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# SLOVENIA AND NATO



**According to many experts and NATO officials, an important rationale for NATO's decision to expand lies in the desire to reduce the "gray zone" of insecurity and uncertainty in Europe. While this sounds plausible in general terms, it raises some serious questions in relation to Slovenia. On the whole, the lines separating secure and insecure areas in Europe, the Mediterranean and Asia do not coincide with the division between NATO members and non-members. For decades there have been flash-points of violence and terrorism on NATO territory, such as Ulster, the Basque country, Corsica, and parts of Turkey. Conflicts have taken place or might conceivably take place between NATO member-states, such as Greece and Turkey, on Cyprus or over Gibraltar.**

It is true that Slovenia is situated in the geographic proximity of recent armed hostilities in the Balkans. In fact, a string of trouble spots stretches from Bosnia and Kosovo across the "Eurasian Balkans", as Z. Brzezinski calls it, all the way to South-East Asia. However, Slovenia, together with a number of other European countries and like neighbouring Austria, belongs to an area of stability and security. Also at the level of Slovenia's intentions there is no room for uncertainty or for treating that country as part of a "gray zone" in Europe.

Full-fledged memberships in EU, WEU and NATO have been declared Slovenia's chief international objectives almost since the proclamation of its independence on June 25, 1991. Its political elite found too little comfort in relying on the country's membership in UN and participation in OSCE alone. The then ineffectiveness of the international community in dealing in 1991-1995 even with a relatively small aggressor in the Balkans has contributed to this unease. Since 1991 the Slovenian Government has abandoned ex-Yugoslavia's stance of "active non-alignment". Under the influence of the Balkan war considerable political clout of the pacifist "Greens", who advocated

Slovenia's unilateral disarmament and neutrality, has practically evaporated. Due to their demise, to the lack either of a neutralist tradition, constitutional or international legal obligations in this respect Slovenia did not opt for a defense policy of armed neutralism. However, as long as the country remained outside the only effective regional security organization (NATO) Slovenia has had no other option but to pursue armed self-reliance. In addition, the Slovenian Defense Ministry signed bilateral cooperation protocols with the defense ministries of USA, UK, Hungary, Austria, the Czech Republic etc. and a trilateral protocol on military cooperation with Italy and Hungary.

As a candidate for membership both in NATO and in the European Union Slovenia's credentials have undergone thorough examinations by a number of respectable Western institutions, by the US government, European Commission and NATO. In its published opinion on Slovenia's application for EU membership the European Commission concluded on July 15, 1997: "Slovenia presents the characteristics of a democracy, with stable institutions guaranteeing the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities. Slovenia can be regarded as a functioning market economy... In the light of these considerations, the Commission recommends that negotiations for accession should be opened with Slovenia."

Slovenia has observed the requirement of peacefully settled disputes with neighbouring states. It has also had fewer problems related to its borders and minorities than some other NATO candidates and indeed less than two NATO members. With the neighbour Hungary, Slovenia signed a bilateral agreement providing for mutually favorable treatment of respective national minorities on both sides of the interstate border. The controversial issue of formerly owned real estate and the present right to acquire real estate by Italian citizens in Slovenia has in principle been settled through the EU-mediated "Spanish" compromise. Accordingly, the Slovenian Parliament amended an article in the Constitution. Slovenia has also conducted a responsible and constructive for-

eign policy and actively supported all international efforts to bring peace, stability and prosperity to the troubled Balkans (UNPROFOR, IFOR, SFOR, SECI, Operation Alba, UNICYP, KFOR).

It is reasonable to conclude that Slovenia has been in the group of four candidates which have earned in the West at least passing marks in fulfilling the overlapping EU criteria and NATO considerations for membership. These

were the states named in the NATO Extension Facilitation Act (NEFA) adopted by US Congress in 1996 – Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia were the states named in the NATO Extension Facilitation Act (NEFA) adopted by the US Congress in 1996. The US Department of State made the same selection in its official document published in 1997. Slovenia has satisfied to the highest degree also the key NATO-specific requirements elaborated in the Study on NATO Enlargement (1995). Having adopted a Western European pattern in civil-military relations Slovenia has reaffirmed democratic civilian rule as one of its fundamental constitutional norms. Moreover, these norms as well as human and minority rights are being observed in Slovenia more thoroughly than in, at least, one present NATO member state. It goes without saying that the desired democratic standards, including those in civil military relations, ought to be equally applied to the present members and to the candidates for membership. The absence of double standards is essential for maintaining the coherence of NATO as an alliance of democracies. It follows from this brief review that Slovenia has complied with almost all, if not all publicly known requirements for NATO membership.

## IN MARCH 1994 SLOVENIA SIGNED UP FOR NATO'S PARTNERSHIP FOR PEACE

The Slovenian Government's keen interest in NATO membership has not been prompted by the fears of social and political instability, by internal dangers for Slovenia's democratic order, by external military threats, unresolved conflicts with neighbouring states or by the desire to obtain sizeable funds and military hardware. Associating Slovenia with NATO has been viewed instead as all important aspect of the country's general political integration into the community of Western democratic states. In addition this association is expected to produce indirect positive security and economic effects.



Since 1996, Slovenian public opinion has largely supported the government's positions on the desirability of Slovenia's membership. A USIA-commissioned survey in April 1997 showed that 56% of respondents would vote in favor if a referendum were then to be held. Other polls showed this support oscillating between about 62% in March 1997 and 50% in January-March 2001, while the percentage of opponents has remained between 18 and 30%. This and other surveys placed Slovenia in 1997 behind the most enthusiastic Romania and Poland but ahead of Hungary, the Czech Republic and the rest of the candidate countries. The latest, July 2001 poll in Slovenia showed 56.4% respondents supporting accession and 28.2% being against. Thus although improved from the government's standpoint the predominant public attitudes toward Slovenia's NATO membership have been contradictory and trailing behind the much more enthusiastic positions held by the Slovenian political elite.

### SUPPORT FOR PRO-NATO STANCE

Slovenia's membership in NATO has been most favored by students, self-employed and retired persons, males over 61 years of age, better educated, less religious and urban dwellers. The support for the government's strong pro-NATO stance has been the lowest among peasants and unemployed. Slovenian housewives more often than males could not decide on this issue. The general support for NATO has been interdependent with the support to Slovenia's membership in EU. In case of referendum on Slovenia's membership in either of the two integrations the percentage of positive votes cast will be probably higher than the polls have indicated heretofore. I suppose that many undecided and some opponents will not show up at the polling stations.

The respondents in a public opinion poll conducted in April 1999, confirmed the need for armed intervention in the Kosovo crisis to the tune of 63-70%. In Slovenia the degree of public support for NATO's action was substantially higher than in some NATO member states, notably in Greece, the Czech Republic and Hungary. At the same time, a clear majority of respondents (about 60%) supported the government's decision to allow the use of Slovenia's air space by the alliance (Slovenia was the first country in the region to grant this permission). The degree of support for Slovenia's membership in NATO has even

slightly increased compared with the pre-crisis period, contrary to the reactions in some other countries.

### IN EXPECTATION OF THE NEXT OPPORTUNITY OF ENLARGEMENT

A number of Slovenian arguments used in 1997 remain valid:

- Slovenia conforms with the overlapping EU requirements and NATO expectations concerning successful reforms, functioning

Although the geostrategic importance of Slovenia has been devalued since the breakdown of the Eastern bloc its space and resources could be still valuable for NATO. Slovenia's territory could usefully serve for projecting security and possibly servicing NATO's peace-making or peace-keeping activities in the Balkans Slovenian professional police and military personnel could valuably contribute to international policing and peace-keeping in the Balkans (including Kosovo), due to their language skills and knowledge about the region.



**NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson and Prime Minister Dr Janez Drnovsek facing the Guard of Honour of Slovenian Armed Forces on November 12th 2001.**

political democracy, market economy, human and minority rights, constructive international behavior and settled relations with neighbors;

- the country complies with the NATO specific expectations concerning civilian control over the military;
- Slovenia's geographic position provides for the shortest and safest land bridge between two NATO members;
- Slovenia would be able to shoulder its membership responsibilities, including the financial ones (a reflection of Slovenia's highest GDP per capita in Central-Eastern Europe) and would not appreciably burden NATO resources;
- Slovenia's admission would make NATO enlargement more geopolitically balanced, would move the area of security and stability in the direction of the volatile Balkans and would serve as a positive incentive for good behavior of the Balkan aspirants for NATO and EU.

Although Slovenia is viewed by some observers as a candidate in the best position to be invited by NATO at the next turn, this prospect remains uncertain. The key general problem lies in the large disparity between the desires of the remaining Central-East European candidates, including Slovenia, to join the alliance and NATO's willingness (and some members' clear unwillingness) to expand further to the East and South-East. There are also a number of imponderables: the NATO-EU relations and the development of the European defense identity; the future of Russia; the stand of the Bush administration: the experience with the first Central East European round etc. These developments might affect Slovenia's relations with the Western integrations. The country's small size and a very modest military potential have contrasting effects on her relations with EU and NATO – facilitating the inclusion into the economic integration and serving as a disincentive for the military alliance. Consequently, at least, at present Slovenia seems to be closer to EU than to NATO membership, with her status as an EU candidate comparable or better than those of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary.

