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SLOVENIA AND ITS RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA IN THE EURO-ATLANTIC CONTEXT

Abstract. *Among the new EU and NATO members Slovenia is known for its “friendly pragmatism” in its relations with Russia. This can be explained as a manifestation of a recurring pattern in identity politics, typical of smaller Slavic nations of Central and South-Eastern Europe. In this sense, the case of Slovenia demonstrates the utility of social constructivism in international relations theory and corroborates the importance of social identities in the formation of intra-state policies and security communities. It also has clear implications for the process of Euro-Atlantic integration in the future, especially as it relates to Slavic candidate countries – unwarranted delays on this path can have unintended consequences.*

Keywords: *Slovenia, Russia, EU, NATO, social constructivism, Slavism, enlargement*

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Introduction

In 2007, the European Council on Foreign Relations published *A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations*. This seminal policy paper closely scrutinised the contacts of individual EU member states with Russia and classified them on a descriptive scale. Most new members found themselves in the more extreme groups of “Frosty Pragmatists” (Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia and Romania) and “New Cold Warriors” (Lithuania and Poland). On the other hand, Slovenia was placed in the middle group of “Friendly Pragmatists”, together with Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal and Slovakia. According to the reports’ authors, these are countries “who maintain a close relationship with Russia and tend to put their business interests above political goals” (Leonard and Popescu, 2007: 2).

However, the actual extent of Slovenian business interests in Russia should not be exaggerated. The volume of bilateral trade has in reality never exceeded more than 4% of the Slovenian total, making it comparable to the intensity of Slovenian business ties with Poland.¹ Moreover, almost half of

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¹ According to official statistics, in 2013 the total volume of trade between Slovenia and Russia amounted to EUR 1,470,288,000, while the total volume of trade between Slovenia and Poland amounted to EUR 1,149,522,000.

Slovenian exports to Russia are consistently accounted for by Slovenia's two main pharmaceutical companies Krka and Lek. This makes the level of Slovenian-Russian business contacts noticeably less significant and diverse than Slovenia's relationship with its traditional trading partners. According to the country's Statistical Office, in the period between 2000 and 2010 "Slovenia exported the most goods to EU Member States and to Croatia" and "Slovenia imported the most goods from Germany and Italy" (Perše et al., 2012: 11). The explanation that Slovenia maintains a close relationship with Russia because of business interests alone therefore does not appear sufficient.

A more complete answer seems to lie in the subtext of official statements on both sides, which have been largely overlooked in the past. Thus, in the words of the spokesman from the Russian Foreign Ministry, it is the "common Slavic roots and the traditionally kind feelings of our peoples toward each other" that represent a good foundation for the intensive contacts between Slovenia and Russia (Nesterenko, 2009). This sentiment was echoed by the Slovenian Foreign Minister who praised "the close connection and understanding, solidarity and respect between two Slavonic nations" (Ministry, 2013a). Picking up on this peculiar aspect of Slovenian-Russian interaction, Gower (2013: 226) also noted: "Official communications by both parties stress their shared Slavic identity and it is especially important in stimulating a wide range of contacts at the civil society as well as official levels".

As such, the statements represent a seeming puzzle. One of the developments that led to Slovenia's breakup with Yugoslavia and its declaration of independence in 1991 was a rupture in the country's identification with its Slavic heritage. This development most clearly manifested itself in the appearance and popularity of the so-called Venetic theory of Slovenian origins, which emphasised an indigenous ethnogenesis and outright rejected the conventional wisdom of Slavic ancestry (Skrbiš, 2008: 138). A return to Slavism and its entry into official discourse after the formation of a sovereign state is therefore something that merits attention in and of itself. All the more so, if it could provide a better understanding of Slovenian-Russian relations and the evolution of Slovenia's foreign policy within the Euro-Atlantic context. From a theoretical perspective, the issue is also interesting for international relations since it touches on several pertinent questions regarding the dynamics of state identity and the development of security communities.

Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

Slavism is a relatively poorly researched topic in international relations theory.² This is ironic because the latter in particular owes its development

² Slavism in this context is defined as the common feeling and interest of the Slavic people. In this

to events in the Slavic-speaking world. As pointed out by Kratochwil (1993: 63), it was the Russian *perestroika* and consequent dissolution of the Soviet Bloc that provided the fateful “crucial test” for neo-realism as the established paradigm of international politics. With the explanatory hegemony of the dominant rationalist theory undermined, the door was left open for critical theorists. Yet, even their subsequent work hardly addressed the subject of Slavic identity and its possible foreign policy implications. In the context of his analysis of the discourse on Central Europe and the associated representations of Russia, Neumann (1996: 237) thus commented in a footnote that “clearly relevant here is the strong Pan-Slavist tradition that has made off-and-on appearances in this part of the world”. However, he did not elaborate on the subject further than that. In the rare foreign policy studies that actually address the issue, Slavism has been dismissed as unimportant. Udovič (2011: 47, 49) thus posited that “Slavism is *passé*” and that “the ‘Slavic’ common identity is a spent concept, non-attractive and irrelevant in modern times”.

On the other hand, the concept has been recognised as potentially significant in other academic circles. Maria Janion, one of the most outstanding Polish scholars of literary Romanticism, caused a stir in her homeland in 2006 with publication of the book *The Amazing Slavdom*. In it, she proposed trying “to imagine a new national identity built on Slavic foundations” (Szyroka, 2010: 202). Moreover, the December 2009 issue of *Osteuropa*, the specialised German monthly on Eastern Europe, was entirely dedicated to analysing the “Slavic Idea after Panslavism”. In a similar vein, the organisers of the 21st International Congress of Historical Sciences, which took place in August 2010 in Amsterdam, held separate sections on “Austroslavism”, “Panslavism and Neoslavism”, as well as “Slavic Solidarity Today” (Makowski and Hadler, 2013). The general point of departure of these inquiries was recognition of the changes brought about by the end of the Cold War. As noted by Troebst (2014: 19): “In between 1991 and 2006, eleven Slavophone states were founded in Europe; thus currently a relative majority of European states are Slavophone”.

Although valuable, these studies are mostly detached from one another, without any unifying connection that would link institutions and political relations with identity structures and mutual perceptions. This missing link can be provided by international relations theory, in particular by social constructivism, because it allows for “bridging political practices with social identities” (Medvedev and Neumann, 2012: 13). Unlike the structural realist and neo-realist approaches, which assume that states act within the

sense, use of the term follows the example of Hans Kohn (1963) in his article “Slavdom and Slavism in the Polish National Consciousness, 1794–1848”.

framework of an anarchic political environment, constructivism derives from the assumption that the state is the dependent variable, determined by the historical, cultural, social and political contexts, which shape its identity. As such, it has been brought to bear on a variety of issues. One of these has been, for example, the Arab collective identity and the ongoing competition between pan-Arabism on the one hand and state-centric models on the other. In a seminal study, Barnett (1996: 401, 404) thus emphasised that even though “Arab leaders routinely paid lip service to the ideals of pan-Arabism while engaging in power-seeking behavior”, they also recognised that “pan-Arabism represents both a force to be reckoned with and a potential threat”. In other words, “the waxing and waning of pan-Arabism has had a profound effect on military alliances in the Middle East” (Jepperson et al., 1996: 64).

In a similar vein, it would make sense to look at the implications of “the waxing and waning” of Slavism in Central and South-Eastern Europe. After all, as pointed out by the prominent philosopher and historian Hans Kohn (1960: xvii), while the Slavic idea “has so far not become a political or cultural reality” it has both “moved many Slav minds” and also “preoccupied and frightened the statesmen and political observers of other nations”. In other words, regardless of whether or not Slavism has gone down the path of Arabism, to be substituted by “the new realism” and “the return to geography”, it would make sense to confirm that Slavic-speaking states are indeed exhibiting new behavioural expectations and patterns of interactions with regard to their security policies in general and alliance arrangements in particular. This issue would warrant even more attention if it turns out that Slavism is actually alive and well, even if only in an individual Slavic-speaking country, such as Slovenia. The first research question that therefore poses itself is: What could have influenced an identity shift in Slovenia from the pre-independence anti-Slavism to a post-independence Slavism? The second question logically follows from the first one: How has this shift manifested itself in Slovenian-Russian relations in the Euro-Atlantic context?

Origins of Slavism

Contrary to the often-held misconception, Slavism as a philosophical and social phenomenon was not born in Russia but in Central Europe (Kohn, 1961: 323). Already in the 17th century, a Croat priest by the name of Juraj Križanić travelled all the way to Moscow in order to “promote the idea of Slavic unity under the religious leadership of the pope and the political leadership of the tsar” (Pipes, 2005: 45). In its modern form, however, it arose among the Slovaks, who were reacting to Hungarian attempts at ethnic assimilation in the first half of the 19th century (Maxwell, 2009: 15). The person who responded to this challenge most vocally was Ján Kollár, a Lutheran

pastor for the Slovak community in Budapest, who called for cultural cooperation among all Slavic-speakers in order to overcome their relative isolation and fragmentation. He took as his starting point the well-known claim by the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder about the Slavic *Volksgeist* and the moral supremacy of the Slavs, as well as their historic duty to lead mankind towards humanity. As noted by Pynsent (1994: 53), Kollár “not only formulated an idea which appealed to intellectuals (and in some countries, politicians) throughout the Slav world, but he also provided a programme of action”.

This programme included concrete suggestions such as the establishment of bookstores, libraries, university chairs, a special literary magazine and a uniform orthography (Kollár, 1844/2008: 131-134). It also included the suggestion that Slavs should concentrate on four “educated dialects” as the media for intellectual conversation – Russian, Illyrian, Polish and Czecho-Slovak – while safeguarding the identity of all the other existing Slavic idioms for the internal purposes of individual nations. Acknowledging the special status of Russians among Slavs, Kollár (1844/2008: 91-92) argued forcefully why they too, “the most numerous and mighty Slavic tribe”, should find Slavic cooperation useful: “Russia can eternally renew itself through Reciprocity, can refresh and strengthen itself”. This point was developed even further by his contemporary and compatriot Ľudovít Štúr. Disillusioned by the continued rejection of demands for language rights and having lost his faith in the transformative potential of the Habsburg Empire, he started advocating the creation of an all-Slavic State. In order to fulfil this goal, Štúr advocated not only the union of all Slavs under Russian leadership, but also the adoption of “Orthodoxy as state religion for all Slavs and, finally, Russian as common literary language” (Baer, 2007: 62-63). All of which led Kohn (1961: 324) to conclude that “even the program of later Russian Pan-Slavism which might be better called Pan-Russianism was developed by a Western Slav”.

The Slovak appeal for Slavic Reciprocity met with quite some resonance, especially among the Slavic-speakers in the Habsburg lands. Kollár’s friend from Zagreb, Ljudevit Gaj, took up the banner of “Illyrianism” among the Croats and laid the foundations for what would later, under Bishop Josip Juraj Strossmayer, become known as Yugo-Slavism (Maxwell, 2008: 39). In his efforts to mobilise the necessary support to withstand the Hungarian pressure, Gaj even wrote to the Tsar of the “mission” of Russia, arguing that “the strategic advantage of mastering the Balkans could be realized by using the sympathies of the Croats, the ‘Illyrians’” (Erickson, 1964: 13). The Czechs also responded to the idea, despite their relatively better position. The main Czech goal, as formulated by the historian František Palacký, was to transform the Habsburg Empire into a strong federal state of nationalities with

equal rights that would serve as a bulwark for all of its small peoples against the surrounding big powers. According to Vyšný (1977: 7): “These ideas, which acquired the name of Austro-Slavism, were to remain, in one form or another, the inspiration of mainstream Czech political activities up to the outbreak of the First World War”.

When faced with increasing challenges from the surrounding German-speakers the Czechs also drew closer to the idea of wider Slavic cooperation. In 1848, reacting to calls from Frankfurt for the establishment of a unified German nation-state, the first-ever Slav Congress was organised in Prague, where 341 representatives from all the Slavic lands discussed “the importance of the Slavs in Austria”, as well as “their relations with the non-Austrian Slavs” (Kohn, 1960: 81–82). In 1867, after the *Ausgleich* created the dualistic structure of the Habsburg Empire, the disappointed Czechs sent by far the most numerous and important delegation to the second Slav Congress in Moscow to demonstrate their affinity with the other Slavs, the Russians in particular. Finally, at the end of the 19th century, Czech politicians, such as Karel Kramář, launched the Neo-Slav movement in order to remodel the internal structure of the Dual Monarchy through “united Slav action” and bring about a rapprochement between Russia and Austria-Hungary against German expansion (Vyšný, 1977: 248).

Slavism, in other words, arose as a protest movement of smaller Slavic nations in reaction to the perceived injustices suffered at the hands of their Western, non-Slav neighbours. While aimed at strengthening intra-Slav cooperation in general, an integral aspect of this response also included increased attention to the “big brother” in the East for protection and help (Kohn, 1960: xiii). Or, to put it differently, when push came to shove the Slavs reacted by reconnecting with their roots at the identity level and turning to each other for assistance at the political one. As such, the defensive reflex also included increased attention to Russia, which was and still is the biggest and most powerful Slavic state. This was the case with the Slovaks, Croats and Czechs in the 19th century. It therefore stands to reason that this could also be the case with the Slovenians in the 21st century.

Slovenians and the Slavic Idea

Slovenians are no strangers to the Slavic Idea. As pointed out by Gantar Godina (1994: 111), they even figured prominently among the founding members of Neo-Slavism. However, generally speaking, the Slovenian approach to Slavic cooperation was prudent and conservative. According to Erickson (1964: 15), Ljubljana was known for “its staunch ‘Austro-Slav’ Slovenes”, a view shared by Kohn (1960: 63): “The Slovenes remained to the end loyal Austro-Slavs”. Indeed, it is well known that the 19th century

Slovenian national poet France Prešeren firmly rejected not only Gaj's advocacy of Illyrianism, but also Kollár's scheme for Slavic Reciprocity.³ Rusinow (2003: 16) therefore concluded the following about Slovenians: "Until very late in the day their political elites of all parties looked to Vienna for solutions and were Austro-Slav or at most 'Trialist' rather than Yugo-Slav in their orientation and goals".

Slovenians' particularism, based on their linguistic distinctiveness, also continued after the fall of the Habsburg Empire in both the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and in Socialist Yugoslavia. This is not to deny the indelible impact of the First World War. Indeed, as a result of the increasingly oppressive Habsburg war regime Slovenians even spearheaded the formation of the "Yugoslav Club", under the leadership of the prominent Slovenian politician Anton Korošec in the Vienna Parliament in 1917. Nonetheless, the Slovenian élite as a rule rejected Neo-Illyrianist ideas of the complete cultural and linguistic unification of South Slavs. The resulting paradox was described by Velikonja (2003: 89) as follows: "The Slovenes generally rejected integral Yugoslavism, but neither the major Slovene political parties nor Slovene intellectuals were anti-Yugoslav". This was a consequence of what Banac (1984: 342) identified as "the exigencies of the Slovenes" and "Slovenia's vulnerability", because "without Serbia's help, Slovenia could hardly be expected to withstand the assaults on its territory by Italy and Austria".

It therefore came as somewhat of a surprise when toward the end of the 20th century, in the mid-eighties, Slovenians witnessed in their midst the emergence of the so-called "Venetic theory" of ethnogenesis. The latter rejected the generally accepted migrationist model, with its emphasis on Slavic ancestry from the *Völkerwanderung* period of the Early Middle Ages, by arguing that Slovenians are "indigenous to the European continent" (Skrbiš, 2008: 138). The theory, which was first advanced in 1985 by a teacher, a priest and a poet, claimed that "the Slovenes as a people began in the prehistory of central Europe, in the 13th century B.C.", that their ancestors were "the Proto-Slavic Veneti", that the Veneti "developed the important Este culture" and that "its numerous inscriptions can still be understood through the Slovene language" (Šavli et al., 1996: 520). According to them, the commonly held view of the Slavic origin of Slovenians is nothing but a relatively recent and undocumented proposition, which does not withstand

³ In a famous epigram entitled "The Four Braggarts of the More Numerous Slavic Races", Prešeren (1847/1986: 102) made it abundantly clear already in the late 1830's what he thought of Kollár's idea of only four Slavic "educated dialects":

*Czech, Pole and Illyrian, Russian – only their mighty races
Have the right to write in their learned tongues;
White Croat, Ruthenian, Slovak, Slovene and all the others,
These – the dogs of Slavdom – get to bark, lick paws.*

serious scrutiny: "Where would all these people come from to occupy a huge territory from the Adriatic Sea to the Danube? Certainly not from the swamps of Pripet, as official historians claim. It would have been a very unusual swamp" (Šavli et al., 1996: 521).

Although highly controversial the theory gained wide popularity in Slovenia, to the astonishment of the Slovenian intellectual establishment. While seemingly illogical, this appeal reflected the spirit of the times. The eighties in Slovenia were characterised by increasing disillusionment with Yugoslavia and mounting tensions with Serbs, the dominant South Slav nation of the federal state. As pointed out by Lisjak Gabrijelčič (2008: 9), the theory represented "a very unequivocal attack on the perception of the South Slavs as a distinctive ethnic and linguistic whole, which was the basis of the Yugoslav idea". It also helped that, according to the theory, the belief in a common Slavic ancestry was "a fabrication and a conspiracy, designed initially by German nationalist historians and later adopted by the Communists" (Skrbiš, 2008: 143).

In light of these developments, as well as the ensuing Ten-Day War of 1991, which followed the Slovenian declaration of independence, the drift of Slovenians away from Slavdom should have continued unabated. In fact, Lisjak Gabrijelčič (2008: 28) openly claims that "the notion of Slavic kinship was an established and quite obvious feature in conceptualizations of Slovene identity prior to its demise after World War Two, especially after the 1980s". However, this is not what happened in the end. Judging from the already quoted public statements by Slovenian authorities, the trend was halted, if not actually reversed. How could this have come about?

The most relevant explanation seems to be found in the already described historical experience of comparable Slavic nations. As mentioned, Slavism arose as a defensive reaction to the perceived dangers or disappointments encountered in their dealings with neighbouring non-Slavs or supranational institutions. When faced with an assault on their language and culture the Slovaks reacted by launching the idea of Slavic Reciprocity and, when their concerns were not addressed, by turning to outright Pan-Slavism. Similarly, despite their initial reservations and an emphasis on Austro-Slavism, the Czechs ended up embracing Neo-Slavism and promoting a rapprochement with Russia when their hopes to remodel the internal structure of the Habsburg Empire came to naught. Judging from this historical track record, it would therefore stand to reason to assume that a comparable external challenge or frustration could have triggered a similar response among the Slovenians.

In the case of Slovenia, the main preoccupation of the newly independent state was to distance itself from the volatile Balkans and to find its rightful place in the nascent European project. So strong was this yearning that in

1989, barely two years before the break with Yugoslavia, even the Slovenian Communist Party formally adopted the slogan of “Europe Now” (Balažic, 2002: 563). This ambition only increased after independence and led, in 1993, to an official application for the signing of the Europe Agreement. In 1994, Slovenia also embarked on the Atlantic path when it became one of the first countries to join NATO’s Partnership for Peace programme. The decision was the result of the widely-held perception of a clear and present danger emanating from the territory of former Yugoslavia.⁴ This general orientation was later also codified in the first Slovenian foreign policy declaration, which defined membership in the EU and NATO as the “strategic developmental and security interest of the Republic of Slovenia” (Deklaracija, 1999). It therefore makes sense to consider whether the external trigger that could have caused an identity shift was encountered along the idealized Euro-Atlantic path.

Sisyphean Path to Brussels

If getting to Brussels was the overarching Slovenian foreign policy goal, then the road to that vaunted destination turned out to be a long and winding one. Italy, the biggest neighbouring country and a founding member of both the EU and NATO, was among the first to contribute to the rough ride. Already in the early nineties, soon after Slovenia secured its independence, the Italian side signalled its intention to reopen the Treaty of Osimo of 1975, which had settled the last contentious issue of the land border between Italy and Yugoslavia. Although Italy primarily wanted to revise the terms of the property restitution to pre-1945 Italian owners who had emigrated from Yugoslavia after the end of the Second World War, the general impression in Slovenia was that the new country’s entire Western border was also in question (Gow and Carmichael, 2010: 220). Justified or not, these fears had an important psychological impact. Italy had controlled one-third of today’s Slovenia between the two World Wars and, as pointed out by Bajc (2008: 125, 130), ruled the local Slovenian population with an iron fist, looking down upon them as members of an ethnically “impure” race, whose language had to be prohibited and whose “funny” and “immoral” names had to be Italianized. The repressions only intensified during the Second World War, when Italian forces also occupied central Slovenia and even surrounded the Slovenian capital Ljubljana with barbed wire, transforming

⁴ *At the beginning of 1994, Slovenia’s neighbour Croatia was still faced with the occupation of one third of its territory, with the westernmost border of the so-called Republic of Serbian Krajina only 20km away from the Slovenian border. The war in nearby Bosnia and Herzegovina was also in full swing, with the first Merkale Massacre in Sarajevo taking place at the start of February 1994. Slovenia was, consequently, hosting an estimated 70,000 Bosnian refugees, representing some 4% of its total population.*

it into an urban concentration camp, with more than 7% of its population additionally subjected to internment.⁵

Italy in Slovenian eyes therefore started acquiring the image of something familiarly sinister from the past. The anxiety was further fuelled by activities and statements of some Italian politicians, who were tapping into the resentment of the ethnic Italians who had moved to Italy after the end of the Second World War.⁶ Mirko Tremaglia, a right-wing member of the Italian Parliament, who would later become Minister for the Italians Abroad, thus not only called for blocking the entry of Slovenia and Croatia in the EU, but also stated in 1994 that Italy should “tear up” the border treaty with the former Yugoslavia and declared that since Istrian peninsula and the Dalmatian coast are “historically Italian” they should be regarded as “occupied territories” (Tagliabue, 1994). The resulting apprehension became noticeable in the statements of members of the Slovenian political establishment. The Deputy Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Slovenian Parliament Borut Pahor, who would later become both the Prime Minister and President of Slovenia, thus famously stated in 1995 that Slovenia does not owe Italy anything, “not even a brick” (Vidmajer, 2012a).

Faced with Italy’s blockage of the EU accession process and feeling unable to present its side of story to the wider international audience, Slovenia resorted to preparing and publishing a *White Book on Diplomatic Relations*. The latter contained some of the key documents regarding the border issue, as well as a list of Italians who had committed war crimes on the territory of Slovenia during the Second World War, which had already been submitted by former Yugoslavia to the United Nations War Crimes Commission in 1945. In the foreword to the publication, the Slovenian Foreign Minister did not mince words, accusing Italy of trying to undermine the legal validity of its agreements with Yugoslavia, which Slovenia had inherited as a successor state, and attempting to force their changes: “Shortly after Slovenia had gained independence, Italy opened the question of the ‘rebuilding’ of the Rome Agreement and to demand the restitution of the former property of the ‘optants’” (Thaler, 1996: 7). He went on to claim that Italy is exploiting its position within the European associations, that it does not distinguish between bilateral agreements and multilateral “string-attaching” and that its behaviour has led to unnecessary and unjustified developments.

In the end, however, Slovenia had to back down. The danger of being left

⁵ Ljubljana was the first city in former Yugoslavia to receive the honorary title of a “Hero City” precisely because of the brutal treatment it had suffered at the hands of the Italians during the Second World War and the resistance it had offered in response (Mikuž, 1981: 5).

⁶ Ballinger (2002: 10) thus describes a conversation with one of the Italian emigrees who stated that “the ‘Slavs’ had stolen an Italian land and driven out its original residents, many of whom . . . had settled in nearby Trieste, from which on a clear day they could gaze on the lost homeland”.

behind in the European integration process was judged to be too great. At the last moment, in July 1997, the Slovenian Parliament thus swallowed its pride and, in accordance with the provisions of the EU-brokered “Spanish compromise”, amended the Slovenian Constitution so that it gave the right to foreigners, including Italians, to buy real estate. This step was taken in the face of strong public opposition, because control of the land “has typically been seen as important for the existence and preservation of the Slovenian nation and its national identity” (Šabič and Brglez, 2002: 72). It was for this reason that Boduszyński (2010: 129) called what was in essence a foreign policy somersault nothing short of “amazing”. Be that as it may, the decision ensured that Slovenia was included on the European Commission’s list of proposed candidates for future accession, leading to the opening of talks in March 1998.

Still, the episode left a bitter aftertaste, which was only reinforced by some of the actions taken by Italy afterwards. Thus, in 2004 the Italian Parliament declared that February 10, the anniversary of the signing of the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947, which determined the border between Yugoslavia and Italy and thus between Slovenia and Italy, will be commemorated as the “Day of Remembrance” in memory of the Istrian exodus and the victims of post-war violence (Vidmajer, 2012b: 134). The very next year, in 2005, the Italian state television RAI marked this date by airing its brand new movie “The Heart in the Pit” (“Il Cuore nel Pozzo”), which purported to show the story of massive and systematic violence committed by Slovenians and Croats against Italians from the border regions at the end of the Second World War. The movie, which was seen by some 17 million Italians upon release, presented the “Slavs” as “diabolical, unconscionable and insensitive occupiers, who kill indiscriminately, also women and children, rape and burn villages”, thus effectively reversing the historical roles of the actual victims and aggressors (Štefančič, 2010: 117). Finally, in 2007, on the occasion of yet another commemoration of the new state holiday, the Italian President stunned the Slovenian public with a speech in which he said the following about the end of the Second World War: “There was therefore a movement of hate and bloodthirsty fury, and a Slavic annexationist design, which prevailed above all in the peace treaty of 1947, and assumed the sinister shape of ‘ethnic cleansing’” (Presidenza, 2007).

Slovenian frustration, however, was not only limited to the EU enlargement process, but extended to the NATO open-door policy as well. Slovenia was one of the first countries to sign up for the Partnership for Peace programme in March 1994 and the first aspirant for membership to open individual dialogue with the Alliance in April 1996. In March 1997 it even hosted the first-ever meeting of the NATO Political Committee outside NATO member countries (Gow and Carmichael, 2010: 209–212). Nonetheless, Ljubljana did not receive an invitation to join the Alliance in the first round of

post-Cold War enlargement at the Madrid Summit in July 1997. This turn of events was a big surprise for both the Slovenian authorities and the public. As revealed by cables of the United States Embassy in Ljubljana, when in June 1997 the American Ambassador informed the Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Drnovšek about the developments, the latter “expressed his anger and disbelief” and went on to write two letters in the space of two weeks to US President Bill Clinton making the case that Slovenia should be included in the planned round of enlargement and urging him to reconsider the decision. Similarly, according to American reporting, Slovenian President Milan Kučan described the situation as “devastating” and complained that “his country was unfairly being held hostage to a broader set of factors beyond its control” (Asmus, 2002: 226).

Adding insult to injury in this context were the accompanying criticisms, especially from the American side, about Slovenia being a potential free rider that wants to enjoy security guarantees while avoiding its duties in the Balkans.⁷ In other words, Slovenia was being told that it needed to prove itself to NATO through active engagement in the very region, which it perceived as its main security threat and was trying to protect itself from by joining the Alliance.⁸ Similarly unjustified from the Slovenians’ point of view were complaints about the pace of their defence reforms and their military structures. After all, among the candidate countries Slovenia was the only one to have recently fought and also won a war.⁹ This impression was further strengthened on the Slovenian side by later developments when, because of a lack of actual military preparedness of the three new invitees, the Alliance introduced the so-called Membership Action Plan in 1999 to ensure that other aspiring countries would meet the necessary standards before entering NATO.¹⁰

The political fallout from the July 1997 Madrid Summit included the

⁷ In the words of Asmus (2002: 217), who served at the time as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Europe at the State Department: “A number of us felt the country was in denial about having once been part of the former Yugoslavia and was shunning its regional responsibility in the Balkans”. He went on to add the following about Slovenia: “We feared it wanted to join NATO to validate its Europeanness, not because it wanted to help us in stemming future European conflicts”.

⁸ Bojinovič Fenko and Šabič (2014: 56) were therefore right to observe that it was the “external actors” who “strongly conditioned Slovenia’s (re)integration in South-East Europe to progress towards Euro-Atlantic integration”.

⁹ Although brief, the Ten-Day War for Slovenian independence was in no way “phony” as some commentators have tried to claim. In addition to 44 dead and 146 wounded the Yugoslav People’s Army also lost a shocking 4,693 soldiers as prisoners of war (Švajncer, 2001). This meant that the army’s 22,300 men strong contingent in Slovenia suffered more than 20% losses over a short period of time, rendering it combat ineffective due to the seriously degraded cohesion and morale. The Slovenian side was thus rightfully proud of its decisive victory in the face of overwhelming odds.

¹⁰ Some of the contemporary observers therefore labeled the three countries from the first round of enlargement as the “rotten apples in the Alliance basket” (Bartkowski, 2004: 1).

resignation of the Slovenian Foreign Minister in the same month, as well as an extraordinary session of the Slovenian Parliament in September. The Government's main defensive line was that it had received assurances, also in the text of the Madrid Declaration, that Slovenia was next in line for enlargement in two years' time. In the expectation of this invitation the Government also took steps to ensure satisfying the wishes of Allies whenever and wherever possible. One of the consequences of this approach was that the country urgently began a twelve-year defence restructuring plan (Gow and Carmichael, 2010: 215). Another was the abrupt withdrawal of Slovenia from the New Agenda Coalition, an initiative for a nuclear-weapons-free world, at the United Nations in New York (Johnson et al., 2006: 49). The move cost the Slovenian diplomacy a fair amount of prestige, as it lost its face in the process.¹¹

However, despite all of this, in 1999 Slovenia was not invited into the Alliance at the Washington Summit, which was dedicated instead to welcoming as full members the three invitees from 1997. Once again, Slovenian hopes were dashed, despite expectations, which were also based on promises received. Slovenia thus had to wait for several more years, until the Prague Summit in November 2002, to be invited together with six other countries. With the momentum gone, this also meant that public support for NATO membership, which had peaked before the Madrid Summit, visibly fell in the months and years that followed and started to show "signs of ambiguity": if in 1996 it was approaching 70%, then by 2000 it was already down to around 50% (Šabič, 2002: 16-17). Similarly, some of the formerly "excellent proponents" of Slovenia's NATO candidacy had turned into its "fiery opponents" (Rupel, 2004: 538-539).

Reconnecting with the Slavic Roots

"It is through reciprocal interaction", Wendt (1992: 406) argues, "that we create and instantiate the relatively enduring social structures in terms of which we define our identities and interests". In the case of Slovenia, the interaction with the West in the first years of its independence was such that it fostered a palpable sense of insecurity and recreated a sharp awareness of its Slavic identity. This newfound self-understanding started manifesting itself in both the words and deeds of the Slovenian leadership.

An important example is quite a significant opinion piece about the EU and NATO written by the long-serving Primer Minister of Slovenia Janez

¹¹ *The Slovenian Ambassador to the United Nations at the time, who was directly affected by the sudden change of course, was later to become the President of Slovenia. In this function he wistfully recalled the episode in the following manner: "While originally part of this initiative, Slovenia subsequently withdrew. There is nothing tragic about this. At that time, Slovenia was not yet ready to participate in such ambitious projects as that one" (Türk, 2009).*

Drnovšek and published in the *Wall Street Journal* in the middle of 2001. While reconfirming Slovenia's commitment to an integrated and consolidated West, he also levelled several critical barbs at both organisations. In connection with the EU, he wrote: "Let's be frank, we see sometimes a lot of horse-trading and not very consistent solutions" (Drnovšek, 2001: E8). As far as NATO is concerned, he called for its open-door policy to be "more than a slogan" and made it pointedly clear that if Slovenia is not finally invited into the Alliance in the next round of enlargement it "will concentrate on the European concept of defense as the remaining alternative".

The palpable sense of frustration with the Euro-Atlantic institutions did not, however, extend to the language on Russia, which was noticeably warmer. Drnovšek actually concluded his text with an appeal to deepen cooperation with Moscow and emphasised the need for "positive messages", so that Russia would not feel excluded from or threatened by the enlargement of the EU and NATO. In fact, according to him, "Russia must see its future cooperation with Europe, with NATO and with the United States" and "it must even be able to aspire to joining the process of integration in the future".

The fact that this opinion piece was written and published in 2001 is significant because that year represents the beginning of a period when Slovenia started reacting to the repeated disappointments and frustrations on its Euro-Atlantic path. In accordance with what has already been described as a long-established reflex response of smaller Slavic nations to rebuffs from the West, Slovenia looked to the East for succour. In the process, it not only rediscovered its Slavic identity, but also started promoting Slavic cooperation as such.

This development is in fact well documented, even down to exact dates. In early 2001, on 10 February, a high-level meeting between Prime Minister Drnovšek and Russian President Vladimir Putin took place at the Slovenian initiative on the margins of a skiing championship in Austria (Kremlin, 2001a). This was followed by an invitation from the Russian side for a working visit to Moscow on 24 March (Kremlin, 2001b). A couple of months later the Russian side proposed and the Slovenian authorities agreed to host the first meeting of President Putin with his American counterpart George Bush (Steyskal, 2001). This high-level get-together still represents the single most prominent foreign policy event in the history of independent Slovenia. The Russian side thus raised the international profile of the small Slavic country at a time when it badly needed additional visibility. And, it was on the margins of the US-Russia Summit in Slovenia, on 16 June, during a bilateral meeting with the Russian President that the Slovenian President suggested the creation of what would eventually become the Forum of Slavic Cultures.

As explained later by President Kučan (2004) himself, his idea was to "make Ljubljana into some sort of a networking and meeting hub of Slavic

cultures and Slavic states in general". The initiative took some time to develop, but after a lengthy period of Slovenian-Russian negotiations on the founding documents the Forum was in fact formally established in 2004 in Ljubljana. In addition to representatives from Slovenia and Russia, the founding meeting was attended by delegates from Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Poland, and Serbia and Montenegro. It was subsequently also joined by Belarus, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine, which means that today the Forum brings together all of the thirteen existing Slavic countries, ten as full members and three as observers, making it one of the "more important institutions of Slovenian cultural diplomacy" (Podgornik et al., 2012: 55). Its stated mission is "to connect Slavic cultural milieu and actualize it in the modern global social context" (Forum, 2011). According to the head of the influential Institute of Slavic Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences: "Although the work of this institution did not take place without problems, it has nevertheless already led to a rapprochement of Slavic cultures and countries" (Nikiforov, 2014: 133).

In addition to this multilateral exercise, the Slovenian side concentrated on deepening bilateral cooperation, in particular with Russia, as the biggest and most influential Slavic state. Following on the heels of the establishment of regular high-level contacts in 2001, Slovenia and Russia adopted a Declaration on Friendly Relations and Cooperation in September 2002. Speaking at an event before this important document was signed Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel pointed out: "Thus, the traditional friendship, common to both Slavic nations, will also be confirmed on a symbolic level" (Ministry, 2002).¹²

This step was followed by a marked increase in contacts between the two countries. Even a cursory look at the reports of the Slovenian Foreign Ministry reveals that while in 1996 bilateral meetings at a higher level were limited to the visit to Moscow by the Slovenian Minister of the Economy (Ministrstvo, 1996: 283–284), by 2006 these had already increased to visits by the Slovenian President, Slovenian Prime Minister, Slovenian Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Defence, Agriculture, Transport, Education, Justice and the Economy, as well as State Secretaries of the Foreign and Interior

¹² In this connection, it becomes clearer why one of the key foreign policy documents, adopted by the Slovenian Government in October 2002, explicitly refers to Slavic cooperation. Titled "Appropriate Foreign Policy - Fundamental Aspects of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Slovenia in Joining the Euro-Atlantic Integrations" it states at the very outset the following: "In addition to coordination within the EU and constructive cooperation within NATO the Slovenian foreign policy will apparently focus on ... relations with ... the Slavic countries ..." (Rupel, 2002: 201). It goes on to argue: "With enlargement the EU will acquire an entirely new – Slavic – element, which will be important also for the concept of 'Wider Europe' and for cooperation of the EU with Slavic countries to the East of its new borders. In this context, Slovenia could have an important role in the CFSP" (Rupel, 2002: 202). It also declares: "Slovenia is in favor of strengthening relations between NATO and Russia, because cooperation between NATO countries and Russia has positive influence on the security situation in the world" (Rupel, 2002: 206).

Ministries and, to round it all off, the President of the Court of Audit (Ministrstvo, 2007: 91–92). Slovenia and Russia also established the practice of annual consultations at the working level between their Foreign Ministries, which are regularly approved at the ministerial level in the form of a formalised plan (Ministry, 2013b).

The growing contacts at the political level were soon reflected in a number of areas, including in the field of cultural cooperation. At the end of 2004, for instance, a joint Slovenian-Russian contemporary exhibition took place at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana. Introductory remarks for the accompanying brochure were contributed by none other than the President of Slovenia who not only recalled “the common Slavonic roots of the Slovene and Russian nations”, but also emphasised “a need for greater cooperation between Slavonic countries in affirming their cultural identity within the European family of nations” (Drnovšek, 2008: 3). In the following years, cooperation in the cultural sphere kept intensifying.¹³ So much so, in fact, that in April 2011 the Russian side decided to open a full-blown Russian Centre for Science and Culture in the middle of Ljubljana, at a ceremony that was attended by both the Slovenian and Russian Foreign Ministers (Soban, 2011).

The change in relations also affected the level of participation at the traditional commemoration at an Orthodox chapel high in the Slovenian Alps for Russian soldiers who fell during the First World War. Built in 1916 in memory of several hundred Russian prisoners of war who perished in a deadly avalanche, the chapel has become the venue of regular Slovenian-Russian meetings at the end of each July, when a memorial service is held for the soldiers who are buried there (Benedejčič, 2007). In the beginning, in the early nineties, these were informal gatherings, organised by enthusiasts from civil society, mostly members of the Slovenia-Russia Association. However, “by and by, official Slovenian state institutions started to participate in increasingly important visits of high representatives of Russian politics” (Testen, 2007: 324). Since 2000 the list of participants at the annual commemorations has become a veritable “who’s who” roll call not only on the Slovenian, but also on the Russian side: Vladimir Lukin, Mikhail Margelov, Metropolitan Kirill (the current Patriarch of Moscow and All-Russia), Alexei Kudrin, Dmitry Mezentsev, Sergey Mironov, Yegor Gaidar, Lyubov Sliska, Boris Gryzlov and others. In 2015, despite the tensions in relations

¹³ This new sensibility even found its way into popular culture. The Slovenian avant-garde music group Laibach thus included in its 2006 concept album “Volk” a reworking of the Pan-Slav anthem “Hey, Slavs”. Titled “Slovania” (referring to an all-Slavic land), the song included the following lyrics:

*Out of the feudal darkness,
Away from the Nameless One,
We stand alone in history,
Facing East in sacrifice.*

between Russia and the West, the chapel was visited by Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, and in 2016 the Russian President Vladimir Putin was invited to mark its centenary (Government, 2015; TASS, 2016).

Slovenia and the Slavic Dimension of New Europe

It was due to these developments that Gower (2013: 222) characterised Slovenia as “unlike most of the other post-communist states” in the sense that it has established “a positive and wide-ranging bilateral relationship with Russia” and also evolved into “a fairly low-key but nevertheless significant actor with regard to EU-Russia policy”. This state of affairs was not affected by domestic political changes, such as the assumption of power in Slovenia by a centre-right coalition in 2004. In fact, soon after coming into office the new Prime Minister Janez Janša (2006: 21) used the annual memorial service at the Russian chapel to declare that “members of the Slovenian and Russian nations have always felt sincere attachment to each other, for they were connected by the spirit of Slavdom and the rich legacy of Saints Cyril and Methodius, whose work brought Slavs into the European cultural space”.

Under the new Government, Slovenia even used its role as the Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2008 to highlight not only its own Slavic roots, but also the Slavic dimension of the enlarged EU and its new neighbourhood. Indeed, it was under the aegis of the Slovenian Presidency that a major exhibition entitled “The Slavs of Europe” was held in Brussels, in the prestigious Cinquantenaire Museum. Organised by the Forum of Slavic Cultures in cooperation with the Slovenian Ethnographic Museum from Ljubljana and Russian Ethnographic Museum from St. Petersburg, it managed to restage the Slavic Ethnographic Exhibition that was originally held in Moscow in 1867 on the occasion of the second Slav Congress (Rogelj Škafar, 2008: 7). History, in a sense, thus came full circle.¹⁴

The ethnolinguistic motif was also apparent at the EU-Russia Summit in Khanty-Mansiysk where the long-awaited negotiations on a new EU framework agreement with Russia were launched in June 2008. According to Gower (2013: 227) this “was one of the main achievements of the Slovenian presidency and hailed as ‘the start of a new age’ in EU-Russia relations”. The spirit of a “new beginning” was attributed in part to the fact that Slovenia was the first Slavic country at the helm of the EU. At the closing news conference the Slovenian Prime Minister, in his capacity as the President of the EU

¹⁴ *The Slovenian side also promoted the work of the Forum of Slavic Cultures during its Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, which it held from May to November 2009. In the context of advancing intercultural dialogue and promoting Slavic cultures to the world at large the Slovenian Chairmanship presented three events in Strasbourg: a literary evening of Slavic works, an evening of Slavic music and a Slavic film festival (Ministry, 2009a).*

Council, thus pointed out “the symbolism of this summit, at which for the first time Slavic languages have been heard on both sides” and – in a very Kollárian turn of phrase – emphasised that “the ancestors of Slovenes and Russians spoke the same language” (Kremlin, 2008). Comparing Slovenia to the older EU members that have special relations with Russia, such as Germany and Portugal, Wagner (2009: 85) therefore observed that “the discourse of Euro-Slavism is a construct which is unique to state representatives of the Republic of Slovenia”.

To be sure, Slovenia was also somewhat of a special case among the new members of NATO because of its non-problematic relations with Russia. This was actually something that the Slovenian side tried to present as one of its advantages when seeking NATO membership already in 1997. According to Gow and Carmichael (2010: 211), the argument “had originally disposed some members of the Alliance to take a favourable view of Slovenia’s membership since it could not be found objectionable or threatening by Russia”. However, by the time of the Madrid Summit the issue became “largely irrelevant” on account of the prior signing of the NATO-Russia Founding Act (Bebler, 2008: 131–132). In the end, though, the question reemerged and Slovenia consequently sided with the group of older NATO Allies, which exhibited a higher level of trust toward Russia, “such as Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Norway and Belgium” (Pouliot, 2010: 111).

This approach manifested itself in a number of ways. Following the Russo-Georgian war and the partial freezing of NATO-Russia cooperation, Slovenia joined those Allies that were in favour of reengaging with Moscow. In March 2009 the Slovenian Foreign Minister thus “supported the strengthening of relations with Russia” at a NATO meeting in Brussels (Ministry, 2009b). In 2010, on the eve of the NATO Lisbon Summit the Slovenian President stated that the post-Cold War mission of NATO “cannot be completely defined without a true partnership with Russia” (Türk, 2010). In May 2013, these words were followed up by concrete steps when Slovenia hosted a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council Political Advisory Group, with the aim of furthering NATO-Russia cooperation. The meeting was significant in the sense that it was only the second such event to be held in three years, after its inaugural launch in Rome in June 2010 (NATO-Russia Council, 2013). At the opening of the meeting, the State Secretary of the Slovenian Foreign Ministry underlined that “it is in our common interest to build a Euro-Atlantic community where we all feel safe” and concluded that “cooperation between NATO and Russia is not only the right choice, but also the only one” (Ministry, 2013c).

Slovenia’s reactions to the subsequent developments in the Middle East and Eastern Europe were therefore predictably restrained. Already in September 2013, at the height of the Syrian crisis, the Slovenian Foreign Minister

rejected suggestions that Slovenian relations with Russia could be affected by the divergent views on the Damascus regime by explaining: “We have this Slavic mentality and understand things differently than others. The Slavic soul is, after all, the Slavic soul. The Russians see us as friends” (Delo, 2013). The reaction to the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis in February 2014 was also a measured one, with an emphasis on diplomatic engagement and the need for continued political dialogue with Russia (Ministry, 2014). It is therefore not surprising that during his visit to Slovenia a couple of months later the Russian Foreign Minister stated: “We appreciate the traditionally constructive position of Slovenia in what concerns the relations between Russia and the European Union, and within the NATO-Russia Council” (Lavrov, 2014).

Social Constructivism and the Enduring Relevance of Slavism

The eminent French student of the Slavs, Alfred Rambaud, once said that the Slavs occupied a greater place in the geography of Europe than in the history of Europe (Waskovich, 1962: 84). It seems that the same holds true for international relations theory. By presenting the story of Slovenia’s relations with Russia within the Euro-Atlantic context from the perspective of its reaffirmed Slavic identity this article therefore attempts to partly fill the gap. In the Slovenian case the turn to Slavism represented a reaction to the West not only temporarily closing its doors to Slovenia, but also questioning the validity of the post-Second World War *status quo* as it applied to the country. Despite its high expectations Slovenia was thus faced with blockage of its EU accession process and exclusion from the first round of NATO enlargement, while one of the founding members of the Euro-Atlantic institutions even tried to revisit the agreements that determined the borders of the new state, which were supposedly the result of unjust “Slavic annexation”.

Slovenia’s consequent withdrawal into its Slavic shell therefore confirms a social constructivist analysis. As argued by Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein (1996: 52–53) cultural and institutional elements of states’ global environments shape their identity, while changes in state identity affect their foreign policy. Applying this research program to the issue of why Slovenia had not been invited to join NATO in the first round of enlargement, Brglez (2002: 45) perceptively pointed out:

Such a process of interaction (including the enlargement process) changed the identity (Self) of NATO and its members in the first place, and at the same time reconstituted the Other(s) (Central and Eastern European states and Russia) with which the Self is relationally codependant.

In other words, “the logic of inclusion” also provided “the danger of exclusion”, which in Slovenia’s case led to a rethinking of its own state identity.

International relations theory notwithstanding, the question does arise of how permanent a fixture could Slavism become in the Slovenian case? On one hand, according to the critical juncture approach, this could be a lasting and even self-reinforcing aspect of the country’s foreign policy given the path-dependent nature of social and political relations. In the words of the veteran diplomat Henry Kissinger (1994: 26–27): “When an international order first comes into being, many choices may be open to it. But each choice constricts the universe of remaining options. Because complexity inhibits flexibility, early choices are especially crucial”. It therefore follows that the “early choices” made by the EU and NATO with regard to Slovenia largely determined the country’s response and its current foreign policy. As stated by Pouliot (2010: 192): “Early steps tend to lock into a certain trajectory and eliminate alternatives that were originally open”. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 133) go even further and warn of the “relative irreversibility” of the process, because “all the external stimuli and conditioning experiences are, at every moment, perceived through categories already constructed by prior experiences”. In other words, in this interpretation, the path already taken by Slovenia has made other paths less likely in the future.

On the other hand, the actual historical experience of Slavism shows that its appeal is cyclical, “waxing and waning” with the exigencies of particular Slavic nations. When discussing the development of the Slavic idea in the 19th century, Kohn (1961: 330) thus pointed out that “Czech Russophile Pan-Slavism had no parallel among the Austrian Poles or Slovenes”. Nowadays, however, the Czechs are considered to have “frosty” relations with Moscow, with their country only recently “at the heart of a row over the building of a US missile defence shield” and with Russia threatening “to point missiles at Prague” (Leonard and Popescu, 2007: 46). In other words, it seems that the Czechs have reverted to their former, pre-*Ausgleich* attitude.¹⁵

It therefore stands to reason that, with time, Slovenia could also shift down to one of its previous, more reserved phases. There are a couple of reasons this might happen. The first is connected to the issue of socialisation, which Brglez (2002: 44) already highlighted as one of the possible

¹⁵ To be sure, an important exception has to be noted. Unlike the Czech Government, the Czech President Miloš Zeman has adopted a different and much more conciliatory approach to Russia, despite the standoff over Ukraine. Explaining his decision to break ranks with his Western colleagues and attend celebrations in Moscow marking the 70th anniversary of victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War he famously stated that his visit to Russia would be a “sign of gratitude for not having to speak German in this country” (New Europe, 2015).

explanations for Slovenia's failure to enter NATO in the nineties. According to this interpretation, which draws inspiration from the social constructivist approach, the duration of Slovenia's interaction with the Alliance was simply too brief at that time to warrant an invitation. By contrast, since joining NATO in 2004, Slovenia has been fully integrated into this security community and increasingly imbued with its *esprit de corps*, which is especially infectious in the framework of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels (Benedejčič, 2014: 13).

The second reason is linked to the first one, as it relates to the evolution of Slovenia's relations with Italy. After Slovenia entered the EU and NATO the two neighbouring countries finally exchanged state visits: the Slovenian President visited Italy in January 2011 and the Italian President visited Slovenia in July 2012 (Office, 2012). This newfound trust has also started to reflect itself in other areas. Slovenia was thus the only EU member state to assist Italy in its early efforts to tackle the increased migrant pressure on Europe by deploying its flagship to the "Mare Nostrum" naval operation in 2013 (Ministry of Defence, 2013). The two countries have also managed to develop a good working relationship within NATO, which extends from Italy performing air policing duties over Slovenia to joint participation in operations (STA, 2004). Slovenia will thus join Italy for the 2018 rotation of the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, also known as NATO's "Spearhead Force" (Allied Land Command, 2015). In other words, if previously Slovenia was looking to Russia also because of Italy, it will now be deterring Russia together with Italy. The prospects for further rapprochement are therefore in place, despite some recurring challenges.¹⁶

Conclusion

Ultimately, the actual evolution of Slovenia's relations with Russia in the Euro-Atlantic context remains to be seen. But what can already be said with respect to the first research question of this study is that Slavism is alive and well. In a prime example of the Self being defined by the Other, Slovenia rediscovered its Slavic roots through historically conditioned reflexes that were activated by the rebuffs and challenges on its Euro-Atlantic path. The imagined

¹⁶ *At the end of May 2014 several members of the Union of Istrians, an Italian emigree outfit, staged an impromptu commemoration in the middle of the Slovenian capital for the Italian victims of post-Second World War justifications that supposedly took place in the castle of Ljubljana. This unexpected provocation sparked a wave of protests, including from Jože Pirjevec, a prominent Slovenian historian and member of the Slovenian minority from Trieste: "Can you imagine that the French would allow the German Nazis to fool around France and celebrate the occupation of Paris? How is it possible that Italy allows such actions and that Slovenia puts up with them? This causes hatred between the two nations at a time when the highest representatives of the two countries proclaim friendship" (Vičič, 2014: 11).*

Slavic community in the early 21st century is therefore more than just an analytical construct but an actual fact, thanks in no small part to the steps taken by the EU and NATO collectively and some of the Western countries individually in their dealings with Slovenia at the end of the 20th century.¹⁷

Regarding the second research question, the inquiry showed that Slovenia's post-independence identity shift transformed its bilateral relations with Russia from practically non-existent to remarkably wide-ranging. This change started taking place just before the Slovenian entry into the EU and NATO and continued afterwards as well, making Slovenia something of a special case among the newcomers in the sense that it was more like the older members of Euro-Atlantic integrations that were interested in building a strategic partnership with Moscow. This evolution has also manifested itself in the reaction of the Slovenian side to the crisis in and around Ukraine, which has been a measured one, with an emphasis on deterrence on the one hand and continued political dialogue with Russia on the other.

The development of Slovenian-Russian relations in the Euro-Atlantic context deserves to be appreciated not only for its irony, however, but also for its implications. As far as theory is concerned, it corroborates the importance of identity and history in the formation of intra-state policies and security communities. It also demonstrates the utility of social constructivism in international relations theory, because of its ability to bridge political practices with social identities. As such, it also helps answer the question posed by Šabič and Brglez (2002: 71) about national identity-building in post-communist Slovenia; namely, "whether the integration of the Self (or exclusion of the Other) is constructed through relations of 'otherness' (i.e. by treating others as a threat) or by relations of mere 'difference' (where no fear of threat exists)".

Finally, as far as policy is concerned, the development holds clear implications for the process of Euro-Atlantic integration in the future, especially as it relates to Slavic aspirant countries. As shown by the example of Slovenia, unwarranted delays on this path can have unintended consequences, which is why the EU and NATO should demonstrate more forethought and sensibility in dealing with the issue of enlargement than in the past. This is particularly true when considering the case of candidate countries from former Yugoslavia, some of which are seemingly condemned to Sisyphean wanderings on their path to Western institutions. This is risky, because divergent expectations can eventually lead to the emergence of hysteresis

¹⁷ In this connection, it is worth noting the answer of the Russian President Vladimir Putin to a recent question about Slavic countries: "They are highly dependent and face many challenges in ensuring their sovereignty. However, I strongly believe that deep down, there is an aspiration among Slavic nations to preserve cultural and spiritual, if not political, unity. This aspiration is still there and will always be there, it can't be uprooted" (Kremlin, 2014).

effects and a weakening of the previously self-evident truths. Judging from the decision of NATO Foreign Ministers of December 2015 to invite Montenegro to begin accession talks to join the Alliance, awareness of this possibility could finally be taking hold (NATO, 2015). In that sense Slovenia's experience might not have been in vain after all.

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