

## REVIEW

## A GEOPOLITICS OF SLOVENIA

Published in June 2021 by La Route de la Soie – Éditions, ‘Une géopolitique de la Slovénie’ (A Geopolitics of Slovenia) by Laurent Hassid PhD is a monograph in French on the geopolitics of Slovenia. The author is an associated researcher at the Université Sorbonne Paris Nord in France, specializing in geography and borders. The foreword by Barthélémy Courmont PhD, Assistant Professor at the Catholic University in Lille, France, introduces the book as an opportunity for the reader to expand their knowledge about Slovenia by obtaining an insight into its geography, history and identity.

Indeed, the 223-page monograph is structured in three parts following the destiny of Slovenia from a community of a language to an independent nation (1: Unity of a nation; 2: Diversity of a nation; and 3: From unity during independence to the division of an European state). From introduction to conclusion the author looks at the geographical, historical, and political factors that led to the emergence of Slovenia as a sovereign state, which can at the same time be seen as belonging to Central Europe, the Balkans, and the Mediterranean region. The conclusion points only briefly to some challenges which could put into question the European commitments of the country and its ability to face the current and upcoming effects of globalization.

The storyline develops gradually from parts one to three, which are broken down into two to three chapters each. The multiple headings within the chapters, and the various maps, pictures and tables which underpin the argumentation, render the book reader-friendly. The article “*une*” (in English “*a*”) in the book’s title seems to suggest that this monograph touches upon one of several possible ways of looking at the geopolitics of Slovenia.

In particular, the introduction outlines the geographical features of the Slovene territory and refers to several historic facts which explain the state-building process of a nation with its own language and territory, but without any particular statehood history. The first part portrays the emergence and evolution of the Slovene nation. This is closely associated with the Slovene literature of the 16th century and onwards, which laid the foundations of a national awakening. The author refers to the history of Carantania and the Counts (Dukes) of Celje as myths that played a significant part in the nation and state-building process of the 19th and 20th centuries. The second part of the book focuses on the differences and challenges within the young country. It describes the historical regions and their dialects, and touches upon the composition of minorities, the Slovene diaspora, and the various ex-Yugoslav nationalities living in Slovenia and their relationships with the native Slovenes. The third part talks about the political developments of the late 1980s and of the post-independence period. The author describes the late 1980s up to 1992 as a time of national unity, which was followed by 20 years of political stability (from 1992 to 2011). Since 2011, he considers that Slovenia has been confronted by an emerging political instability. He offers a snapshot of the contemporary political system, and the main political personalities and events. The book ends with a short reflection of the potential challenges ahead for Slovenia.

The book is a welcome addition to monographs written in French. The scarce literature dedicated to Slovenia and its geopolitics is most likely due to the fact that Slovene territory had not been independent historically before 1991. If ever mentioned, it was within the Austrian, Italian, or Yugoslav (Balkan) geopolitical context. In his preface to the book, Barthélémy Courmont indicates this when mentioning that he crossed Slovenia a few times in the early 1990s without even realizing it. This observation is very similar to the one made by Robert Kaplan in his geopolitical bestseller, *Balkan Ghosts*<sup>1</sup>, where he explains how he crossed the Yugoslav-Austrian border and came to Zagreb (Croatia) in the late 1980s, without noticing any territory or (geo)political entity in between.

Timewise, its publication coincides with the anniversaries of two key geopolitical moments in Slovene history. June 2021 marks 30 years since Slovenia became a sovereign and independent state and a full member of the international community. It is also the anniversary of the “Vidovdan” constitution of June 1921, which consecrated the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes; it put an end to the very first independent appearance of Slovenes on the geopolitical chessboard, which had begun in October 1918.

This monograph assembles an important amount of geographic, linguistic, cultural and (mostly contemporary) political data and events, which together help to understand the geo(political) landscape of Slovenia. These also explain, in the view

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<sup>1</sup> *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*, first published in 1993, is a geopolitical bestseller written by US author Robert D. Kaplan.

of the author of the monograph, the birth of the Slovene nation and its development into an independent country. As more than a quarter of the book is focused on contemporary Slovene politics and related actual (geo)political events<sup>2</sup>, the reader can get a sound insight of the first three decades since Slovenia's independence.

What the book does not provide to the reader, and in particular to the French-speaking audience, is a geostrategic analysis. The author refers briefly to the Napoleonic Illyrian provinces and the Illyrian movement, but he falls short of offering any assessment of the strategic impact of France or other main powers with regard to this territory. One might have expected a closer look at France's strategic reasons for establishing the Illyrian provinces (1809-13), and at its role in the formation of the Versailles Yugoslavia in 1918-19. The involvement of France in the drawing of the Slovene borders with Austria and Italy<sup>3</sup>, and its current and future strategic stance with regard to Slovenia and the region it belongs to, would have also deserved further consideration.

All in all, *Une géopolitique de la Slovénie* has the merit of offering to the reader, especially to the francophone one, an insight into the geography, identity, and history of Slovenia. It could be a reference for future writing on this young country. It offers a starting point to those who wish to learn more about Slovenia, be it for professional or personal reasons. To Slovene academia, the book provides an insight into how the overall Slovene geopolitical context is perceived through the lens of a foreign (French) author, and it may generate an interest in future writing on this topic accessible to foreign readers.

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<sup>2</sup> *Mainly focused on defining the border with Croatia and the issue of migrations since 2015.*

<sup>3</sup> *For example, presenting maps and the geostrategic background of France's (as well as other Great Powers') border proposals with Austria in 1919 and with Italy in 1945-47.*