



Weekly Briefing

**Slovenia external relations briefing:
The 20th anniversary of the Slovenian acceptance into NATO,
the currents of global security,
and the (waning) support for NATO in Slovenia**
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The 20th anniversary of the Slovenian acceptance into NATO, the currents of global security, and the (waning) support for NATO in Slovenia

Summary

The year 2004 proved to be one of the most fateful in Slovenia after its independence in 1991. This was the year when Slovenia became a full member of the two critical organization of the political West: first it joined NATO, and just over a month later it became a member of the European Union. Both accessions were the fulfillments of long-term strategic goals of the Western-oriented Slovenian politics.

While some Euroscepticism has endured in Slovenian society, the Slovenian membership in NATO proved to be a much more controversial matter. On the eve of the celebration of the 20th anniversary of Slovenian accession to NATO, protests against the Slovenian membership in NATO took place in a Slovenian capital Ljubljana.

As of now, the support for NATO in Slovenia is among the lowest in the Central Europe, specially given the pro-ceasefire stance regarding conflict in Palestine on behalf of both Slovene government and public; however, Slovenia is likely to remain a member of NATO for indefinite time.

Background: the Slovenian political goals, specific preparations, and accession to NATO

On March 29, 2004, Slovenia deposited its instrument of accession with the USA and formally became a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.¹ Slovenia entered NATO in the same year as the other states of the so-called “Vilnius Group”: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia.² The domestic legitimacy of Slovenia’s accession was achieved with the results of the referendum a year before which were overwhelmingly in favor of joining NATO with two-thirds of the voters exhibiting a supportive attitude.³

¹ Source: “Slovenia’s NATO membership,” Portal GOV.SI, accessed March 31, 2024,

<https://www.gov.si/en/topics/slovenias-nato-membership/>.

² See Laurence Peter, “Why Nato-Russia relations soured before Ukraine,” *BBC*, September 3, 2014,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29030744>.

³ The 66% of votes in favor of joining NATO however presented a much lesser majority than in the case of joining the EU for which nearly 90% consented to. Even now, it is believed that membership in the EU is less arguable though it does not seem that Slovenia is on the verge of having any similar referendum in the foreseeable future. Consult Peter S. Green, “Slovenia Votes for Membership in European Union and NATO,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/24/world/slovenia-votes-for-membership-in-european-union-and-nato.html>.

Since it acceded to the organization, the Slovenian membership has been a frequent source of criticism (particularly from the left-wing parties and civil society) due to the high military expenses and the political and military controversies involving NATO's military forces,⁴ or, contrary, of the critical assessment on behalf of the leading members of the organization due to Slovenia's lack of enthusiasm and insufficient military funding.⁵ Nevertheless, membership in NATO managed to become an important feature of Slovenian society and has been vital in the professionalization of the Slovenian army and the reconstruction of the Slovenian military material and general capabilities.

In the same year as Slovenia gained membership in NATO, it also acceded to the European Union; there was an even greater consensus regarding the membership of Slovenia in that organization compared to the membership in NATO as nearly 90% of voters supported Slovenia's entry in the EU.⁶

Since the early 1990s, Slovenia strategically worked on raising its international profile, becoming one of the leading former socialist states regarding the economy and social development, and becoming a member of the key international organizations. Much like several other former socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe, both economic and social transformation and redevelopment in the capitalist market-oriented Western economy, and simultaneous integration into the key Western alliances became imperative for Slovenia, and in its endeavor, it is considered to have been largely successful – possibly the most or at least in consideration to be so amongst former socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe.⁷ The results of cooperativeness and redevelopment within the lines of Western liberal economy and politics were its quick gaining of membership of North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in January 1996,⁸ its attaining of the non-permanent membership in the United Nations Security

⁴ See STA, "Dvajset let Slovenije v Natu: Levica namesto na državno proslavo na demonstracije," *Dnevnik*, March 28, 2023, <https://www.dnevnik.si/1043046602>; or "Zahteva za izstop Slovenije iz zveze NATO," *Mladina*, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://www.mladina.si/231570/zahteva-za-izstop-slovenije-iz-zveze-nato/>.

⁵ See e.g. "Marjan Šarec: človek še vedno ni v fazi, kjer je spoznal, da vojna ni rešitev," *Metropolitan*, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://www.metropolitan.si/novice/slovenija/marjan-sarec-intervju-sta/>.

⁶ See Peter S. Green, "Slovenia Votes for Membership in European Union and NATO," *The New York Times*, March 23, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/24/world/slovenia-votes-for-membership-in-european-union-and-nato.html>.

⁷ See e.g. Clare Nuttall, "Slovenia: Emerging Europe's secret success story," *IntelliNews*, March 10, 2021, <https://www.intellinews.com/slovenia-emerging-europe-s-secret-success-story-205022/>.

⁸ Source: "Slovenia's NATO membership," Portal GOV.SI, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://www.gov.si/en/topics/slovenias-nato-membership/>.

Council in the years 1998-1999,⁹ and, after lengthy respective processes, its accession into NATO on March 29 and European Union on May 1, 2004.¹⁰

While the membership in the European Union has affected Slovenia on a much greater level, its membership in NATO has been seemingly more controversial for Slovenian citizens and became under heavy scrutiny even before Slovenia's accession, specifically after the American invasion of Iraq against which many in Slovenia protested to little avail;¹¹ nevertheless, Slovenia did become a member of NATO in 2004.

During its membership in NATO, Slovenia regularly attended its international missions and trainings; for example, in 2022 the Slovenian military personnel and representatives from the private sector participated in an international high-profile training regarding cyber defense which took place in Slovenia; this was the largest and most complex international cyber defense exercise in the world. The exercise was attended experts in the fields of cyber security, strategic decision-making, cyber rights, and strategic communications.¹²

While Slovenia never specifically dissented from the action on behalf of NATO, the membership in NATO has, at least in the eyes of many citizens, becoming more and more a contentious matter; there are also some doubts regarding Slovenian role in European Union, however, it seems clear that Slovenia does not present a potential "exit case".

Despite all that, it is clear that it would be different and likely much more difficult for Slovenia if it would withdraw from the main Western organizations; and still a positive experience also likely factors in keen Slovenian assistance to the hopefuls for the future EU integration such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro.¹³

⁹ See "Slovenia," UNSCR, accessed March 31, 2024, http://unscr.com/en/country/SVN?topic_id=40.

¹⁰ See "Slovenia," Eurydice, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/slovenia/historical-development>.

¹¹ See e.g. J. R., "20 let od nezakonite invazije ZDA v Iraku," *MMC Radiotelevizije Slovenija*, March 20, 2023, <https://www.rtvslo.si/svet/bliznji-vzhod/20-let-od-nezakonite-invazije-zda-v-iraku/661826>.

¹² See Be. B., "Nato začel vaje iz kibernetске obrambe, sodeluje tudi Slovenija," *Delo*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.delo.si/novice/slovenija/zacetek-natove-vaje-kibernetске-obrambe-na-kateri-sodeluje-tudi-slovenija/>.

¹³ See e.g. "Minister Fajon: Slovenia supports Montenegro's efforts to speed up the negotiation process with the EU," Portal GOV.SI, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://www.gov.si/en/news/2024-03-27-minister-fajon-slovenia-supports-montenegros-efforts-to-speed-up-the-negotiation-process-with-the-eu/>.

The current global geopolitical situation and the support for NATO in Slovenia

On March 29, 2004, the accession of Slovenia to NATO was formalized after years of extensive negotiations, consolidations, and specific preparations.¹⁴ While for many, joining NATO was of secondary consideration regarding joining European Union, which was formalized just over a month later, the accession to NATO was nevertheless a culmination of a long-time goal of Slovenian foreign politics which perfectly aligned with post-Yugoslavian agenda of independent Slovenia. Slovenia has been the first independent state from the former Yugoslavia that joined NATO or the European Union.

Slovenia has seemingly always had an ambiguous relationship with its military. Traditionally a source of pride – in case of Slovenia, such was the reputation of the so-called territorial defense during the short independence war in 1991 – especially after joining NATO and professionalization of the army, military has been seen as an obligation given from the outside source rather than something that would have a particular relevance for today's Slovenian society apart from the role of the military regarding civilian issues (such as natural disasters). Several controversies regarding financing of the army and purchase of military equipment have not helped the status of the military; among the most heavily discussed military-related controversies were the so-called Patria affair which saw some key Slovenian politicians – including then-Prime Minister Janez Janša – accused of corruption,¹⁵ and the recent armored vehicles affair which was the first slight dent on the current defense minister Marjan Šarec.¹⁶

The Patria affair was the most important of the so-called “arms affairs” and one of the most vividly discussed and controversial events in the past 20 years. From what we can gather, in order to win the EUR 278 million worth armored vehicles business, the Finnish company Patria allegedly bribed several key people in the highest decision-making positions in Slovenia, including the reigning Prime Minister and the president of the largest coalition party Janez Janša. Janša was later sentenced to two years of prison sentence due to corruption charges;

¹⁴ See “Slovenia,” Eurydice, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/slovenia/historical-development>.

¹⁵ See, among others, “Kronologija afere Patria - Afera desetletja se končuje z zastaranjem,” IUS-INFO, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://www.iusinfo.si/medijsko-sredisce/dnevne-novice/150555#>.

¹⁶ See e.g. M. S., “Odpoved pogodbe o nakupu oklepnikov Boxer bo stala štiri milijone,” *24ur.com*, June 8, 2023, <https://www.24ur.com/novice/slovenija/odpoved-pogodbe-o-nakupu-oklepnikov-boxer-bo-stala-stiri-milijone.html>.

however, his sentence, much like those of the other sentenced high officials, was later suspended and case would later be dropped due to the statute of limitations on the case.¹⁷

In another example of the “arms affair”, the new Slovenian government decided in September 2022 that it will cancel the purchase contract for 45 German Boxer eight-wheeler armored vehicles, after reviewing the audit report on the feasibility of such a purchase. The audit report revealed that the deal that was settled by the previous government was not carried out in the most economical way, since hundreds of millions of euros could have been saved by choosing a possible cheaper provider and upgrading the existing armored vehicles. The cancellation of the contract proved controversial as such an action carried an insignificant penalty; however, it has been speculated that the cost of cancellation was lower than predicted.

Nevertheless, the affair proved contentious both among the supporters of the opposition and left-wing and anti-NATO public which decried attempts at so significant military investments.¹⁸

Since joining the organization, Slovenian government has been generally supportive of most of (defensive and supposedly peacekeeping) actions and activities of NATO; however, apart from combined exercises and politically low-charged peacekeeping Slovenia generally showed reserved enthusiasm, especially regarding more contentious activities of the organization with more problematic or at least ambiguous geopolitical agenda.

The survey from 2022 showed that just 62 percent of people would vote for Slovenia to remain in NATO, and 30 percent would vote against; compared to previous year’s survey the opposition to NATO increased by four percent. Given the rate of support for the membership in NATO, Slovenia is near the rear end of the EU-affiliated or approaching Europe – only in Montenegro and Bulgaria there is a lesser nominal support for NATO. In the European Union, the support for the increase in defense funds is likewise among the lowest in Slovenia.¹⁹ It is believed that the support for NATO may be even lower right now given the recent protests against the membership in the organization and as the level of enthusiasm for the concrete

¹⁷ See “Kronologija afere Patria - Afera desetletja se končuje z zastaranjem,” IUS-INFO, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://www.iusinfo.si/medijsko-sredisce/dnevne-novice/150555#>.

¹⁸ See M. S., “Odpoved pogodbe o nakupu oklepnikov Boxer bo stala štiri milijone,” *24ur.com*, June 8, 2023, <https://www.24ur.com/novice/slovenija/odpoved-pogodbe-o-nakup-oklepnikov-boxer-bo-stala-stiri-milijone.html>; and Barbara Eržen, “V iskanju podlag za nakup alternativnih osemkolesnikov,” *Delo*, February 11, 2023, <https://www.delo.si/novice/slovenija/v-iskanju-podlag-za-nakup-alternativnih-osemkolesnikov/>.

¹⁹ The survey also showed that 56% of people think that Slovenia is safer because of membership in NATO; the latter is perceived by 22% of Slovenians as “very important” for the future security of the country, and by 40% as important. Source: K. M., “Anketa: podpora obstanku v Natu v Sloveniji med najnižjimi,” *N1*, June 29, 2022, <https://n1info.si/novice/svet/anketa-podpora-obstanku-v-natu-v-sloveniji-med-najnizjimi/>.

support for Ukraine appears to be stalling, even if it is still unquestionably part of the Slovenian external political agenda.

While both Slovenian government that have been in charge since the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war have been adamant in their support for the Ukrainian defense of their territory and political decisions, and condemned Russian aggression,²⁰ there appears to be slightly less enthusiasm for the continued support of war in 2024, especially after the start of the Israel's, itself a "major non-NATO ally", invasion of the Gaza strip. While the rhetoric has somewhat changed since the beginning of the invasion, Israel continues to be heavily supported by the major NATO powers including the USA and Germany.

Unlike the Russo-Ukrainian war, the Israeli invasion of Gaza strip has proven to be a more controversial matter for Slovenian politics and public, and Slovenia has been among the most vocal compared to other EU member states regarding the need for immediate ceasefire, Israel's accountability for their alleged crimes, the work toward two-state solution, and condemnation of any possible signs of genocide. Coordinating its stance with similarly minded Ireland, Spain, and Malta, the Slovenian government unveiled its plans to officially recognize the state of Palestine if there is no permanent ceasefire in Gaza in the reasonably near future. That is especially visible given the current status of Slovenia as a temporary member of the UN Security Council.²¹

While the above-mentioned concerns do not necessarily equate to the lack of support for the continued membership in NATO, the disapproval of the actions of the major NATO ally and the rise of the demand for accountability for the actions of the West and its allies have likely added another contribution to the already less-than-optimal level of support for NATO in Slovenia.

²⁰ On April 4, 2024, the Slovenian foreign ministry reaffirmed its lasting support for Ukraine: B. V., "Slovenija je podprla zagotovitev dolgoročne podpore Ukrajini," *MMC Radiotelevizije Slovenija*, April 4, 2024, <https://www.rtvlo.si/slovenija/slovenija-je-podprla-zagotovitev-dolgorocne-podpore-ukrajini/703937>. See also "Prime Minister Golob: Ukraine is the victim and Russia the aggressor," Portal GOV.SI, accessed February 29, 2024, <https://www.gov.si/en/news/2023-02-10-prime-minister-golob-ukraine-is-the-victim-and-russia-the-aggressor/>.

²¹ Consult G. K., "Fajon: Če ne bo trajnega premirja v Gazi, bomo priznali državo Palestino," *MMC Radiotelevizije Slovenija*, March 29, 2024, <https://www.rtvlo.si/slovenija/fajon-ce-ne-bo-trajnega-premirja-v-gazi-bomo-priznali-drzavo-palestino/703320>; or STA, N1, <https://n1info.si/novice/slovenija/slovenija-nasla-partnerke-s-katerimi-bi-lahko-priznala-palestino/>, N1, March 22, 2024, <https://n1info.si/novice/slovenija/slovenija-nasla-partnerke-s-katerimi-bi-lahko-priznala-palestino/>.

The 20th anniversary of Slovenian membership in NATO and the protests against the organization

On March 29, 2024, Slovenia marked the 20th anniversary of its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) which it celebrated with high-level meeting with the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Christopher G. Cavoli, and the Minister of National Defence of Romania Angel Tîlvăr, three panel discussions with international participants, and a national ceremony held at the Brdo Congress Centre where the role of the keynote speaker was given to the President of the Republic of Slovenia and the Commander-in-Chief of the Slovenian Armed Forces, Dr. Nataša Pirc Musar. Pirc Musar emphasized that NATO membership provides Slovenia with the access to a defence alliance, and at the same time allows us to see ourselves as a part of democratic environment where the notions of the “rule of law, respect for human rights and territorial integrity and sovereignty” are given priority.²²

A day before, the celebration organized by the Slovenian government, on March 28, 2024, visible protests against the continued Slovenian membership in NATO took place in the Slovenian capital Ljubljana. The protesters demanded the withdrawal of Slovenia from NATO, a decrease in military spending, an end to military and financial aid for the continuation of the war in Ukraine, and embargo on arms exports to Israel, and the adoption of sanctions against what they consider "Israeli apartheid regime". One of the leaders of the protests stressed that NATO should be seen as an offensive pact that serves to defend imperialist tensions of its leading members, and that defense funds should be spent on the construction of public housing, healthcare, homes for the elderly, and education in Slovenia. The protests were also attended by the smallest coalitional party the Left the representatives of which stated Slovenia, as a NATO member, is jointly responsible for wars started or endorsed by other NATO members. While the leader of the party's parliamentary group, Matej Tašner Vatovec, asserted that the party still firmly supports the withdrawal of Slovenia from NATO, he however admitted that this is not possible during this governmental term.²³

²² Sources: “The Republic of Slovenia celebrates 20 years of NATO membership,” Portal GOV.SI, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://www.gov.si/en/news/2024-03-29-the-republic-of-slovenia-celebrates-20-years-of-nato-membership/>; and “Who leads the Slovenian Armed Forces,” Slovenska vojska, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://www.slovenskavojska.si/en/about/who-is-who/>.

²³ Source: T. K. B., A. K. K., “Nasprotniki članstva v Natu na protestu pozivali k izstopu iz zveze,” *MMC Radiotelevizije Slovenija*, March 28, 2024, <https://www.rtv.slo.si/slovenija/nasprotniki-clanstva-v-natu-na-protestu-pozivali-k-izstopu-iz-zveze/703182>. See also LV, STA, “FOTO / Shod proti Natu,” *Mladina*, March 28, 2024, <https://www.mladina.si/231746/foto-shod-proti-natu/>.

A few days before the protest, a letter with the demand for the withdrawal of Slovenia from NATO has surfaced; it was signed by many visible Slovenian non-governmental organizations, civil institutions and societies, including the Free Trade Union of Slovenia, IDS – Inštitut za delavske študije, and KLAS – ekosocialistična iniciativa. In the letter, the signees demanded, among others, the stopping of the increase in military spending and the spending of public funds for social goals, the containment of the expansion of the army and preventing the reintroduction of conscription, the cancellation of military and financial aid for the continuation of the war in Ukraine and other “imperialist wars”, an arms embargo to Israel and the recognition of Palestine as an independent state, and the withdrawal of the Slovenian Army from NATO, all its military operations and NATO projects. Finally, they also demanded dissolution of NATO and the withdrawal of the US military from all its former members.²⁴

While there seems to be enough public support for the continued aid for Ukrainian war effort – especially in light of recent revelations of high possibility of widespread pro-Russian propaganda in Slovenia borne by Russian students –²⁵ it seems that the momentum has swung against NATO as a result of the actions of its close ally, Israel. While it is not reasonable to expect a referendum or any other similar critical action oriented against Slovenian membership in NATO anytime soon, it might be believed that Slovenia – including the current government – would support the creation of common army of the European Union and the lesser dependence on non-EU military allies.

²⁴ Source: “Zahteva za izstop Slovenije iz zveze NATO,” Mladina, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://www.mladina.si/231746/foto-shod-proti-natu/>.

²⁵ See Aleš Gaube, “Zaradi obsežne ruske propagande izgnali diplomata,” *Dnevnik*, March 21, 2024, <https://www.dnevnik.si/1043046135>.

Conclusion

While Slovenia joined both the European Union and NATO almost concurrently in 2004, the assessments of particular worth of specific organization for the future of Slovenia started to vary greatly. Despite both being long-term strategic goals of Slovenian foreign policy, it has been clear that Slovenia has been geographically well-distanced from the nearest warzones after the end of Yugoslav wars in the 1990s; consequently, the immediate benefits of NATO are harder to gauge and may be affected by cooperation in wars that are not directly affecting the country's political and social state.

A lot has changed since the war came to Eastern Europe again with the Russian invasion of Ukraine; while the support for the NATO may not have risen dramatically among general population, the government of Slovenia has reattached itself to the common goals of the organization. However, after 2 years of struggles in Ukraine, and the terrible costs of the invasion of one of the main NATO's allies into Gaza strip, the tides might be slowly turning for the support of NATO in Slovenia; while there are also Eurosceptics in Slovenia, they may not be as loud as NATO skeptics right now. But we may find whether that is true on the upcoming EU-elections.