

SLOVENIA, NATO, AND THE EU: FROM REJECTION TO RESPONSIBILITY

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Slovenia's accession to both NATO and the EU in spring 2004 marked a significant reversal of the disappointment experienced when Slovenia was not included on NATO's enlargement list in 1997. It was also, of course, a remarkable point on the road travelled after the fractious break up of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia and the country's emergence as an independent international personality. It was at once the overcoming of the challenges that moving towards these international organizations presented for the preservation of traditional Slovene culture, as well as a new set of challenges to *slovenstvo*. On one hand, the referenda supporting membership of these bodies revealed a positive trend. On the other, the degree of support shown by Slovenes for NATO accession was notably less than in other accession countries. All others had not even felt the pressure to hold a referendum, except Hungary, in the first wave of enlargement in 1997–99, where the positive vote was 85.3. This compared with only 62 percent in Slovenia's NATO accession poll—and 89.61 percent support for EU membership in Slovenia, in the referendum held simultaneously.¹

Partnership and internationalisation, and the transfer of the exercise of sovereign rights, continued to be in tension with the forces of “nationalism” and cultural protection. This tension appeared likely to be enhanced by the election of a conservative, center-right government in October 2004. However, the achievement in gaining membership of both NATO and the EU confirmed that the trend was for Slovenia to do that which was in its interest and, crucially, to take responsibility for its own destiny—in contrast, partly, to the experience of 1997. The following analysis will first review the tension between preserving and promoting Sloveneness, on the one hand, and the complacency that meant Slovenia's 1997 road to NATO membership could be overtaken by power politics. Secondly, it will review the important relationships within both NATO and the EU for Slovenia. Thirdly, it will discuss the commitments

¹ *BBC News* 24 March 2003 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2877197.stm> at 24 January 2005; Government and Media PR Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defense, Ljubljana, 17 March 2003.

and responsibilities the country has taken in the run-up to, and since, gaining its membership credentials, as well as the roles it has played, notably concerning relationships with the remaining former Yugoslav countries and their prospective membership of the European Security bodies, as well as the potential impact of Slovenia's first significant center-right government on the key issues of relationships and roles, particularly regarding countries to the south and east.

1997, Complacency and "Slovenstvo"

In 1997, Slovenia had faced the disappointment of not being invited to join NATO, despite expectations that an invitation would be forthcoming. At the same time, although Slovenia was on the list for EU enlargement, a variety of issues had emerged to be confronted. Dealing with the problems of internationalization brought on by relations with these key bodies of European Security was a peculiar challenge for Slovenia, as it savored independence and clung to traditional culture.²

In the end, the country had to weigh the benefits of prospective EU membership against those of nationalist pride and sovereignty. In contrast, the belief that Slovenia's absence from the list of invitees to join NATO was not because of Slovenia was wholly consistent with traditional cultural values. While NATO decided not to invite Slovenia, there was a question over what Slovenia could have done differently. Although the decision was made elsewhere, factors inside Slovenia also played a role. Explanations for the NATO failure included the slow pace at which the country had embarked on appropriate military restructuring because of attachment to traditional homeland notions, as well as the deadening impact of governmental impotence and inertia after the 1996 elections. Lastly, less importantly, there was the failure to deploy suitable strategic arguments to persuade the Alliance of Slovenia's virtue.

The outcome over NATO and the experience of dealing with entry to the EU both brought shocks to Slovenia. While these shocks were survivable, they were also indicative of the relative complacency that characterized Slovenia's approach. Content with itself, basking in international praise for the Slovene transition in general, and only unhappy

² The present section draws on James Gow and Cathie Carmichael *Slovenia and the Slovenes: A Small State in the New Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000) chapters 6–7.

with the temporary difficulties inflicted by outsiders and circumstances, in their own minds it was understandable that Slovenes could think that NATO and EU membership were all-but foregone conclusions. Chastened by the experience, Slovenes then had to confront themselves. Both country and people had been historically concerned with parochial insulation against external influences in broader political communities. Having gained control over the exercise of sovereign rights, Slovenia and the Slovenes had to learn how to reinterpret and redistribute those sovereign rights if they were to prosper.

Integration into European and international life posed dilemmas for Slovenia and the Slovenes because sovereignty in international terms meant a process of opening up, whereas internal sovereignty, in many respects, had been built through language and culture, the hallmarks of Slovene particularity. All the requirements of general integration into European and international processes—politics, economics, communications—had language needs and concomitant value demands that ran against the preservation of much that was traditionally Slovene. Yet, political and economic realities made it increasingly hard to preserve cultural and social peculiarities. Slovenia and the Slovenes were caught between tradition and contemporary life.

Slovenia was finding ways to meet the challenges of integration in European and international life in the twenty-first century, while preserving cultural peculiarity. When Slovenia acquired independent international personality, the notion that the new state was in some sense the embodiment of *slovenstvo* was undeniable.³ The nationalist dream of the nineteenth century had been achieved. Yet, it was also a modern phenomenon. Statehood resulted from the dreams and campaigns of nationalists, but also emerged from democratization, economic liberalization, and the promotion of individual human rights. The new state had been blessed with the problem of reconciling its modern outlook and direction with its role as the embodiment of that which was peculiarly Slovene. Slovenia gradually found ways to reconcile tension between the old and the new. This meant finding a balance between the need to preserve traditional values and the need to live a prosperous and comfortable modern life. By the start of the twenty-first century, while still tested, the balance was being struck and Slovenia was showing itself capable of reflection, change, and adaptation. As a result, both EU

³ See Gow and Carmichael *Slovenia and the Slovenes* 9ff.

membership and NATO accession were gained because Slovenia had looked at itself and had begun to produce answers from within. In doing so, it helped to preserve the peculiarly Slovene while embracing change, in some ways integrating *slovenstvo* and cosmopolitan openness.

Multilateral and Bi-lateral Relations with and within NATO and the EU

Slovenia's accession to both NATO and the EU, and its performance since joining those organizations cannot be understood without reference to its pattern of bi-lateral relations with some of the individual member states in each body. For example, Italy, a sometimes-awkward neighbor in the accession process, became a major sponsor and a close collaborator in some spheres. One critical example in this regard is Italy's provision of air defense, under the rubric of a collective NATO initiative. With no fixed wing fighter capability and little in the way of ground based air defense systems, Slovenia had been faced with the impossibility of exercising control of its airspace since establishing its independence in 1992. One of the issues here had been the cost of such a provision, as well as the development of capability and procedures. The arrangement with the Alliance, essentially meant Italy's offering Slovenia protection, should it be needed. At the same time, it also signaled a degree of flexibility that will define many aspects of NATO's work in the decades ahead, as cooperation and role specialization become increasingly the norm, given the limitations each member state is likely to face in terms of politics, cost, and capability.

The relationship with Italy within NATO was not the only example of Slovenia's military cooperation with its new allies. In the run-up to accession, Slovenia also engaged in building a defense relationship with France. While cooperation with Italy offered clear substantive benefit, it is probable that the military cooperation with France had more to do with diplomacy, as Ljubljana sought to ensure that its security policy position within the Alliance and the EU was balanced. Defense cooperation with France was an offset to closer relationships with countries such as the UK and the US. This was a canny move to ensure that the country was not seen to be entirely in one camp.

The relationships with the UK and the US were clearly calculated. Ljubljana had already made the judgement at a very early stage that its vision of the EU and the core of defense issues in NATO meant a close link with London and a general approach that shadowed London's

policy.⁴ At the heart of Ljubljana's assessment was a vision shared with the UK, in which state sovereignty remained important in defining the nature of the EU. The EU agenda should not be marked by centralization and federalization. Shared views could be seen once Slovenia joined the Union, for example, in terms of the overall EU budget for the 2007–2013 period.⁵ However, in the same context, Slovenia also looked to a narrow version of its interests. While the Janša government formed in 2004 was committed to Slovenia's entering the euro currency by 2007 (despite its American leanings), both it and its predecessor had considerable concerns about the GDP-common budget calculation in the forthcoming budget period. As a new member, Slovenia was a net-beneficiary of the EU—in contrast to the UK, which was a net contributor as one of the economically stronger and more dynamic members of the Union. This meant that it received more from common funds than it contributed to them. However, given the 75 percent of average GDP figure that underpinned the existing relationship, and the prospect that countries such as Bulgaria and Romania would accede to the Union in 2007 or soon thereafter, the prospect was that Slovenia would quickly lose its status as a net beneficiary. The country was already only just under the threshold for development funds and was also ahead of some states that had been members of the Union for far longer in GDP and wealth terms. With the accession of two considerably poorer countries, Slovenia would clearly move to the other side of that 75 percent line and therefore become a net contributor. The general perspective from Ljubljana was that this would be undesirable, as the lack of direct financial benefit might undermine the relative popularity of membership and generate political problems—as well as making a hole in the budget. However, just as when Slovenia had been obliged to meet unusually demanding terms regarding property rights in the early stages of its relationship with the Union,⁶ the real message here was not what Slovenia might appear to be losing, but the evidence of just how economically and politically advanced it had become, so swiftly.

⁴ This view was clearly expressed to the author by those responsible initially for building relationships with the UK, following Slovenia's independence. This was confirmed by foreign ministry officials in the run-up to NATO and EU accession in discussion with the author.

⁵ Slovenska tiskovna agencija (STA [Slovene Press Agency] Ljubljana) 23 June 2004.

⁶ Gow and Carmichael, *Slovenia and the Slovenes*, chapter 6.

Slovenia, in this situation, would be a victim of its own success. But that success was the real story—and would bring added influence to Ljubljana within the Union as one of the leading economies in a Europe-wide market.

Comparable with both its emerging relationship with Italy, based on physical proximity, and its political proximity to the UK, Ljubljana also developed links with Austria in the European context. The relationship with Vienna pre-dated Slovenia's independence, where links had been established as Austrian diplomats sought to create a zone of influence corresponding to the former Habsburg Empire, just at the moment the Socialist Federative Republic was falling apart and Slovenia was picking up speed towards independence. Slovenia's northern neighbor clearly played a sympathetic role in the run up to the declaration of independence, even to the extent that some in political and diplomatic circles in Ljubljana were disappointed that Vienna did not immediately recognize Slovenia as having independent international personality in June 1991. This was of course unrealistic, given Austria's own aspirations to become a member state of the Union, as it was shaping to be. Nonetheless, this did not mean that Vienna was not very supportive. Indeed, it was Austria, under Foreign Minister Alois Mock, who led the way in triggering formal international attention to Slovenia's position and the onset of armed hostilities there, using the brand new Conflict Prevention mechanisms of the then-CSCE (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, later the OSCE—Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) to raise international concern. That led to the dispatch of the European Community "Troika"⁷ of foreign ministers that began the international engagement with the Yugoslav

⁷ The European Community was the precursor to the European Union, which was agreed in the Maastricht Treaty of December 1991, while the European Community was seeking to end the Yugoslav War. The Union came into effect on 1 January 1993 after all of the then member states had ratified the treaty. The "Troika" was and remains a key instrument of EU foreign policy. The current, previous and next member states to hold the rotating presidency of the Union have always formed it. However, with the creation of the High Representative for Security Policy—the first and current holder of this position is former Spanish Foreign Minister and former NATO Secretary General Javier Solana—the institution of the "Troika" has become less prominent.

War.⁸ The Ljubljana-Vienna relationship has continued on generally good terms and, balanced with other relationships, such as that with London, has led to a positive role being played in the security policy context. For example, in December 2003, Austria, Slovenia, and the UK, under NATO and Partnership for Peace auspices, organised a seminar in Belgrade on civilian and democratic control of the armed forces, as part of an assistance program in cooperation with the Ministry of Defense there to help in the reform and transformation of the Belgrade military.⁹

Alongside these important links in the EU and NATO contexts, Slovenia fostered its relationship with the US, in particular. While only formally relevant within NATO, this key relationship shaded Ljubljana's positions within the Union too—as it did for other countries, such as the UK, or the Netherlands, both completely committed to the EU, but seeking also to ensure good and balanced relations with Washington DC. For Slovenia, this meant that under the government of Janez Janša, a previously strong relationship could be expected to get still stronger. Thus, there would be no question of cutting back on commitments made concerning the US-led operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Whereas Slovenian Ambassador to NATO Matjaž Šinkovec had offered the formal public explanation for Slovenia's joining ISAF, the force in Afghanistan, these were not the main part of the story. According to Šinkovec, when asked directly why Slovenia was contributing to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), rather than the Balkans where it had particular advantages, the reasons were generic:

Let me put it this way. "If we don't go to Afghanistan, Afghanistan will come to us." What I want to say is that the situation in Afghanistan affects Slovenia's security, not only through international terrorism, but other means as well. For example, 80 percent of the poppy seeds that are used for drugs which are destined for Western Europe and in some cases pass through Slovenia, are produced in Afghanistan. What is more, a deterioration of security conditions in

⁸ Norbert Both, *From indifference to entrapment: the Netherlands and the Yugoslav crisis, 1990–1995* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2000).

⁹ Matjaž Šinkovec, Slovenian Ambassador to Partnership for Peace/NATO Headquarters, to the author, 17 December 2003.

Afghanistan could well lead to larger waves of refugees heading towards the EU, which would also affect Slovenia.¹⁰

While there could be no doubt that these broad security issues applied, equally there could be no doubt that the real reason for Ljubljana's deployment to Afghanistan was Washington. Indeed, it was the strategic importance of ensuring a relationship with the US, as well as a broad commitment to action fostering and supporting international peace and security, that explained why Slovenia had made significant security policy commitments in those places, not only in the South East European neighborhood, where it had particular links, interests and comparative advantages. This range of commitments is discussed in the following section.

2004 and Beyond: Commitments, Responsibilities and Questions

In the run-up to joining NATO and the EU, Slovenia began making commitments to international peace and security, particularly through contributions to peace and security operations. These commitments became the cement for Ljubljana's roles within NATO and the security arrangements of the EU. Slovenia committed a detachment of Special Forces to reconnaissance missions around Kabul the Afghan capital as part of ISAF, deployed in that country to assist transition under UN Security Council authority. That detachment of 17–20 personnel was a significant stake in one of the most sensitive security operations of the new century. While only numerically small, it was not only operationally notable, but also politically salient. The deployment in Afghanistan was important because it demonstrated both Slovenia's commitment *de facto* as an indispensable partner in multilateral operations and its political credentials *vis a vis* the United States. While the commitment of Special Forces made the essential point, it was backed up by the further deployment of a fire-fighting detachment, taking the total number deployed in Afghanistan to around thirty, according to Anton Grizold, defense minister until the change of government in November 2004.¹¹ In addition, Slovenia donated ninety tons of equipment to the Afghan national army being formed, as well as deploying two officers to the US CENTCOM Coordination Center in

¹⁰ Interview in *Slovenia News* 31 March 2004.

¹¹ STA 29 June 2004.

Tampa, Florida. Beyond military contributions in the Afghan context, Slovenia also contributed police experts for training missions, as well as offering to train five rehabilitation experts in Slovenia, as part of the International Trust Fund for De-mining and Mine Victims Assistance (ITF), and considerable humanitarian assistance.

While not committing forces directly to the US-led engagement in Iraq, Slovenia none the less made politically significant commitments to supporting that mission. These included sending five police instructors to train Iraqi police officers at the Jordanian Police training Center in Amman, in line with agreement in the North Atlantic Council in June 2004 to assist in the transition by offering training in third countries. In addition to this, among other Slovenian steps, Ljubljana donated USD 72,000 for a clean water project and USD 150,000 to a project co-founded with Austria to provide psychological help for children in Iraq.¹²

Engagement regarding Afghanistan and Iraq is symptomatic of Slovenia's commitment to international peace and security, and in particular to positioning itself alongside the US, as far as this can be balanced with commitments also to the EU and its member states, as well as domestic opinion. However, Ljubljana's most significant commitment of resources has come in the "Yugoslav" neighborhood, exploiting its position as the one former Yugoslav country successfully making the transition to membership of the European Security bodies, as well as showing a clear sense of responsibility for its erstwhile partners. In particular, this includes the commitment of a battalion of troops attached to the Tuzla command of EUFOR, the EU-organized force that continued the peace implementation and transition mission previously carried out by the NATO-led forces IFOR and SFOR, with the Slovenian Army contributing in the later stages of SFOR.

On 2 December 2004, EUFOR succeeded SFOR. The decision that the EU should take over responsibility for stabilisation in the Balkans had been taken back in June, although discussion and planning had been under way for some time. Operation Althea, the name for the EU mission, was formally authorized by UN Security Council Resolution 1572, on 22 November 2004 to take over. The emergence of EUFOR in Bosnia and Hercegovina was an important step politically, in terms of the EU-NATO and broader European-US relationships. It also had the

¹² http://www.centcom.mil/Operations/Coalition/Coalition_pages/slovenia.htm.

potential to make a difference in terms of weakened credibility for the force deployed in Bosnia and Hercegovina. However, it was not likely that there would be reduced credibility. In part, this was because a small US force was remaining in Bosnia to liaise with EUFOR, particularly regarding the continuing need to detain those indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, who remained at large. In larger part, however, credibility issues would be negligible because the introduction of EUFOR was essentially a re-branding exercise.

For the most part, the troops involved remained the same. The only significant differences were the withdrawal of the US element and the replacement of a US-led command with one led by the UK. The US contribution was withdrawn on 24 November. At that point, NATO Deputy Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, UK General Sir John Reith became the EU Operational Commander, based at SHAPE, the military command for NATO based at Mons, in Belgium, which is where the EU Operational Headquarters was also based. This reflected the close cooperation required between NATO and the EU to make this possible, involving the “double-hatting” of forces. In Bosnia and Hercegovina itself, EUFOR would be commanded by another British General, Major General David Leakey. However, the basic composition of the force did not change greatly.

In this context, although Poland took over command of the Multi-National Force North, based in Tuzla, from the US, Slovenia maintained its one battalion strong commitment to the 1500–2000-strong force. This deployment was an example of the way Slovenia was ensuring it played a significant role in both NATO and EU contexts, as well as demonstrating responsibility in the former Yugoslav context, where it had a particular history—one that some in Slovenia, at times, seemed to try to pretend was not there, arguing that the country had nothing to do with its southeastern neighbors and former partners.

Slovenia showed awareness of how it could make a useful contribution in the Yugoslav region in other ways. However, there were some doubts over whether these would continue or develop after the advent of the Janša government. Among the steps taken to show that Ljubljana was prepared to play a leading role in fostering transition in the war affected countries of the Yugoslav region, it announced plans for regional centers to assist. While the center proposed to help regarding

NATO had begun operation, the center for EU-linked assistance appeared likely to be more problematic under a Janša government. In June 2004, Minister for Europe Milan Cvikl had announced plans for this center, giving it particular attention during a visit to Montenegro. Cvikl proposed that Montenegrin delegates should attend a center in Slovenia for training and an exchange of experiences. He stressed that Ljubljana was “keen to support Western Balkan countries.”¹³ However, this commitment to its neighbors was complicated by difficulties in relations with Croatia.

Since establishing their independence, border questions between the two countries had been a small source of friction. Despite this, Slovenia had placed itself as a friend of Croatia and a champion of its developing relationship with the EU and NATO. In July, the Slovenian Foreign Affairs Committee was told that support for Croatia to become a member of the EU was in the country’s “strategic interest” by Ivo Vajgl, expected to be the country’s next foreign minister at that point, and that Slovenia would “do everything to be on Croatia’s side, sharing our knowledge and helping as much as Croatia wants” to make that eventuality possible.¹⁴ However, this position was turned around when Ljubljana announced that it would block Croatia’s joining the EU. This followed the arrest of the SLS leader, Janez Podobnik, and eleven other Slovenian politicians by the Croatian police. They were visiting a prominent SLS member, Joško Joras, who lived on a narrow strip of disputed land, one of the border issues between the two countries. The arrests by Croatian police soured relations between the countries. Slovenian politicians also provoked attention to the maritime border issues between the countries when Prime Minister Rop, along with Vajgl and Transport Minister Marko Pavliha cast fishing nets in front of photographers and a publicity stunt in the Bay of Piran. Later, Vajgl deepened the attack by saying that Slovenian fishermen could not fish without fear because “pirates rather than colleagues” awaited them.¹⁵ The tensions with Croatia were likely to remain and quite possibly be aggravated by Janša’s coming to power.

¹³ STA 25 June 2004.

¹⁴ RFE/RL *Newsline* 2 July 2004

¹⁵ Quoted in Donald F. Reindl “Slovenia Threatens To Block Croatian EU Membership,” RFE/RL *Newsline* 27 September 2004.

However, against this, Slovenia had to temper its position. Under pressure from its new partners and allies, Ljubljana relaxed its position. EU Security chief Javier Solana told Slovenian leaders at the government conference center at Brdo that membership of the EU carried with it “obligations” with regard to other countries waiting to be part of the EU.¹⁶ After this, and even following the change to the Janša government, which could be expected to have more strained relations with Croatia than its predecessor on “national” issues, Ljubljana was unlikely to pursue the issue to the extent of blocking membership. However, the warning showed what Slovenia held in reserve, should Croatia not improve its record on implementing agreements—agreements that Ljubljana regarded itself as having long fulfilled, with good justification.

Slovenia’s integration as a solid player in the regional context was also in evidence with reference to other international bodies. Slovenian Roman Jakič, for example, spoke for the Council of Europe, when proclaiming that the Council, and the international community as a whole, including Slovenia, preferred to see a single Serbia and Montenegro, rather than two separate states. This was balanced by the recognition that there would be respect for the “democratically expressed wishes of the citizens of the two republics.”¹⁷ There was a striking irony in a Slovenian figure uttering almost exactly the same line that US diplomats had used in trying to persuade Slovenia against declaring independence in 1991. This could well be taken as a real sign of how the Slovenian poacher had become integrated as an international gamekeeper, using its regional position to foster stability and avoid further separation of states in Union. With Slovenia also set to take over the chair of the OSCE in 2005, and with Kosovo number one on that body’s agenda, it seemed certain that Ljubljana would continue to have plenty of opportunity to apply its regional advantage, experience and expertise.

Conclusion

Joining NATO and the EU during 2004 demonstrated that Slovenia had clearly overcome the problems regarding each organization

¹⁶ RFE/RL *Newsline* 29 September 2004.

¹⁷ RFE/RL *Newsline* 20 August 2004.

that had seen failure to be invited to join the former and difficulties with the other in 1997. These historic events showed how far the country had been able to accommodate the preservation of traditional Slovene culture to challenges of international life in the twenty-first century. However, it was clear that questions would remain. The tension inherent in those questions seemed likely to be amplified by the election of a conservative, center-right government, led by Janez Janša, in 2004.

While tensions with Croatia remained at low levels and had even risen to levels of temporary political significance, the major sign of Ljubljana's increasing international political maturity was its willingness to play a leading role, where relevant, and a serious part in collective engagement, otherwise, regarding its former Yugoslav neighbors, to the south east. While recognising that there was a real role to play in that context, Slovenia had also made sure to shape its security policy in ways that meant the strongest diplomatic ties with all points of the compass, but notably with the US. Slovenia had established itself as a reliable partner both in terms of bi-lateral relations and multi-lateral relations with both the Alliance and the Union. At the same time, it had managed to establish a security policy that had the measure of the country's needs and potential, albeit one that would not likely be free of frictions, particularly as the first center-right government in Slovenia's independent history settled into office, with strong positions already stated regarding neighborhood questions, notably border and treaty issues with Croatia. However, overall, it seemed likely that there would be considerable continuity in Ljubljana's security policy.

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