

BULLETIN

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The EU Eastern Neighbourhood in Slovenia's Foreign Policy

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The eastern neighbourhood of the EU is not a significant direction for the foreign policy of Slovenia. The country pursues its policy towards Eastern Europe and South Caucasus mainly through the Union. Slovenia's position on sanctions against Belarus shows that while having little interest in an eastern-focused policy, economic relations with the area covered by it remain significant. Poland should strengthen bilateral and regional cooperation instruments with countries that do not treat with priority the EU's actions towards its eastern partners, which can increase the effectiveness of this policy.

Slovenia's Position on Sanctions for Belarus. On 27 February, the EU adopted further sanctions against Belarus. These included a ban on entry to the Union for 21 Belarusian citizens, including 19 judges and two policemen. It was planned to also include on the list Yuri Chizh, a Belarusian businessmen in the energy and construction industry, who conducted business in several EU countries. Slovenia blocked Chizh's inclusion to the list, arguing that it should not involve only a single trader, and that sanctions on Belarusian business people would strengthen Russia's position in the economy of Belarus. Meanwhile, a few days earlier, a Slovenian company had received a contract with a substantial investment with the participation of Chizh's enterprise in a project in Minsk. In response to criticism from some of the Member States, Slovenia proposed a wider debate on economic sanctions against Belarus. The country also announced that during the EU Council in March it would be in favour of the imposition of sanctions on Chizh if the list would also include other business people.

The Eastern Dimension of Slovenia's European Policy. Slovenia supports the strengthening of cooperation with the eastern partners of the EU, but the approach to these states is not a part of the strategic objectives of the country's foreign policy. While Slovenia was holding the EU presidency, it welcomed a proposal in May 2008 to establish the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and has seen it as a project that promoted European values in the Union's immediate vicinity. But soon after, Slovenia's then-Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel spoke with reservations about the EaP, stressing that it should not be pursued at the expense of the EU's actions towards its southern neighbours or as an alternative to the Union's commitment to the European integration of the Western Balkans. Slovenia's position on this was the result of both poorly developed political and economic relations with countries in the partnership as well as from fear about the project's influence on EU regional initiatives aimed at bringing southeastern Europe into the Union. However, after the EaP was launched, President Danilo Türk argued that Slovenia was interested in strengthening the instrument. He pointed out that closer cooperation with the countries covered by the EaP should take into account the potential of the individual countries and their attitudes towards the project, and that the EU should not build relations with the eastern partners purely on energy issues, but extend it to actions that strengthen their democracies. Moreover, the Slovenian government lent support to offering a European perspective to at least some of the countries covered by the EaP. This statement was an expression of Slovenia's openness to further cooperation within the EU to strengthen relations with its eastern neighbours.

In addition to its policy towards the East at the EU forum, Slovenia has participated in regional initiatives aimed at this area. The country took part in the Visegrád Group summits on numerous occasions as the only external partner. The conclusions from these meetings often contained

the common position on reinforcement of Union's cooperation with countries of Eastern Europe, including support for democratic changes in Georgia and for the strengthening of the EU's relations with Ukraine.

Slovenia's bilateral relations with the countries of Eastern Europe and Southern Caucasus are characterized by low dynamics. The only Slovenian diplomatic missions in these countries is the embassy in Kiev. Relations with Belarus are coordinated by the embassy in Moscow, and with Moldova from Budapest. The visit by President Türk to Armenia in autumn 2010, and a return visit by the Armenian president to Slovenia half a year later was one of the rare examples of the country's sporadic relations with the Southern Caucasus states. Slovenia's modest political relations with the EaP countries reflect in their economic ties: neither imports from nor exports to these countries exceeds 1% of Slovenia's trade.

Against this background, economic relations with Russia looks advantageous. That country is one of Slovenia's main trading partners outside the EU, with 2.5% of Slovenia's total trade. Besides that, political cooperation between the two countries has also developed intensively, as evidenced by, among other things, last year's meeting of representatives of both countries at the levels of presidents, prime ministers and foreign ministers. During its presidency of the EU Council, Slovenia also pointed to the need for a broader discussion about the Union's future relations with Russia.

Slovenia's Policy towards the EU neighbourhood. The policy of Slovenia towards the EU's immediate surroundings, including the East, is determined by its location—within Central Europe, the Alpine area, the Mediterranean basin and the Balkan Peninsula—as well as because prior to independence in 1991, the country was part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. For this reason, among the areas neighbouring the EU, Slovenia's priority are the Western Balkans, which lie in its immediate vicinity. The relationship with this region also is a result of cultural, social and economic ties. Therefore, after completing its strategic aspirations to join the EU and NATO, the overarching objective of Slovenia's policy towards the Union's neighbours is to consolidate security and stability in the Balkans by bringing the region into both of these organizations.

Under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) Slovenia shows more interest in the South than in the East. The Union for the Mediterranean, launched in July 2008, was supported by the international Euro-Mediterranean University, which was founded in the same year in the Slovenian city of Portorož. Slovenia's involvement in this area also is confirmed by its participation (along with Cyprus, France, Greece, Malta and Spain) in a joint note to HR Catherine Ashton at the beginning of 2011 that contained proposals for an EU response to the events in North Africa. The demands included an increase in the Union's funding for activities in the South, even at the cost of relocation from the East.

Conclusions and Recommendations. Slovenia's policy towards the East is overwhelmed by a commitment in the other directions of the country's policy towards the neighbourhood of the EU. Slovenia pursues the eastern dimension of the ENP primarily through multilateral initiatives and is much less focused on bilateral relations with the EaP countries. In the context of Slovenia's position towards Belarus, it should be noted that it had no effect on either the reaction of the Belarusian authorities to the EU sanctions or the EU's response to these actions. However, it revealed the weakness of the EU consultation mechanism while determining the list of people affected by the sanctions. The Slovenian statement—regardless of its motivation—shows that countries that do not have a tradition of political involvement in Belarus may submit to bilateral economic interests over the EU's joint actions aimed at the democratization of that country. It also shows that some economic projects for small countries—including the Baltic states—can be more significant than it would seem from the Polish perspective.

In the interest of Poland—for which the eastern neighbourhood is a priority in European policy—is the involvement of Slovenia in the implementation of the EaP and the active engagement of this country in policy towards Belarus. This should be helped not only by the bilateral consultations, but also by regional cooperation. It is important that if Poland has the ambition to create EU policy on the East, then it must perfect the instruments of bilateral cooperation with countries that are less interested in the Union's activities in the EaP. Poland can also use its upcoming presidency in the Visegrád Group as a platform to develop common positions on the EU's eastern policy with Slovenia, and in the future also with Croatia. Consultations in the early stages of the development of specific instruments in the framework of this policy could let the EU avoid the perception of a lack of unity among the Member States towards its eastern policy, which would undermine its effectiveness. It should also be kept in mind that the traditional area for V4 operations, along with the EaP, is the Western Balkans.