

SLOVENIA AND NATO

According to many experts and also NATO officials an important rationale for NATO's decision to expand lied in the desire to reduce the "gray zone" of insecurity and uncertainty in Europe. Although underlying contention sounds plausible in general terms it raises some serious questions in relation, e.g., to Slovenia. On the whole, the lines separating security and insecurity areas in Europe, Mediterranean and Asia do not coincide with the division between NATO members and non-members. There have been already for decades flash-points of violence and terrorism on the territory of NATO members, such as Ulster, the Basque country, Corsica, parts of Turkey etc. Actual or potential interstate conflicts have taken or might conceivably (again) take place between NATO member-states, e.g. on the Greek-Turkish border, 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 neighboring 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 neutrality. 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 to it 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.

Having been 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 also by 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."¹

Slovenia has observed throughout also the requirement of peacefully settled disputes with neighboring 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 neighboring 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 the real estate formerly owned and of the present right to acquire real estate by Italian citizens in Slovenia has in principle been settled through the EU-mediated "Spanish" compromise. In line with it Slovenian Parliament amended an article in the Constitution. Slovenia has also conducted a responsible and constructive foreign policy, 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 our candidates, which have

Presentation of NATO's enlargement study in 1995.



Photo: NATO

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

Since 1996 Slovenian public opinion has largely supported the government's



Slovenian Premier dr. Drnovšek meeting Secretary General of NATO, Mr Xavier Solana, in 1995.

positions on the desirability of Slovenia's membership. An 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 percent in March 1997 and 50 percent in January-March 2001, while the percentage of opponents has remained between 18 and 30 percent. 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 percent responders supporting accession and 28.2 percent being against. Thus although improved from the government's standpoint the predominant public attitudes toward Slovenia's NATO membership has been contradictory and trailing behind the much more enthusiastic positions held by the Slovenian political elite.

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 very appreciably interdependent with the support to Slovenia's membership in EU. In case of referenda 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 of the membership simply 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 per-



Summit in Madrid, July 1997, where NATO passed a resolution on new members' affiliation and officially invited the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to join the Alliance.

Photo: NATO



cent. The degree of public support for NATO's action was in Slovenia 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 percent) 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.

Although successive Slovenian governments since 1991 have hardly missed a single opportunity to express their interest in being invited to NATO the Slovenian diplomatic campaign to attain this goal was launched in earnest only in the first half of 1996. After a long pause in the second half of 1996, caused by parliamentary election and the formation of a new ruling coalition, it was restarted in early 1997. Since then Slovenia had appeared occasionally among the countries mentioned as credible candidates for the first round of enlargement. In July 1997 Slovenia's admission in the first round is said to have been supported by nine NATO members, including all Mediterranean member-states and Canada. Eventually the considerable efforts by Slovenian diplomacy to gain an invitation ended up unsuccessfully both at the Madrid and at the Washington NATO summits (1997, 1999).

President B. Clinton's public arguments in Madrid in favor of only three candidates, if understood as indirect disqualification of Slovenia's candidacy, remained however mostly unconvincing. They contradicted, i.e., the US Government's (Department of State) own assessment of Slovenia's candidacy prepared prior to the Madrid NATO summit. In some respects, such as firm civilian control over the military, the financial ability to pay, a low cost for NATO, public support for NATO membership etc., Slovenia should have been then ranked higher than no. 4.

The NATO deferring decision concerning Slovenia could be explained in a number of ways. One conceivable calculation in NATO might have been that by bringing Slovenia into its wings the Alliance would not make any appreciable gain in geopolitical and military terms as compared with its present assets and forward positions in Central and South-Eastern Europe. Some presumed advantages of Slovenia repeated time over again by Slovenian officials would not make any appreciable gain in geopolitical and military Pact member, the visible lack of Russian objections, Slovenia's full cooperativeness with US and NATO military forces transiting and overflying Slovenia etc. gain by Slovenian officials would not make any appreciable gain in geopolitical and military also undercut one of the key Sloven-



NATO Headquarters in Brussels: partner-state delegations' offices building. It was opened three months after Slovenia joined Partnership for Peace (in June 1994).

ian arguments. It was also speculated at the time that NATO wanted to leave in the waiting line a widely acceptable candidate in order to make its pledge of openness more credible.

Full-fledged membership in the EU, and in the Western European Union (WEU), as well as in NATO, has been Slovenia's chief international objective almost since the proclamation of its independence on 25 June 1991. The Slovenian National Assembly has passed by acclamation several resolutions to this effect. Among the five major political parties, three as been Slovenia's chief international objective almost since the proclamation of its independence on 25 June 1991. The Slovenian National Assembly has passed years for Slovenia's accession to NATO as soon as possible. Two others initially showed certain reservations. By April 1996, however, all major parliamentary political parties and groups supported this position. But behind the facade of consensus among the leaders of the larger parliamentary parties one finds variations of opinions concerning the urgency, speed, and the bearable costs of joining the alliance. Some opposition to NATO membership among the rank and file has been detected in the right-of-the-center Slovenian Peoples's Party (SLS) and in the left-of-the-center United List of Social Democrats (ZLSD). In addition there are one small parliamentary Slovenian National Party (SNS) and several minor non-

parliamentary parties and groups which oppose Slovenia's possible membership. However the percentage of opponents among respondents in public opinion polls in Slovenia has been consistently lower than the corresponding percentages in the Czech Republic and Hungary.

It should be noted that following the NATO decision in Madrid there has been practically no psychological backlash among the Slovenian population. But the political opposition and critical press portrayed the Madrid outcome as a heavy defeat for the government and demanded convening an extraordinary session of the National Assembly. However the reaction of disappointment among the elite was allayed when on July 15, 1997 the European Commission recommended to include Slovenia into the first round of EU enlargement talks. This move helped the Slovenian government to easily survive the interpellation.

The Slovenian government continued lobbying prior to the Washington summit hoping to be invited to the second East European round of NATO enlargement. Slovenia's candidacy gained some ground in 1998. In October 1998 the North Atlantic Assembly in its report NATO in the 21st century recommended that at the Washington summit, only she should be invited. Other presumably discussed options included four conceivable groups. In all five variations a candidate was missing comparable in strength to Poland who re-

ally pulled the first Central East European round through. Although the least controversial among Central East European candidates Slovenia could not play this role. The situation prior to the Washington summit was summarized by an American expert in the following manner: "First, digesting the first three members is likely to be difficult... Slovenia is the best qualified for admission on political and economic grounds. But it adds little to the Alliance's military capability. Romania looked like a strong candidate for a second round... but its chances have actually declined since Madrid as a result of its internal difficulties... In short there are no clear-cut candidates for a second round. All the leading candidates have some liabilities and will need time to improve their qualifications. Thus NATO should not rush into an early new round of expansion. Third, there is no consensus within the Alliance for an early second round. With the exception of France, and to a lesser extent Italy, there is no support within the Alliance for issuing new invitations... Indeed, some members, especially Britain, are strongly opposed to an early second round."² The above-mentioned "Slovenia alone" recommendation was later supported by some well-known US figures but remained unheeded nevertheless. Thus the relative improvements in Slovenia's position proved to be insufficient for a breakthrough. The other enlargement options were discarded as well. The alliance, busy with the Kosovo crisis, was not inclined to burden further its agenda.

In April 1999 NATO decided to make a pause. Months before the Washington summit a silent consensus is said to have been arrived at not to invite any additional state, not to mention any particular candidate and not to fix any date for a future decision on enlargement ("no names, no dates"). The Kosovo crisis, the needs related to NATO's military operations and to the international humanitarian efforts in the Balkans led however to several modifications in this position. They affected the text of the relevant Chapter 7 in the Washington summit communique. In addition to confirming once again the principle of the Alliance's openness the names of all nine candidates were stated for the first time. The pair of Romania and Slovenia was placed at the top of the pack – in the same alphabetical order as in the corresponding 1997 document. It was followed (with no alphabetical order) by the names of the three Baltic states, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Macedonia and Albania. This sequence imperfectly and partly incorrectly reflected the actual standing and chances of the candidates, including the improved ratings of Slovakia, Bulgaria and Lithuania. In fact the strongest candidates would have been elsewhere – among the neutralist Sweden, Finland and Austria, should they decide to join the alliance.

To sweeten the pill of deferment a new

"Membership Action Plan" (MAP) was offered to those willing to sign up. Once accepted by NATO the participating candidates will have to go through a grueling preparatory course and examinations, without however a guarantee of admission. And thirdly, a review of the enlargement process was promised no later than in November 2002. However the relevant formulations used in the communique contained several escape clauses which could be utilized by NATO in 2002 to postpone again the next step of enlargement or even to stop the process altogether.

In expectation of the next opportunity a number of Slovenian arguments used in 1997 remain valid:

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

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 (it) further to the East and South-East. There is also a number of imponderables: the NATO-EU relations and the development of the Euro-



Photo: B. Kumarić

pean 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 also Slovenia's relations with the Western integrations. The country's smallness (and a very modest military potential) has 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 a EU candidate comparable or better than those of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary.

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- 1 Agenda 2000, European Commission's Opinion on Slovenia's Application for Membership of the European Union, Brussels: July 15, 1997, p. 114.
- 2 F. Stephen Larrabee NATO's Adaptation and Transformation: Key Challenges RAND Testimony, Washington: April 1999, pp. 7-8

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