

*FMA activities*

# FMA VISIT TO SLOVAKIA

## THE FMA IN SLOVAKIA

For a number of years now I have regularly taken part in our Association's study trips to various countries. It has been an enlightening experience.

The list of countries I have visited is already a long one, and my next trip, to Cuba, will top it off.

The choice of destination is very fitting, particularly at a time when Donald Trump is preparing to implement an improvised, threatening and unpredictable foreign policy.

A group of regulars has formed for these trips, former parliamentarians who continue to advocate and believe in Europe, many of whom still hold positions of political, academic, legal and intellectual responsibility in their respective countries. They apply their experience to real situations in today's Europe.

The host countries welcome these EU activists with interest as they freely offer explanations, ask questions and make suggestions. Fruitful debate creates a thread which links the past, the present and the issues of the future.

With Slovakia holding the Presidency of the EU, and a few weeks after the Bratislava summit, our brief mission enabled us to attempt a diagnosis. The EU has lacked leadership and vision for a number of years now. I felt this once again while I was listening to the Slovak leaders who, although they are conducting their presidency conscientiously, apparently feel compelled to play everything strictly by the book. It is pragmatism that guides Slovakia's foreign policy. Because it is largely dependent on Russia for economic assistance and energy supplies, Slovakia takes



*FMA participants in the Slovakia visit with Miroslav Lajčák, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic*

an extremely cautious approach, particularly in applying sanctions and commenting on the situation in Ukraine.

As a result of its problems with minorities, in particular the Roma and Hungarians, Slovakia is refusing to accept any binding mechanisms for receiving refugees. It filed an action for annulment before the Court of Justice. Slovakia is gripped by the same fears and anxiety about committing to a Europe of power and solidarity. This was how I saw it, and the discussions between the members of the FMA delegation and leading politicians, journalists and civil society representatives enabled us to brush these issues aside and open up a debate which could help us to find a common way ahead.

What remains after such a brief study mission of this nature?

At the very least, we have learnt that it is imperative to listen, and that exchanging ideas with no taboos is more necessary than ever in a Europe that is uncertain about its future or what it really wants to be, for itself or

for the rest of the world.

This is my personal opinion on the matter; I am not speaking on behalf of all the colleagues in our group. The Association needs to pursue this approach based on auditing and intellectual exchange throughout Europe and the rest of the world, an approach characterised by competence, experience and modesty. And who is to say that it cannot sometimes be effective? In my view this is how we can contribute to the Europe which is everybody's future.

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## BRATISLAVA

We visited Bratislava the capital city of Slovakia towards the end of the country's EU presidency during the second half of last year when it was clear that the country is determined to show its commitment to the European project.

Slovakia which joined the EU on 1st May 2004 has benefited from its EU membership in terms of the growth of its economy and is particularly proud of its car industry and its record of producing the largest number of cars per person in Europe. I arrived in Slovakia via Austria and within minutes of touching down at Vienna's international airport I was on my way to the centre Bratislava by bus on a journey of less than an hour for the bargain price of 5 Euros including a delicious lemon tea on route.

Slovakia has a population of a little over 5 million and Bratislava which has been the capital of Slovakia since 1993 is relatively small for an EU capital city. Bratislava is an attractive city with an old town of narrow cobbled streets.

The history of the country includes being occupied by both Nazi and Soviet invaders and the Jewish population of Bratislava was almost totally wiped out and transported to their deaths in the concentration camps during the Nazi period. There are today only about 650 Jewish people left in the city following the mass slaughter of the Jewish population.

In 1969 the Prague Spring and the name of Alexander Dubcek was heralded across the world but their reforming efforts were crushed by the invasion of the Soviet Union and countries of the Warsaw Pact.



*FMA members in front of the Bratislava Castle*

Dubcek, who was a Slovak, was awarded the Sakharov Prize by the European Parliament for his efforts for human rights. He died in a road accident in 1992.

At a meeting with the Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, Mr. Miroslav Lajcak, he was highly critical of the UK referendum vote to leave the EU and said: 'We are a small country but we are very European'. He also stressed that he believed 'the EU should be a global player' and was critical of the EU's approach to Russia. He said it is important to step up diplomatic relations and acknowledge that Russia is a world player.

He defended his country's refusal to receive refugees and said his country was not prepared to be dictated to by the European Commission and will not take a quota of migrants. I found this surprising from a minister of such experience in diplomacy and international affairs, but he was not alone in his refusal to cooperate in the EU on the issue of sharing responsibility of hosting migrants.

In fact the Chair of the European Affairs Committee, Mr. Lubos Blah, who is on the European Affairs Committee and a member of parliament for the left wing SMER-SD party took the same line.

He was even critical of Germany for receiving large numbers of migrants and in particular of Mrs Merkel for her welcoming approach to migrants.

As an eastern country of the EU there is no doubt that Slovakia can have an important influence in the eastern region besides helping to promote improved diplomatic relations with Russia.

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