. I highlight the role of NGOs. In the first days, they played a huge role. Then the state agencies and organisations came in and it all started like a fluent mechanism. NGOs are important in any humanitarian crisis. I am not saying it is most of them but a huge number of volunteers are not working with NGOs but just coming, bringing humanitarian aid and coming with their cars. They are asking: “Have you somewhere to sleep?” and are saying “Come on, you can stay with me.” It is not that they just come and pick someone up and choose someone to stay with them. It is a process. You cannot just come to pick up a person. There is a mechanism for this.

The question was about NGOs. Yes, they are very important. They played and will play a huge role in this.

**Chairman:** I thank the ambassador. We have a couple of minutes left so we have time for some final contributions.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I have a supplementary question for the ambassador that I put to his Georgian and Moldovan colleagues last week because I am interested in the nuances in the differences of approach. It concerns a move towards defence co-operation within the EU, the EU having its own defence capacity and how this would sit with NATO. I discerned last week that there was concern that the defence of Georgia, Moldova and the rest of Europe is anchored on ensuring the presence of the United States and that anything that might be perceived as moving away from that would diminish the strength of the protection. It is all well and good unless someone like Mr. Trump is elected or Mr. Trump is elected again. Could one depend on the support of the United States in those circumstances? It is a complicated question. I do not know whether the ambassador has a view on how enhanced security arrangements within the EU might play against the issue of NATO.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** That is a really complex question so I will now be very diplomatic. It is not about individuals but about states and agreements. It is not about the president of one country saying he or she wants to or does not want to do something. I fully understand the Deputy’s question and am trying very hard to avoid it.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** I understand the diplomacy required. It is a very difficult question to answer. In essence, I am asking whether the ambassador would bet his nation’s security on the agreement in question, regardless of who turns out to be the next President of the United



States.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** Our Parliament has already passed the deal that allows NATO troops in Slovakia. Not only are there American soldiers but there are also other soldiers. The enhanced NATO groups were established after 2014, after the annexation of Crimea. Slovakian troops are also deployed in Baltic states. Yes, Slovakia will support defence and regard being part of NATO as crucial. Is that what the Deputy is asking about? What is he asking me?

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** That is as far as I am going to get. How does the ambassador envisage the enhancement of EU co-operation walking in parallel with the concept he outlined?

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** There is an ongoing discussion on the Strategic Compass. There are countries with different views but mine is among those that support enhancing European military capability. Also, we are supporting co-operation with NATO. We regard both organisations as partners.

**Deputy Brendan Howlin:** Complementary.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** Yes. We do not see them as competing with each other.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** Regarding what Deputy Howlin has just said, I am going to go off on a slight tangent. He has put on the table the conversation about possible US involvement or non-involvement in the future. That brings up the wider question of possible Russian involvement in elections in Europe and other places, but that is for another day. Putting European militarisation on the agenda and making moves on it at the minute probably only reflect the reality concerning European battlegroups and arrangements made under previous European treaties, etc. However, considering that we want to make room for Ukraine to enter the EU, does putting these matters on the agenda make negotiation more difficult? I hope Mr. Vladimir Putin will want a way out at some point and that there will be a negotiation. I am not going to determine what that negotiation will entail, but we have all probably heard people state off the record at European gigs that we have a general idea where this could go. It is on the agenda that the Russians will not accept Ukraine joining NATO. Is there a difficulty in putting on the agenda the question of the EU setting itself up as, or highlighting the point of, a military alliance in that its doing so would become part of a negotiating gambit, just creating difficulties for Ukraine in the future? I am not saying we should make things easy, because there is ultimately only one person at fault, namely, Vladimir Putin. The big fear is that he is not looking for a negotiation or way out. I hope he is, however. Could we just be creating a difficulty by doing what I have described?

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** The Ukraine–Russia negotiations are very difficult but we fully support them. No conflict or war can be resolved without negotiations. The European Union as a whole supports the negotiations. At the end of the day, any deal reached between Russia and Ukraine should be acceptable to Ukraine. President Zelenskyy already showed us there are some red lines that he is not willing to cross.

I am not part of the negotiations, but I heard Ukraine already admitted it will not be trying to apply to join the NATO alliance or any military organisation. We cannot discuss it right now because we do not know what is going on.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I accept that. All I was raising was the view that moves regarding EU militarisation could end up in the same sphere in negotiations-----

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** Yes, but NATO is a defence organisation at its core. The talk about the Strategic Compass is about approximately 5,000 soldiers who can be deployed-----

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** A rapid reaction force.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** As I understand it, the idea is especially related to a crisis-management mechanism and is not about fighting. I understand it entails something like the Blue Helmets. Ireland has good and much experience of peacekeeping. We have to keep in mind that it is a question of something like this. As I understand it, it is not about forming some kind of military formation that can attack anybody.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** I accept that. My fear is about putting the matter on the agenda.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** Nevertheless, in the European Union, Ireland, for example, is a neutral country and Slovakia and others states are members of NATO. We strongly support Ukraine being part of the EU. This can also require that Ukraine be a neutral country. There is no need for Ukraine to be part of some military organisation.

**Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú:** We all accept that a huge amount of co-operation needs to occur to deal with the hybrid and cyberattacks we spoke about. This is the last question. Mr. Pokojný spoke about connectivity with Ukraine and Russia in terms of supply chains, in particular energy and food. What plans does Slovakia have in the medium term? How has it been impacted by sanctions or further moves that will be made on sanctions? We all want to cut off the money supply to Russia, but that can create difficulties.

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** This is a very good question, not only for Slovakia but for other countries in the EU as a whole. Even in Ireland we can already see that something is going on with gas prices. The impact will be on Europe as a whole and the rest of the world. We support sanctions against Russia because we think it is one of the ways to eliminate Russian aggression.

The situation in Slovakia depends on Russian energy carriers. There are two views. On the one hand, this can accelerate our transition to carbon neutrality, which is good. On the other hand, it will be very challenging and require mutual solidarity among EU countries. As I mentioned, Slovakia is dependent on a supply of gas, oil or raw materials from the east. Now it will rely on that coming from the west. In this sense, Slovakia would be at the end of the supply chain.

We support sanctions. We think they will be challenging, but necessary. They are painful not only for Russia. They hit Russia where it hurts, and we can see that, but they also hit other countries. Nevertheless, it is important to isolate Russia. However, we will strongly support mutual action at an EU level in terms of the supply of raw materials. We will not be alone. We are all in the same boat.

**Chairman:** I thank the ambassador. On behalf of members, we are grateful for his contributions and helping us to develop a deeper understanding of the situation. We will leave him with the final word. He might attempt an answer on whether he sees a further escalation of the aggression in non-NATO aligned countries. It is a speculative question, but that is a genuine fear. Will the aggression grow or continue?

As a committee, we would like to acknowledge the role of Slovakia in providing the solidarity that is so evident against the backdrop of courage and fortitude on behalf of the Ukrainian people and the nightmare they are enduring. I would like to acknowledge the solidarity of the

ambassador's citizens in facing such adversity. There is hope in his contribution today, such as his call for equality, like mindedness and working with people. He made reference to the parameters of the European Union in terms of equality and a level playing field, which is what we are looking for.

We are thankful for his contribution and message of hope. However, as Deputy Harkin pointed out we have an immediate issue to deal with here and we are with the ambassador all of the way on that. I ask for an attempted answer, having acknowledged his message of hope. Is there a very real concern about a further escalation in non-NATO aligned countries?

**H.E. Mr. Igor Pokojný:** I thank the Chairman. We all hope that it will end as soon as possible, but unfortunately it does not look like that will happen because Russia is very clear that it wants to fulfil its aim to take control of Ukraine and it does not matter how that is being covered. Ukraine and the rest of the democratic world is also very clear that they will not accept it.

The blitzkrieg has not happened for Russia, which means that it looks like it will take some time to get somewhere. This is why sanctions are important. Without support and finance for the war, Russia could not bear all of the burden. We hope it will end as soon as possible, but we do not know how long it will take. We can now see that the Russian military is targeting and bombing civilian areas and targets, such as hospitals, schools and residential areas. I am afraid that in that sense things will escalate a little bit. It is also perhaps a sign that Russians are trying to help themselves as much as possible by doing practically anything. We hope it will end as soon as possible.

I am really thankful for the opportunity to be here. I consider this a very useful exchange of views. It was also very useful for me to hear the views of the committee and what they think about this, because Ireland is on the western side of the European Union. Nonetheless, it is also part of it, and is very involved in this process and helping the Ukrainian people as much as possible. The positive side is that Ukraine is not alone and we are here to help and show an example of what we can do. This is what the European Union is about, namely helping colleagues and people. I thank the committee.

**Chairman:** I thank the ambassador. Once again, we will stay in touch. We can learn from each other. If it is possible, I ask him to send on information on how his department of education is working towards identifying Ukrainian teachers. Marino College, in Deputy Haughey's constituency, has a very good migrant teacher programme which it has been working on for years. It is looking to expand that. Any information that the ambassador could give us in terms of identifying Ukrainian teachers might be of help to us.

I again thank him. As a committee, we want to keep this issue very much on the agenda. History is repeating itself, unfortunately. I remember reading *Dynamo*, a football book set against the backdrop of 1942 when Operation Barbarossa was very much part of Kyiv. At the time I read it, I thought all of this was behind us and would never happen again. Reality bites, and it has bitten really hard this time.

It is important for us as a country that is part of the European Union to not just show solidarity but to keep this issue very live on the agenda. We will stay in touch with the ambassadors of individual countries along the eastern Baltic. We had a great five-hour meeting last week. We do not want to dip in and out of this issue; we want to have continuity because this is an important juncture in the history of the world. We stand in solidarity with the Ukrainians. We look forward to further engagement. I thank the ambassador for his honesty and openness, and

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his diplomatic skills with some of the questions. We certainly cannot predict the future and we are grateful for his contribution today.

The joint committee adjourned at 11.20 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 30 March 2022.