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DIPLOMATIC BRIDGES: TWO DECADES OF SLOVENIA'S DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Slovenia's international development co-operation since its accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004, focusing on its strategic priorities, challenges, and impact in regions such as the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa. Using a historical and comparative approach, the study analyses policy documents, official development assistance (ODA) data and case studies to assess Slovenia's role as a small donor state within the EU framework. The analysis sheds light on the evolution of Slovenian development diplomacy, the integration of development assistance into foreign policy objectives and the challenges of policy coherence and resource allocation. The article also examines the opportunities Slovenia has to improve its development impact and strategic partnerships by better aligning with international standards and adapting to global dynamics.

Keywords: international development cooperation, Slovenian diplomacy, Western Balkans, sustainable development, European Union

PONTI DIPLOMATICI: DUE DECENNI DI COOPERAZIONE ALLO SVILUPPO IN SLOVENIA

SINTESI

Questo articolo esamina la cooperazione internazionale allo sviluppo della Slovenia a partire dalla sua adesione all'Unione Europea (UE) nel 2004, concentrandosi sulle sue priorità strategiche, le sfide e gli impatti in regioni come i Balcani occidentali, l'Europa orientale e l'Africa sub-sahariana. Utilizzando un approccio storico e comparativo, lo studio analizza i documenti politici, i dati sull'aiuto pubblico allo sviluppo (APS) e alcuni casi di studio per valutare il ruolo della Slovenia come piccolo Stato donatore nel quadro dell'UE. I risultati evidenziano l'evoluzione della diplomazia dello sviluppo slovena, l'integrazione degli aiuti allo sviluppo negli obiettivi di politica estera e le sfide poste dalla coerenza politica e dell'allocazione delle risorse. L'articolo esplora anche le opportunità per la Slovenia di migliorare il suo impatto sullo sviluppo e i suoi partenariati strategici attraverso un migliore allineamento con gli standard internazionali e l'adattamento alle dinamiche globali.

Parole chiave: cooperazione internazionale allo sviluppo, diplomazia slovena, Balcani occidentali, sviluppo sostenibile, Unione Europea

INTRODUCTION¹

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of its accession to the European Union (EU), Slovenia has undergone a significant transformation as a small diplomatic actor. Since gaining independence in 1991 and especially after joining the EU in 2004, the country has endeavoured to align its foreign policy with the general objectives of the EU while pursuing its strategic interests in the Western Balkans. However, Slovenia's path in development co-operation has not been without challenges. While Slovenia has aligned itself with the EU's development policy, its development efforts often reflect the tension between altruistic goals and pragmatic diplomatic (political and economic) interests in the region (Bučar, 2011; Udovič & Bučar, 2014; Udovič & Vojinović Jačimović, 2019). As global development priorities have shifted towards sustainable development and addressing challenges such as migration and climate change, Slovenian development diplomacy needs to adapt to these changing demands. The integration of such global priorities into Slovenia's foreign policy strategy reflects the country's efforts to harmonise national interests with its commitments to international development objectives.

One of the most important instruments for balancing these aims has been development co-operation.² Over the past 20 years, Slovenia has not only transformed itself from an aid recipient to an active donor country in 2004 and a member of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (DAC OECD) but has also sought to reshape its development cooperation to reflect changing global dynamics, regional priorities and the country's growing role within the EU. At the centre of this evolution is Slovenia's approach of using Official Development Assistance (ODA) to build diplomatic bridges through development cooperation. While the official narrative emphasises the use of ODA to improve economic and social stability in recipient countries and to support the integration of the Western Balkans into Euro-Atlantic structures, there is also a need to critically analyse the effectiveness and strategic coherence of these efforts (Bučar, 2011; Rogelj et al., 2023). For this reason, this article focuses not only on a historical overview of Slovenia's development cooperation since EU accession, but also on the main phases, strategic priorities and possible future directions.

In the first years after its independence, the focus of Slovenian foreign policy was on gaining international recognition and securing membership in key international organisations, shifting the focus away from the ex-Yugoslav countries (Udovič &

1 The present paper is the result of the authors' research within the research programme P5-0177 *Slovenia and its Actors in International Relations and European Integrations*. The author would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on the first version of the text, which were helpful in revising and improving the analysis.

2 Development cooperation is one of the most important tools of development diplomacy, which is about using development assistance to achieve foreign policy objectives by building relationships, fostering good relations and strengthening a donor's soft power (Zielińska, 2016).

Bučar, 2016). However, after joining the EU in 2004, Slovenia faced new challenges and opportunities as it transformed from a post-socialist state to an active participant in the EU, which required a shift in Slovenia's foreign policy orientation towards a more proactive engagement with its neighbouring regions. This shift was influenced not only by Slovenia's strategic interest in the region, but also by its economic ties and the potential benefits of regional stability for its own security and economic growth (Mrak et al., 2007; Jaklič & Svetličič, 2016).³ Bučar (2011) highlights that Slovenia's transition from a recipient of development assistance to a donor was characterised by a strategic emphasis on promoting stability in the Western Balkans through targeted development cooperation.⁴ However, this strategy was often characterised by Slovenia's dual objectives of promoting development and attempting to advance its own economic interests at the same time (Udovič & Bučar, 2014; Arbeiter et al., 2019).⁵ The prioritisation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Macedonia and Albania in Slovenian development cooperation reflects both Slovenia's historical ties and its strategic interest in promoting stability and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures (Udovič & Bučar, 2014). By acting as a bridge between the EU and the Western Balkans, Slovenia has sought to use its unique position to promote regional cooperation and stability, strengthen its diplomatic influence in the region and create a favourable environment for its own economic interests (Mrak et al., 2007).⁶

Slovenia's integration into the EU framework entailed the adoption of important legal and political framework conditions for the country's development cooperation. The 2006 International Development Cooperation Act (IDC Act) and the 2008 Resolution on International Development Cooperation of the Republic of Slovenia until 2015 (ReIDC) were important milestones, but their implementation was sometimes inconsistent, reflecting the overall challenges of aligning national policies with international development objectives (Udovič & Bučar, 2014). Although the documents outlined Slovenia's commitment to supporting sustainable development, democratic governance and economic stability in its neighbouring regions

- 3 While development cooperation is often presented as an altruistic effort to support development in recipient countries, it is often intertwined with strategic and self-interested motives of donor countries such as geopolitical influence and economic advantage (Arbeiter et al., 2019; Arbeiter & Bučar, 2022).
- 4 This also reflects Slovenia's diplomatic identity, which is deeply rooted in its collective memory of regional conflict and historical transition (Kočan & Udovič, 2020; Udovič, 2022). By prioritizing the Western Balkans, Slovenia wishes to use ODA as an extension of its diplomatic influence, with historical ties and collective memory of shared experiences guiding its foreign policy.
- 5 As Udovič and Bučar (2014) point out, Slovenia's efforts are primarily aimed at the Western Balkans due to historical ties and strategic interests in promoting regional stability and economic cooperation.
- 6 Slovenia's ODA focus on the Western Balkans not only reflects national strategic interests, but is also in line with the broader diplomatic focus of the EU, which has endeavoured to address the difficult past of its member and non-member states. Slovenia's contribution to development in the region reflects the EU's efforts to promote stability and reconciliation, even if these efforts face challenges in implementation (Zupančič et al., 2021).

in line with broader EU development goals, various scholars pointed out that the practical application of these commitments often falls short, with policy coherence and effective implementation remaining a challenge (Bučar & Milosavljević, 2011; Arbeiter et al., 2019).

Over the past two decades, Slovenia's development cooperation strategy has gone through several development phases characterised by shifts in focus, geographical priorities and thematic areas. In the first phase (2004–2010), important framework conditions were created and Slovenia's development policy was harmonised with that of the EU, while the political and economic transition of the Western Balkan countries was actively supported through bilateral aid and technical assistance. The following phase (2010–2015) involved a strategic consolidation and expansion of Slovenian development cooperation with a broader geographical focus and greater integration into EU development initiatives (Arbeiter et al., 2019). In recent years, Slovenia has sought to adapt its development cooperation in response to new global challenges such as the migration crisis, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. The latest Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia (MFA, 2019a) for the period 2023–2030 reflects these changes and emphasises the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), humanitarian aid and a stronger focus on building resilience in fragile states, which is in line with Slovenia's commitment to international solidarity and the promotion of peace, security and human rights worldwide. Thus, it seems that by further build diplomatic bridges through targeted development cooperation, Slovenia aims to increase its influence and contribute to a more stable and prosperous international environment.

This paper will provide a comprehensive historical overview of Slovenia's development co-operation since its accession to the EU, focusing on the key phases, achievements and challenges of the last 20 years. It will also analyse possible future directions of Slovenia's development cooperation strategy in the light of new global and regional dynamics. By examining Slovenia's evolving role as a donor country within the EU framework, the paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the opportunities and challenges faced by small states in shaping an effective development co-operation policy, understood as one of the most important instruments of mature diplomacy in the world. This paper is divided into four main sections. The first two sections provide a historical overview of Slovenia's development cooperation since its accession to the EU in 2004, discussing the legal and institutional framework and analysing the strategic priorities. The analysis of Slovenia's development cooperation is divided into two main periods to reflect the country's changing role in the international development landscape: before and after joining the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) in 2013. The first period (2004–2013) covers Slovenia's first years as a donor country after its accession to the European Union in 2004, during which time Slovenia focused on establishing a legal and institutional framework for development cooperation, aligning its policies with EU objectives and prioritising regional stability in the Western Balkans.

The second period (2013–2024) represents Slovenia's development cooperation efforts as a DAC member, characterised by a more strategic and structured approach to official development assistance, a stronger alignment with international development standards and an increased commitment to global priorities such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This division allows for a nuanced analysis of the evolution of Slovenia's development cooperation strategy from a regional focus to a broader engagement in global development efforts, reflecting the country's growing responsibility and influence within the international donor community. The third section discusses the challenges Slovenia has faced in the different phases of its development policy. The final section discusses possible opportunities for Slovenia's development cooperation, taking into account current global trends and political changes in the EU.

THE FOUNDING YEARS: SLOVENIA'S ESTABLISHMENT AS A DONOR COUNTRY (2004–2013)

Following its accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004, Slovenia's approach to international development cooperation changed significantly. As a new member state, Slovenia had to align its policies with the EU's development objectives, which focus on poverty eradication, international development and later on sustainable development, the promotion of human rights and democracy worldwide. This alignment required the creation of a solid legal and policy framework to guide Slovenia's development cooperation efforts and integrate them into the broader EU context (Bučar & Udovič, 2007; Mrak et al., 2007; Udovič & Bučar, 2014; 2016).

Initially, Slovenia focussed on establishing a basic legal and institutional structure through the IDC Act (2006) and the subsequent ReIDC (PISRS, 2008), as shown in Table 1. These frameworks were designed to align with EU development objectives while reflecting Slovenia's strategic interests, particularly in the Western Balkans. The IDC Act emphasised the importance of aligning Slovenia's development goals with EU policies while considering Slovenia's national interests. It established the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the central coordinating body for development cooperation, responsible for policy formulation, coordination of aid programmes and compliance with international commitments (Udovič & Bučar, 2014).

Building on the IDC Act, Slovenia adopted the Resolution on International Development Cooperation of the Republic of Slovenia until 2015 (ReIDC) in 2008. The ReIDC (PISRS, 2008) set out Slovenia's strategic priorities for development cooperation, emphasising geographical and thematic priority areas. The ReIDC identified the Western Balkans as a priority area determined by Slovenia's historical ties and its strategic interest in promoting regional stability and development (Mrak et al., 2007). This alignment with the EU's development policy framework emphasises Slovenia's commitment to principles such as aid effectiveness, ownership and partnership.

Table 1: Legal and institutional structure of Slovenian development cooperation 2004–2013 (own elaboration based on documents mentioned).

Year	Document	Main Objectives	Geographical Priorities	Other important Points
2006	Act on International Development Cooperation of the Republic of Slovenia (<i>Zakon o mednarodnem razvojnem sodelovanju Republike Slovenije</i>)	Eradication of poverty in developing countries	Developing countries eligible for ODA (OECD DAC criteria)	Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the national coordinator
		Promotion of peace, human security, democracy, and good governance		Emphasising policy coherence
		Sustainable development (economic, social, environmental)		Creation of a framework for bilateral and multilateral development cooperation
		Provision of basic social services		
2008	Resolution on International Development Cooperation of the Republic of Slovenia until 2015 (<i>Resolucija o mednarodnem razvojnem sodelovanju Republike Slovenije za obdobje do leta 2015</i>)	Alignment with international development goals (MDGs)	Western Balkans and neighbouring regions	Strengthening partnerships with international organisations and NGOs
		Improving the effectiveness of aid		Promoting human rights, democracy, and the rule of law
		Focus on priority sectors (good governance, education, economic development)		Contribution to global peace and security

The focus on the Western Balkans – particularly Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo – was at the centre of Slovenia’s ODA strategy during this period (Mrak et al., 2007; Udovič & Bučar, 2016; Rogelj et al., 2023). This focus also reflects Slovenia’s diplomatic and foreign policy ambitions and shows that, at least strategically and at a declaratory level, Slovenia wanted to use ODA as a tool not only to support the development of the region, but also to consolidate its role as a diplomatic bridge between the EU and the Western Balkans. Slovenia wanted to use its own post-socialist transition experience to support the political and economic reforms of its neighbours, strengthen institutional capacity and promote regional cooperation. These efforts were closely aligned with the EU’s broader objectives, which prioritised good governance, human rights and sustainable development as part of the EU enlargement process (Arbeiter et al., 2019).

An important trend during this period was the gradual increase in Slovenia’s ODA. From 2005 to 2013, Slovenia’s total ODA increased steadily from EUR 29.02 million to EUR 46.22 million (MFA, 2019b; OECD, 2020; 2024; MFEA, 2023). This growth in ODA reflects Slovenia’s commitment to becoming an active

Table 2: Slovenia's ODA 2005–2013 (own elaboration based on MFA (2014) and OECD (2024)).

Year	Bilateral Aid (Millions EUR)	Multilateral Aid (Millions EUR)	Total ODA (Millions EUR)	ODA as % of GNI
2005	11.96	17.06	29.02	0.11%
2006	13.99	21.09	35.08 ↑	0.12%
2007	17.38	22.14	39.52 ↑	0.12%
2008	20.32	26.55	46.87 ↑	0.13%
2009	18.16	33.11	51.27 ↑	0.15%
2010	17.87	27.47	45.34 ↓	0.13%
2011	13.53	31.58	45.11 ↓	0.13%
2012	14.86	30.62	45.48 ↑	0.13%
2013	15.35	30.87	46.22 ↑	0.13%

donor, despite its relatively small size and economic capacity. By increasing its aid, Slovenia wanted to demonstrate its commitment to global development goals and position itself as a reliable partner in EU development.

As Arbeiter and Bučar (2020) emphasise, the global level of ODA did not fall excessively after the 2008 financial crisis and the real results only became visible after 2011.⁷ In the case of Slovenia, ODA funding actually increased in 2009 and the impact of the crisis was only reflected in the budget allocated to ODA in 2010 (Table 2). The real challenges for Slovenia's ODA efforts due to the global financial crisis thus only emerged after 2013.

The growth of Slovenia's ODA from 2005 to 2013 shows a steady increase in the total volume of ODA over the years, but also illustrates that Slovenia has not met its commitment to increase ODA to 0.33% of gross national income (GNI) by 2015, as shown in Chart 1. Despite efforts to increase development aid, reflected in occasional peaks, Slovenia's ODA as a percentage of GNI remained well below target. There was a modest upward trend with a peak of 0.15%, probably reflecting a brief increase in aid flows, but the subsequent plateau suggests that economic constraints and competing national priorities make it difficult to sustain this growth. This highlights the challenges Slovenia has faced in reconciling economic constraints at home with its international development commitments and

⁷ A 1% decrease in ODA was recorded in 2011, followed by a 4% decrease in 2012 (World Bank, n.d.)

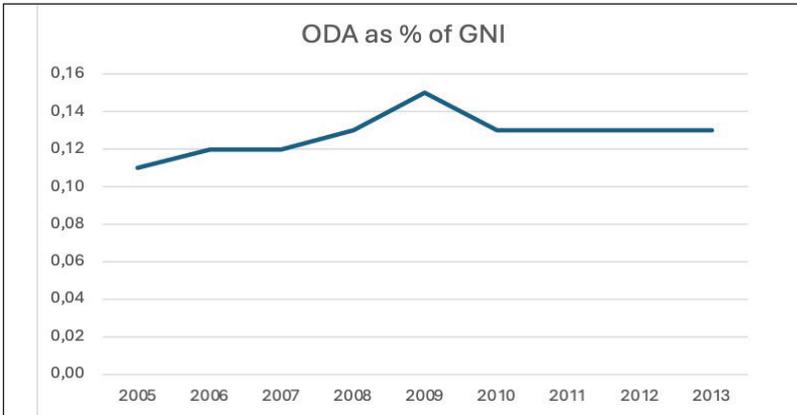


Chart 1: ODA as % of GNI (own elaboration based on OECD (2024)).

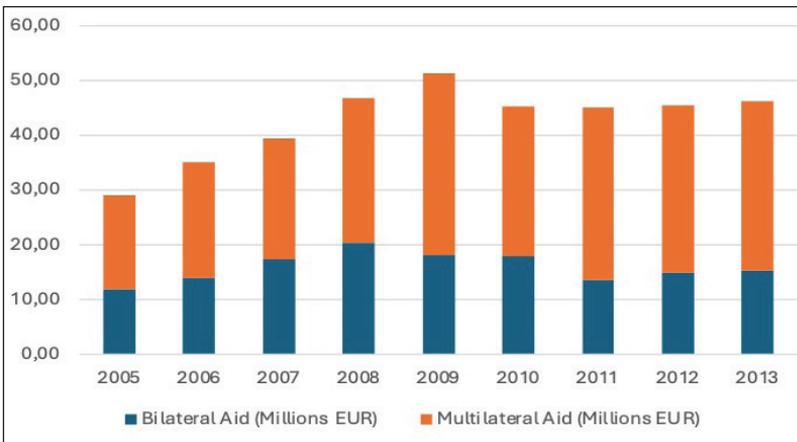


Chart 2: Slovenia's bilateral and multilateral ODA (2005–2013) (own elaboration based on OECD (2024)).

mirrors similar struggles in other EU member states that joined the EU after 2002 (Arbeiter & Bučar, 2020).

One of the main features of Slovenian ODA in these years was also a strong emphasis on multilateral aid, as Chart 2 shows. A significant share of Slovenian development assistance was channelled through multilateral organisations such as EU institutions, United Nations agencies and other international development organisations (Bučar, 2011). The higher share of multilateral contributions primarily reflects the share of Slovenia's contribution to the EU budget and is only to a

lesser extent an expression of Slovenia's strategic orientation to capitalise on its EU membership by contributing to EU-led development initiatives (OECD, 2020). This is evidenced by the fact that the allocation of multilateral ODA to EU institutions averaged 83% (OECD Data Explorer, n.d.).⁸

To summarise, Slovenia's development cooperation from 2004 to 2013 was characterised by significant change, driven by the country's integration into the EU framework and the introduction of sound legal and policy guidelines. Despite its modest economic size, Slovenia demonstrated a strong commitment to increasing its ODA contributions and aligning its strategic priorities with broader EU and global objectives. However, challenges such as economic constraints and the global financial crisis impacted Slovenia's ability to achieve its ODA targets, in particular reaching the commitment of 0.33% of GNI by 2015. An important milestone on this path, however, was Slovenia's accession to the OECD DAC in 2013, which elevated the country to the ranks of the world's top donors and underlined its commitment to meeting international standards for aid effectiveness and transparency.

STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT: SLOVENIA'S EXTENDED ENGAGEMENT IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (2014–2024)

The period from 2014 to 2024 marks a significant evolution in Slovenia's approach to international development cooperation, characterised by both successes and critical challenges, as highlighted in the OECD Development Cooperation Peer Review (2017). The adoption of several strategic documents during this period reflects Slovenia's efforts to align its development policy with international standards while recognising its unique context as a small, emerging donor country. The Slovenian strategy (2019) clarifies the alignment with global development frameworks such as the SDGs and emphasises priorities such as sustainable development, climate action and the fight against migration. Although the strategy reflects global commitments, Slovenia faces the challenge of fully realising these priorities due to limited resources and the need to reconcile regional stability, particularly in the Western Balkans, with these broader international goals. This dual focus reveals both opportunities and tensions in the declaratory and actual implementation of Slovenia's development co-operation.

During this period, Slovenia adopted important legal frameworks that shaped its approach to development co-operation and humanitarian assistance (Table 3). These include the Resolution on Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (PISRS, 2017), the Act on Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (PISRS, 2018a), the Decree on the Implementation of International Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid (PISRS, 2018b) and the Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid Strategy until 2030 (2019).

8 In 2009, the share of multilateral ODA allocated to EU institutions decreased to 65.73%, but already increased to 94.79% in 2010 (OECD Data Explorer, n.d.).

Table 3: Legislative and institutional structure of Slovenia's development cooperation 2014–2024 (own elaboration based on the documents mentioned).

Year	Document	Main Objectives	Geographical Priorities	Other important Points
2017	Resolution on Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid of the Republic of Slovenia <i>(Resolucija o mednarodnem razvojnem sodelovanju in humanitarni pomoči Republike Slovenije)</i>	Contributing to balanced global development	Western Balkans, European Neighbourhood, Sub-Saharan Africa	Policy coherence for development
		Promotion of peace, stability, and inclusive societies		Raising public awareness and global education
		Fight against climate change		Commitment to increase the ODA share of GNI
		Provide humanitarian assistance during crises		
2018	Act on Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid <i>(Zakon o mednarodnem razvojnem sodelovanju in humanitarni pomoči Republike Slovenije)</i>	Contribution to global poverty reduction	Western Balkans, European Neighbourhood, Sub-Saharan Africa (Least Developed Countries)	Guidelines for the distribution of ODA funds
		Promotion of human rights and sustainable development		Emphasising partnerships with NGOs and the private sector
		Harmonisation with international standards for development cooperation		Role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as coordinator
2018	Decree on the Implementation of International Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid of the Republic of Slovenia <i>(Uredba o izvajanju mednarodnega razvojnega sodelovanja in humanitarne pomoči Republike Slovenije)</i>	Operationalisation of the strategic objectives of Slovenian development cooperation and humanitarian aid	As defined in the relevant strategies (Western Balkans, European Neighbourhood, Sub-Saharan Africa)	Roles and responsibilities of the various government agencies
		Establish procedures for the implementation of development and humanitarian projects		Specifies the framework for project selection, resource allocation, monitoring and evaluation
		Ensures alignment with EU and international standards for aid effectiveness		Emphasis on transparency and accountability in the use of development funds
2019	Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia until 2030 <i>(Strategija mednarodnega razvojnega sodelovanja in humanitarne pomoči Republike Slovenije do leta 2030)</i>	Eradication of poverty and inequality	Western Balkans (60–70% of aid), European Neighbourhood, Sub-Saharan Africa	Focus on thematic priorities (employment, climate change, governance, crisis response)
		Promoting sustainable development		Strengthening institutions and raising public awareness
		Strengthening humanitarian aid and resilience		Regular evaluations to adapt the strategy
		Effective and inclusive partnerships		
		Managing for results		

Table 4: Slovenia's ODA 2014–2022 (own elaboration based on MFA (2018; 2019b; 2020; 2022; 2023).

Year	Bilateral ODA (EUR millions)	Multilateral ODA (EUR millions)	Total ODA (EUR millions)	% of GNI for ODA
2014	15.19	31.19	46.38 ↑	0.13%
2015	22.62	34.48	57.11 ↑	0.15%
2016	25.22	48.33	73.55 ↑	0.19%
2017	22.11	45.12	67.23 ↓	0.16%
2018	24.81	45.95	70.76 ↑	0.16%
2019	27.77	49.68	77.44 ↑	0.16%
2020	26.49	53.12	79.61 ↑	0.17%
2021	38.96	59.29	98.25 ↑	0.19%
2022	82.31	77.34	159.66 ↑	0.29%

Each of these documents set objectives such as contributing to global poverty reduction, promoting human rights and sustainable development, and harmonising Slovenian efforts with international and EU standards for development cooperation.

However, the first OECD Peer Review for Slovenia (2017) identified several critical issues that Slovenia needs to address in order to improve its effectiveness as a donor. While Slovenia has made progress in establishing a comprehensive policy framework, the review pointed to gaps in implementation, particularly in ensuring policy coherence and coordination between different government agencies and sectors. The review also pointed to the need for a more strategic approach to resource allocation, particularly in targeting limited ODA resources to the areas with the greatest impact (OECD, 2017).

The analysis of Slovenia's ODA trends from 2014 to 2022, as shown in Table 4, reveals a period of strategic adjustments and responses to both external pressures and evolving domestic priorities. During this period, Slovenia's total ODA increased significantly, reflecting a commitment to strengthening its international development role. However, this growth was not without fluctuations, as evidenced by the decline in 2017, which can be attributed to budgetary constraints and shifts in strategic focus (Arbeiter & Bučar, 2020). From 2014 to 2016, Slovenia's ODA experienced significant growth, with a notable peak in 2016, as shown in Chart 3, primarily due to higher multilateral contributions. This increase was in line with

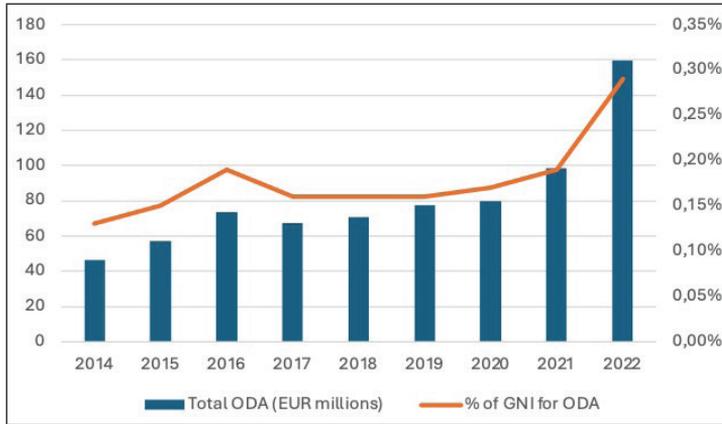


Chart 3: Slovenia's total ODA and its % of GNI (2014–2022) (own elaboration based on MFA (2018; 2019b; 2020; 2022; 2023)).

global and European responses to the Syrian refugee crisis and other international humanitarian needs, demonstrating Slovenia's alignment with EU-wide priorities (OECD, 2017). The subsequent decline in 2017 reflects adjustments in domestic budgeting and possibly a recalibration of development priorities.

The period from 2018 onwards was characterised by a recovery and a steady increase in ODA, which culminated in a significant increase in 2022. This increase in 2022 was mainly influenced by relatively high allocations of Slovenia's funds for Ukrainian refugees and humanitarian aid to this country. Slovenia, like many other donors, has reallocated funds to support reconstruction and address the immediate challenges posed by the war.

Despite the overall increase in ODA, the percentage of GNI allocated to ODA remained below Slovenia's target of 0.33% by 2030. This shortfall points to the ongoing challenges of scaling up financial commitments amid economic constraints and competing national priorities. Like the majority of countries that joined the EU between 2004 and 2007 and failed to achieve internationally agreed targets for development co-operation (Zrinski & Bučar, 2015), Slovenia also belongs to this club. The increase to 0.29% of GNI in 2022 reflects a significant increase in the volume of ODA, which was mainly influenced by high allocations for Ukrainian refugees and humanitarian aid for Ukraine.

A significant portion of ODA was spent on multilateral aid and fluctuated between 48% and 67% of total ODA over the period analysed. This indicates a strategic preference for channelling aid through international organisations such as the EU and the UN, but also, and more importantly, the share of Slovenia's contribution to the EU budget. However, as is often noted, small donors use multilateral aid to maximise their impact by contributing to broader, collective efforts (OECD, 2017).

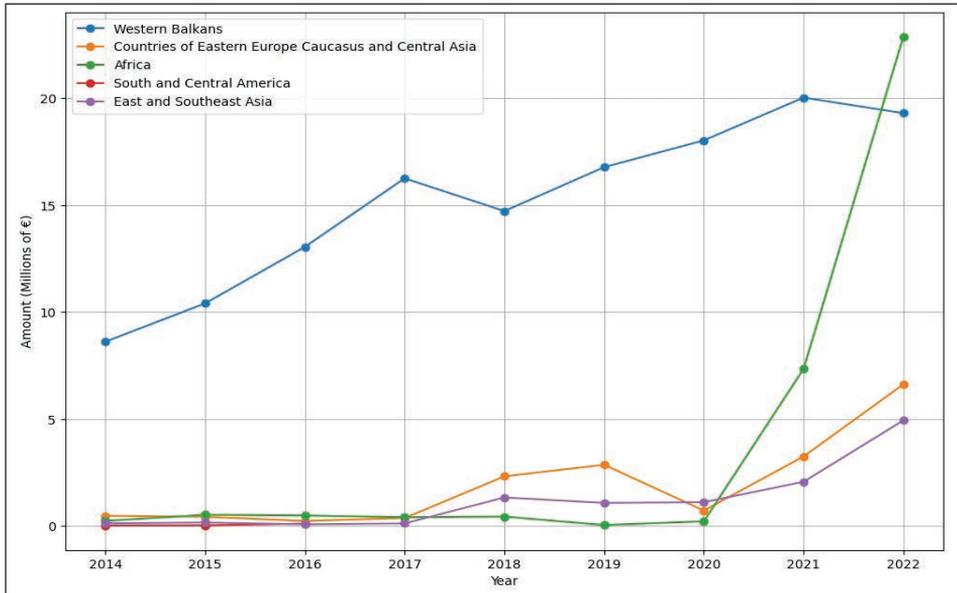


Chart 4: Geographical allocation of Slovenia's bilateral ODA in €million (2014–2022) (own elaboration based on MFA annual reports (MFA, 2018; 2019b; 2020; 2022; 2023)).

However, the reliance on multilateral contributions also emphasises the challenges Slovenia faces in scaling up its bilateral aid initiatives, which are critical to building direct partnerships and promoting long-term development impact. Slovenia's development co-operation efforts have often been hampered by fragmented coordination between various actors, including ministries, NGOs and international partners. This fragmentation has led to inefficiencies in project implementation and a lack of clear, strategic priorities (OECD, 2017).

The allocation of Slovenia's bilateral ODA to specific geographical regions from 2014 to 2022 partly reflects a strategic approach that is consistent with Slovenia's legal and institutional framework. The data shows that the Western Balkans consistently received the largest share of Slovenia's bilateral ODA during this period, emphasising Slovenia's commitment to regional stability and integration. However, this approach has been criticised for its fragmentation and lack of targeted impact, as Slovenia's aid was spread thinly across several countries, resulting in numerous small projects with limited transformative potential (OECD, 2017).

The Western Balkans remains a priority for Slovenia's bilateral ODA (Chart 4) and consistently receives a significant share of bilateral ODA, peaking at almost 74% in 2017. In 2022, however, there was a notable decrease to 23% (EUR 19.31 million), with the largest share of bilateral ODA allocated to the Africa region, which received 27% of total bilateral ODA (EUR 22.8 million).

Table 5: The percentage of total bilateral ODA for the countries of the Western Balkans (2014–2022) (own elaboration based on MFA annual reports MFA (2018; 2019b; 2020; 2022; 2023)).

Year	North Macedonia (%)	Montenegro (%)	Kosovo (%)	Bosnia and Herzegovina (%)	Serbia (%)	Albania (%)	Turkey (%)
2014	13.86	7.58	5.01	15.91	6.25	1.96	0.39
2015	10.09	5.09	4.24	14.61	6.29	0.29	0.20
2016	10.89	4.88	4.42	12.45	7.86	2.32	5.96
2017	14.19	5.61	7.18	19.28	12.05	0.71	10.40
2018	15.61	5.48	3.84	15.65	16.10	0.32	4.67
2019	16.83	5.55	3.56	18.17	12.85	1.04	3.03
2020	20.05	3.66	3.92	20.62	16.66	1.12	3.13
2021	15.74	3.19	2.29	16.14	12.51	0.17	1.11
2022	7.41	1.10	1.02	6.69	6.05	0.33	0.57

Although the largest portion of Slovenia's bilateral ODA is earmarked for the Western Balkans, a detailed analysis, as shown in Table 5, reveals that each country received a relatively modest share of total bilateral aid to the region. This fragmentation contributed to a dilution of Slovenia's overall development impact, as resources were spread too thinly to achieve significant results (OECD, 2017).

The share of bilateral ODA for Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia was relatively modest and generally fluctuated between 1% and 10%. This allocation and the visible fluctuations (Chart 4) reflect changing geopolitical priorities and responses to regional crises. The main recipients in this region were Ukraine, Moldova, Syria and Palestine. Slovenia's assistance to this region was often driven by the need to support democratic transitions, human rights and socio-economic reforms, which is in line with the objectives of the EU's Eastern Partnership (Arbeiter & Bučar, 2020). Nevertheless, Slovenia's aid efforts were again spread across too many initiatives, which reduced the potential effectiveness of interventions and hampered efforts to effectively monitor and evaluate their impact (OECD, 2017).



Fig. 1: Development project of Caritas Slovenia: Women's entrepreneurship development in agriculture in south-east Serbia (Caritas Slovenia, 2024a). More information about the project is available at <https://www.gov.si/podrocja/zunanje-zadeve/mednarodno-razvojno-sodelovanje-in-humanitarna-pomoc/razvojni-in-humanitarni-projekti/razvoj-zenskega-podjetnistva-v-kmetijstvu-v-jv-srbiji/>

Africa's share of bilateral ODA remained relatively low until 2020 and then increased dramatically from 0.84% in 2020 to 18.88% in 2021 and further to 27.80% in 2022.⁹ This was related to the cancellation of clearing debt to some countries and was unfortunately not a strategic decision to redirect ODA to less developed countries. However, it is certain that this measure by Slovenia is at least partly related to the desire to gain the support of African countries for its candidature for a seat as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. However, an important player alongside the official channels are non-governmental organisations (NGOs),¹⁰ which are very active in Africa. One example of this is

9 Main recipients of bilateral ODA in African region were Ruanda and Uganda (OECD, 2017; MFA, 2023).

10 The Slovenian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regularly publishes public tenders for the implementation of international development projects for NGOs. As Arbeiter and Bučar (2020) found, NGOs often improve economic opportunities at the micro level with their projects and thus increase the chances of survival in specific communities.



Fig. 2: Development project of Caritas Slovenia: Ensuring sustainable primary education capacity for children in Nyangungu, Burundi (Caritas Slovenia, 2024b). More information about the project is available at <https://www.karitas.si/mednarodna-pomoc/humanitarna-in-razvojna-pomoc-afrika/>

the Slovenian Caritas, which implements international development cooperation projects and programmes in Central African countries (Figure 2), particularly in rural areas in Rwanda, Burundi, Zambia, Malawi, the Central African Republic, Madagascar and Botswana, with a priority on water and food supply, education and healthcare (Caritas Slovenia, n.d.). However, similar to other regions, Slovenia's scattered aid initiatives in several African countries lack a coherent strategic focus, further fragmenting the country's overall development efforts (OECD, 2017).

Bilateral ODA allocations to East and Southeast Asia remained relatively low throughout the period, reflecting a more limited strategic interest compared to other regions. However, the slight increases in aid in 2018 and 2022 show that Slovenia is responding (declaratively) to emerging global issues such as climate change and economic development, particularly in countries such as Vietnam and Myanmar, which are among the main recipients of EU aid programmes. The lack of a clear strategic framework for these allocations suggests that Slovenia's limited resources could be better utilised through a more targeted and strategic approach (OECD, 2017).

The geographical distribution of bilateral ODA in Slovenia indicates a strategy that attempts to balance national interests, regional stability and alignment with EU foreign policy objectives. The consistent focus on the Western Balkans underlines Slovenia's commitment to promoting stability in its immediate neighbourhood, while the selective engagement in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Africa reflects the response to the EU's broader development policy and global challenges. However, the fragmented distribution of Slovenian aid across countries (and regions) poses a major challenge. Slovenia's limited resources require a more concentrated approach to ODA allocation, focusing on fewer regions and sectors where it can have a greater impact and increase its diplomatic leverage (Arbeiter & Bučar, 2020). Going forward, Slovenia's ability to sustain and strategically deploy its ODA will depend on its ability to adapt to changing geopolitical dynamics, reduce fragmentation and maintain alignment with the EU and international development frameworks (OECD, 2017).

NAVIGATING COMPLEXITY: CHALLENGES IN SLOVENIAN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

Slovenia's development cooperation has evolved considerably since its accession to the EU in 2004. However, it faces several challenges that affect its effectiveness and its ability to achieve strategic objectives. These challenges are driven by internal constraints, such as limited resources and institutional capacity, and external factors, such as global crises and complex regional dynamics. Understanding these challenges is crucial for identifying opportunities for improvement and strengthening Slovenia's role as a donor country.

One of the biggest challenges for Slovenia's development cooperation is the limitation of financial and human resources. Slovenia's ODA remains below the EU average and is far from the international target of 0.7% of GNI set by the UN. In 2022, Slovenia's ODA amounted to 0.29% of GNI, which is an improvement on previous years but still falls short of the commitments of other EU member states (OECD, 2022). This limited funding restricts Slovenia's ability to implement large-scale, impactful development projects and limits its flexibility to respond to new global needs.

In addition, Slovenia's development efforts are constrained by insufficient human resources and institutional capacity. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other ministries involved in development cooperation are understaffed, making it difficult to plan, implement and monitor development programmes. This lack of qualified personnel also affects Slovenia's ability to effectively engage in international policy dialogue and coordinate with other donors, further limiting its influence and impact in the development sector (Arbeiter et al., 2019).

The second identified challenge is achieving policy coherence, which requires that national policies in areas such as trade, agriculture and migration do not undermine development objectives (Arbeiter et al., 2019). However,

Slovenia struggles to ensure coherence between its various policy areas, leading to potential conflicts that could undermine the effectiveness of its development assistance. For example, trade or agricultural policies designed to protect domestic interests may unintentionally harm developing countries and run counter to Slovenia's development goals.

Although Slovenia has committed itself to the principles of policy coherence for development in its development strategy, practical implementation has often been hampered by a lack of coordination between ministries and authorities. The fragmented approach to policymaking can lead to inconsistencies where domestic policies can conflict with Slovenia's international development goals, reducing the effectiveness of development assistance and in some cases even cancelling out its positive impact (OECD, 2017; Arbeiter et al., 2019; Arbeiter & Bučar, 2020).

The rapidly evolving global landscape poses ongoing challenges for Slovenia's development cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and increasing migration flows have required Slovenia to adopt a more flexible and adaptive approach to its development strategy. While Slovenia has proven that it is able to respond to these crises – for example, it has increased its support for healthcare systems during the pandemic – it can only scale up its efforts to a limited extent due to resource constraints. Dealing with climate change and environmental sustainability is another area where Slovenia faces challenges. Although the country has integrated climate action into its development strategy, there is a need for more comprehensive, cross-sectoral approaches that recognise the complexity of environmental problems in partner countries. Developing such approaches requires better coordination and stronger policy frameworks (Arbeiter & Bučar, 2020).

Another challenge is geopolitical constraints and regional dynamics. Slovenia's development cooperation is also influenced by broader geopolitical dynamics, particularly its involvement in the Western Balkans. The region's complex political environment and the Western Balkan countries' varying commitment to EU integration create a difficult context for Slovenia's development activities. The challenge of reconciling Slovenia's strategic focus on the Western Balkans with its responsibilities as an EU member state can lead to tensions. Slovenia's development policy must be in line with EU objectives while taking into account its unique geopolitical interests. This makes it difficult to pursue a coherent and effective development strategy. In addition, Slovenia must manage its role within the EU and harmonise its national interests with broader European priorities (Bučar & Udovič, 2014). Very importantly, however, the focus on the Western Balkans is not only a strategic choice, but is also characterised by Slovenia's collective memory of its shared history, which is an important driver in supporting a country's diplomatic identity. By supporting the development of the region, Slovenia is engaging in what Kočan and Udovič (2020) call 'diplomacy with collective memory diplomacy', using its own historical

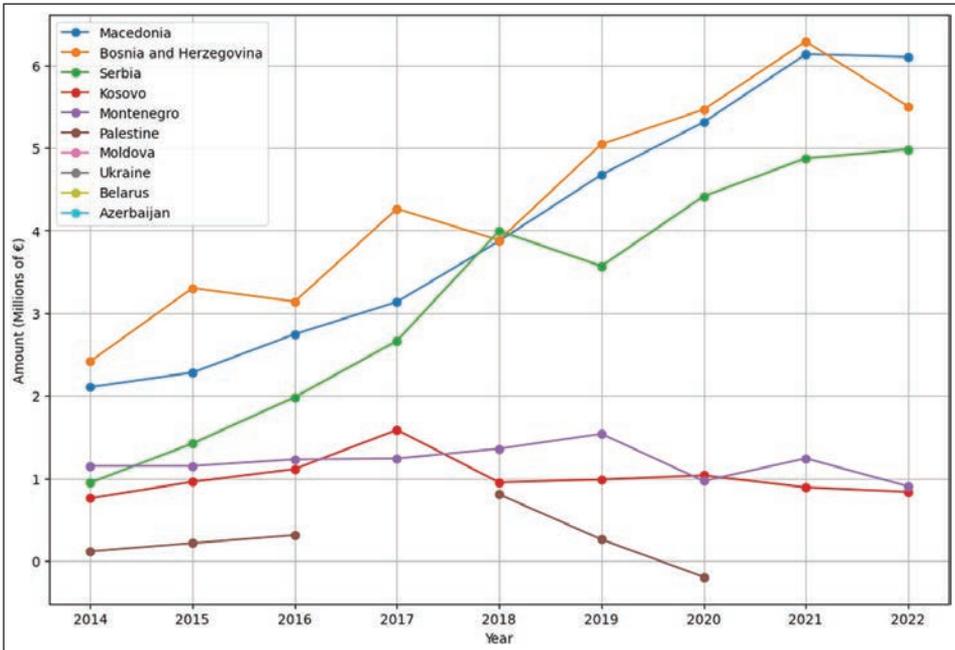


Chart 5: Top 10 recipients of Slovenia's bilateral ODA (2014–2022) (own elaboration based on annual reports on Slovenia's Development Cooperation (MFA, 2017; 2018; 2019b; 2020; 2022; 2023)).

experiences to guide its diplomatic actions and strengthen relations within the region. However, juggling all these aspects can often be difficult and often leads to a lack of strategic focus.

Slovenia's bilateral aid is often criticised for its fragmentation and lack of geographical focus. Although Slovenia has always prioritised the Western Balkans, aid is spread across numerous countries and projects (Chart 5), which reduces the overall impact. The OECD Peer Review emphasises that the distribution of Slovenian aid across several countries leads to a limited strategic focus, which weakens the effectiveness of development measures (OECD, 2017). A more focussed approach, concentrating on fewer countries or projects, could potentially improve the strategic impact and effectiveness of Slovenia's ODA.

Slovenia's development cooperation faces several challenges. However, these challenges also offer Slovenia the opportunity to increase its development impact, build strategic partnerships and align its efforts with global development priorities. By capitalising on its unique strengths and addressing its weaknesses, Slovenia can continue to play a significant role in international development and contribute to global efforts towards sustainable development.

CONCLUSION: STRATEGIC INSIGHTS AND SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES

Over the past two decades, as Slovenia celebrates the 20th anniversary of its accession to the EU, the country has been at a pivotal point in its journey as a diplomatic and development actor. Slovenian development cooperation has undergone a significant transformation, evolving from a newly established donor to an experienced partner in international development. It has navigated through complex geopolitical dynamics, economic constraints and changing global development priorities. This dual role of reconciling national interests with the realisation of international goals has shaped Slovenia's declaratory development strategy, particularly in the Western Balkans. This article traces Slovenia's path, which has been characterised by both opportunities and challenges, reflecting the complexity of navigating global development dynamics as a small state within the EU framework.

Analysing Slovenia's development cooperation strategy reveals several important findings. First, Slovenia's development efforts have consistently focussed on the countries of the Western Balkans, a region with which it shares historical ties and strategic interests. This focus is reflected, at least at the declaratory level, in the significant share of Slovenia's bilateral ODA to countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania. In practice, however, the amount of aid to individual countries varies greatly, which in reality reflects the lack of a long-term strategy. Although one might think that Slovenia's strategy should be linked to sharing its post-socialist transition experience in order to support political and economic reforms in these countries, promote their integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and thereby strengthen regional stability and Slovenia's own security and economic interests. The reality is often related to current politics and the (global) crisis, especially the lack of clear ideas in the selection of so-called priority countries, which change too often without the reasons being clear.

Second, Slovenia's integration into the EU framework has required the adoption of important legal and policy frameworks, such as the International Development Cooperation Act of 2006 (IDC Act) and the Resolution on International Development Cooperation until 2015 (ReIDC) of 2008. While these frameworks have aligned Slovenia's development goals with EU policies, their implementation has been uneven, reflecting the overall challenges in policy coherence and alignment of national policies with international development objectives.

Thirdly, the evolution of Slovenia's development cooperation strategy has been characterised by shifts in focus, geographical priorities and thematic areas. In the first phase (2004–2010), Slovenia established important framework conditions and harmonised its development policy with that of the EU by actively supporting the political and economic transition in the Western Balkans. The subsequent phase (2010–2015) was about strategic consolidation and expansion

with a broader geographical focus and stronger integration into EU development initiatives. More recently, Slovenia has sought to adapt its development cooperation to new global challenges such as the migration crisis, climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic, which is reflected in the Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid Strategy for 2023–2030.

Looking to the future and despite the identified challenges, Slovenia has several promising opportunities to strengthen its role in international development. One of the most important opportunities lies in building and strengthening strategic partnerships, particularly with the countries of the Western Balkans and other regions undergoing similar transformations. Slovenia should capitalise on its unique experience as a post-socialist country and EU member, as it is well positioned to provide valuable support in the areas of governance, rule of law and democratic transition. However, to truly assume a leadership role in the region, Slovenia should forge closer ties, promote stability and develop a clear long-term strategy for its role in the Western Balkans.

Slovenia's participation in EU development initiatives such as the European Development Fund and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument also represents a strategic opportunity. By aligning its development efforts with broader EU strategies, Slovenia can increase its impact through joint initiatives and thus increase its visibility and influence within the international development community. This alignment not only strengthens Slovenia's development co-operation, but also ensures that its efforts are more effectively integrated into the broader EU development framework.

The global sustainable development agenda, particularly the SDGs, offers another significant opportunity for Slovenia. By integrating the SDGs into its national policies, Slovenia has created a comprehensive framework for tackling a range of development challenges, from poverty reduction to climate action. Slovenia's commitment to the SDGs, as outlined in its Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid Strategy, positions the country well to contribute to global efforts to achieve these goals. In addition, Slovenia's progress in integrating the SDGs into its national development strategy could improve its ability to attract funding and partnerships for SDG-related projects, further enhancing its impact.

Improving policy coherence and coordination remains a key opportunity for Slovenia to increase the effectiveness of its development cooperation. Strengthening a whole-of-government approach to development that ensures coordination between all relevant ministries and agencies is essential to reducing policy incoherence and maximising the impact of Slovenia's development assistance. By promoting greater awareness of development issues across government and improving coordination between ministries, Slovenia can streamline its efforts and better align its policies with its international development goals, for which it could also utilise all available diplomatic means.

Slovenia's development co-operation over the last two decades illustrates the path of a small state navigating the complexities of international development. By harmonising its strategic interests with its commitments to international development goals, Slovenia has demonstrated its ability to make a meaningful contribution to regional stability and global development. In the future, Slovenia's development cooperation, and thus development diplomacy, will need to focus on capitalising on the country's unique strengths, such as its experience with democratic governance and EU membership, while addressing the challenges related to policy coherence, limited resources and the changing global landscape. In this way, Slovenia can further enhance its role as a constructive and influential player in international development and contribute to a more stable and prosperous international environment.

DIPLOMATSKI MOSTOVI: DVE DESETLETJI SLOVENSKEGA
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POVZETEK

Članek ponuja celovito analizo slovenskega mednarodnega razvojnega sodelovanja med letoma 2004 in 2024, podrobno opisuje razvoj, strateške prednostne naloge ter vlogo mednarodnega razvojnega sodelovanja v okviru zunanje politike. Članek podrobneje proučuje, kako je Slovenija uporabljala razvojno pomoč kot diplomatsko orodje, zlasti v kontekstu Evropske unije (EU), za spodbujanje regionalne stabilnosti in podporo trajnostnemu razvoju. Raziskava, ki uporablja zgodovinskoprimerjalno metodologijo, analizira politične dokumente, podatke o uradni razvojni pomoči in konkretne študije primerov ter opredeljuje ključne faze slovenskih prizadevanj za razvojno sodelovanje. Ugotovitve poudarjajo premike v geografskih in tematskih težiščih Slovenije, s posebnim poudarkom na Zahodnem Balkanu, medtem ko se je geografski fokus zaradi globalnih izzivov razširil tudi na Vzhodno Evropo, Podsaharsko Afriko in druge regije. Študija obravnava izzive, kot so omejeni finančni in človeški viri in potreba po skladnosti politik. Poleg tega članek prepoznava priložnosti za Slovenijo za krepitev razvojnega sodelovanja prek strateških partnerstev, izboljšanja institucionalnih zmogljivosti in boljšega usklajevanja z mednarodnimi razvojnimi cilji ter cilji EU. Ugotovitve prispevajo k boljšemu razumevanju vloge malih držav v mednarodnem razvoju in diplomaciji ter izpostavljajo potencial Slovenije, da s ciljno usmerjenimi in kontekstu prilagojenimi ukrepi prispeva k regionalni stabilnosti in trajnostnemu razvoju.

Ključne besede: mednarodno razvojno sodelovanje, slovenska diplomacija, Zahodni Balkan, trajnostni razvoj, Evropska unija

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