



**REFERENDUM BRIEFING NO 3
THE SLOVENIAN EU (AND NATO) ACCESSION
REFERENDUM(S)
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Key points:

- The Slovenian EU accession referendum was held on 23 March 2003 simultaneously with the NATO accession referendum, with the latter overshadowing the former.
- Both referendums were binding on the Slovenian parliament rather than consultative.
- The 'Yes' campaign was outstandingly well-organised and synchronised in stark contrast to the 'No' campaign, which was poorly organised and came across as representative of a narrow set of interests.
- The relatively low turnout of only 60.4 % was unexpected.
- In spite of this, the 'Yes' camp achieved (equally unexpectedly) large victories in both the EU (almost 90 %) and NATO (66 %) polls reflecting the broad consensus on this issue that exists among the Slovenian political elite.

Introduction

This paper reviews the background to, the campaign and the results of the Slovenian EU accession referendum. The paper also partially examines the Slovenian NATO accession referendum, but only to the extent that it influenced the campaign and results of EU referendum.

¹ This briefing was completed on 30 March 2003.

Slovenia is a relatively young state, which proclaimed its independence in 1991. In parallel with the establishment of independent statehood Slovenia has also been pursuing integration into the West, expressed through the full membership of the EU. The first diplomatic relations between Slovenia and the then EC were established on 13 April 1992, but the process of building institutional relations began with the 'Co-operation Agreement' in April 1993, which primarily emphasised trade relations. Based on this agreement exploratory discussions between Slovenia and the EC/EU began regarding the signing of the 'Europe Agreement'. Because one of the current EU member-states, Italy, objected to the prohibition on purchase of real estate by non-Slovenian citizens that was included in Slovenian Constitution, the negotiations on the Europe Agreement were postponed several times. Italy succeeded in winning the argument that Slovenian property legislation was not in line with European legislation, and the EU required a change to the Slovenian Constitution. As a consequence, Slovenia was forced to accept a compromise under which it was obliged to modify Article 68 of its Constitution.² The Europe Agreement was finally signed on 10 June 1996,³ when Slovenia also formally applied for full membership of the EU. The Slovenian National Assembly ratified the Europe Agreement on 15 July 1997, and at the same time also decided that the final decision on EU membership should be made by a referendum. The accession negotiations were officially opened on 31 March 1998 and completed in mid-December 2002.

Background

During the last decade, the objective of Slovenian EU membership has been generally characterised by a broad consensus among the political elite and all relevant (parliamentary) political parties. With the exception of the Slovenian National Party (a party that won 3.2 % of the vote in the 1996 parliamentary election and 4.4 % in 2000) no other parliamentary political party has publicly opposed this objective. Moreover, as early as 3 July 1997 the leaders of all the other Slovenian parliamentary political parties signed a special agreement on co-operation during Slovenia's accession to the EU. Among non-parliamentary parties only the New Party (that won 0.1% in 1996 and 0.6% in 2000) can be defined as Eurosceptic.

The story of the Slovenian EU accession referendum formally started on 15 July 1997, when parliament decided that the final decision on EU membership should be made by a popular vote. Even before this date, but especially after it, both the Slovenian government and opposition agreed that the EU accession process should be a transparent one and not appear to be reached 'behind closed doors'. As a result, Slovenia was the only of the ten candidate countries where the parliament discussed and approved all of the negotiating positions before they were sent to Brussels and where the negotiating positions were also presented to the general public.

After Slovenia completed the negotiating process at the December 2002 Copenhagen summit, the question arose of whether the two 'Euro-Atlantic' referendums, on EU and NATO accession, should be held as a single linked question or simultaneously but as two separate questions, and whether these should be binding or consultative polls.

² The Slovenian National Assembly amended Article 68 of the Constitution on 13 July 1997.

³ The Europe Agreement came into force on 1 February 1999 after the Greek Parliament, the last so to do, ratified it in October 1998.

The Slovenian political elite characterised joining both organisations as a linked project in furthering the national interest. But Slovenian public opinion was not as strongly supportive of NATO membership as it was of joining the EU. There was also a (justified) fear that a NATO accession referendum might not be successful. Hence, the Slovenian political elite tried to improve the result of the NATO referendum by linking it with the EU accession referendum where ‘success was assured’. Eventually, a decision was made to conduct both referendums at the same time but as two separate issues. The most important formal reason for such a decision was to reduce the costs of holding two separate referendums (70 % of the Slovenian public were also in favour of simultaneous polls). As such, the ‘Euro-Atlantic referendum story’ in Slovenia can best be described as a story about a two-sided coin, one side represented the decision on EU membership, the other the decision on NATO membership.

The second key question that arose was one of timing which was, in turn, influenced by the previous decision to hold simultaneous EU and NATO referendums. As the Slovenian parliament could not ratify the EU Accession Treaty anyway until it had been approved on 16 April 2003, it was quite possible to wait for the EU poll until after this date (as all the other candidate states except Malta and Hungary have done). However, there was pressure to conduct the referendum on NATO membership, since NATO allies had expected this decision to be taken by 26 March 2003.⁴ When it was decided to hold both referendums simultaneously, because of time pressure from NATO and foreseen events in international community (namely, Iraq crisis), it was proposed that the referendums be held as early as mid-February. However, those responsible for the ‘EU campaign’ in particular opposed such an early referendum date on the grounds that it left too little time for public consultations following the conclusion of accession negotiations. Eventually, it was agreed that both referendums would be held on 23 March 2003, which was also the last possible date for a referendum on NATO membership. Minister of European Affairs and Head of the Slovenian Negotiating Team Janez Potočnik expressed himself satisfied with this decision, saying that it left enough time to properly inform the public of the consequences of Slovenian EU accession.

At the 30 January session of the National Assembly the date for realization of referendums was agreed. But the question about the nature of referendums, consultative or binding, was still open. According to the Slovenian Constitution and referendum law, any referendum organized before a final decision has been taken by parliament can only be consultative and invalid voting papers count as votes against. Since public opinion and the parliamentary opposition demanded binding referendums the only solution was amendments to the Constitution and referendum laws. Consequently, the relevant Constitutional and legal changes were made to facilitate this.⁵ Moreover, invalid voting papers were now ignored rather than treated

⁴ When NATO accession protocol was due to be signed. Due to the relatively low and unstable support for NATO membership in Slovenia, NATO allies wanted to know the outcome of the referendum before signing this protocol.

⁵ The new article of the constitution reads: “Pursuant to a treaty ratified by the National Assembly by a two-thirds majority vote of all deputies, Slovenia may transfer the exercise of part of its sovereign rights to international organisations which are based on respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, democracy and the principles of the rule of law and may enter into a defensive alliance with states which are based on respect for these values. Before ratifying an international treaty referred to in the preceding paragraph, the National Assembly may call a referendum. A proposal shall pass at the referendum if a majority of voters who have cast valid votes vote in favour of such. The National

as votes against.⁶ The only parliamentary party which that did not support these changes was the Slovenian National Party, while Slovenian Youth Party, which supported EU membership but opposed NATO accession, originally opposed the new article but in the event did not vote against it.

The Campaign

One could argue that an indirect campaign on EU accession actually began in Slovenia as far back as mid-1997, when it first became clear that the final decision on EU membership should be taken by a referendum. This might be termed a ‘pre-referendum campaign’. However, it is important to emphasize that this was a campaign that only presented the case of the ‘Yes’ side in favour of EU accession. This ‘Yes’ campaign could be characterized as an official, government campaign, but which also included virtually all of the parliamentary opposition. Both the ‘pre-referendum’ and actual referendum campaigns were characterised by the virtual non-appearance of the ‘No’ camp.

The pre-referendum ‘Yes’ campaign was perceived above all as a process of informing Slovenian citizens about the accession and negotiating processes, as well as about the broader issues, like the nature of EU institutions and decision-making processes. Otherwise, generally speaking, the ‘Yes’ campaign was based on the arguments of the necessity of close political, economic, cultural and security relationships between Slovenia and the EU. On this basis, according to the government’s ‘Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia for Integration into the European Union’, the country’s most important reasons for wanting to join the EU were defined as: a) the consolidation of the democratic political system and strengthening the free-market economy; b) fostering the social and economic development of the Republic of Slovenia; c) strengthening political and economic co-operation with EU member-states; d) boosting the international reputation and negotiating strength of the Republic of Slovenia; and e) consolidation of the Republic of Slovenia’s international identity as a peaceful state oriented committed to fostering integration processes.

Partly as a result of this of this well-organized and synchronized (even between the government and most of the opposition) campaign, “EU” public opinion polls throughout the accession negotiations pointed to a positive result in the accession referendum (see Table 1).

Table 1: “If the EU accession referendum would be held this Sunday, how would you vote?” (in %)

	Yes	No	Don’t know
Apr 02	53.8%	31.8%	14.4%
May 02	55.1%	25.9%	19.0%
Jun 02	55.4%	26.8%	17.7%
Jul 02	56.0%	24.0%	20.0%

Assembly is bound by the result of such referendum. If such referendum has been held, a referendum regarding the law on the ratification of the treaty concerned may not be called”.

⁶ Both referendums were also of special importance, because for the first time Slovenian voters who temporarily or permanently live abroad also had the right to vote by post or at one of 35 diplomatic-consular Slovenian representations.

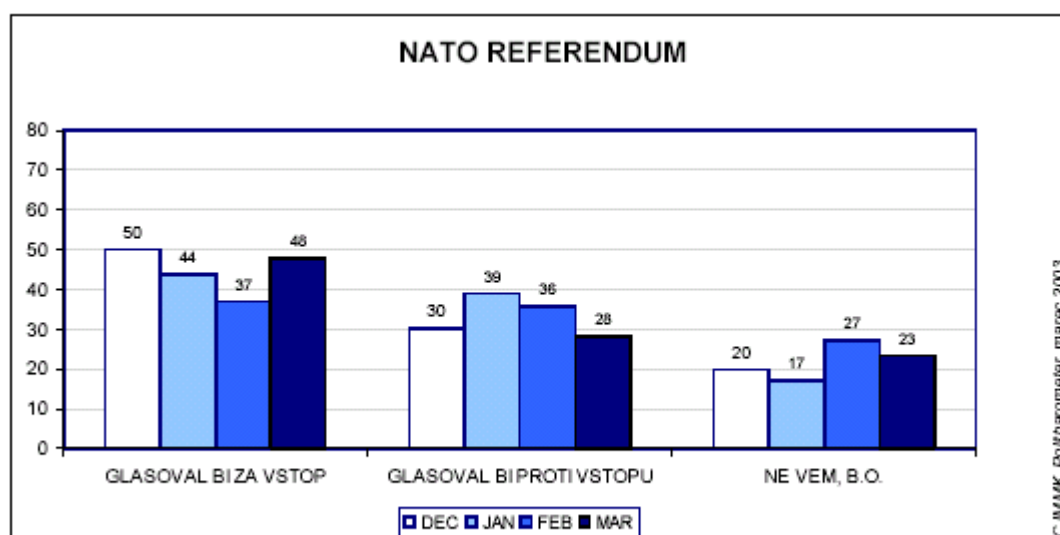
Sep 02	55.4%	25.9%	18.7%
Oct 02	62.3%	22.7%	15.0%
Nov 02	61.0%	23.0%	16.0%
Dec 02	66.4%	19.9%	13.7%
Jan 03	65.0%	18.0%	16.0%
Feb 03	62.0%	15.0%	23.0%
Mar 03	71.0%	10.0%	19.0%

Source: Politbarometer

Nevertheless, in spite of several years of indirect campaigning, the last month before the referendum still saw a very intensive government campaign. This campaign had the three main features.

Firstly, it is important to emphasize that the EU accession referendum campaign was held in the shadow of NATO campaign. Due to the strong anti-NATO movement and much weaker public support for NATO accession (see Table 2), the Slovenian government campaign put much more effort into the NATO campaign.⁷ However, in this aspect it is interesting to note that many opponents of NATO membership indirectly ‘advertised’ EU membership as an alternative solution to NATO by emphasising the implicit security guarantee that EU membership brought.

Figure 1: “If the NATO membership referendum would be held this Sunday, how would you vote?” (in %)



Source: Politbarometer

* The first bloc (four columns) represents “Yes” votes; the second block (four columns) represents “No” votes; the third bloc (four columns) represents “Don’t knows” .

⁷ This can be seen from the scale of the financial resources invested in the NATO campaign 72 million tolars) compared to that on the EU (55 million tolars). (1 EUR equal to around 230 tolars).

Secondly, the ‘Yes’ campaign was very well organised and consisted of three main elements. The first one involved pre-referendum visits by international dignitaries. During the very short period before the EU accession referendum was held the most prominent European and NATO representatives (for example, Prodi, Verheugen, Solana, Fisher and Robertson) all visited Slovenia. The second element comprised the ‘pro-EU’ speeches of respected Slovenians on prime-time television, especially prominent politicians and successful economists. Finally, a large amount of ‘EU-related’ materials, such as publications and leaflets were distributed.

Thirdly, the EU accession referendum campaign was marked by the lack of a broad, synchronized and well-organized ‘No’ campaign. As such, the ‘No’ campaign only represented some very particular interests. The strongest and most recognised opponent of EU membership was the Slovenian National Party, which had already criticised the government at various points during the accession negotiations and warned of the potential traps and dangers of EU membership. Non-parliamentary parties that opposed Slovenia’s integration into the EU included the New Party. However, both parties were (unexpectedly) almost completely silent during the referendum campaign. There were of course still some movements and individuals that opposed the Slovenia’s integration to the EU, such as the ‘Movement 23 December’. But none of the Eurosceptic parties, movements and individuals were successful in attracting popular support. Their critique of the EU membership could be sum up in three points: 1) accession to the EU represents a loss of sovereignty by a young, newly independent state; 2) the economic, social and security situation of Slovenia will not be improved by EU accession; 3) positing the alternative model of Slovenia as a ‘Slavic Switzerland’.

The Results

The results of the Slovenian EU and NATO accession referendum were striking for both their relatively low turnout and surprising high ‘Yes’ votes.

Table 2: Results of the 2003 EU Accession Referendum in Slovenia

	Total	%
Registered Voters	1 613 272	100.0
Votes Cast	975 015	60.4
Invalid Votes	4 884	0.5
Valid Votes	974 558	99.5
Yes	869 171	89.6
No	100 503	10.4

Source: <http://www.rvk.si/referendum/eu-nato/eng/index.html>

The question was: “Do you agree to the proposal that the Republic of Slovenia should become a member of the European Union?”

Table 3: Results of the 2003 NATO Membership Referendum in Slovenia

	Total	%
Registered Voters	1 613 272	100.0

Votes Cast	974 988	60.4
Invalid Votes	9 179	0.9
Valid Votes	965 345	99.1
Yes	637 882	66.1
No	327 463	33.9

Source: <http://www.rvk.si/referendum/eu-nato/eng/index.html>

The question was: "Do you agree to the proposal that the Republic of Slovenia should become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)?"

Since many commentators have compared the process of Slovenia's accession to the EU with that of gaining independence at the beginning of the 1990s, the relatively low voter turnout ('just' 60.4 %) was unexpected. Indeed, all public opinion polls in the run up to the referendum had forecast a turnout that was at least 10 % higher. In the plebiscite on independence (held on 23 December 1990) the turnout was 93.2 %. On the other hand, the turnout for the EU and NATO accession referendums was much higher than in any other subsequent Slovenian referendum.⁸

89.6 % of voters voted in favour of Slovenia's accession to the EU. It was expected that EU referendum would deliver a 'Yes' vote, but such a good result was a big surprise – even better than the previous 'record' of 85 % set by Ireland in its accession referendum. This result was also even better than the vote for Slovenian independence, where 88.5 % voted 'Yes'. But, as mentioned above, there was a big difference between the two in terms of voter turnout.

There is a broad consensus about the key turning points that assured such high support for both EU and NATO accession. Firstly, several speeches made by the former President Milan Kučan approximately two weeks before the referendums were held. Kučan is still the politician who enjoys the highest level of trust among citizens (according to Politbarometer, 3.8 and 3.9 respectively in February and March on a 5-point scale). Secondly, the visits by prominent EU and NATO representatives mentioned above. Politbarometer opinion polls showed that Slovenian citizens accepted the arguments highlighted by Prodi (40 %), Verheugen (37 %) and Robertson (34 %). Thirdly, some observers have also stressed the importance of events in the near neighbourhood, namely the murder of Prime Minister of Serbia, Zoran Djindjić shortly before the referendums were held.

Finally, we can present some demographic variables that could determine support for EU accession and NATO membership.⁹ Support for EU membership was particularly strong among 60-65 years old people (97 %) and among those with higher (college) education (98 %). More Eurosceptic views could be found among younger people between 18-24 and 25-29 year olds of whom 'only' 85 % of them voted for EU accession, and among those with only a primary education (77 %). Among party supporters the most Eurosceptic voters were, naturally enough to be found among the Slovenian National Party of whom 'only' 82% said they would vote for EU accession.

⁸ Just for illustration, in the last five referendums held in Slovenia since 1996 (four were organized on specific policies ors law and one on the electoral system) the turnout was between 27 % and 38 %.

⁹ Based on an opinion poll conducted by the CATI group for public television) two days before the referendums were held.

Support for NATO membership was particularly high among 66-75 year olds (80 %) and, again, among those with higher (college) education (69 %). More NATO-sceptic views were found among 18-24 year olds people (only 44 % in favour) and among those with only a primary education (49 %). The voters of Slovenian Youth Party were among the most NATO-sceptic voters, only 28 % said that they would vote for NATO membership.

Conclusion

With the successful completion of the accession referendum Slovenia made the final, key step towards full membership of the EU. The overwhelming success of the 'Yes' camp confirmed the strong consensus that exists among Slovenian political elites to join the EU and showed that this orientation is shared by a large majority of Slovenian citizens. It also illustrates the absence of popular fears that EU membership will lead to an 'erosion of sovereignty'. However, such a resounding result was still a big surprise as it even beat than the previous 'record' of 85 % set by Ireland in its accession referendum, not to mention the historic 1991 vote on Slovenian independence. Such a good result was unexpected, but so was such a relatively low turnout.

This is the latest in a series of election and referendum briefings produced by the Opposing Europe Research Network (OERN). Based in the Sussex European Institute OERN was established in June 2000 as an international network of scholars studying party politics. The original focus was to chart the divisions over Europe that exist within party systems but the Network has widened its objectives to consider the broader impact of the European issue on the domestic politics of EU member and candidate states. The Network retains an independent stance on the issues under consideration. For more information and copies of all our publications visit our website at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/SEI/oern/index.html>