

KO MAJHNO POSTANE VELIKO – SLOVENIJA IN NJENIH PETNAJST LET V NATU

WHEN SMALL BECOMES BIG – FIFTEEN YEARS OF SLOVENIA IN NATO

Povzetek Prispevek analizira članstvo Slovenije v Natu z zunanjega, zlasti regionalnega, vidika. Konceptualni okvir temelji na teoretičnih izhodiščih mednarodnih odnosov, ki pomagajo razumeti dogodke, povezane s procesi vključevanja v Nato. Metodologija za analizo je predvsem kvalitativna raziskava z nekaterimi primarnimi in sekundarnimi viri.

Besedilo prispeva k razpravam, ali majhne države zagotavljajo stalno varnost v zavezništvu. Zato preučuje primer Slovenije pri njenih prizadevanjih, da bi bila zanesljiva članica Nata. Pri tem obravnava njen trud in njeno vlogo v evro-atlantskih prizadevanjih držav Zahodnega Balkana.

Obravnava tudi vprašanje, koliko Slovenija pravzaprav sledi svojim nacionalnim interesom, prispeva k uresničevanju ambicij sosednjih držav glede Nata in krepi regionalno stabilnost, pri čemer je njena podlaga velika organizacija.

Po nekaterih predhodnih trditvah je v prispevku na kratko opisana pot vključevanja, ki jo je Slovenija opravila v obdobju od razpada Jugoslavije do vstopa v Nato. Avtor se nato osredotoči na njeno delovanje v soseščini, nazadnje pa na kratko oriše tudi vlogo Slovenije kot zagovornice in podpornice regije.

Prispevek se konča z ugotovitvijo, da Slovenija kljub svoji majhnosti in obsegu delovanja zagotavlja določene zmogljivosti, zaradi katerih je ugledna članica zavezništva.

Ključne besede *Slovenija, Nato, regija, Balkan, članstvo.*

Abstract This paper analyzes Slovenia's membership of NATO from an external, rather regional perspective. The conceptual context is based on theories of international relations, simplifying the understanding of developments related to the NATO integration processes. The methodology used for this analysis is mainly qualitative research, by means of several primary and secondary sources.

In this context, the paper contributes to debates on whether small states serve as consistent security providers in the Alliance; hence, it examines Slovenia's case in its efforts to be a reliable member of the Alliance. Correspondingly, it studies Slovenia's attempts and its role in the Euro-Atlantic efforts of the Western Balkan countries. Likewise, the paper further examines to what extent, using the large organization as a platform, Slovenia pursues its own national interests, contributes to achieving the NATO ambitions of neighbouring countries, and strengthens regional stability. After some preliminary arguments, the paper briefly describes Slovenia's integration path, from Yugoslavia to NATO. It then elaborates Slovenian engagements in the neighbourhood, before attempting to provide a short illustration of the role of Slovenia as an advocate of the region. The paper concludes that, despite its size and scope, Slovenia provides specific capacities that have verified the country as a respected member of the Alliance.

Key words *Slovenia, NATO, region, Balkan, membership.*

Introduction Even though NATO changed its mission considerably when the Cold War ended, developing the concept of “cooperative security”¹ and adapting to the emergence of asymmetric threats, today, 25 years later, we are once more facing the significance of the NATO military purpose, which is yet again to protect the dispersion of Russian influence in Europe. There has been a great deal of interest in terms of integrating ex-Yugoslav states into Euro-Atlantic society, expressed by most western countries, as well as by the Alliance *per se*. In addition to the benefits that each new member gains, despite some hesitations, many researchers argue that the integration of the entire Western Balkans² would undoubtedly be beneficial for the wider region and beyond.

Seemingly, the common security umbrella has been perceived as a prerequisite to preventing fragility in the region, but at the same time, to enhancing neighbourly relationships, boosting economic development and improving overall welfare.

Although Realpolitik claims that international organizations are “... slaves to nation-states and tools of great powers” (Shapiro, 2017), small countries can still obtain influence through powerful international organizations, as NATO certainly is, to realize their own national interests.

¹ “In the early 1990s, many strategic thinkers were caught up in a tide of optimism generally hailed as the New World Order. The term Cooperative Security became a catch phrase for a rather idealistic approach to the swiftly changing international climate.” (Cohen and Mihalka 2001, p 4).

² The term Western Balkans is both geographic and political. It was initially employed by US and European policymakers to describe the part of the Balkan Peninsula that has remained outside both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) since the early 1990s. It included all seven states which were formed during the collapse of Yugoslavia (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia) together with Albania, which was emerging from international isolation. (Bugajski, 2017).

Thus, in order to compensate for a lack of visibility and foreign appreciation, a small state must find unconventional ways to gain international attention in order to convince powerful countries of its relevance. There are numerous appropriate approaches for small states to be internationally recognized, including lobbying in international organizations, friendships with great powers, or the cooperation of several states, which are suggested by Alan Henrikson. Henrikson further suggests that “One of the most popular approaches that successful small states followed to address this problem is the so-called ‘niche diplomacy’, by which they are focusing their resources within one area in order to get the best returns and the widest international recognitions” (Lakatos, 2017, p 59). To a great degree, this could explain Slovenia’s efforts to become part of one of the most recognized regional organizations by name, even global by perception, i.e. NATO.

1 FROM YUGOSLAVIA TO NATO

The new mission of NATO that emerged after the culmination of the bipolar system was largely focused on the promotion of security and democracy in Europe and beyond. This also included a significant enlargement of the Alliance, with a clearly expressed interest in embracing Central and Eastern European countries, primarily the ex-Warsaw pact states and ex-Yugoslavia. In fact, the interest in enlargement was mutual, and not only in countries that were part of or under the huge influence of the Soviet Union, but also in the ex-Yugoslav republics, including Slovenia.

Later came the dissolution of Yugoslavia, which would not have echoed so loudly in comparison with the collapse of the Soviet Union if the republics had succeeded in finding a peaceful solution.

Slovenia, as the most western republic of ex-Yugoslavia, was utterly oriented towards its own independence, undoubtedly seeing before it its Western European future. Such intentions were visible even during the existence of the Yugoslavian federation; however, the overall circumstances, including global and regional developments, were not as much in favour of that until these two dissolutions occurred. From the perspective of size and population, Slovenia was generally considered a rather small state, determined to achieve independence and western associations. Euro-Atlantic integration was apparently the best-matched vehicle for attaining that strategic goal.

Although Slovenia immediately expressed its interest in joining both the European Union and NATO, political debate, as well as public opinion, varied on the benefits of affiliating with these organizations. The motivation to join the European Union was never seriously questioned, but this was not the case with NATO. Highlighting the significance of the Alliance, it was argued that, in addition to the security benefits, for Slovenia as well as for the region, “NATO membership would improve relations with other NATO members, especially neighbouring Italy, vital relationships for a small, trade-oriented country such as Slovenia,”

(Veltman, 2003). This suggests that by emphasizing the importance of the Alliance as a security umbrella, Slovenia's ambition to join NATO was augmented.

“The great interest shown in becoming part of the organization was mainly because the new NATO was seen as an organization that would provide rock-solid security by enabling democracy and a market economy where the favourable security environment would allow many businesses to safely invest capital in these countries and provide them with prosperity” (Delova, 2009, p 1).

When the first post-Cold War enlargement of NATO occurred in 1999, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland joined the Alliance³. What characterized this enlargement was a set of preconditions that aspirant countries had to fulfil in order to obtain membership. This conditionality would remain as an adopted philosophy for future NATO enlargements. Slovenia also applied for the first wave of enlargement, despite the internal dilemmas, and mainly fulfilled all the preconditions; however, it was not invited to join.

While Slovenia quickly succeeded with democratic reforms and achieved the highest per capita GDP in Central and Eastern Europe at that time (Šabič and Bukowski, 2002), apparently the strongest voices within the Alliance did not recognize the benefits of embracing Slovenia. The arguments for excluding Slovenia from the first wave of enlargement were related to defence competences and Slovenia's ability to afford the costs of membership. One of the major reasons explaining the initial denial to bring Slovenia into NATO in the first wave was that the country would “not make any appreciable gain in geopolitical and military terms’ and it would only bring cost to the Alliance” (Bebler, 1999, p 39). Accordingly, even though Slovenia was not too poor, and would not be the smallest member, one could claim that the country was generally still too minor for the Alliance's interests. In addition to this, many argued that Slovenia did not have any concrete backers among the big powers; even on the contrary, France required a Romanian invitation together with Slovenia, which also complicated the aspirant ambitions of the country⁴.

Initial reservations about Slovenian membership did not last long. Alongside its continued progress, and increased cooperation with the Alliance, there were also some external developments that enhanced the inclusion of Slovenia in the new enlargement wave. Instability in the region, including the Kosovo crises, as well as the 9/11 terrorist attacks, augmented Slovenia's cause, and at the same time increased domestic support for joining NATO. It was therefore undeniably in line with expectations that the invitation to join the Alliance came during the NATO Prague summit in 2002.

³ On 10 December 1996 NATO decided to invite Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic to apply for membership at the Madrid summit, scheduled for July 1997.

⁴ From discussion with Slovenian Military representative to NATO and EU, BG D. Humar.

The importance of building bridges and linking concurring nations in the newly established international environment was recognized by the big powers. Thus, the US specifically acknowledged the importance of small states, whether because of their location, resources or other capital that a country could bring to the Alliance. “Nobody is bigger than the United States of America. No big power more appreciates small powers. No small state will find a better friend than the United States” (Carafano, 2017).

Hence, Slovenia was warmly welcomed as a new NATO member, whose potential and significance had been recognized. Being the first country from the region to join the Alliance, Slovenia’s experience was also quickly respected in the region. In fact, this success of Slovenia served as a tangible motivating factor for other ex-Yugoslav countries, including Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Firstly, although some of them were far behind Slovenia’s successes, NATO membership was perceived as an achievable goal. Secondly, because of their common past, Slovenia was inevitably considered as an imminent supporter of other countries from the region.

2 ENGAGEMENTS IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Taking into consideration that “peace, security and prosperity are the three pillars of Slovenia’s foreign policy” with the strategic interests of Slovenia being “to ensure security and stability around the globe, but particularly in Europe”, it is clear why NATO remains the most relevant arrangement for guaranteeing Slovenia’s national security (The Foreign Policy of the Republic of Slovenia, 2015).

Originally, Slovenia strove to associate with initiatives from other regions, with a more Western European affiliation, including the Central European Initiative and the Central European Free Trade Agreement. Although geographically Slovenia partly belongs to the Balkan peninsula, from the perspective of other ex-Yugoslav states this move has been understood as a sign of hesitation in Slovenia to be considered as a Balkan country. This was emphasized by highlighting differences between the rest of Yugoslavia, developing a distinct discourse, distant from the Balkan region. An example of this was “the rejection of participation in the South-East Europe Cooperation Initiative (SECI)” (Bojinović and Šabič, 2017, p 53). Slovenia even refused to join the Balkan Countries' CHODs Conference on Military Cooperation, even though “the main aim of this initiative is to promote the stability, cooperation and well-being of the countries in this region,” (Balkan countries CHODs forum).

Although initial Slovenian foreign policy slanted towards an “away from the Balkans” approach (Bojinović and Šabič, 2017), Slovenia soon made a move back towards the Balkan region. This was already announced by the Declaration on Foreign Policy from 1999, where an active role of the state in the South-East European group of countries was highlighted (Declaration on Foreign Policy 1999).

Being aware of its limited resources to implement these goals, Slovenia projected its specific capabilities. “That niche was the Western Balkans,” (Bojinović and Šabič, 2017, p 58).

Notably, Slovenia’s reservations about the Balkans changed into a more creative way of considering the region. It also seems that a new platform – South-East Europe – became much more acceptable for Slovenia to affiliate with, hence regional forums, such as the Stability Pact for South-East Europe, later the Regional Cooperation Council, the South-East European Defence Ministerial, the South-East Europe Cooperation Programme, and some others proved appropriate settings for cooperation.

Thus, in addition to the Alliance’s arrangements, there have been a number of regional forums where Slovenia has actively participated. Most of these settings have also been used as a platform to bring the region closer to the Euro-Atlantic society. The engagement of Slovenia in the region was visibly enlarged, particularly once the country had become a fully-fledged member of NATO.

This put this young country in a position to trace the Euro-Atlantic path for others, but at the same time, to build its own international image. Participation and facilitation in regional activities, and direct engagement in common missions and tasks in the countries from the region, with backing of these countries in their attempts to join NATO, were some of Slovenia’s most notable efforts.

The appreciation that came with membership of NATO and the EU also stimulated Slovenian officials to lead or host various initiatives related to the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region. Slovenia’s proactive attitude has been truly acknowledged by both particular countries and the NATO authorities, so triggering its significant involvement in the integration processes of the Western Balkan states. It has been accepted as beneficial for all: Slovenia, countries from the region, and the Alliance as a whole.

However, in order to implement these ambitions, considerable resources are required. Indeed, there has been constant demand to achieve a defence expenditure share which is in accordance with the NATO guide of 2% of the countries’ GDP. Slovenia regularly strives to reach that objective; however, it seems that is too demanding, bearing in mind that Slovenia consistently allocates only around 1% for defence. In such circumstances, it has been imperative for Slovenia to find a way to justify its effective contribution to the Alliance, compensating for its defence expenditure shortfall. As Grizold stated, “Although Slovenia will never be able militarily to match the capabilities of the larger NATO members, it, and no doubt other small countries, can contribute far more than its size would suggest by playing to its strengths, specializing to a certain extent and concentrating on niche areas. Indeed, it is itching to be given the opportunity and assume its responsibilities,” (Grizold, 2002). Certainly, Slovenia has assumed responsibilities,

and among other things, played an important role in the integration processes, offering in this way an additional value to the Alliance.

By increasing its participation in NATO activities and projects, Slovenia demonstrated its tangible involvement in the Alliance. “Membership of today’s NATO is not only about security guarantees, but increasingly about influence and participation,” (Honkanen, 2002, p 15). Hence, by participating in the decision-making process of the Alliance, Slovenia has been able to influence it. Furthermore, it empowers the country to engage in the region, contributing to the Alliance’s efforts, while at the same time sharing experience with countries from the region and enhancing their aspirant positions. A common history with the ex-Yugoslav republics was the key prerequisite to comprehending developments in neighbouring countries. It is argued that “Slovenian membership of NATO can help bring a lasting peace to the whole Balkan region, better ensuring Slovenian security in the long run,” (Veltman, 2003).

Subsequently, Slovenia participated in most NATO projects in the region, which includes missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo. Taking an active part in NATO engagements in Bosnia and Herzegovina, from SFOR to NATO HQ Sarajevo, as well as the EU operation ALTEA, Slovenia proved its political orientation towards supporting reforms and security in the host nation, and also towards validating Slovenian defence and military relevance within the Alliance.

Slovenian military participation in the KFOR mission (Kosovo Force) was perceived as an additional quality, which is related to the fact that Slovenian presence has been never misjudged by the host nation (unlike Croatia for instance)⁵. Involvement in the NATO mission in North Macedonia⁶ – the NATO Military Liaison Office in Skopje⁷ – represents a higher level of contribution from Slovenia, providing military advice to defence structures in the host nation, in this way enhancing security reforms and supporting the NATO membership aspirations of North Macedonia. Again, there are paybacks for all: Slovenian status within the Alliance has been improved by the continual appointments of Slovenian senior officers as commanders of NATO Headquarters in Skopje. They have undeniably been representing NATO as an organization and implementing the policy of the

⁵ *As an outcome of the recent conflict, Serbia has considered Croatia’s eventual engagement as partial.*

⁶ *In accordance with the Prespa agreement, which was ratified by the parliaments of Greece and North Macedonia by 25 January 2019 and went into force on 12 February 2019, replacing the interim accord of 1995. It sees the country’s constitutional name, then the Republic of Macedonia, changed to the Republic of North Macedonia (European Western Balkans, 2019).*

⁷ *NHQS was created in April 2002 by the amalgamation of two HQs, namely KFOR REAR and AMBER FOX. The mission is to advise the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia’s Government Authorities on military aspects of Security Sector Reform in order to contribute to further Euro-Atlantic Integration and provide support to NATO-led operations within the Balkans Joint Area of Operations. As of April 1 2012, the mission’s name is NATO LIAISON OFFICE SKOPJE, which is more representative of its mission (NATO Liaison Office Skopje, 2019).*

Alliance by accomplishing this mission.⁸ Still, having its representatives heading a NATO command has also been an excellent opportunity for Slovenia to underscore its own national interests in the region and beyond.

Even in non-aspirant countries such as Serbia, Slovenia has been welcome to take part via the NATO Military Liaison Office in Belgrade. The experience and prestige that Slovenia gained in previous missions, as well as the constant support of particular intentions expressed by respective countries, made Slovenia highly qualified to take part in assisting the implementation of defence reforms in Serbia, as well as the reform and modernization of the Serbian Armed Forces.

Slovenian membership of NATO and the EU has also been very well used to protect Slovenia's national interests, even disputing some regional issues. One example was a border dispute with Croatia, "when Slovenia, a European Union member state, blocked the negotiation progress of Croatia, an EU candidate state." (Croatia Country Study Guide, Volume 1: Strategic Information and Developments, 2013, p 30) The issue was resolved when the two countries agreed with the EU to settle the dispute with an obligatory arbitration. Similarly, some political parties from Slovenia threatened to block Croatian accession to NATO in January 2009, causing a delay to the Assembly session supposed to ratify the accession protocols. However, after NATO expressed concerns, the Slovenian Parliament finally ratified Croatia's NATO accession (Croatia-Slovenia border disputes, 2019).

By engaging in the region, Slovenia has further improved its international image and gained additional influence by becoming a well-recognized 'insider'. Through this, Slovenia has come to the position of not only being able to contribute to preserving security in the region, but also to better protecting its own comforts, using common instruments from both organizations, NATO and the EU. Furthermore, enjoying the benefits and responsibilities of membership, Slovenia quickly extended its contribution to the level of direct assistance to countries from the region in opening the Alliance's door, by being a NATO contact embassy, deploying its advisors or promoting overall progress towards NATO.

3 SLOVENIA AS AN ADVOCATE OF THE REGION

New security dilemmas which appeared in the 21st century required an appropriate response, which also became a big challenge for NATO. After coping with multiple challenges and risks, including the fight against terrorism, NATO again faced the

⁸ *A joint statement by the EU Special Representative and Head of Delegation of the EU, Erwan Fouéré; the NATO HQ Skopje Commander and Senior Military Representative, David Humar; the Head of the OSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje, Ambassador Jose-Luis Herrero; and the United States Ambassador, Philip T. Reeker: We recognize and welcome the positive progress the country has made in improving interethnic relations since the signature of the Ohrid Framework Agreement. The Agreement and relevant constitutional provisions remain indispensable to building a peaceful, just and cohesive multiethnic society (OSCE, 12 August 2010).*

necessity of protecting its own area⁹. The area of the Western Balkans, which had begun its integration into the Alliance precisely through Slovenian membership, has faced strong Russian influence, particularly during the last decade, with Russia's obvious intent being to expand its control across this part of Europe and beyond. There is also a growing awareness that the fragility of the region could affect security and stability, as well as there being concerns about the occurrence of extreme organizations, supported from abroad, in the region. The strategy of intense cooperation and the open-door policy therefore extended the Alliance's relevance. As NATO secretary General Stoltenberg stated, "NATO enlargement is not a provocation. We respect the right of every sovereign nation to decide their own destiny, without force and without interference," (Stoltenberg, 2019).

Consequently, assisting countries from the region to overcome existing obstacles on their Euro-Atlantic road became an imperative for Slovenian foreign policy, triggering an intensification of activities in order to embrace them into the Alliance.

Indeed, since 2004, when Slovenia became a fully-fledged NATO member state, the region has had its promoter. In addition to other constant efforts, Slovenia's proactive role in the region has been proven by competition with other NATO members for assuming the role of the NATO Contact Point Embassy. Tackling 'bigger' players has been perceived as a very demanding challenge from the outside. However, a number of factors predisposed Slovenia to be a credible competitor and even to win the position. A relevant explanation of this triumph could be presented by two assessments, one observed from NATO, and the other from a regional perspective. Firstly, without any doubt, NATO appreciated Slovenia's rapid reform accomplishments, as well as its insider knowledge of the region, which boosted Slovenian relevance. Secondly, countries from the region not only appreciated Slovenia's accomplishments, but also Slovenia's truly impartial position in the sense of the inter-ethnic disputes that constantly occur between the ex-Yugoslav republics.

Thus, after just two years in the Alliance, Slovenia became a provider of a new quality of benefits, with an enhanced status for pursuing the integration process of other countries. An appropriate understanding of the situation of the NATO area and its immediate proximity brought Slovenia to be a NATO proxy for the region, being recognized as one of the best explainers of the situation.

Accordingly, on 1 January 2007, the Embassy of the Republic of Slovenia in Skopje assumed the role of NATO Contact Point Embassy to the Republic of Macedonia (Ministrstvo za zunanje zadeve, 2007). This insider position empowered Slovenia to effectively arrange appropriate activities (debates, seminars, meetings, conferences) to bring the country closer to the Alliance. At the same time, it enabled Slovenia to encourage progress within this particular country and accordingly, to promote

⁹ *The area of the Western Balkans could geographically even be considered as being within NATO.*

every improvement achieved among the other members and the NATO authorities, in this way becoming an efficient bond between NATO and the host nation. As the Macedonian Minister of Defence, Radmila Sekerinska, recently claimed, “Macedonia has the unreserved support of Slovenia for its efforts towards accession to the European Union (EU) and NATO membership,” (Xinhua.net, 2019).

Active preparation brought about good results; however, due to the bilateral dispute with Greece, Macedonian membership was vetoed for a long time. Nevertheless, after the internal political balance had changed in Macedonia, announcing a more flexible position with regard to the name disagreement with Greece, Slovenia stepped in once again, joining the overall international efforts to find a solution to eliminate the veto against NATO membership. Slovenia’s engagement was also evidenced by the statement of the Slovenian Foreign Minister, Miro Cerar, who said: “It is an extremely important step forward that confirms the will to permanently tackle the name issue and thus to allow Macedonia to move forward on its path to the Euro-Atlantic associations,” (Total Slovenia News, 2018). Direct involvement was also expressed by Slovenian civilian and military diplomats from NATO HQ Brussels, who travelled to Skopje and worked with the Macedonian authorities on specific issues, in order to overcome obstacles to joining the Alliance. Obviously, Slovenia’s advisory role and the constant sponsorship of Macedonia directly contributed to the recent achievement of its receiving an invitation to NATO membership.

Slovenia’s backing role has been particularly noticeable with regard to assisting Montenegro. Continuing with a similar practice of serving as a NATO Contact Point Embassy, Slovenia completed two appointments in Montenegro, from 2011 until 2014. An intensive engagement was carried out by repeatedly positioning high level civilian or military advisors to the Ministry of Defence of Montenegro. This concrete Slovenian assignment, which has already lasted for a decade, provided an additional quality of direct assistance to Montenegrin efforts to join NATO. Slovenia undoubtedly earned credits for the great advancement that Montenegro achieved, which encouraged the Montenegrin Prime Minister Milo Djukanovic to knock on the Alliance’s door in January 2014, clearly expressing the desire for Montenegro to join NATO.

Slovenia’s proactive sponsoring continued, as was highlighted by a letter to the NATO Secretary General, co-signed by Slovenian and Croatian Foreign and Defence Ministers on 29th May 2014, “stressing the importance of inviting Montenegro into NATO” during NATO’s 2014 Summit in Wales (The Slovenia Times, 2014).

Although NATO did not offer membership to any new countries that year, the Alliance announced at the summit that it would soon be embracing Montenegro by opening intensified talks with the country. Intensive cooperation was also sustained between Slovenia and Montenegro within NATO HQ in Brussels, with constant engagement between the two delegations to NATO, as well as of the two capitals, paving the way to Montenegro’s fully-fledged membership. NATO issued a formal invitation

on 2 December 2015, and after the ratification process, Montenegro officially joined NATO on 5 June 2017. Slovenia completed its sponsorship by being one of the first two countries to ratify the Protocol on the Accession of Montenegro to NATO, on 8 June 2017, the day after Iceland finalized its ratification (Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2016).

Bosnia and Herzegovina also enjoyed intensive backing from Slovenia in its efforts to extend its relationship with NATO. In 2015, Slovenia was also a candidate for the NATO Contact Point Embassy for Bosnia and Herzegovina; however, on that occasion the UK won that position. This occurred for two reasons: firstly, the UK had already begun sponsorship of the UK-German initiative to intensify Euro-Atlantic integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina; and secondly, Slovenia preferred a more realistic course of action and focused on some other countries from the region where success was faster to achieve. Nevertheless, it did not damage Slovenian support for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Since the Membership Action Plan (MAP) was provisionally granted to Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Tallinn in 2010, with the condition of registering prospective immovable military property in the state, Slovenia has constantly advocated the progress made in that country, striving to convince the Allies to activate the MAP. The implementation of this precondition was indeed complex; however, Bosnia and Herzegovina found it very difficult to convince the Allies of the difficulty of the process. Thus, working closely with its Bosnian counterparts, the Slovenian delegation to NATO in Brussels appropriated various activities in order to find a way to unblock the process. Alongside the presentation of progress made by Bosnia and Herzegovina in numerous areas, especially in the field of defence and military operations, Slovenian civilian and military officials constantly backed Bosnia and Herzegovina during NAC and ministerial meetings, summits and other similar occasions. One of the initiatives which first smashed the principally rigid position of the member states on the fulfilment of the 'Tallinn precondition' was launched in cooperation with the Slovenian Ambassador to NATO, Jelko Kacin, who arranged the circulation of the 'Progress Paper of Bosnia and Herzegovina', including an explanation of the tangible completion of the Tallinn precondition. This continued with a series of meetings at NATO HQ with officials from Bosnia and Herzegovina, facilitated by the Slovenian delegation, resulting in a 'reinterpretation' of the Tallinn precondition. The intention was to combine all the progress made, including its well-perceived contribution to the NATO operation, with a presentation of the advancement and explanation of the objective complications in registering military property. This kind of backing could only be made by NATO members who really understood the complexity of the legal and administrative procedures in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who were aware of the mentality of the people there, and at the same time, who knew the political difficulties imposed by the Dayton constitution. Slovenia had not only the competence to understand all this, but also the privilege to be accepted as the most unbiased country from the region, without hidden interests, which could not be said about some other neighbouring countries.

Finally, at the end of 2018, NATO offered Bosnia and Herzegovina the opportunity to submit their first Annual National Programme. Slovenia was again one of the upbeat advocates in obtaining a consensus between the Allies. It is now up to the authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina to respond properly and to obtain the activation of the MAP.

Slovenia was the first ex-Yugoslav country to recognize Kosovo as an independent state, which caused an instant dissatisfaction response from Serbia. Despite frequent calls from Serbia to revoke its recognition of Kosovo, Slovenia's sustained policy has been confirmed by the recent statement of the Foreign Minister, Miro Cerar, who said: "I think we had good grounds to recognize Kosovo as a state," (N1, 2019).

However, Kosovo remains an issue where Slovenia's balanced approach could be challenged, taking into consideration the constant efforts of Kosovo to join NATO, with parallel intent from Serbia to block any kind of endeavour to gain overall international recognition, including Euro-Atlantic ambitions.

Clearly, Slovenia has been very proactive in supporting countries from the region towards enhanced cooperation with NATO, as well as obtaining membership of the Alliance. The spectrum of the support has encompassed various measures and activities, including advice, administrative assistance, expertise, lobbying, and official advocacy by acting as the NATO Contact Point Embassy.

This has been also demonstrated by the NATO Secretary, General Stoltenberg, speaking to the Slovenian President, Borut Pahor, highlighting that Slovenia does "play an important role in the Western Balkans. You (Slovenia) help to address the challenges we face in that region. You are contributing significantly to our mission in Kosovo, KFOR, and you play an important role in bringing the region closer to the rest of Europe and the transatlantic family".¹⁰

Conclusion Despite the fact that after the disappearance of the Warsaw Pact the geopolitical position of Slovenia initially seemed moderated, this young republic swiftly prospered, and confirmed its worth to the Alliance. Also, although Slovenia has been considered as a relatively small state, it has shown that the size and population are not the only factors that matter. Apparently, there were other potentials that quickly verified Slovenia as a valuable member of the Alliance.

NATO membership obviously triggered greater engagement of Slovenia in the Western Balkans, which became a sort of Slovenian niche capability, directly contributing to enhancing stability and peace in the region. Using the advantages of NATO membership as well as the common past of the region, Slovenia has been

¹⁰ *Joint press point with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the President of the Republic of Slovenia, Borut Pahor. NATO, 20 February 2019.*

welcomed by both the Alliance and the Balkan countries to engage in their Euro-Atlantic efforts.

With an improved international image, and the opportunity to participate in NATO decision-making processes, Slovenia took responsibility for being an advocate for the region. Through this, it has supported the reforms and integration of each country individually. While implementing its national interests, Slovenia has contributed to the overall attempts of the Alliance to enhance regional security and stability, as well as the expansion of the Alliance, but at the same time, Slovenia has strengthened its own international position.

The road from small to big is not an easy endeavour, but obviously is achievable. Slovenia has clearly verified this, which could be a good pattern for others, both in the region and beyond. However, such undertakings are never completed. Still, after 15 years in the Alliance, there are challenges that will require continuous efforts and constant proof. They undoubtedly include an increase in defence expenditure, perseverance in offering adequate niche capabilities, and sustaining a balanced approach in the region.

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