TITLE: THE ROLE OF SLOVENIA IN A COMPREHENSIVE BALKAN PEACE PLAN

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THE ROLE OF SLOVENIA IN A COMPREHENSIVE BALKAN PEACE PLAN

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To this point, Slovenia has played a minor role in post-Yugoslav events. It was, of course, Slovenia’s declaration of independence in the summer of 1991 that led to the irrevocable breakup of the country. And, what is more, Slovenia did fight a ten-day war against the Yugoslav national army in defense of its independence. Since then, however, the Slovenes have assiduously attempted to avoid looking toward their southern borders, preferring instead to concentrate on the process of state and nation building, and on cultivating ties with their neighbors to the North (principally Austria) and West (Italy). Ultimately, Slovenia’s goal is to become fully integrated into European and world institutions, particularly the European economic union and NATO. Whereas before 1991 some 75% of Slovenia’s trade was linked to the former Yugoslavia and only 25% with Western Europe, today those percentages have been reversed. In conversations with Slovenians, it is impossible not to hear a certain pride, even smugness, when you are told that "We Slovenians are not part of the Balkan cauldron but rather an Alpine nation" (as the Assistant Mayor of Ljubljana put it at one reception I attended). As a result of this attitude, the Slovenians have been quite inactive, even a bit callous, regarding Bosnia. Slovenia, it appears, was the only nation in Europe which did not mount a state-sponsored aid campaign for Bosnia. And although they did allow a certain number of refugees from war-torn areas into the country, they did their best to hustle them out again, further North to Austria and Germany, or overseas to the US, Canada, and Australia. Given this, it would appear that Slovenia is not a very good candidate to play a role in post-war Yugoslav events.

Nevertheless, longer acquaintance with Slovenia and Slovenians leaves a somewhat different impression. The most important thing one senses is that Slovenia’s inaction is the result of a lingering, subconscious sense of collective guilt regarding the war. This feeling was perhaps brought home most strongly at a press conference for former US Ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmerman, organized by one of the leading Slovenian journals (Nova revija, The New Review). In his memoirs, Zimmerman has stated that Slovenia has to bear some of the moral responsibility for the fighting in the former Yugoslavia. According to Zimmerman, the Slovenes were well aware of what the consequences of the declaration of
independence would be, reasoning that had Slovenia waited to declare independence until a conference had been held on how and where the borders of the newly-independent republics in the Balkans would be drawn, war might have been avoided. Instead, their overly hasty declaration encouraged Croatia to follow suit, setting in motion the chain of events which has still not yet come to a conclusion. It is, of course, possible to disagree with Zimmerman’s interpretation of events, but the reaction of the Slovenes who attended this press conference went far beyond simply disagreement. One after another, speakers rose to denounce the former ambassador’s statement, with such vehemence and frequency (each time the moderator attempted to move the questioning to some other topic it would invariably return to this one), that one’s only conclusion was that at some sub- or unconscious level the Slovenes recognized that Mr. Zimmerman’s assessment was correct.

Moreover, Slovenia’s insistence on avoiding anything having to do with the former Yugoslavia appears to result not only from a lingering complex of guilt regarding the origins of the war in the first place, but also from a fairly strong sense of survivor guilt. In comparison to the horrific price that Croatia and Bosnia have had to pay for their independence, the Slovenians escaped with the lightest of scratches—a ten-day war that was clearly not prosecuted with full intensity by the Yugoslav National Army. Again, the vehemence with which Slovenes dismiss the possibility that the Serbs wanted Slovenia to secede (and, therefore, made their escape rather easy) in order to be able to concentrate on settling scores with the Croats suggests that there is more than a grain of truth to this supposition.

Now, however, as the conflicts in Croatia and Bosnia seem to be winding down to an exhausted conclusion, and as the process of reconstruction is contemplated, it is time to ask the Slovenians to play a much greater role than they have heretofore in the region. If one examines the countries which directly border the parties to the Balkan conflicts (Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania), it is obvious that Slovenia is in the best position to help directly or to be used as a staging point for help from the larger Western powers. The reasons for this are obvious:

1) For all their desire to avoid the “Balkan” label, the Slovenes understand their former countrymen better than anyone else does. They did, after all, live in some version of the same state for almost 70 years, and although their languages are not the same, most Slovenes can understand Serbian or Croatian fairly well. One can say the same thing about
Macedonia in this regard, but is obvious that the Macedonians have so many troubles of their own that they are best left out of the equation.

2) The Slovenians have built a stable, reasonably prosperous country since independence. This is true of Hungary as well, but the Hungarians speak a language that no one understands, and they do not generally know Serbian or Croatian.

3) Although they cannot yet admit it openly, the Slovenes need and want to have greater contact with Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia. If these countries eventually become functioning players in the world economy (which they will do, sooner or later), Slovenia will be in an excellent position to recapture a prominent position in their markets. Old contacts will be reestablished and new ones formed. What is more, the major truck and train routes from Western Europe to the Balkans lie through Slovenia, so it will be a natural jumping-off point for the reconstruction business.

4) Slovenia appears to be eager to play a greater role on the world stage. It is, of course, a tiny country (approximately 2 million inhabitants), and like all such countries it has something of an inferiority complex. The country would certainly be willing to make some sacrifices in order to help its neighbors if it felt that these sacrifices would be rewarded with greater international recognition.

Thus, it would appear that now is the time to ask the Slovenes to play a major role in the reconstruction of the Balkans. They can afford to do it in the first place, and they have good reasons, both psychological and economic, for wanting to do so. The country would be an ideal staging point for aid deliveries, and it would be a good place to recruit the kind of people who will be needed to rebuild the shattered infrastructure of the former Yugoslavia. Certainly, it might be proposed that the government set up an organized aid and redevelopment program on its own to complement and/or help defray the costs of Western European or US programs of a similar nature. All of these things are well within the power of Slovenia to do, and they are in her national interest as well. Although Slovenia has avoided the Balkan wars almost completely, she should not be allowed to avoid her responsibilities toward a Balkan peace.