

Slovenia - An Area of Contact Between the EU and South-Eastern Europe

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As it has been at so many points in its history, in the current time Slovenia is once again acting as a passage country, on the border between the West and East of Europe. Due to its geostrategic and cultural situation, the country finds itself facing numerous challenges. Even after its entry into the EU, Slovenia will still occupy a «border position», because its eastern boundaries will become the external Schengen border. Through its connections with the Venetian Republic, the Habsburg Monarchy and Trieste, Slovenia has always been inclined to gravitate toward the Mediterranean area. The influence of these ties has left an indelible mark on the cultural image of the area, which geographically and culturally can be included in both the Mediterranean region and Central-Eastern Europe. However, the geopolitical situation of Slovenia is, and it seems will remain, problematic owing to its position as an area of contact, on the edge of Central Europe and at the intersection of cultures and religions: the Slovene world lies between the Latin influence to the west, the Germanic influence to the north, and the Ugro-Finnic influence to the northeast. Throughout the past, Slovenia has long been at the centre of historical tumult, and consequently, the Slovene nation has always lived in one form or another of varying social transition. Although the country lies on the border between the «civilised» and «barbarian» worlds, until the Great War the Slovene people formed a part of

western culture and civilisation. In an effort to achieve greater independence and an enhancement of the Slovene national awareness, after the Great War Slovenes decided to join themselves to Yugoslavia, of which they formed a part in all constitutional forms until the year 1991.

The definition of Slovenia as a contact area creates some difficulties in the allocation of the Slovene territory into standardised geographical contexts. From the point of view of physical geography, four European macro-regions meet at this point: the Alps, the Pannonian Plains, the Dinaric-Karst mountain range and the Adriatic-Mediterranean coast. Although the Alps are perceived as a particularly significant area for Slovenes (Triglav, the highest mountain, is the national symbol of the country), the Alpine landscape, located on the north-western border area with Italy and Austria, makes up only fifteen percent of the entire Slovene territory. In reality, the most typical Slovene landscape is formed by sub-Alpine orography at an altitude of up to 1,600 meters above sea level, which constitutes the Ljubljana basin and nearly the whole of the central part of the country. Thus, in a wider sense only, covering both Alpine and sub-Alpine areas, the Alpine region represents more than forty percent of the Slovene territory and nearly half of its populated area. Similarly, the Pannonian and Mediterranean belts, in the strictest sense, cover only two very small areas in the country's north-eastern and south-western extremes respectively. However, if we consider Pannonian and sub-Pannonian Slovenia as a single unit, they represent twenty-one percent of the total territory and the area where more than thirty percent of

the total population of the country live. This region includes Maribor and the entire eastern borderland with Croatia and Hungary. On the other hand, the Mediterranean belt is usually associated with the sub-Mediterranean part of the country (including the Karst, the Vipava valley and the Brda region), making up nine percent of the total territory and inhabited area. This area represents the southern part of the Italo-Slovene borderland and the Croato-Slovene borderland in Istra. What remains is the least densely populated area, the high plateau of Dinaric-Karst, which extends from the River Soca to the River Kolpa and covers a great part of southern Slovenia and the central Slovene-Croatian border area (covering twenty-eight percent of the territory and inhabited by sixteen percent of the total population in Slovenia).

In the Upper Adriatic, a point contact between Italy, Austria, Slovenia and Croatia, the potentials for and practices of cross-border co-operation are quite different, when we compare it to the rest of the Slovene territory. In this area, institutional cross-border relations are based on the Alps-Adria Community, a broad association of the Alpine, Pannonian and Adriatic border regions, which was established as early as the 1970s, as the first international zone to embrace regions on both sides of the Iron Curtain. In addition, local problems related to the function of the border (for instance, between Italy and Austria, between Italy and Slovenia, or between Austria and Slovenia) are usually solved according to special bilateral agreements that were signed as long ago as the 1950s. This frame has been very useful in the transformation of the re-

gion, from an area of potential conflict into an area of peaceful coexistence. Slovenia has always been aware of its position on the border, and today it aims to play a significant stabilising role in the accelerated processes of globalisation and integration. Slovene foreign policy strongly emphasises the country's orientation toward maritime aspects and the Mediterranean region, although only a minor part of the country displays typical Mediterranean cultural and social traits. As has already been mentioned, the Mediterranean belt in Slovenia covers only the border area between Slovenia, Italy and Croatia. The Slovene orientation toward the Mediterranean region, however, is confirmed by its cooperation with European international projects that focussed on the stabilisation of the Central European area. Two of those international projects merit particular recognition: the Pact of

Stability for South-Eastern Europe and the Adriatic-Ionic Initiative (All). Initiated by Italy, the All was established on 20th May 2000, and is made up of members Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Albania, and Greece. The All Council, the highest body of the initiative at the level of foreign affairs ministers, also boasts a representative of the European Commission as another of its members. The central aim of the All is the stabilisation of the entire region along the coasts of the Adriatic and Ionic Seas, which they intend to convert into a zone of stability and higher prosperity. A further objective of the All is to facilitate the proximity of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia and Montenegro to the EU. The All is striving to create better opportunities for cooperation that will result in the solution of specific environmental problems, and

of problems related to the struggle against illegal activities that endanger the security and welfare of the entire region. Additional objectives of the All are to accelerate the economic development, as well as to develop and deepen the democratisation processes throughout the entire region. From May 2003 to May 2004, Slovenia will be the country to preside the All. Its activities will focus mainly on the development of joint projects between member countries. The entry of Slovenia into the EU will provide the country with the opportunity to cooperate in EU foreign policy. Based on the country's experience, Slovenia will undoubtedly play a significant role in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and will thus gain further opportunities for additional development and the intensification of its relations with other countries of the Mediterranean region.

Fundamental dates:

- 13th December 2002: accession negotiations concluded with Slovenia.
- 16th April 2003: Adhesion Treaty signed.
- 23rd March 2003: referendum held on accession to the EU. A large majority of Slovenians expressed their support for membership of the EU.
- 1st May 2004: date on which Slovenia becomes member of the EU.

The report on Slovenia's preparation for accession, presented in September 2003, states that the country has attained a high level of alignment with the EU acquis in many

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areas. However, it also states the need for improved efforts in areas such as legislation on the free circulation of goods; data protection; the right of establishment and freedom to provide non-financial services and the information society; protection of intellectual and industrial property rights; and antitrust legislation. In agriculture, a number of issues are highlighted, such as the sugar and milk markets, the veterinary control system, the trade of animal products and measures on residues. The report also affirms that certain aspects must be improved in areas such as taxation, telecommunications, social policies,

health and consumer protection, or measures to combat fraud and corruption. Finally, the report expresses serious concern about an issue in which it regards immediate action is necessary: the mutual recognition of professional qualifications in the field of the free circulation of people, particularly regarding the general system of recognition and certain professions in the health care sector.

References:

- http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/report_2003/pdf/cmr_si_final.pdf
- <http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/slovenia/index.htm>