

15 LET REPUBLIKE SLOVENIJE V NATU – KRITIČNI POGLED NA OBRAMBNI SISTEM

15 YEARS OF THE REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA IN NATO – A CRITICAL VIEW ON DEFENCE SYSTEM

Povzetek Kmalu po osamosvojitvi, še bolj izrazito pa po vstopu v Nato, je bilo vprašanje obrambe in zagotavljanja varnosti v Sloveniji postavljeno na stran. Pozabilo se je, da je vojska temeljni element državnosti in da smo bili Slovenci z oboroženo silo večkrat v zgodovini prisiljeni (o)braniti svoj obstoj. Pomanjkljivo financiranje je v kombinaciji s pomanjkljivim delovanjem kadrovskega sistema vsako leto potiskalo obrambni sistem v spiralo iskanja končnega dna. V zavezništvu smo si z neizpolnjevanjem zavez o višini in strukturi obrambnih izdatkov v zadnjih letih zapravili velik del kredibilnosti.

Slovenija je z vstopom v Nato zelo veliko pridobila. V geopolitičnem smislu se je (ponovno) pozicionirala kot del najrazvitejšega sveta. Največji prispevek članstva je kolektivna varnost, kar ima več multiplikativnih učinkov, tudi ekonomske. Obramba je danes veliko cenejša, kot bi bila sicer. Slovenija je po 15 letih članstva v Natu še vedno razpeta med mirovnim idealizmom in realizmom, ki zgodovinsko izraža, da potrebuje zaveznike. Obrambni sistem je treba prenoviti, preoblikovati in povezati v celoto ter uresničiti to, kar je bilo že večkrat ugotovljeno. Politične elite pa morajo te izzive prepoznati, voditi in usmerjati.

Ključne besede *Obrambni sistem, Nato, kritična analiza, reforme.*

Abstract Shortly after Independence, and even more profoundly after joining NATO, the issue of defence and security in Slovenia was set aside. It has been quickly forgotten that an army is a fundamental element of statehood, and that several times in history Slovenes have been forced to defend their existence with an armed force. “Budgetary malnutrition”, in combination with malfunctioning human resource management, has pushed the defence system into a spiral quest for the lowest point. By failing to fulfil its commitments on the level and structure of defence spending, Slovenia has lost much of its credibility in the Alliance in recent years.

Slovenia gained a great deal by joining NATO. Geopolitically it has (re)positioned itself as part of the most developed world. The most significant benefit of membership is collective security, which has brought manifold effects, including economic ones; defence is much cheaper today than it would be if Slovenia were not a member of the Alliance. After fifteen years of NATO membership, Slovenia is still divided between peace idealism and realism that historically confirms that allies are required. The defence system needs to be renovated, transformed and integrated, and solutions that have been repeatedly already identified must be implemented. The role of the political elites is to recognize, lead and guide these challenges.

Key words *Defence system, NATO, critical analysis, reforms.*

“Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfils the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things.”

Winston Churchill

Introduction It was Sunday, 23 March 2003. For Slovenia, after the plebiscite for independence in 1990, this was the greatest referendum day. Political elites in Slovenia had unanimously agreed to formally ask the population the strategic question of entering the strongest political and military Alliance. Slovenia was actually one of the few invitees to conduct a referendum, after Hungary, Slovakia and Spain. The result was quite hard to forecast, so the NATO referendum was set up at the same time as the referendum to enter the EU¹.

After the successful referendum, the majority of Slovenian political elites still did not really adopt NATO membership as part of their political agenda. At the beginning of the 21st century, the legacy of the Yugoslavian policy of non-alignment and the peace movement ideas from the independence era, infused with a romantic illusion of a neutral “second Switzerland”, were still very much alive in Slovenia. As the President of Slovenia, Borut Pahor, recognized in his speech for the 15th anniversary of Slovenia joining NATO, “at that time, as well as today, part of the Slovenian public fostered a belief that our so-called Western identity would not be compromised if we remained militarily neutral or exempt from the military cooperation of most Western world countries,” (Pahor, 2019a).

After Independence, and even more profoundly after joining NATO, the question of defence was set aside in predominant political discourse in Slovenia. Periodically

¹ *The question in the NATO referendum was: “Do you agree that the Republic of Slovenia should become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)?”, while the question for the EU referendum was: “Do you agree that the Republic of Slovenia should become a member of the European Union (EU)?” (Poročilo o izidu glasovanja in o izidu referendumu, 2003).*

it was the exclusive theme of those on the right wing of the political spectrum. This is the main reason why there is a great lack of expertise in defence policy, which is reflected in a dearth of appropriate experts, mainly in the headquarters of political parties, but also in Parliament. For instance, Jelušič warns of the risk of civilian-political control being taken over by Parliaments (from Governments), as they lack professionalism and expertise (1998, p 81). Even the Members of Parliament themselves believe that they lack expertise and that their professional development is left to their own initiative (Prebilič 2007, pp 103-104). These institutions are therefore not capable of critically observing, defining and supervising these issues in a satisfactory way, and the frequent rotations of the political elites do not help in any way to improve the situation (yet).

Bearing in mind the importance of the defence sector as one of the key pillars of statehood, a questionable professional level of media supervision is unfortunately not improving the situation. The media should play the role of the “fourth branch of government” in a democratic system. From a long-term perspective, the long-lasting trend of lowering the quality and level of professionalism of the media is worrisome. Nationwide there are fewer journalists who are able to understand, comprehend, interpret and critically judge defence issues than there are fingers on one hand.

Lack of knowledge, professionalism and supervision has also resulted in malfunctioning human resource management which, together with “budgetary malnutrition”, is pushing the defence system further into a spiral quest for the lowest point every year. The Strategic Review of the Defence Sector had already identified the absence of a comprehensive human resource policy a decade ago (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Slovenia, 2009, p 13). The shortcomings in the same field were also identified in the Strategic Defence Review in 2016, claiming that the efforts in the Slovenian Armed Forces (SAF) should be “directed to the planning of career paths, providing high-quality and stable leadership, education, and improving the status of active component members” (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Slovenia, 2016, p 7).

In a Report on the Readiness of the Slovenian Armed Forces in April 2019, the General Staff, without any appropriate reactions, once more graded itself on average “unsatisfactory” for readiness in wartime and “satisfactory” for readiness in peace. The same has been the case for a number of consecutive years. The President of Slovenia and Supreme Commander of the SAF explained during a speech: “the key issues for these kind of grades were insufficient manning and deficiency in arms and equipment” (Pahor, 2019b). While the core essence of the army is exactly wartime activities, the logical and legitimate question occurs – do we need (this kind of) an army?

The fact is that Slovenia has obviously not fulfilled very clear commitments on the level and structure of defence expenditure for many years. Therefore, Slovenia is

losing credibility and the positive image that it has nurtured for many years as the most developed part of “Eastern Europe”. At operational-technical levels the Allies are very straight and are sending us unambiguous messages. One of these, which due to special circumstances² was even made public, was the Draft Overview of the NATO Defence Planning Capability Review 2015/2016 for Slovenia. In this report NATO experts were very straightforward, claiming that “Slovenia’s proportion of defence expenditure spent on major equipment is totally inadequate”, and that “the overall lack of investment in defence is at odds with the need to meet the challenges of the new security environment” (NATO, 2016, p 8). Five years ago NATO experts were also very clear, and in writing informed the Slovenian political elites that “much more defence spending is required, especially if Slovenia wishes, and wishes to be seen, to deliver fully the assigned NATO Capability Targets. Until then, other Allies will likely have to continue to shoulder Slovenia’s share of the burden” (ibid.). Since then the situation has not in any way improved – more likely the opposite.

1 DECLARATION FOR PEACE

When the referendum was held back in 2003, there was still a vivid memory of the Declaration for Peace of 1991, which among other things demanded the demilitarization of Slovenia. The Declaration was signed not only by groups of oppositional parties and movements, but – what is even more important – by four out of the five members of the collective presidency of Slovenia, which at that time was also the Supreme Commander of the SAF, including the President of the collective presidency, Milan Kučan, who later became the first President of independent Slovenia.

The Declaration, which was published in 1991 all over the media including local ones, among other things promoted “Slovenia without an army and military industry” during the crucial era of independence. The Declaration proposed a new “peace” article in the new Slovenian Constitution, which would contain the text, “Slovenia is a demilitarized state” (Deklaracija za mir, 1991). The Declaration named the question of having an army as “one of the fundamental development dilemmas”, claiming that Slovenia could not compete in any way with its neighbours in military strength, and that the “establishment of its own army would drastically threaten the current modest accumulation of Slovenian economy and population” (ibid.). Luckily, the attempt was not successful. The Declaration for Peace, which was published a couple of months before the Declaration of Independence, was bluntly characterized as “shame” and “treason” by probably the most important founding father of the Slovenian state, Jože Pučnik (Pučnik, 1999). As another founding father, the main creator of the Slovenian Constitution and the first speaker

² *On behalf of Slovenia, the former leadership of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Slovenia proposed that in 2016 NATO should not put a Confidential classification on the report. This enabled the Ministry of Defence to publish the Draft Overview of the NATO Defence Planning Capability Review 2015/2016 for Slovenia on its website.*

of the Slovenian Parliament, France Bučar, colourfully expressed, Slovenia had “appeared as an undesired, illegitimate child in the old European family. What to do with it? The masters of Europe at that time, the great western countries, tried everything to carry out an abortion before its birth” (Bučar, 2007, p 315). This “abortion” would have definitely been successful if Slovenia had not won the Ten Days War in 1991 with armed military resistance.

2 ILLUSIONS OF NEUTRALITY

The referendum that was implemented on 23 March 2003 was a success. With its relatively high threshold (60%), the decision on the strategic Euro-Atlantic future received high legitimacy. Although the question on EU membership on that Sunday enjoyed much higher support (89%), public support for NATO membership was still high, with two-thirds voting for it (66%) (Poročilo o izidu glasovanja in o izidu referendumu, 2003). Euro-Atlantic optimism certainly had a strong impact on the overall result of the NATO referendum, and the EU referendum held on the same day exploited this optimism with the promised prospects of accession to the EU.

The most important element which contributed to lowering public support for NATO was the Yugoslavian legacy of non-alignment, which also fed the illusion of a second, “neutral” Switzerland during the process of Slovenia’s independence. The second element was the collective disappointment of 1999, when Slovenia (although economically the most developed) did not receive an invitation to join NATO together with the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland when the first NATO enlargement after the Cold War took place. Slovenia was invited to join NATO during the fifth and largest NATO enlargement in 2003, together with Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Slovakia. Slovenia became a NATO member on 29 March 2004, after completing all the legal procedures for accession and depositing the instruments of the ratification of the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington, along with the other six invited countries.

3 POLITICAL ELITES IN RELATION TO THE DEFENCE SYSTEM

Since Independence, the Slovenian political elites have not been able to gather sufficient political courage to properly, uniformly and unambiguously inform the public that Slovenia needs a national army which will actively engage in international cooperation and which will be able to defend the motherland. As a consequence, 15 years after joining NATO, public support for membership is rather low. In May 2018 a survey was published (by Valicon) showing that 59% of the Slovenian population believe that Slovenia does not benefit from NATO membership and support the idea of leaving NATO. On the other hand, only 41% of the population believe that Slovenia should strengthen its status in NATO and “assign more money to the Alliance from the budget” (Večer, 2018, p 3). Although the question (published in one of the most important Slovenian dailies) was

manipulative, misleading and incorrect³, the result is still rather worrisome and also reflects the low level of media professionalism in Slovenia (see Introduction).

In Slovenian political space there are still lively debates questioning whether Slovenia needs its own army. Political elites are unable to spread uniform and unambiguous answers and are mainly avoiding the debates, lacking not only the knowledge and ability to articulate the position, but also the political courage. On the other hand it seems that recently we may have observed a positive change, as the current Prime Minister has publically expressed that after 30 years “it is clear that we not only need the Slovenian Armed Forces, but we need to modernize, develop and above all trust it” (Šarec, 2018).

It is historical fact that during the last hundred years the Slovenian nation has been forced many times to defend its national existence with an armed force. It is completely illogical that most of the people who are still advocating demilitarization are at the same time praising the partisan combat which was really the key element to defending Slovenian national existence during the Second World War. They praise national and international historical icons of armed resistance, but at the same time they are advocating the position that Slovenia does not need its own military force.

There are a number of formal documents endorsed by the political elites in Parliament where it is clearly stated that Slovenia needs its own armed forces. For instance the “Resolution of General Long-term Development and Equipping Programme of the Slovenian Armed Forces up to 2025”, endorsed by Parliament, even clearly defines the main purpose of the Slovenian Armed Forces, namely to “contribute to the implementation of interests and national security objectives of the Republic of Slovenia through military capabilities” (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Slovenia, 2011, p 8). However, on the other hand, the political elites are not loud enough in public to highlight the fact that the army is a fundamental element of statehood, and that in the world there are really very few demilitarized nations (exactly 15), almost exclusively on remote islands (except for the pocket states of Andorra, Lichtenstein and Vatican City). Concerning military neutrality, it should be very clear that this is a result of specific historical circumstances, where other, mightier nations have imposed it or a mutual agreement was made about it for geopolitical reasons (Austria, Finland, Ireland, Sweden and Switzerland). Moreover, according to the World Bank, these neutral states have on average an even higher defence budget than Slovenia, not only nominally, but also as a share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (World Bank, 2019). They also, with the exception of Ireland, have compulsory enlistment of people in a military service (military conscription).

³ *Slovenia needs to assign more resources to its own army (not to the Alliance) and to fulfil its own commitments.*

4 THE CHALLENGES OF FULFILLING THE COMMITMENTS

At the NATO Summit in Wales in 2014, heads of states and governments – including Slovenia – agreed to reverse the trend of declining defence budgets. They agreed the members would, within a decade (i.e. up to 2024), a) halt any decline, b) increase defence budgets with the aim of moving towards the 2% of GDP guideline, and c) structurally adapt defence budgets to spend 20% or more on major new equipment (NATO, 2014).

Although this commitment was made at the highest political level, Slovenia was one of the few NATO countries which in the following years actually lowered its defence budget, both in terms of the percentage of GDP (to 0.93%) and in nominal terms. In 2016 and 2017 the defence budget was slightly increased to 1% of GDP, but in 2018 the budget was again decreased below 1% of GDP (see index: http://www.mo.gov.si/si/o_ministrstvu/). Compared to the other Allies, in 2018 only Spain (0.93%), Belgium (0.93%) and Luxemburg (0.54%) were behind Slovenia in the proportion of GDP set aside for defence. If we compare data from 2011 and 2018, we can see that in 2011 Montenegro, Luxemburg, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia were behind Slovenia in the nominal weight of the defence budget, while in 2018 only Luxemburg and Montenegro were behind Slovenia (NATO, 2019).

With regard to the structure of defence expenditure, Slovenia has been the worst of all the Allied countries for a number of years. In 2018 only 8.2% of total defence expenditure was designated for equipment (NATO, 2019), while on the other hand personnel costs came to almost 80%.

These facts have not remained hidden from the other Allied states and NATO Headquarters. Slovenia has been reminded of its commitments as to the level and structure of defence expenditure at various levels and in internal reports (NATO, 2016). Among other things, during his visit in March 2019 on the occasion of the celebration of 15 years of NATO membership, the former NATO Secretary General, George Robertson, was very blunt when he publically stated that “Slovenia is not even close to fulfilling the obligations that you made to NATO 15 years ago” (Kosec, 2019). Unfortunately, even when analyzing hard facts, it must be concluded that Slovenia is becoming irrelevant to the Alliance.

5 BENEFITS OF NATO MEMBERSHIP

It should be noted that Slovenia has gained a great deal by joining the Alliance. Geopolitically it has (re)positioned itself as part of the most developed world. In this context it is understandable that in 2003 the NATO referendum was held at the same time as the EU referendum. All the countries from the other side of “the Iron curtain” which joined NATO have later also joined the EU, including Slovenia.

The most significant benefit of membership is the collective security brought with Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, as all of the Allies should defend Slovenia in the event of an armed attack.

As a consequence Slovenia has become economically more attractive. It has received better credit ratings (resulting in lower interest rates), which have had a positive impact on the whole Slovenian economy. Slovenia has become a country with lower risk levels for foreign investments. Membership of NATO has also brought opportunities for the Slovenian defence industry, and possibility for participation in the scientific and technological events of the most developed world.

Internationally, the foreign policy potential and position of Slovenia has been greatly improved. Slovenia has gained a seat behind the joint table together with the militarily and politically strongest states. The possibility of participation in decision-making about the most important questions of world security issues has emerged. Even the strongest players often listen to the positions of Slovenia, mostly on the security issues in our immediate neighbourhood, the Western Balkans.

Defence is much cheaper today than it would be otherwise. The SAF no longer needs to develop and invest in the whole spectrum of the defence system, especially those parts which are often financially the most demanding (military aviation, maritime components, anti-aircraft systems, and so on). Besides this, membership of NATO has in fact enabled Slovenia to abolish the conscript system and professionalize the army. Young boys do not need to enlist and lose six months of their lives in the army; they are available earlier in the labour market, which also has a positive effect on the Slovenian economy.

Membership of NATO also offers more intense cooperation in international military operations and missions. Currently almost 350 members of the SAF (or 5% of all the forces) are deployed abroad (86% in NATO-led operations and missions) (see index: <http://www.slovenskavojska.si>). This puts Slovenia among the top nations compared to the other Allies. Participation in international operations “has been demonstrated as being very beneficial from the systematic point of view, as it was for a long time a driving engine for the transformation of the Slovenian Armed Forces and defence system” (Čehovin, 2017, p 230).

Conclusion After fifteen years of NATO membership, Slovenia is still divided between peace idealism, which was part of the Slovenian independence story, and realism, which historically inexorably confirms that allies are needed, and that Slovenians have been forced many times to defend their own existence with military power.

Although we are celebrating 15 years of Slovenia’s strategic decision to enter the Alliance, unfortunately there are (still) not many reasons to be sincerely contented with that. A lot of time for urgent defence sector reforms has been lost. The aftertaste is bitter, as Slovenia does not have the military force it should and could have. As has

been identified in the latest Strategic Defence Review in 2016, “the defence system of the Republic of Slovenia has been stopped in its development. Currently, it does not achieve the required level of capacity to tackle the future threats and risks to national security, nor can it fulfil all the assigned objectives and tasks and establish all the necessary defence capabilities of the state” (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Slovenia, 2016, p 8). Unfortunately, in Slovenian politics there is not enough human resource potential able to engage appropriately in defence policy. When formally accepting a number of strategic documents, including the strategic defence reviews of 2009 and 2016 (see Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Slovenia, 2009 and 2016), the political elites have in fact formally recognized the very poor situation of the defence system while being unable or unwilling to implement the identified proposals.

No amendments to the Law on Defence, no so-called White Book or any other formal strategic document will change the situation in the defence system. Slovenia already has a number of good strategic defence documents, but unfortunately they are more or less ignored. Every new Government in the last decade has obliged themselves to implement the defence reforms, but none of the really needed reforms were made. Almost all the Governments initially wanted to implement the integration of the military and civil parts of the Ministry of Defence, but they very soon lost interest and courage. The processes are duplicating and the functioning of the defence system is far from optimum. On the other hand, some of the defence reforms were entirely left to the General Staff of the SAF and the results were defective (for instance, the Force Command was abolished in 2013, and then after a few years re-established in 2017; also some of the key specialized battalions – such as chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear – have been abolished).

The defence system has been underfinanced for a decade. After 2010 the defence budget fell from 1.61% of GDP (583 million EUR) to 0.93% of GDP (361 million EUR) in 2015. In 2018 it slowly rose to 0.99% of GDP (448 million EUR). Today, in nominal terms the defence budget is around 150 million EUR lower than it was a decade ago (see index: http://www.mo.gov.si/si/o_ministrstvu/).

The defence system needs to be renovated, transformed and integrated, and the solutions repeatedly identified in the strategic defence reviews need to be implemented (see Defence Sector Strategic Review 2009 and Strategic Defence Review 2016; Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Slovenia, 2009 and 2016). According to the latest Strategic Defence Review an improvement in defence expenditure will not automatically improve defence capacity. The review also concluded that there is a need for systematic changes (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Slovenia, 2016, p 8). Nevertheless, the financing of the defence system needs to be greatly improved with regard to the level of GDP, as well as the structure of the budget, which includes raising the budget for defence equipment. Human resource management needs to be improved and a better financial position for military personnel should be achieved. There are a lot of challenges that need to be faced. The role of the political elites

is to recognize, lead and guide the solutions to these challenges; they will not just happen by themselves. If there are no changes, the defence system will continue to decompose to the point of no return. A grounded hope exists that in 2018 the Slovenian defence system has already reached its lowest point and that the extra financial input promised in 2019 by the current Government is a sign of the difficult and lengthy recovery process on the horizon.

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