

ASSESSING SLOVENIA'S EUROPEAN UNION PRESIDENCY

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Since emerging from the remains of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991, Slovenia has enjoyed what is arguably the most successful path of all of the post-socialist states. In addition to a rapid consolidation of democratic rule (begun even before Slovenia declared its independence) and several routine transfers of power following free elections, Slovenia has experienced remarkable success in accomplishing its major foreign policy goals (Bukowski 2000). With this success it has raised its visibility both in Europe and globally and solidified its security in the most unstable part of the European continent. The core of Slovenia's foreign policy strategy was simple—it sought membership in NATO and the European Union (EU). Both objectives were accomplished in 2004. Slovenia built on its EU accession success in 2006 when it became the first of the ten countries involved in the 2004 enlargement to adopt the Euro currency. It accomplished another first among the new entrants on 1 January 2008 when it took on the six-month responsibility of the EU presidency.

This paper will assess Slovenia's historic EU presidency in terms of its accomplishments and its significance for the country's future foreign policy. A brief explanation of the presidency and its responsibilities will be offered followed by a description of Slovenia's preparations for its presidency term. The paper will then review the major events that occurred during Slovenia's term, focusing both on the outcome of these events and Slovenia's efforts to guide the EU through to responses, if not solutions. Finally, the paper will assess Slovenia's work in its role as the presidency country and seek to understand its experiences through two explanatory lenses first proposed by Elgstrom (2003) in his work on EU presidencies: country characteristics and actor expectations. In terms of country characteristics the key dimension in the case of Slovenia is country size. The very limited footprint Slovenia is able to cast in Europe provides an obvious analytical tool for understanding the course of Slovenia's presidency. Elgstrom's second analytical dimension utilizes actor expectations in terms of what was expected of Slovenia's presidency by EU actors as well as expectations of the overall function of the position of the EU presidency.

Understanding the EU Presidency

The European Union presidency is in reality a generic term describing two official responsibilities that are held concurrently: the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and the Presidency of the European Council (Nugent 2003: 184). The Council of Ministers was established in 1958 (the offshoot of the Special Council of Ministers of the European Coal and Steel Community) and is in itself generic in its membership.¹ While each member state is represented at the Council, the individuals attending a particular meeting will vary according to the decision-making needs of the body. Under rules established in 2001 the Council can meet in up to nine different configurations.² The national representative to the Council would be the minister with responsibility for the issue discussed. The Council stands as the primary intergovernmental decision-making component of the European Union (in contrast to the supranational aspect represented most visibly by the European Commission). The Council strives to make policy-related decisions by consensus, sometimes resulting in extended negotiations and elaborate compromises. When consensus cannot be achieved, a qualified majority vote (QVM) is utilized. Under QVM procedures, each member state is assigned a number of votes determined roughly by the population of the state. The provisions for attaining a qualified majority are designed to ensure that a combination of large and small states support a proposal before it is passed. QVM thus prevents the bigger member states from forcing through a decision by virtue of their larger populations (McCormick 149–50).³

The European Council was a relatively late addition to the institutional structure of the EU. The governmental heads of the then-European Communities (EC) met intermittently throughout the 1960s. At a summit in Paris in 1974 it was decided that these occasional summits

¹ Since 1993 the official designation of the Council of Ministers is “The Council of the European Union.” This name is easily confused with the European Council and as a result is rarely used outside of official proceedings and documents. For this reason, this paper will utilize Council of Ministers when referring to this body.

² The nine Council formations are General Affairs and External Relations; Economic and Financial Affairs; Justice and Home Affairs; Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs; Competitiveness; Transport, Telecommunications and Energy; Agriculture and Fisheries; Environment; Education, Youth and Culture (Nugent 154).

³ Under the QVM process, Slovenia has four votes. Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy, with twenty-nine votes, have the largest representation (McCormick 149). It is notable that while the nature of the Council is intergovernmental and thus designed to balance the supranational characteristics of the European Commission, the QVM is in itself a sovereignty-limiting activity.

should be turned into a regular activity. This gathering of the heads of government of the European Communities/European Union and the administrative support it required came to be called the European Council. The impetus for creating the European Council was the perception among the member states that the EC needed to be more nimble in its ability to respond to the growing number of challenges it faced and so required a mechanism that would bring the heads of government together on a regular basis. Initially the heads of government agreed to regular meetings three times a year; the rate was reduced to twice a year in 1986. Additional meetings may be held if the need arises. Over time the European Council has grown in influence and has become a key player in the EU policy-making process (Nugent 2003: 178–81).

Despite drawing its identity from two different entities, the main characteristics of the EU presidency have become standardized. The presidency responsibility rotates among the member countries every six months: January–June and July–December. In order to at least partially overcome the disruptive effect of changing leadership twice a year, the EU makes use of a “troika” system in which each presidency country coordinates (or at least consults) with the countries holding the presidency immediately before and after it. Each troika attempts to establish a short list of common objectives that can be pursued even as the presidency changes hands. Given that virtually no policy initiative can be completed in a six-month period, the troika gives some continuity to the policy process. In its original form, the rotation proceeded through the member states alphabetically. As the size of the EU grew (recall that the original European Communities had only six members), the process was modified to ensure a sort of balance of representation between larger and smaller states. The current order of rotation designates the presidency countries through 2020. It was finalized in 2007 and is designed to reflect the 2006 enlargement as well as the subsequent addition of Bulgaria and Romania. The latest arrangement maintains the earlier effort to place a larger country in the presidency at regular intervals, but also factors in geographical location, economic differences, and length of membership. These criteria ensure that each troika includes one of the EU's larger states as well as a state holding EU membership prior to 2006 (and thus with more experience in EU affairs—obviously both of these characteristics are often present in one country) (McCormick 2008: 141–42).

The responsibilities of the EU presidency are numerous, can significantly tax the foreign policy resources of smaller countries, and require a solid grasp of the subtleties of EU policy-making as well as the complexities of the EU bureaucracy and its myriad rules and regulations. The most important responsibility of the country holding the EU presidency is to organize and manage the work of the European Council and the Council of Ministers. This task includes setting the agendas for EU

meetings at a variety of levels, most importantly for the Council of Ministers and the Committee of Permanent Representatives. The latter (known as COREPER, which is derived from the French acronym for the Committee) consists of the heads of each member state's permanent representation (the de facto embassy) to the EU in Brussels. In conjunction with this coordinating responsibility, the task of chairing the meetings of the Council of Ministers, COREPER, and all of the other council-related meetings falls to the presidency country. Overall a presidency country can expect to organize and chair nearly 4,000 meetings, including at least eight held at the ministerial level. In order to successfully accomplish this coordinating function, the presidency country is expected to act as a mediator and to facilitate bargaining among the members in order to solve problems and to move policy initiatives forward. The occupant of the presidency also represents the Council of Ministers in all meetings with other EU bodies (e.g. the European Commission—the administrative arm of the EU—and the European Parliament). In keeping with the joint origins of the role, all European Council summits are chaired (with accompanying responsibilities) by the country holding the presidency. Finally, the presidency country is charged with oversight of EU foreign policy including acting as the official voice of the EU, managing the EU position at international conferences or negotiations conducted by the EU, and representing the EU at summit-level meetings (McCormick 2008: 141; Nugent 2003: 157).

In its entirety the EU presidency carries broad responsibilities that require the expenditure of significant resources. Larger countries shoulder much of the burden themselves, but smaller states rely on appropriate EU bureaucracies for support⁴ and may even ask other member states for assistance. Members are not bound to accept the presidency role. In 1986 Portugal, having just entered the EU, opted to forego its turn in the rotation. It felt it lacked both the diplomatic resources and the necessary expertise on EU affairs to successfully fulfill the responsibilities of the office (McCormick 2008: 143).

Holding the office of the presidency carries possible rewards as well as risks. The EU presidency brings considerable prestige and international attention to the country holding the office. This is a particularly significant benefit to the smaller countries of the EU. It is unlikely that a small state such as Slovenia will ever receive as much positive attention and visibility on the global stage as it did during its presidency term. The presidency potentially permits a country to have

⁴ The European Council lacks a secretariat, so the primary source of administrative support is the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers. It is made up of approximately 2,500 staff providing a wide range of administrative assistance (Nugent 2003: 160; 185).

considerable influence on the EU's policy priorities. Although many issues are carried over from the previous presidency term (indeed, given the considerable length of time it takes for the EU to settle on many of its policies there can be carry over from several presidency terms), the presidency country can add a few new priorities it considers important as well as decide how existing issues will be prioritized at the many meetings it is expected to organize (keeping in mind its responsibility to conform to any preferences emerging from its troika arrangement). Another obvious limitation here is that in reality little of substance can be accomplished during a six-month period. If final agreement is reached on any major policy during a particular presidency it is generally due to the successful work of the preceding presidency (or presidencies). Finally, the completion of a successful presidency is likely to enhance a country's reputation, both among European states and globally. An enhanced reputation may aid the country in achieving future foreign policy goals.

The risks endemic with holding the presidency are particularly germane to small states. In the first place, the numerous responsibilities of the office are very taxing on the administrative capabilities of even the largest states. Small states rely heavily on the assistance of European Council's General Secretariat and still find their own ministerial bureaucracies to be heavily burdened. Second, in attempting to undertake the role of facilitator in EU discussions, a state may compromise efforts to achieve its own national goals for EU policy. Such circumstances could have a negative impact on the domestic political prospects of the governing parties at the time of the presidency term (Nugent 2003: 163–64) and beyond. Third, an unsuccessful presidency might hurt a country's reputation both regionally and globally and affect its future ability to successfully pursue its foreign policy objectives. This represents a greater threat for a small state that may lack the ability and the resources to overcome such a handicap.

Preparations for Slovenia's presidency

The possibility that Slovenia could hold the EU presidency first emerged in November 2004, as Slovenia was in the process of forming a new government following general elections on 3 October. The proposal to include Slovenia in the presidency rotation emerged out of broader plans to reform the EU Constitution and alter the rotation to ensure a diverse selection of presidency countries following the EU's substantial enlargement earlier that year (see explanation above). Then Prime Minister designate Janša indicated that he desired a vote by the country's parliament, citing the costs involved with holding the office which he estimated at 60–

80 million euros.⁵ On 17 November, the Slovenian National Assembly voted 71–0 to support Slovenia’s inclusion in the presidency rotation. The unanimous view among the respective party leaderships was that the long-term benefits for Slovenia would exceed the short-term costs of managing the presidency.⁶ There was also informal agreement among the parliamentary parties that they would not permit politics to interfere with the operation of the presidency. This was an important concern since parliamentary elections were scheduled to be held less than four months after the conclusion of Slovenia’s proposed presidency term.⁷

Slovenia’s presidency term was confirmed by the EU Council of Ministers in December 2004 and incorporated into a new eighteen-month presidency program that included Germany and Portugal. The extended program would begin with Germany’s presidency in January 2007, followed by Portugal in July, and conclude with Slovenia’s term during the first half of 2008.⁸ The rationale behind the new “troika” arrangement was to allow three countries to jointly draft a work program that could be pursued over an eighteen-month period. It was hoped that this process would permit more continuity in policy and more time for program development. Preparations began just a month later in Ljubljana with the establishment of a government working group chaired by Prime Minister Janša as well as his foreign minister, finance minister, minister for Public Administration, and the state secretary for European Affairs.⁹ In July 2005 Janša announced that the cost of the presidency would not exceed 60 million euros, and in October a staffing plan was adopted that included assigning 1,200 government employees to tasks related to the presidency, adding 310 temporary employees to various government offices and increasing the size of Slovenia’s permanent representation mission in Brussels from forty-nine to 170.¹⁰ Also, a new conference center was to be built outside of Ljubljana at Brdo pri Kranju to handle the many EU meetings that would be held in Slovenia—although the vast majority of the meetings taking place during Slovenia’s presidency would occur in Brussels. This conference center would be the only major facilities-related expense of Slovenia’s presidency.

In April 2006 Germany, Portugal, and Slovenia began negotiations aimed at developing a draft program to be implemented by their respective presidencies. The following troika of France, the Czech Republic, and

⁵ STA, 9 November 2004.

⁶ STA, 17 November 2004.

⁷ *Financial Times*, 18 December 2007, p. 25.

⁸ STA, 13 December 2004.

⁹ Television Slovenia. 6 January 2005, translated by BBC Monitoring, 11 January 2008.

¹⁰ STA, 6 October 2005.

Sweden was also consulted. The program was released in December at a meeting in Berlin. In conjunction with the plan, Foreign Minister Rupel described four issues that would be the focus of Slovenia's presidency: ratification of an EU constitutional treaty, enlargement (particularly into the western Balkans), climate change and energy policy, and intercultural dialog.¹¹ Subsequent discussions resulted in adding implementation of the Lisbon Strategy¹² as a fifth priority.¹³

Slovenia's EU Presidency

Almost from the time Slovenia's presidency term was finalized, concern emerged throughout Europe as to whether such a small country was up to the task. One unnamed Slovene diplomat described Slovenia's goal for running the EU presidency as simply "Just not screw it up."¹⁴ Slovenia would become the smallest state to assume the presidency while relying primarily on its own governmental personnel.¹⁵ Cognizant of the resources necessary to complete its responsibility, the Janša government announced its intention to run a "commission presidency" meaning that it would depend heavily on the EU bureaucracy for advice and administrative support. Also, since Slovenia maintained a limited number of embassies, it reached agreement with France to use its embassies for activities associated with the representation of EU interests abroad.¹⁶

The first major event related to Slovenia's presidency took place on 8 January 2008 at its new conference center in Brdo pri Kranju when it hosted a meeting with key members of the European Commission. In addition to reviewing Slovenia's presidency objectives, Foreign Minister Rupel also announced the formation of an EU task force for Serbia that would include individuals from Slovenia's presidency as well as representatives from the subsequent French presidency, the European Commission and the European Council. The aim of the task force was to facilitate Serbia's efforts to join the EU—in keeping with Slovenia's wish to include the Western Balkans in any future EU enlargement. Minister Rupel indicated Slovenia's desire to have Serbia sign a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU during Slovenia's presidency, although he noted the importance of gaining Serbia's full cooperation with

¹¹ STA, 5 December 2006.

¹² The Lisbon Strategy was adopted by the EU in 2000 and commits the member states to making the EU's economy more competitive globally.

¹³ A more complete description of Slovenia's presidency priorities can be found at www.eu2008.si/en/The_Council_Presidency/Priorities_Programmes/index.html.

¹⁴ *Economist*, 18 November 2006.

¹⁵ Luxembourg has held the EU presidency several times, but it relies heavily on France and Germany for staffing.

¹⁶ *Financial Times*, 18 December 2007.

the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia before the SAA could become a reality. In this regard, he said, “new assessments” were needed.¹⁷ Prime Minister Janša used the meeting to call attention to the problem of Kosovo’s anticipated declaration of independence. Apparently he hoped to lower expectations about the EU’s reaction to Kosovo’s aspirations by remarking that he did not expect the EU reach a consensus on Kosovo’s independence. Janša instead called attention to the EU’s pending approval of the EULEX (European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo)¹⁸ force as the product of a united EU.¹⁹

At the same time as the meeting at Brdo pri Kranju, Slovenia’s first dedicated effort toward achieving its announced presidency goals commenced with the staging of a two-day international conference to mark the beginning of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue. The conference included remarks by the European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth and the President of the European Parliament as well as Prime Minister Janša and Slovenia’s President Danilo Türk (Slovenian Presidency of the EU, 8 January 2008).

Slovenia made progress on another of its EU policy emphases on 23 January when the European Commission put forward a directive on renewable energy and climate change. More commonly referred to as the energy and climate change package, the directive had its origins in a proposal made a year earlier that the EU undertake specific efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Emissions reduction targets were set in January 2007 and the targets were approved at the European Council summit in March. The Commission then began the long process of drafting rules that would allow the targets to be met. The January 2008 directive is significant in that, among other things, it largely kept intact the initial targets (“Memo,” 23 January 2008). Although this outcome is a consequence of many factors playing out over the course of nearly twelve months of bargaining, Slovenia was able to enjoy the good fortune of having the directive issued during its presidency. Following the Commission’s release of the directive, Slovenia, in its role as the presidency country, immediately initiated negotiations aimed at gaining approval by the European Council. This would be a long process that would not conclude before the end of Slovenia’s presidency term, but facilitating the negotiations can be included as an element of Slovenia’s presidency goals.

The advantages of holding the EU presidency were evident in the outcome of the Council of Ministers meeting attended by EU foreign

¹⁷ STA, 8 January 2008.

¹⁸ The EULEX mission, approved by the EU Council on 16 February 2008, will eventually consist of nearly 1,800 judges, police officers, prosecutors, and customs officials who will assist their counterparts in Kosovo.

¹⁹ *Die Welt*, 8 January 2008.

ministers on 18 February in Brussels. Less than twenty-four hours before the meeting, Kosovo's Provisional Assembly had approved an independence declaration for the province. While the declaration was a prominent subject of the Council meeting, it is notable that the first joint statement released by the ministers was a reaffirmation of the Council's conclusions of December 2007 that essentially sided with Slovenia in its dispute with Croatia regarding the status of the waters off Slovenia's coast.²⁰ The following month the Croatian parliament complied with the Council's request. On the one hand, this exchange represented a clear gain for Slovenia, and likely one that it would not have attained solely through bilateral negotiations. On the other hand, it is likely that using its presidency status to push the Croatian issue to the top of the meeting's agenda, led to some dissatisfaction on the part of many of the EU's members. One diplomat familiar with the situation noted that "It is frowned on to use your membership of [sic] the EU to blatantly achieve your national ends and it's definitely frowned on to use the presidency for your own purposes."²¹

The same Council of Ministers meeting also addressed Kosovo's independence declaration. Prime Minister Janša's prediction of the previous month proved correct, as Slovenia was unable to lead the ministers to a unanimous response. In the end, five of the EU's twenty-seven members chose not to recognize Kosovo's independence. Foreign Minister Rupel tried to put a positive spin on the disappointing outcome by declaring that "The European Union has once again successfully passed the test showing its unity and adopted a common view on recent developments in Kosovo." The "unity" described by Rupel rested in the ministers taking "note" of Kosovo's declaration and that the declaration included "provisions on democracy and equality of citizens, as well as the protection of the Serbian

²⁰ *Financial Times*, 20 February 2008, p. 10. The status of Slovenia's coastal waters is part of a larger dispute between Slovenia and Croatia that encompasses maritime and land borders as well as other issues. Space does not permit a discussion of these issues in their entirety. In the case of the Council of Ministers declaration of February 18, 2008, the issue concerned Croatia's establishment and enforcement of an ecological and fisheries protection zone which restricted Slovenia's access to the Adriatic and severely limited Slovene (and Italian) commercial fishing in the area covered by the zone. In June 2004, Croatia agreed that the zone would not be enforced against EU members while negotiating an amended relationship with the EU. In 2007 Croatia appeared to reverse that stand. The Council of Ministers responded on December 10, 2007 by calling on Croatia to respect its 2004 agreement. This statement was made in the context of the Council of Ministers' findings with respect to Croatia's efforts to join the EU, so the contents of the statement had implications beyond the simple expression of disappointment. The February 18 statement reiterated the initial finding and indicated that the Ministers would "return to this matter at a forthcoming meeting" (Council of the European Union, 18 February 2008).

²¹ *Financial Times*, 20 February 2008.

and other minorities” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs). For its part, the Slovenian Parliament voted to recognize Kosovo on 5 March by a vote of 57–4. Rupel remarked that Slovenia’s decision should not be regarded as an attempt to oppose Serbian interests, but rather was a matter of placing Slovenia in conformity with European Union policy.²²

Slovenia chaired the first of the two European Council summits in Brussels on 13 and 14 March. The outcome of these summits is rarely in doubt since any necessary agreements are brokered in advance. The most notable outcome of this summit was the launching of the second three-year cycle of the EU’s Lisbon Strategy to improve the economic competitiveness of the region (European Council, 13/14 March 2008). The new cycle was essentially a reconfirmation of the initial cycle, but the outcome conformed to one of Slovenia’s stated objectives for its presidency term.

Slovenia’s objective of using its presidency to extend EU enlargement into the western Balkans was the focus of an “informal” meeting of EU foreign ministers at the conference center in Brdo pri Kranju held 28 and 29 March 2008.²³ The ministers held meetings and heard presentations from representatives of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. The meeting was attended by the EU’s Commissioner for Enlargement Olli Rehn who discussed the European Commission’s latest set of proposals designed to enhance cooperation between the EU and the states of the western Balkans. Among the proposals were the listing of steps designed to lead to visa-free travel between the region and the EU. In conjunction with the meeting, Slovenia’s EU presidency office issued a statement drawing attention to the Commission’s efforts and specifically calling on Serbia’s leaders to “confirm their commitment to the European perspective.”²⁴ In this regard, Slovenia was continuing its efforts to coax Serbia toward the EU in the midst of Serbia’s contentious parliamentary election campaign scheduled to culminate on 11 May. Slovenia was anxious to provide the pro-European elements running in the election with useful, if not substantial, gestures that would improve their electoral fortunes.

A key element in Slovenia’s efforts to assist the pro-European parties in Serbia was encouraging the EU to conclude a Stabilization and Association Agreement with Belgrade (SAA). The SAA would bring a

²² STA, 5 March 2008.

²³ At the time of Slovenia’s presidency, EU foreign ministers would gather once during each presidency term for an informal meeting. These meetings were designated as “informal” because they were not expected to produce official statements. Rather, informal meetings represented an opportunity for the ministers to exchange views on issues chosen by the presidency country in an effort to facilitate subsequent policy decisions.

²⁴ STA, 29 March 2008.

significant increase in the level of cooperation between Serbia and the EU, and more importantly would be regarded as the critical first step in the long process that could allow Serbia to become an EU member. The major stumbling block to signing the SAA was opposition by the Netherlands and other member states, who were insisting that Serbia do more to cooperate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). As Serbia's election day drew closer (along with the prospects for a victory by radical Serbian nationalists), Slovenia's preference won out. The SAA was signed on 29 April at a ceremony in Brussels; however, it was noted that ratification of the agreement (and thus implementation) would not take place until Serbia cooperated more completely with the ICTY. The Slovene daily *Večer* described the gesture and its apparent intent as "Pre-Election Candy."²⁵ This small success for Slovenia may have had the desired effect on the Serbian electorate. On 11 May, a pro-Western coalition of political parties, somewhat unexpectedly, prevailed over nationalist parties.²⁶

Slovenia's efforts to encourage EU enlargement into the western Balkans received a further boost on 16 June, when Bosnia-Herzegovina signed its SAA with the EU. With the conclusion of Stabilization and Association Agreements with Serbia and Bosnia, all of the territories of the former Yugoslavia except Kosovo, had now made at least the first step toward EU accession.²⁷

While not receiving extensive publicity, Slovenia's presidency was marked by two notable developments during the early part of June. On 7 June, Slovenia helped bring to conclusion a long series of negotiations aimed at liberalizing the EU's energy market. The negotiations were complex and involved high stakes, with Germany and France expressing skepticism at efforts to promote more competition. In the end a liberalization process was approved, but with safeguards to satisfy the EU's two largest members.²⁸ An even longer set of negotiations (going back to 2004) were concluded under Slovenia's guidance on 10 June, when a compromise was reached on EU labor rules. Britain had long sought the right to opt-out of efforts to cap the standard work week at forty-eight hours and the EU membership finally agreed to this demand—although Spain and four other states were very vocal in expressing their disappointment with the compromise.²⁹ Both of these agreements represent major successes for Slovenia and its presidency, however, neither compromise can be implemented until they are approved by the European Parliament.

²⁵ STA, 30 April 2008.

²⁶ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. 12 May 2008. 1 June 2009 www.rferl.org/content/article/1117467.html.

²⁷ *Financial Times*, 17 June 2008, p. 2.

²⁸ *Financial Times*, 17 June 2008, p. 2.

²⁹ *Financial Times*, 10 June 2008, p. 4.

The most visible event hosted by Slovenia during its presidency took place on 10 June. The annual EU-US summit was held in Brdo pri Kranju. Given the many issues that divided the EU (and most of the EU's members) and the US, expectations for the summit were modest. A strong effort was made to highlight the positive nature of the overall relationship between the two powers with the summit declaration calling the EU-US connection "the most significant bilateral economic relationship in the world."³⁰ Nevertheless both sides acknowledged that differences existed on major issues. With little expected in terms of the outcome, Slovenia's challenge for the summit was to primarily ensure that the event was run smoothly. In this it was successful, especially with the advantage of holding the summit at the relatively remote conference center site outside of Ljubljana in order to reduce the exposure of the unpopular President Bush to the Slovene public and others. The newspaper *Večer* remarked on the general candor expressed by both sides about their differences, and *Dnevnik* titled its commentary on the summit, "A Decent Ending."³¹

Slovenia had barely two days to recover from the summit when Ireland, in a referendum held on 12 June, rejected the so-called Lisbon Treaty. This treaty represented the second attempt by the EU to make significant revisions in its governing processes. The current institutional decision-making processes were developed when the EU had a much smaller membership. Now, with twenty-seven members, policy-making in the EU has become extraordinarily cumbersome, time-consuming, and largely limited to incremental decisions. An initial effort to streamline decision-making procedures was rejected by Dutch and French voters in 2005, and a revised Treaty was agreed to in late 2007. In order for the treaty to go into effect, all twenty-seven members would have to complete national ratification procedures. In most cases, Slovenia included, ratification required only parliamentary approval, but other states were committed to national referenda.³² Prime Minister Janša accepted the results of the Irish vote with regret and announced that the EU heads of state would meet in Brussels the following week to assess the situation. Janša reiterated the necessity of the Treaty and observed that two-thirds of the member states had already ratified it.³³ In reality, there was little Slovenia (or any country holding the presidency) could do about this development. If the EU presidency been held by one of the larger states, the expression of regret may have had more *gravitas*, but the outcome of the vote would not have changed.

³⁰ STA, 10 June 2008.

³¹ STA, 11 June 2008.

³² Slovenia's Parliament ratified the Lisbon Treaty on 29 January 2008.

³³ STA, 13 June.

With the failure of the Irish referendum, some observers were of the opinion that EU plans for further enlargement would be abandoned or at least suspended. Indeed, this view was expressed by French President Sarkozy during the European Council meeting held the week following the Irish vote. This would have been a particularly strong blow to Croatia, whose membership application was further along than any other of the EU hopefuls. Speaking at the same meeting, Prime Minister Janša indicated his preference that enlargement plans move forward while the EU sought a new solution to its governing dilemma.³⁴ This view eventually prevailed.

Slovenia used the regularly scheduled summit of the European Council (19–20 June 2008) to make one final effort to reinforce the EU's commitment to enlargement into the western Balkans. The Council's official conclusions include an expression of support for the ongoing efforts to draw the region closer to the EU and a reaffirmation of the finding that all states in the region have the opportunity to achieve candidacy status. Perhaps more importantly, Slovenia arranged for an annex to be added to the summit's conclusions. The annex outlines generic and sometimes specific initiatives that the EU should take in the areas of enhanced regional cooperation, the facilitation of people-to-people contacts, and the strengthening of social and economic development in the region. All of these endeavors are designed to underpin the more general goal of furthering good governance (European Council, 19/20 June 2008). The inclusion of the annex represents a tangible effort by Slovenia to maintain, if not enhance, the EU's interest in the western Balkans. With the second failure of the EU's efforts to reform its governing mechanism, there existed the real possibility that most of the organization's membership would lose interest in further enlargement. Slovenia's actions were meant to ensure that neither the EU's bureaucracy nor its membership would neglect the states of former Yugoslavia.

The final major event of Slovenia's presidency was the annual two-day summit with Russia held on 26 and 27 June 2008. The meeting took place in the Siberian city of Khanty-Mansiysk. The challenge for Slovenia, as the presidency country, was to gain the approval of the EU membership to commence talks with Russia with the intent of negotiating a new strategic partnership between the two entities that would be more reflective of the current economic and geo-political situation (the previous partnership agreement was more than ten years old).³⁵ This effort had been on hold for nearly two years due to various objections from some of the EU members of central Europe. When Slovenia assumed the presidency, Lithuania represented the biggest obstacle to gaining approval for new

³⁴ Television Slovenia, 20 June 2008, translated by BBC Monitoring, 24 June 2008.

³⁵ Formally, the pact will be titled "Partnership and Cooperation Agreement."

partnership talks (with some support from Latvia and Estonia), and its objections continued through a 29 April meeting of EU foreign ministers. Lithuania's objections centered on issues of energy delivery from Russia and on the need for partnership talks to directly address the so-called "frozen conflicts" related to Georgia and Moldova.³⁶ Subsequent talks with Lithuania involving representatives from Slovenia and the European Commission finally led to a compromise and at a meeting in Brussels on 26 May the EU foreign ministers reached a formal agreement on pursuing EU-Russia partnership and cooperation talks.³⁷ The summit itself went smoothly and concluded with the announcement that the two sides would commence talks the following month aimed at reaching a new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement to replace the one concluded in 1997. At the closing ceremony, Russian President Medvedev specifically complimented Prime Minister Janša for his preparatory work, which he noted would allow the new partnership talks to begin.³⁸

With the mandate to pursue a new partnership and cooperation agreement, Slovenia's final presidency function can be regarded as a significant success. The need for a new agreement was widely recognized, and the two-year delay in launching talks was a major impediment to building better relations between the two most important strategic actors on the European continent.³⁹

On 30 June 2008 Slovenia handed over the presidency role to France. During its six-month presidency more than 8,000 EU events took place, 283 of which were held in Slovenia. These events involved the work of 2,720 Slovenian civil servants, 133 special participants, and 245 students. The total cost to Slovenia was €62.4 million (Slovenian Presidency of the European Union, 30 June 2008).

Slovenia's presidency assessed

By most measures, Slovenia's presidency experience was successful. At the very least, Slovenia met the expectations of the unnamed Slovenian diplomat quoted at the beginning of this paper who hoped only that Slovenia would "Just not screw it up." Slovenia proved that the concern held by some in Brussels that it was not up to the task was misplaced as it successfully handled both the routine and extraordinary demands of the presidency role.

³⁶ *Diena* (Riga), 2 May 2008.

³⁷ *Financial Times*, 27 May 2008, p. 7.

³⁸ STA, 27 June 2008.

³⁹ *Financial Times*, 28 June 2008, p. 12.

In terms of the more routine issues, the most notable are the advancement of the European Commission's directive on renewable energy and climate change, an agreement on the liberalization of the EU's energy market, and an agreement on EU labor rules. The issuance of the directive came only three weeks into Slovenia's presidency. For this reason, it is not plausible to assign Slovenia with the preponderance of the credit for the completion of this task. Nevertheless, the last stages of the directive were completed during the Slovenian presidency, allowing it to be considered as part of Ljubljana's EU legacy. It is notable that the goals of the directive largely reflected the targets set by the European Council ten months earlier. Targets or preferences expressed by the European Council do not always translate as expected into Commission directives. As noted earlier, once the directive was issued, Slovenia quickly commenced negotiations within the Council of Ministers over the contents of the directive as part of the first step toward getting the directive approved by the European Parliament, thus allowing it to become policy. This complex process would take several months to complete and so whatever was accomplished in the negotiations under Slovenia's auspices would not be recognized as part of its presidency accomplishments.

As with the renewable energy and climate change directive, Slovenia must receive some recognition for the completion of negotiations on energy market liberalization and on labor rules. Both of these negotiations had dragged through several presidencies, and it is impossible to determine how much responsibility can be fairly credited to Slovenia for bringing them to closure in June 2008. Since the talks carried through most of Slovenia's presidency, it would be reasonable to assign Slovenia at least some recognition.

Although these three accomplishments have been described here as routine, it would be wrong to view them as being of minor importance. While they did not receive the broad press coverage of the summits, for example, all three represent important public policy endeavors that will involve the commitment of significant amounts of resources.

The two most visible activities of Slovenia's presidency were the EU-US and the EU-Russia summits. The former was sensibly approached as primarily an effort at damage control. For obvious reasons nothing was expected of this summit, and Slovenia fully met the challenge of ensuring that it was conducted without incident. Regarding the latter, Slovenia's preparatory work paid off. Under its direction, Slovenia was able to ensure a positive outcome for the summit by persuading Lithuania to drop its resistance to commencing new partnership negotiations between the EU and Russia. As with other EU negotiations, it is difficult to attribute a particular level of influence to Slovenia over the process of reaching an agreement among the EU members to engage Russia, but given the sensitivity of the

issue as well as the length of time it took to resolve it, one can reasonably assign considerable credit to Slovenia and its diplomats for permitting the summit to end in such a positive manner.

Kosovo's independence declaration easily represented the greatest unscheduled challenge of Slovenia's presidency term. The declaration was not unexpected, but it was unwanted.⁴⁰ However, Slovenia was uniquely qualified to deal with this challenge—understanding the issues and the actors better than any other EU state. Ideally, Slovenia would have hoped for all twenty-seven of the member states to announce their plans to recognize Kosovo's independence. However, as noted above, Janša and Rupel understood from the beginning of Slovenia's presidency that a unanimous stand would be impossible. Nevertheless, Slovenia should receive credit for acting quickly and generating the most positive response possible, even if Rupel's remarks at the end of the meeting about Europe's "unity" and its "common view" on the situation were overstated.

In terms of its stated objectives, Slovenia could claim at least some success on four of its five priorities. At least partially through Slovenia's efforts, the EU experienced positive developments in enlargement toward the western Balkans, climate change and energy policy, intercultural dialogue, and the Lisbon Strategy. It was deeply disappointing for Slovenia to watch Irish voters reject the EU's proposed treaty on governance, but it should be noted that during Slovenia's presidency many other countries—including Slovenia—did ratify the treaty.

Among EU observers, the evaluation of Slovenia's presidency was overwhelmingly positive, although it should be reiterated that few, if any, observers had high expectations for Slovenia's presidency and some felt that it was a mistake to make the choice in the first place.⁴¹

The *Financial Times* noted that several significant developments occurred during Slovenia's tenure in office and described its role in these achievements as "useful but modest." It observed that Ireland's failure to approve the Lisbon Treaty was in no way the fault of Slovenia and regretted that this event "overshadowed a number of achievements" that could be credited to Slovenia's presidency. The newspaper also noted that Slovenia was able to make good use of its intimate knowledge of the western

⁴⁰ In what may have been a misguided effort to persuade Kosovo to postpone its plans for independence, Foreign Minister Rupel told a German radio network on January 11 that he did not think Kosovo would declare independence (*Koha Ditore* [Pristina], 13 January 2008, p. 4 [translated by BBC Monitoring, 17 January 2008]).

⁴¹ The Slovene government's own summary of its presidency achievements can be found at: www.eu2008.si/en/News_and_Documents/Press_Releases/June/0630SVEZdosezki.html.

Balkans, both in its handling of the Kosovo independence issue and in the way that it guided the EU's delicate relationship with Serbia.⁴² The pro-Europe outcome of Serbia's parliamentary election in May 2008 is remarkable given that most EU members chose to recognize Kosovo's independence. Some credit must be given to Slovenia's successful efforts to arrange for the signing of Serbia's Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU shortly before those elections.

The European Policy Centre in Brussels observed that Slovenia's presidency came at a difficult time for the EU, but that Ljubljana managed its challenges well. The Centre highlighted Slovenia's successful use of the European Commission. This observation mirrors Slovenia's pre-presidency declaration noted above that it would conduct a "Commission presidency." The Centre's report suggests that continued EU interest in the western Balkans may be the biggest legacy of Slovenia's presidency (23 June 2008).

Diplomats in Brussels generally expressed approval of Slovenia's performance, while acknowledging that Slovenia's small size handicapped its ability to function robustly. Slovenia made good use of its expertise in the Balkans region, relied on the capabilities of the Commission where necessary, and avoided getting involved in complex topics that it lacked the ability to deal with such as financial market reform and regulation.⁴³ European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso assessed Slovenia's term favorably and remarked the "If all the member states applied the same principles [as Slovenia], the European Union would overcome many of its difficulties."⁴⁴

Slovenia's presidency, and the success of that presidency, brought it several benefits. Without question, Slovenia's reputation within the EU will be enhanced both within the Commission and its attendant and massive bureaucracy as well as among the member states themselves. This boost in reputation should aid Slovenia in the future as it promotes its interests within the EU. Pursuing its EU interests will be facilitated by the knowledge Slovenia has gained of the EU's many complex processes. This knowledge will improve the capabilities of the Slovenian officials that handle EU affairs and should provide Slovenia with an advantage over the other recent EU entrants in terms of pursuing interests and utilizing EU programs to the fullest extent possible. The many personal contacts that Slovenian officials made in Brussels as a result of the presidency experience will also be beneficial. With a successful presidency behind it, Slovenia is likely to experience modest benefits to its overall foreign policy endeavors, having increased both its reputation and visibility on the global stage.

⁴² *Financial Times*, 27 June 2008, p. 2.

⁴³ *Financial Times*, 27 June 2008, p. 2.

⁴⁴ Deutsche Welle, 30 June 2008, 8 June 2009 www.dwworld.de/dw/article/0,2144,3449880,00.html

An important factor in Slovenia's success is due to the domestic political arrangements that prevailed before and during its presidency term. As noted above, when the issue of Slovenia receiving an EU presidency term first arose, all of the country's major political parties supported the idea and informally agreed to refrain from letting domestic political concerns interfere with issues related to Slovenia's presidency. By-and-large this agreement held. This allowed Slovenia to begin preparations for its term at an early stage and for those preparations to move forward at a steady pace. Slovenia, therefore, was well prepared when its presidency term commenced in January 2008.

Prime Minister Janša deserves credit for his competent management both in preparing Slovenia for the challenge of the presidency and for his work in guiding the country through its term. It is likely that a lack of domestic political interference aided Janša in his work. Janša also deserves credit for his willingness to cooperate extensively with the various bureaucracies of the European Commission. It would have been easy for him to overestimate how much of the presidency responsibility Slovenia could comfortably handle, but he and his staff made a realistic assessment of Slovenia's capabilities and expertise and relied heavily on the Commission for many administrative matters.

Foreign Minister Rupel also performed his role well and aided in Slovenia's success. His reputation in Brussels and Ljubljana as an individual prone to brusque behavior caused some concern over how he would fare in the difficult role of chairing the meetings of foreign ministers. These concerns did not materialize, however, and there is little evidence that his performance was anything other than helpful.

A review of Slovenia's work during its presidency does yield one issue that might harm its standing in the European Union. Slovenia's efforts to highlight its boundary dispute with Croatia during the meeting of EU foreign ministers in Brussels on 18 February appear to have created ill will among some member states. As noted earlier, presidency countries have the responsibility to set the agenda for most EU meetings. It is expected that presidency countries will use this responsibility wisely by, among other things, not entangling the EU in issues that primarily impact the presidency country. By pushing its concern over Croatia's enforcement of an ecological and fisheries protection zone to the top of the meeting agenda (even ahead of Kosovo's declaration of independence), Slovenia was perceived by some as violating its position of trust. On the other hand, the public record suggests that beyond this foreign ministers meeting, Slovenia did little to use its presidency authority to advantage itself in its dispute with Croatia. While the foreign ministers did responsibly side with Slovenia on the protection zone issue, Rupel's (and Janša's) move may have cost Slovenia future good will on the boundary issue, since the dispute over territorial

waters is far from being settled. Slovenia will have to rely on the good will of several EU members if it is to favorably resolve its border issues with Croatia prior to that country's accession to the EU.

Conclusions

Elgstrom's (2003) two analytical lenses for understanding EU presidencies, country characteristics and actor expectations, provide useful tools for assessing Slovenia's experience.

In terms of country characteristics, the operative variable in this case is Slovenia's small size. As noted above, the small size of Slovenia's bureaucratic resources and diplomatic presence, made it impossible for it to undertake the full scope of EU presidential responsibilities. Janša's government recognized this limitation when it acknowledged that it would conduct a "Commission presidency." As a result, much of the presidency-related administrative work was carried out, under Slovenian guidance, by bureaucrats associated with the European Commission. France, which would follow Slovenia to the EU presidency, was asked to represent Slovenia's presidency in the many countries where Slovenia did not maintain a diplomatic presence.

Slovenia's reliance on the European Commission carried an additional advantage. As a new entrant, Slovenia was relatively inexperienced with the byzantine EU bureaucracy and with its equally complex administrative procedures. In relying on the Commission, Slovenia could ensure that administrative mistakes would be minimized and that critical meetings would not be hindered by incomplete or inept preparation.

Small size should not be considered only a handicap. The benign domestic political environment that was created for presidency-related issues can be understood as the result of Slovenia's small and manageable political system. This environment facilitated the county's effective preparation for the presidency and allowed Janša to oversee the presidency with a minimum of political interference.

The actor expectations approach seeks to understand how a state conducts its presidency in terms of what is anticipated of that experience. These expectations can be based on the office itself and on the country that will occupy that office. Elgstrom writes that "Expectations are powerful determinants of what is considered to be appropriate Presidency behavior" (2003: 13). Without question, little was expected of Slovenia's presidency and some feared the endeavor would fail entirely. The Slovenian government could not have been unaware of this perception. To some extent, accepting the presidency was a risk, since failure would be especially poorly-tolerated by the many skeptical EU members. On the other hand, taking on the presidency with such limited expectations meant

that anything Slovenia did accomplish would count as a benefit. In this sense Slovenia has demonstrated that even small states can have relative success in the EU and with the EU presidency. The designation of Slovenia's presidency as a success is, of course, tempered by the realization that the amount of substantive accomplishments was not great. But there was the perception of quality in the execution of the presidency, which permitted Slovenia to acquire an improved reputation within the EU. The lesson for other small states should be that quality and competence matter. This may be particularly important to small states that are new to the EU and have not yet had sufficient time to build a reputation among the rest of the EU membership.

Understanding the expectations of its office and its own limitations as a small state shed light on Slovenia's presidency. Slovenia made a realistic assessment of its capabilities, took advantage of the flexibility inherent in its small size and arguably met or exceeded the expectations of the EU membership and the EU bureaucracy. As a result, aided by its enhanced reputation within the EU and globally, Slovenia may now enjoy a more productive association within the EU and better prospects of achieving its foreign policy goals.

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POVZETEK

SLOVENSKO PREDSEDOVANJE EVROPSKE UNIJE

Članek podaja pregled in oceno slovenskega predsedovanja Evropski uniji (januar-junij 2008). Izkušnjo predsedovanja analizira tako s stališča pričakovanih nosilcev te naloge kot s stališča značilnosti države. Ukvarja se tudi s posledicami, ki jih je predsedovanje imelo na prihodnje slovenske odnose z Evropsko unijo in na sposobnost Slovenije, da uresniči svoje zunanjepolitične cilje.