



# Weekly Briefing

**Slovenia Political briefing:**  
**Politics developments in Slovenia**  
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With the next parliamentary elections scheduled in early summer, the campaign, although unofficially, is already starting. Political parties seek to set their positions against their opponents and to profile themselves in relation to their traditional allies. On this background it is understandable that any issue could be politicized, even if it less obviously concerns the competition between political parties. This month one of the biggest issues turned out to be the present state of the Slovenian armed forces and the issues related to it. The trigger for the debate was a NATO assessment of combat preparedness of the 72. Battalion of the Slovenian Army, which was disappointingly low. This started replacements at the top of Slovenian armed forces, tense dynamics between military and the Minister of Defence, and many responses among the political parties.

### **History and Background**

In the time of SFR Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav People's Army was centralized, organized from the capital and both conscripts and permanent army members, the conscripts made up an especially big part of the ground forces (roughly more than half of active military personnel and less in other branches of the army). It was also a very political institution, with almost 100% of permanent army staff being also members of the League of Communists. After 1968 Soviet invasion in Czechoslovakia the need for preparedness became more pressing and a new institution was established as a more local auxiliary body to the regular army forces, the so-called Territorial Defence. They were organized separately (and sometimes even differently) in each of the federal states and were also armed and led quite independently. In 1990 when the tensions between the Slovenian political leadership and the central government in Belgrade started to become worse, the territorial defence, now under scrutiny and pressure from the Yugoslav People's Army side, started to effectively function as the Slovenian army. They were officially organized as such at the

end of 1990 and before June next year the first conscripts were officially sworn in. In the 10-days'-war in late June/Early July 1991, this reorganized Territorial Defence was fighting against Yugoslav People's army and when the war ended with the final retreat of the Yugoslav army in late October 1991, it became the only military force within the newly established Republic of Slovenia.

Slovenia Territorial Defence officially became the Slovenian Army in 1993 with a reorganization of armed forces. Initially it was based on conscription forces with the mandatory service of 6-7 months (half the length of conscription in the previous Yugoslav Army). Conscription was then completely abolished in 2003 and the army was again reorganized in 2004 to become a fully professional army. The number of active members dropped significantly with the shift, from 55.000 at the time of conscription system, to between 7000 and 8000 in active troops and 1,500 in reserve. The 2004 reorganization and shift to professional army was partly due to another significant change, namely, Slovenia joined NATO in March 2004. As part of the partnership with NATO Slovenian elite units train together with and are integrated into international units. Two aspects of the NATO related activity are most prominent – disaster preparedness (especially the mountain troops) and international army missions in crisis areas, e.g. in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq etc. Slovenian Army also hosts the Multinational Centre of Excellence for Mountain Warfare, a NATO Centre of Excellence for the training for mountain operations, in Bohinjska Bela.

### **Negative trends in Slovenian Armed Forces and the 2018 NATO Assessment**

Weeks before the 2008 parliamentary elections a journalist from Finland publicly accused the Prime Minister Janez Janša and his political Party SDS (Slovenian Democratic Party) of taking part in a corruptive deal between the Finnish company Patria and certain top level politicians in Slovenia for the buying of armoured personnel carriers. In December 2006 Slovenia purchased 135 Patria vehicles which later turned out to have all different kinds of problems,

failing equipment and constant need of repair. The choice of Patria over other competitors in this tender was not transparent and seemed to have breached regulations for public tenders, which led to speculations of corruption on the highest level. The CEO of the Finnish company was accused of bribery, while the counterparts in this alleged deal were subsequently trialled in several European countries with different outcomes.

This corruption scandal and the failure to find a good systemic solution for the planning, choice and purchase of equipment suited to the general strategy of the Slovenian army became one of the most prominent problems in the following decade. The situation in the army in general started to further worsen during the times of economic crisis from 2009 onwards, especially due to the fact that the armed forces as part of the unitary salary system for the public sector had to undergo similar austerity measures as other parts of the public sector. The already low ranking salaries and worsening work conditions in the armed forces greatly reduced the number of people willing to join the army. The savings combined with lack of staff also took their toll on the equipment and the general preparedness of the army. The commitment to NATO, which required 2% of GDP to be dedicated to military purposes, were not achieved in several consecutive years.

The negative trends became painfully obvious in the last five years. Preparedness of the army is officially assessed once per year by the President of Slovenia, i.e. the Chief Commander of the Armed Forces, who bases his assessment on the report presented by the President of Slovenia in 2013 for the first time issued a negative assessment of the preparedness of the army, which was then repeated in 2014 and in all consecutive years. The main problems were repeatedly identified to be:

- decrease in the number of permanently employed army force and increase in average age of the army members
- decrease in contract reserve forces

- growing percentage of vehicles used beyond the recommended expiration year

- low realization of military practice
- low preparedness for essential tasks in army strategy
- insufficient budget resources

The same assessment was repeated in 2015, 2016 and 2017. The political pressure after the last 2017 assessment was especially strong because of the pre-election year. There were a lot of speculations who will have to take the responsibility for the situation if the army fails to pass the assessment again in 2018, President of Slovenia and chief commander Borut Pahor, Minister of Defence Andreja Katič or Chief of the General Staff Andrej Osterman, whose relation with the Minister of Defence has been very tense. IT was generally expected that the army, especially the Chief of the General Staff whose position was in danger, will do whatever possible to ensure a positive assessment in the following year.

A month before the scheduled 2018 assessment by President Pahor, another assessment was made according to the NATO standards to assess the preparedness of the elite Battalion Combat Group of the 72.Brigade. Slovenia was supposed to guarantee the combat preparedness of this group by 1st of April this year and testing according to the CREVAL method was the last check of combat readiness before the group starts participating in NATO operations. The assessment, despite training abroad and long preparation was »not combat ready«. Due to failing equipment some solders even had frostbite and had to be hospitalized.

Despite the failures in past assessments, this result still came as a great shock. A lot of political upheaval followed. The pressure was especially directed at the Minister of Defence to finally address the problem, opposition parties even called for her resignation. Under this political pressure, the reaction of the Minister was to remove the Chief of the General Staff Osterman, who she claimed was the most responsible for the present state of the Slovenian Army

Forces. She replaced him with Major General Alan Geder, previously the Deputy Chief of the General Staff.

These events were followed by a lot of political dynamics and provided a new profiling point before the upcoming election campaign. Prime Minister Miro Cerar supported the Minister Katič (from Social Democrats Party) and hinted that the failure at the NATO assessment could be seen as a staged sabotage for political reasons. The main opposition party SDS supported the army commanders (Osterman was closer to SDS) and demanded the resignation of the Minister of Defence. Another response came from the side of left-wing opposition party The Left which announced a referendum for lowering the army budget, which was required by NATO to reach 1.2 billion EUR. The upcoming President's assessment of the army preparedness in March might give some epilogue to this affair and most probably keep this topic on the political agenda before upcoming elections.