



AMBASSADOR
MATJAZ SINKOVEC,
HEAD OF THE MISSION
OF SLOVENIA
TO NATO SPEAKING
TO NN&PP
CORRESPONDENT
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of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the first democratic Parliament of Slovenia in 1990, I can tell you that one of the first Parliamentary resolutions was to support the Western Coalition in the Gulf War. At the same time we were still formally part of Yugoslavia which sided against the Coalition. In the Allied Force campaign of 1998 we acted as Allies. However, it still remains a challenge to demonstrate clearly to the Allies that we have the will, the ability and the capabilities to be a true Ally. I hope that by end of this year we will have achieved that.

NN&PP: In this process the Membership Action Plan (MAP) plays a vital role. Please explain its importance for Slovenia.

Matjaz Šinkovec: The MAP, now in its third annual cycle, has proven to be a most useful tool for our preparations for membership in all specified areas, in all 5 chapters. It has helped us to organise ourselves and establish the necessary discipline of all the Government bodies concerned. The well-structured consultations with the International Staff and the 19 member states have been most helpful; they are candid and constructive. I do not doubt that this is one of the reasons for the great progress we have made so far. Because of the results achieved in the MAP and our experience in consultations, our accession process should be easier than otherwise. Both Slovenia and NATO have learned to work together.

NN&PP: How do you co-operate with the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Co-operation (EAPC) and the North Atlantic Council (NAC)?

Matjaz Šinkovec: Slovenia sees the EAPC as an important mechanism in the field of security, trust, confidence building and transparency in the Euro-Atlantic area. Its multi-layered structure enables us to choose those areas to which we can add value, and we also benefit from it in a broader sense for our preparations for NATO membership. Besides its general Euro-Atlantic context, it also enables us to participate in a narrower regional context. We participate in the EAPC from the very top to the bottom – from the Ambassadorial level to the very technical levels. The EAPC has proven its value and significance. You can hardly find anywhere else such a family of nations that works and consults together on common issues. It is important for Slovenia to participate in the decision-shaping process. The EAPC is a living mechanism that evolves every day to meet new challenges and perspectives.

With regards to the North Atlantic Council, I work closely with their permanent representatives on a regular basis. This is an excellent opportunity to inform the Council about our work and progress.

TO BUILD THE FUTURE TOGETHER

NN&PP: Excellency, Slovenia will join NATO in the near future. What has been your greatest challenge for this decisive step?

Matjaz Šinkovec: I sincerely hope that what you say is true. I have been involved in the process of Slovenia's emancipation and Euro-Atlantic integration for over a dozen years now. I believe I can vouch for the fact that our basic thinking has not changed in all this time. Slovenia's independence meant not an end in and of itself but also a chance for our nation to play a greater role to take on greater responsibility in international affairs. The inclusion of Slovenia in international organisations will on the one hand strengthen, not weaken these organisations. And on the other hand, we will be able to contribute more once we are inside than we could do on the outside.

We have had experience as Allies with NATO countries before, including World War II and shouldered our part of the burden then. Furthermore, we were never part of the Warsaw Pact, never adversaries. As the Chairman



NN&PP: *During the 1999 Washington Summit, Slovenia failed to win an invitation to join NATO. What was the reaction of the Slovenian people?*

Matjaž Šinkovec: I would not agree that Slovenia failed. I would say that an opportunity was missed to invite Slovenia, as occurred in 1997 at the Madrid Summit. However, in 1999 the Slovenian public understood that the Summit priority was not enlargement so much as the situation in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. I am not crying over spilt milk, but I believe that Slovenia would have progressed even further, especially in the fields of defence and military, if it had already been invited to join the Alliance. As a member of NATO, we could already have played a greater role in our common endeavours to increase the security and stability of the Euro-Atlantic area. However, since then we have been everything but idle. We have made tremendous progress and we will not let up either before or after Prague. This fact should be recognised at the Prague Summit by issuing an invitation to Slovenia to join the Alliance. An invitation would signify a mandate that we can progress even faster.

NN&PP: *How do you explain Slovenian public opinion regarding NATO membership?*

Matjaž Šinkovec: Slovenian public opinion is too often judged on the basis of polls performed on very small samples. However, the latest authoritative poll showed that there was more than a 2:1 ratio of people supporting NATO membership to those opposing it, actually 53% in favour and 24% against. Or to be even more exact, only 4% of Slovenians do not believe that we will ever become a NATO member. Pretty impressive. However, this poll was taken before the Government's public awareness activities began. I believe we can build on this bedrock of staunch support for membership, which has not failed us in past years, even during the Allied Force campaign when Slovenians fully understood that we were already acting as Allies. You should also not forget that all Parliamentary parties, except for a small one, have supported membership in the Alliance for almost a decade now.

NN&PP: *How can Slovenia demonstrate readiness for NATO membership? Can Slovenia solve the deficits before the Prague Summit?*

Matjaž Šinkovec: The principles outlined in the "Study on NATO Enlargement" endorsed by the Allies and published in 1995, still remain the basis for NATO's approach to inviting new members to join. Slovenia with its democratic political system, highly successful market economy, clear record of human rights and minorities protection, and

strong commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes – be they internal or with other states – clearly meets the criteria set by the Study. Slovenian willingness and ability to meet commitments of future membership in the Alliance in practice and not only on paper are, in our view, a critical factor which qualifies Slovenia as ready to join. Our defence reform, which is proceeding in accordance with plans and timelines, agreed too by the Allies, plays a central role in achieving what constitutes "a readiness" for becoming a NATO member. That is Slovenia's defence effort, which is strategically acceptable not only by the Alliance but also in the eyes of our public, and at the same time affordable to Slovenia.

I do not like to think in terms of solving deficits up to the Prague Summit. We are not interested in some minor and easy "quick fixes" which would artificially create a better picture of our situation than exists in fact. We have unquestionably achieved a great deal already but at the same time we prefer to think in the long term. A sustainable commitment rests on sound defence planning for years to come.

Here is a quote from NATO's latest progress report: "Slovenia continues to make significant progress in development of its armed forces with a focus on the development of capable and deployable reaction forces in accordance with NATO standards and strategy, so reflecting its strategic goal of Alliance membership." This confirms that we are on the right track but we have to keep the commitment. And I believe we are doing exactly that.

NN&PP: *Please explain the geo-strategic situation of Slovenia. How are your relations to neighbouring countries?*

Matjaž Šinkovec: After September 11 the geo-strategic situation, as that of other countries, has changed considerably. If we could have talked about Slovenia not facing any direct threat previous to the terrorist attacks in the United States, it is clear to all of us now that threats do not have recognisable faces or borders any longer. Contrary to what some "Natosceptics" say, there is even more reason now to be part of the Alliance. Only by working together we can face and defeat these new threats to the security of our nations.

At the same time Slovenia, a Western Central European nation, bordering on South-Eastern Europe, is in a unique position to play an even greater role in our neighbourhood. We have developed excellent relations with our immediate neighbours, Alliance members Italy and Hungary amongst them. We have invested a lot in helping stabilise the Western Balkans, both in defence, de-mining, humani-

tarian activities and, I would stress, in the economy. For instance, we are the largest foreign direct investors in Bosnia-Herzegovina. We have also shown to some of these troubled nations, by our example, that there is a "light at the end of the tunnel". Slovenia's inclusion in NATO would send a clear signal to them that the door to the Euro-Atlantic community is open to them once they fulfil the necessary criteria.

NN&PP: *Slovenia's Armed Forces have upgraded the equipment to meet NATO standards. What are the priorities?*

Matjaž Šinkovec: Priorities are clearly given to the development of deployable and sustainable reaction forces, air defence and surveillance, Host Nation Support, C³I and deployable Combat Support and Combat Service Support elements. The entire modernisation programme is driven by the implementation of the Partnership Goals agreed mutually by NATO and Slovenia, and is, much to our satisfaction, proceeding broadly according to our plan. The planned modernisation programme is progressing in accordance with financial projections and assisted by a special law (the Law on Basic Developments Programmes through to 2007) which has provided an additional US\$259 million for equipping and modernising the Armed Forces during this period. The funds will be used primarily to support the implementation of those Partnership Goals that are indispensable for the obligations of future NATO membership. Those projects include the procurement of telecommunications and secure CIS equipment, connectivity with NATINEADS, new infantry and anti-tank weapons, acquisition of a tactical mobile tele-communications network and hand-held combat radios, the purchase of additional Light Armoured Vehicles (Valuk, HMMWV), additional helicopters (Cougar), and modernisation of air defence assets.

NN&PP: *What is your vision for the future?*

Matjaž Šinkovec: We will be joining NATO, hopefully soon, the NATO as we know it now. Europe and the wider international community need NATO, a collective defence organisation that is concerned with wider international security and stability. If there were no NATO we would have to invent it. The transatlantic link is irreplaceable. History has demonstrated that more than once. The role of the United States is vital. It is also clear that Europe needs to improve on its capabilities. And Russia needs to be as involved as possible. We are aware of the internal debates on NATO's future role and its internal mechanisms. We believe we can participate constructively in these debates. We want to build the future together.

