

## Modernization of Slovak Armed Forces: Reasons, main weapons systems, principles and challenges

That the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic are on the verge of technological collapse is relatively well known by the general public. Already in 2011, when the first outcomes of the Strategic Defense Review were published, the document publicly pointed out the lamentable conditions of the armed forces and provoked a long debate on the need of modernization. Among the available data in support of this claim, we could for instance mention the level of interoperability with allied troops which stands at 54%. In addition, alarming was that the main capabilities of mechanized troops reach approximately 62% of NATO's requirements, engineer units achieve only 39% of NATO's standards, and the capabilities of the MiG-29 tactical aircraft, performing tasks in NATINADS system fulfill NATO criteria at the level of just 66%. What's more, approximately 90% of all the ammunition in depot storages was at the end of its service life, but also the same applied for 100% of tanks and BVP-1 armored vehicles. Overall, more than 70% of weapons systems of the ground forces were past service life and this number only increased over the last years.

Along with these negative trends, the reality faced by the Slovak Armed Forces is almost 100% dependence on the weapons of Soviet or Russian origin, which is detrimental not only in terms of technological, but also the economic and political considerations. And this dependence was already quite pronounced before the Ukrainian-Russian war.

Even though the war returned the security questions to the global and political radar screen, despite the widely-held opinion, war is not the main argument for the modernization of armed forces. Of course, the need seems more urgent and evident, but the main reason is their really poor condition, which has to be resolved whether there is war or not. The core question, that must be resolved, is whether in the next decade we want Slovakia that has functional armed forces or not. If so, modernization is a much needed process.

Modernization should be driven by several principles, such as prioritization, real and sustained economic planning, and should be harmonized with international trends and the evolution of the security environment, as well as to reflect the political commitments of the Slovak Republic. In addition, modernization should be carried out in line with transparency, efficiency, and political and professional consensus. When we define modernization programs, there is a necessity to prioritize, due to limited available resources. Of course, it will never be possible to achieve everything, to fulfill every need, just because the resources will always be limited, even with a top-level political support for the armed forces. Therefore, the priorities must be defined, as is customary in most militaries around the world.

The overall costs of replacement of all needed weapons systems, without accounting for the replacement of supersonic aircraft, are estimated at 3 billion Euro within the 10 years' horizon. In other words, just this fixed expenditure comes to 300 million Euro per year, a sum which we clearly cannot afford given that it would consume a disproportionate part of the annual budget for defense, which is approximately 800 million Euro per year. And this without the final tally being complete – as there is talk of replacing 18 multi-purpose helicopters (e.g. Black Hawk), 12 supersonic jets (e.g. Gripen), 90-120 armoured transporters, and 2-3 tactical medium-range transport aircraft (e.g. Spartan). To sum up, we cannot afford all of these expenditures in such a short term. So, there is an urgent need to set the priorities on the basis of the trends in the international security environment. For example, it makes sense to focus on multi-purpose helicopters, which are deployable in international operations, for domestic crisis management and in as last resort, in a support role within territorial defense.

From this point of view, purchase of transport aircraft seems less relevant, because the capability to transport/deploy weapons systems and troops for longer distances won't be a priority, for Slovakia or for NATO. Yes, it will be an important capability, but not a crucial one. Closely related is also the real and sustained economic planning for the process of modernization. There is a long history of excellent but unfortunately economically impracticable or unrealized plans and models within the Slovakia's Ministry of Defense (Model 2010, Model 2015). Thus, we can conclude it's not a good practice to promise, and even enter into contracts related to the modernization programs, which are not fiscally realistic to begin with. However, if it will happen again, practically any potential steps of the successive management of the ministry to mitigate the wrong decisions would be rendered ineffective, as no maneuver space would be left. Regarding the long-term nature of these programs, even two successive political leaderships of the MoD after the 2016 parliamentary elections would not be able to reverse the situation and adequately react to the situation.

This could be prevented by searching for political and professional consensus on the basic questions of modernization. In Europe, there are several good examples of this, e.g. Denmark, where the government and opposition meet in opinion on the core principles and direction of the armed forces, and all the important programs are based on consensus. Subsequently, no one has the motivation to change the course or even deny their position on the key issues. It would be a much welcome approach to apply this principle in Slovakia. Unfortunately, the political leadership of the Ministry of Defense chose quite the opposite path. What's more, the approach seems to be marked by avoiding compromises, even unwillingness to communicate and refusal to publish the conceptions, on which the modernization is based. What's more, the data relating to new weapons systems is kept hidden from public scrutiny, including their specification, future deployment, and costs. In the case of Slovakia, the adherence to the principle of consensus, including the principle of transparency is absolutely inapplicable.

Moreover, the Ministry did not react at all to the dramatic changes caused by the Ukrainian-Russian war. There were no discussions about the conflict's impact on our armed forces, on the erosion of their capabilities, the equipment and modernization. The worst case scenario would be to continue along the planning (including modernization) in accordance with the conditions before 2014, thus under completely different security environment. Poland, the Baltic region but also other allies, and NATO as a whole, have adopted changes, which dramatically shift the direction of their armed forces. In our case, neither change, nor discussion in this field is observed, an attitude that creates several problems. Lack of transparency generates not only the (political) questions, but also potentially significantly reduces the efficiency of the money that is invested. The next problem is an absence of conceptuality. We do not know why the given type of equipment is purchased. We don't have information, whether we have a conception for its deployment, for what missions we would need it, and why priority is given to a particular equipment or specification. This is a handicap, which could be easily avoided and would reduce the great number of questions and suggestions presented by security professionals.

But the appeals on the conceptual solution or discussion are confronted with the communication barrier of Ministry of Defense, given that the response of the Ministry to criticism, as constructive as it may be, is of third-rate quality. We are often witnessing that even the most noble idea, which would normally receive broad professional and political support, is doomed to failure due to the wrong communication approach. To that are related for instance problems with published figures on the purchases of the new systems. For example, we will purchase 9 multifunctional helicopters, probably Black Hawks, when we know that we will need 16, maybe even 18. Nevertheless, the Ministry does not define whether 9 is the final number, and consequently plans to reduce the final number of helicopters, or whether it is only the first part of the procurement process. Likewise, according to available information, the number of supersonic jets would be 8, yet military professionals put the minimum number of fighters (able to form a separate unit) at about 12. With a 60% deployment rate, it means approximately 7 deployable jets, of which 2+1 deployed for permanent control of air space (within the NATINADS system) and 2+2 for training purposes. It is evident that with the planned 8 aircraft and their 60% standard deployment rate (4-5 units), it is not possible to ensure this allocation. And it does not matter, whether it is Gripen or F-16 fighters, the numbers needed remain constant. The solution could be reaching of an agreement on international cooperation on the provision of training on a regular basis. Needless to say, there is no debate concerning this matter.

Moreover, in discussions about the armed forces, all Ministry's communication is aimed at several modernization programs, but long-term development is not mentioned at all. There is no debate about military bases, whether they are needed or not, and if they are needed, what is the preferred type. Should they be placed under the commanding structure or supporting structure? Needless to say, the Ministry's ambition should go beyond just making few – even if arguably necessary – purchases. But this requires conceptual thinking and approach. The problems, which have accumulated are exacerba-

ted by the financial demands of modernization projects. Spartan aircraft could be financed only from the defense budget, without additional sources. But fighter jets, helicopters and other purchases are not able to be financed this way. Under the actual state of things, it seems that even if the minister signs the contracts, the actual process of payment will pass to the successor cabinet, without any initiated discussion on the subject. The statement by the Prime Minister Fico, who should be concerned about such strategic and financially challenging projects, is still missing. Until now, his statements seem to go directly counter to his minister of defense when he proclaimed that there won't be any full-range modernization and any one-off increases in the defense budget. At the same time, his minister of defense was talking about modernization costing several hundreds of millions Euro. The old "guns versus butter" dilemma seems to be alive and well – after all it would be difficult to defend a purchase of helicopters for the army, when this money could be used on much more "useful" social packages. But once the contracts are signed, it is essential that they are upheld.