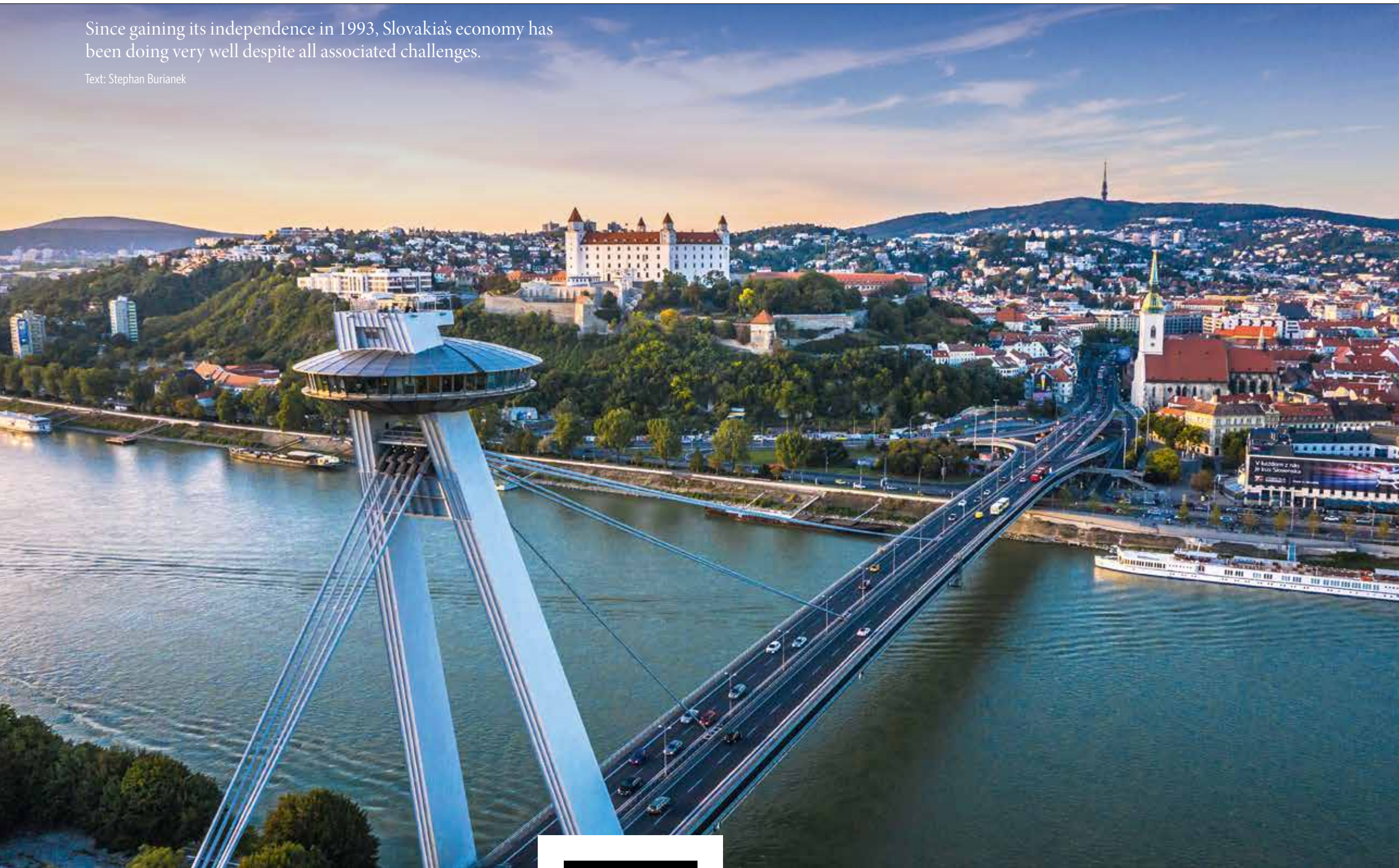




A country on the rise

Since gaining its independence in 1993, Slovakia's economy has been doing very well despite all associated challenges.

Text: Stephan Burianek



BRATISLAVA is both economic driving force and capital of the Slovak Republic.

Slovakia's leisure activities are growing.



The Lomnický štít is the third largest mountain of the High Tatras (right); the famous altar in Levoča is a hand-crafted masterpiece of crafted wood (very right).



FACTS & FIGURES

Slovakia

Official name: Slovenská republika (Slovak Republic)

Population: 5.443.120 (estimate: 31. Dezember 2017)

Capital: Bratislava

Area: 49.030 sqkm

Religion:

- Roman Catholics: 62 %
- Protestants: 5,9 %
- Slovak Greek Catholics: 3,8 %
- Continental Reformed: 1,8 %

Currency: Euro

GDP per capita: 17.664 USD

Form of government: Parliamentary democracy

Major cities:

- Bratislava: 432.864
- Košice: 238.757
- Prešov: 88.680

Back in this February, Czech TV host Jan Kraus didn't leave any doubt regarding the question whether he or his guest were the more famous person, when he ended his interview with the Slovakian presidential candidate Zuzana Čaputová – he questioned her in Czech, she answered in Slovak – with a somewhat presumptuous final point: „If you win, it will be my achievement. And if you lose it's because you made mistakes.“ Čaputová hardly made mistakes, obviously, as she won both the first round as well as the run-off ballot in March this year. Her success was surprising and logical at the same time. Astonishing, because liberal politicians like Čaputová – who speaks out in favour of LGBT rights – trend to have a hard time in Slovakia, where the „protection of marriage between man and woman“ was added to the constitution a few years ago. On the other side, it was logical as for decades the mother of two almost-adults had been campaigning as a lawyer for simple citizens and against the economic heavyweights of her country. She had fought, for example, against a poisonous landfill in her hometown Pezinok near Bratislava – a challenge that took her 14 years to succeed. While experts say she won the election because of her open and sincere character, it seems that Slovakia's first female President represents exactly what most Slovaks are currently longing for: honesty. Tensions were running high lately, after the worldwide reported murder of the journalist Ján Kuciak in February 2018, who had been involved in the examination of the so-called Panama Papers and who investigated the embroilment between high-profile officials and organised crime. After massive protests, the social democrat Prime Minister Robert Fico stepped back, handing over the torch to his fellow party member Peter Pellegrini.

While the country has always had to deal with certain challenges since it initialised its separation from what is now the Czech Republic in 1993, one cannot deny the positive developments since then. Slovakia joined the European Union in 2004 and has been part of the Eurozone since 2009, which helped to assure its indispensable position in Central Europe. Slovakia's main trading partner is Germany, regarding both the imports and the exports, followed by the Czech Republic. Austria is Slovakia's third most important country of importation. The GDP per capita steadily approaches the average value in the EU, with expected growth rates between three

PHOTOS: SLOVAKIA TRAVEL, MINISTRY OF TRANSPORT AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC, MS AGENCY, KANCELARIA PREZIDENTA SR



The new President Zuzana Čaputová has captured the hearts of the people.





The Bratislava Castle houses the Museum of History.



Trenčín is dominated by an impressive castle (very left); Slovakia is heaven for winter sports enthusiasts (left).



nal responsibility by sending troops on UN peace-keeping missions to locations like Afghanistan, Iraq and Kosovo.

There is no doubt that Slovakia's orientation points towards the West. The distance between Bratislava and Vienna is the shortest one between two capitals in Europe, which were once connected by cable car – and indeed the ties between Austria and Slovakia have reached a substantial degree. This does not only apply for cultural issues as Bratislava has become a popular spot for Austrian opera lovers that prefer traditional productions over all too modern ones – but mostly for the fact that a considerable amount of Bratislava residents drive to their Austrian working place every day, and vice versa. By now, the Bratislava region is one of the wealthiest areas in the European Union, with de facto full employment currently. Most of the economic output is generated in the West of the country.

Who would guess that Slovakia – that does not have its own car brand – is holding a world record in producing cars? With more than one million passenger cars per annum, the automotive sector counts for 44% of the total industry, employing more than 270,000 people. The ratio of 198 produced cars per thousand inhabitants represents the world's peak value – a record that is expected to even increase, after Jaguar Land Rover joined the already existing Original Equipment Manufacturer Volkswagen, PSA (Peugeot, Citroen, etc.), and Kia Motors only one year ago.

Other significant industries are plant engineering



The Dobšinská Ice Cave in the Slovak Karst region is listed at the UNESCO World Heritage list.

and four percent for the next three years (source: International Monetary Fund). Slovakia is one of the fastest-growing developed economies in the world.

Together with its neighbouring countries Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, it forms part of the Visegrád Group that has gained considerable respect within the European Union in recent years. Due to its geographical position, Slovakia is an important EU member in securing the external border of the European Union. The country has shown internatio-

Every summer, the Folklore Festival Východná takes place in a large open-air theatre (above); the town hall of the UNESCO World Heritage Town of Levoča is only one pearl out of a few (below).



A good place to calm down: The Štrbské Pleso lake in the High Tatras.

PHOTOS: SLOVAKIA TRAVEL, MINISTRY OF TRANSPORT AND CONSTRUCTION OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC, MAREK HAIKOVSKY, KRISTINA ŠPIŠÁKOVÁ

and metal processing, both with an increasing portion of the latest generation's smart technologies. A more and more important role furthermore is developed by the information and communications technologies. Software companies like the anti-virus software developer and global player ESET or start-ups like the online shop service provider Expandeco testify a fertile ground for new ideas.

Last but not least, there is another sector with a lot of potential: Tourism. A trip across the country reveals that its beauty is acutely underrated. Most of the national territory area is sprawled by the Carpathian Mountains, whose preserved wilderness comes up with bears, wolves and golden eagles. The High Tatras at the northern border with Poland recently gained international attention after the travel guide Lonely Planet listed them as the number one "Best in Europe" travel destination this year, calling it a "wonderland for hikers". Kayakers love it, too, and in winter the area is a good pointer for skiers. Another attraction is the Slovak Karst region on the south-eastern border to Hungary, which includes

several caves. The most eye-catching one is the Ochtinská cave as one out of only three discovered Aragonite caves on our planet.

Slovakia also is blessed with thermal springs, like the ones in Piešťany, which becomes classier from year to year. Still less known are the ones in Trenčianske Teplice and Turčianske Teplice. Art history buffs, on the other side, should not miss the Basilica of St. James on the round square of Levoča, a small town in the northeast of the country, as it houses the world's largest gothic altar, which at the same time is reportedly the world's largest wooden carved altar. Visitors will inevitably come across one of the impressive castle ruins that surmount some of the Slovakian hills. Romantic! However, they will also notice the undeniable prosperity gap between the West and the East. A fact that led to a perceptible level of frustration and tensions especially between the Slovaks and its main minorities, the Romani and Hungarians. Challenges obviously remain, but there is no doubt that Slovakia has the economic potential to overcome them.



Operas are not only shown in Bratislava, but also in the State Theatre of Košice.



ENJOY A SHOPPING ATMOSPHERE IN THE HEART OF BRATISLAVA



- ❑ Shopping, gastronomy and relax on 60 000 m²
- ❑ Breathtaking view on Danube river
- ❑ Popular shopping and leisure time destination
- ❑ 200+ shops

www.eurovea.sk



H.E. Peter Mišík

“Our ties with Austria go deeper than economics.”

The Ambassador of the Slovak Republic on his country's relationship with Austria and future challenges.

Interview: Stephan Burianek

CD: Are you pleased with the election of Zuzana Čaputová as the new President of the Slovak Republic?

PETER MIŠÍK: We are very glad that we have a President who is committed to Europe and its values. Zuzana Čaputová is a good sign. She is calm, factual and very competent.

In addition to that, she has a confident personality, also on the international stage. During a recent visit by China's foreign minister Wang Yi, she expressed “concern and worries about the deteriorating situation in terms of human rights protection” in his country - a move that international observers called a rare incident.

She is actually a lawyer by profession and not a traditional politician. Issues such as the environment, rule of law and the fight against corruption take the centre stage for her. She considers herself a lawyer of the people. She successfully fought against a landfill in the Slovak town of Pezinok for 14 years, proving that she is able to patiently and lastingly fight for a just cause. She wants to serve her people.

At the end of August, your President visited Austrian Federal President Alexander Van der Bellen. Slovakia and Austria's relationship is as friendly as it is intensive.

I am happy to confirm this. We may have different opinions on the use of nuclear energy, but, generally speaking, there are no big unanswered questions. Approximately 2,000 Austrian businesses operate in Slovakia. Overall investments amount to around 6.6 billion euro, which secures 40,000 jobs. On the other hand, there are approximately 500 Slovak companies in Austria. Our relationship, however, goes much deeper than economics, for we also maintain very friendly exchanges on a local and regional level. Schools on both sides are making an effort to ensure regular ex-

change programmes. There are also many cultural events, neonatology patients from Hainburg and surroundings can be taken to Bratislava for treatment and there is soon going to be a new bicycle bridge connecting Marchegg and the Slovak side. I also wish for an additional bridge for cars, which, I hope, will arrive sooner or later.

On what issues do Slovakia and Austria have shared positions within the EU?

We are both making an effort towards stability in the Western Balkans and share positions in regard to the stabilisation of Ukraine. Multilateralism is also an important subject - like Austria, we favour fair conditions in international trade. We also have similar views when it comes to tackling migration - these problems should be resolved in the countries they originate in.

Last year, Slovakia celebrated its first quarter-century of independence. Retrospectively, was it a good idea to leave the former Czechoslovakia behind or would things have been better together?

Independence was both the right as well as a successful step. Back in 1993, people weren't all too sure when it came to this question. There were many people who didn't believe that an independent Slovakia could become a success story. Today, however, we know: It is a success story. We continue to maintain an excellent relationship with our Czech neighbours and no side can claim to be paying for the other. The kinds of discussions that were being held at the time have been eliminated through the separation process, and this is a good thing.

There continues to be a gap between Slovakia's rich west and the poorer east.

This is true, but the situation has undergone rapid improvements in the past few years. The government is trying to promote

investment in the east by way of a series of different measures. An increasing number of new factories is being built in the nation's east. Infrastructure has improved and the east is generally becoming more attractive for investors. Košice, the second-largest city in Slovakia, for example, provides superb conditions for the IT industry, especially thanks to the excellent universities located there - just like Prešov, incidentally. But all of this is, of course, a process.

In Slovakia, the car industry makes up 44 percent of total industrial output. Currently, this is working out very well, but does it pose a risk in the long term?

It goes without saying that the situation isn't ideal for us, especially in light of the facts that the overall demand for cars is decreasing and that automation in this area is becoming stronger and stronger. I have already spoken about the emerging IT sector in Slovakia. We are also very strong when it comes to electrical engineering or chemistry and the government is actively promoting diversification and better training to reduce possible dependencies. In addition, we have the fortune of having countless successful countrymen and women dispersed all over the world. Unfortunately, I cannot list them all, but in the US, for example, we have Radoslav Danilak, the founder of Tachyum. Very soon, he will begin producing the world's best chips for blockchain technology in Slovakia. The time to start steering training and education in this direction is now. As a result of what is basically full employment in Slovakia, we are lacking 70,000 skilled workers, which we are currently forced to compensate for with workers from abroad. Our Ministry of labour and the economy are engaging intensively with this challenge.

Austrians know Bratislava well, but they don't

spend much of their holidays in the rest of Slovakia, which boasts countless attractions. What could be the reason for this?

Our touristic potential is not yet fully realised - this is true. After all, we spent 40 years behind the Iron Curtain, the effects of which still linger with us, despite the fact that the quality of our service industry has made significant improvements. On top of that, Austria offers everything that we also have to offer when it comes to tourism. It may be that we just aren't “exotic” enough for our Austrian neighbours. However, we have started receiving tourists from other countries. In the past few years, we have increasingly become a travel destination for Israelis and a number of Asian countries, especially China. However, I do believe that we will soon start seeing more Austrian tourists, especially when it comes to spa and conference visits. After all, we are beginning to see an increase in the number of Austrian tourists, too.

You are a trained actor and as such you were part of a theatre ensemble in Nitra during the Velvet Revolution. In what way has this training helped you with your diplomatic work?

Learning the art of acting is very useful, for it helps you better present yourself. As an ambassador, you should be a little more extroverted and be able to trigger positive emotions in order to represent and implement your country's interests. ●

H.E. PETER MIŠÍK

was born in Bratislava in 1965. After years as an actor at the Theatre of Nitra he worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic before starting his international career in Bonn, Germany. Mišík, who is a father of two children, became Ambassador of the Slovak Republic to Austria in 2017.



Peter Mišík, Ambassador of the Slovak Republic to Austria, during the interview with Cercle Diplomatique.

PHOTOS: RALPH MANFREDI