

DIPLOMATSKI ZVEZEK

DIPLOMATIC BULLETIN



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Debate Strategic foresight – a tool for the future,
Faculty of Social Sciences, 20 February 2025 / Author: MFEA

FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

In this issue, we introduce the ministry's new Secretary General and discuss some of the challenges facing Slovenian diplomacy and the Ministry as a whole. However, the essence of diplomacy is people and, as the Secretary General points out, working for people. It is most fulfilling when we can do something good for people directly. Viktor Mlakar and Mateja Blaj reflect on this in their article on the importance of consular work in diplomacy. It is an all too often overlooked part of diplomatic work, even though consular officers directly help those who find themselves in trouble abroad.

If a few months ago we wrote about the need for new tools in diplomacy, we are now proud to report that we have presented at the Faculty of Social Sciences the first strategic foresight document aimed at providing Slovenian diplomats with recommendations for future development. We remain active in the field of international law, and by participating in the advisory proceedings at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, we reaffirm our commitment to international law and environmental protection, both of which are among the strategic priorities of Slovenian foreign policy. The Slovenian Consulate in Shanghai is an enjoyable project that meets two challenges at the same time: introducing children to the diplomatic profession and presenting Slovenia.

As part of our cultural diplomacy, we are also involved in the European Capital of Culture project, which will take place throughout the year in both Nova Gorica and Gorizia, connecting people on both sides of the border and beyond. Culture unites. And so does sport. Diplomats are also athletes: read how we competed in a cross-country skiing race in Pokljuka in the excellent company of politicians and managers, and combined pleasure with business at a roundtable on Slovenian innovation. The Bled Strategic Forum continues its involvement in the follow-up to the Conclave Conference, where European thinkers reflected on the future of the EU. This issue's "In the past" section looks back at the negotiations that led to the signing of the Osimo Treaty half a century ago.

We hope you enjoy reading and wish you a happy beginning of spring.

Sabina Stadler Repnik, Editor

»I believe that strategic foresight will only become more important. The complexity of today's world requires a different way of thinking and a strategic approach to the future.«

Tanja Fajon
Minister of Foreign and European Affairs

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QUESTIONS FOR THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

Ambassador Barbara Žvokelj assumed the position of Secretary-General on 26 August 2024, and a few months later, it is time for a first review. We asked her a few questions about the work of the Ministry and her personal vision for it.

What was the first task on your desk after you took office? What was it that needed your immediate attention?

Before I took up the post, I sat in my office and read the "legal basis for my future work", i.e. the legislative and regulatory framework for the tasks that the Secretariat deals with. Then, in September, I officially assumed the position and three major "challenges" landed on my desk: amendments to the Foreign Affairs Act, the budget and the draft act amending the Personal Income Tax Act.



SG Barbara Žvokelj / Author: Dipl. Academy

The latter was the toughest nut to crack as the draft act proposed the deletion of the article stating that those of us posted abroad were entitled to an exemption from paying income tax, namely that "only income or parts of income from employment relationship, which, by its content and scope, corresponds to income from an employment relationship which the employee or official would receive for the same type of work in Slovenia" would be taxed. A two-day intensive diplomatic campaign with the secretaries-general of other ministries and the Office of the Prime Minister, which also sends staff abroad, was successful. We proposed improvements or at least an extension of the existing article until the act on salaries earned abroad (which does not have an official name yet) is passed by the end of the year. We now have to enter into tough negotiations to ensure that the same exemption is included in the new legislation.

We have received many comments on the amendments to the Foreign Affairs Act, which have been coordinated by Gregor Pelicon and his legal team with relevant other ministries, and the wording of the Act is now in the final stages of coordination before being submitted to the Government. Although the Government Office for Legislation initially stated that it would not be possible to ensure the retroactive regulation of the pension rights of diplomats' partners without penalising them, to put it simply, we have once again proposed a solution after a discussion with the Director of the Government Office for Legislation and some additional arguments. Now we are keeping our fingers crossed.

As far as the budget is concerned, following the excellent work of my predecessor, Ambassador Renata Cvelbar Bek, for the first time in history it was set at a level where the Directors-General received a notice from the Ministry's Accounting and Finance Service, headed by Nataša Adlešič Barba, informing them that they would get everything they had planned for – a total of EUR 161 million for 2025 and EUR 167 million for 2026.

There were probably quite a few things that needed your immediate attention. What is your vision for the future work of the Ministry? You are introducing some innovations, such as the so-called town hall meetings, where everyone can ask questions directly or make suggestions for improvements.

This is the part I like the most, much more than signing travel forms or invoices. When I worked in the external service, I noticed that we often lacked motivation. In fact, what needs to be done to motivate people in our profession? Salaries alone are not enough.

This is why I have introduced, or rather re-introduced, some forms of cooperation and transparency that I find helpful in identifying the main challenges. So my door is always open – my assistant has been instructed to arrange a meeting with anyone who requested it until the end of January, except during lunch hour. When the ambassadors held consultations, I gave them the “Q&A”, in order to find out why our colleagues do not choose to work abroad, we conducted a survey, mainly prepared by Deputy Secretary-General Urška Čas, which revealed the key challenges: unemployed partners, children’s schooling, relatively low salary, increased workload, loss of contact with the home environment, and so on.

A little late, although I wanted to introduce it at the very beginning, we held the so-called town hall meeting for all staff, where I gave a short 20-minute presentation on four topical issues of the time, and then gave everyone the opportunity to ask questions or make suggestions for improvement. I was pleasantly surprised by the excellent response: over 300 people participated remotely, often more than one person on the same computer or phone line. We received 15 questions, some live and some via chat, and I hope there will be even more questions and suggestions next time, as I plan to hold three or four such meetings a year to identify major challenges in time and get suggestions for improving working conditions.

In addition, I would like to start working on a more individualised staffing plan, not just filling vacancies when possible, working with young people in secondary schools and then in universities to encourage more of them to choose our profession (Jana Kvaternik and her team), contributing to a healthier lifestyle (so far we only have the option of jogging once a week, but we are thinking ahead), and taking care of our mental health issues. Our work abroad is becoming more demanding, with more and more locations in areas where there is a risk of terrorist attack or even war, and our colleagues sometimes find themselves in distress. The use of new technologies (Aleksander Boh and his team), the improvement of the deployment system (Gordana Hribar and her team), and the training in the safe use of artificial intelligence are being improved (Sabina Stadler and Andraž Zidar and their teams), and colleagues are also making sure that our properties are presentable and in safe locations (Barbara Javornik and her team).

What is the current number of our staff? How many of us are at headquarters and how many abroad?

At the end of December, we had a total of 754 employees, 426 in Slovenia and 328 abroad. We still hope that the ratio will change in favour of those working abroad in the future, but we have to make sure that the conditions are right. I am pleased to say that 58% of the staff are women, 51% of the staff are women in leadership positions, 67% of the staff are women here in Ljubljana, which means that there are fewer women abroad. Of the 54 ambassadors abroad, 22 are women. More than a third, but still less than half!

I am also pleased that we have started to recruit local staff more intensively and have broadened the range of areas they can cover, because when we are short of staff – diplomatic and administrative and technical staff – their work is more than useful. They can help with financial and consular tasks, in addition to the more established tasks in the fields of culture, business and public relations.

Slovenia opened several new diplomatic missions and consular posts last year. Are there any similar plans in the pipeline for the future, also in line with the newly adopted foreign policy strategy?

The opening of diplomatic missions and consular posts is in line with the foreign policy strategy and current developments in the world. We have opened Algiers, Manila and Addis Ababa, and we will open Morocco this year. We will build on the possibility of other forms of representation, such as ambassadors-at-large, where we intend to start with an ambassador to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, covering the countries from Ljubljana.

So far, we have this arrangement for Portugal, but we intend to improve the system so that the ambassadors-at-large will have administrative and substantive support.

We have no other plans for new openings at the moment, until we fulfil my predecessor's plans to staff all diplomatic missions and consular posts with at least 1+2. Unfortunately, we have not yet reached this target, but we hope to obtain additional quotas. In addition, most of the diplomats from the enlarged Permanent Mission to the UN in New York will be returning at the beginning of 2026, which will help.

There has been a lot of publicity about the salaries of diplomats abroad. Are there also any misconceptions about how diplomats and their families live and work?

Yes, there are! In addition to my desire to establish more contact and direct communication with the staff of the Ministry, my aim is to communicate as much as possible directly with representatives of other ministries. I have found that communication takes place mainly through official correspondence, which unfortunately does not explain everything very well. In my direct communications with representatives of other ministries, I have found that in many cases there are misunderstandings and misinformation. To give just one example, there is the repeated statement that the reason there is no green light to raise the housing limit is that the money we do not spend on housing we can pocket ourselves. There are also similar misconceptions about representation spending. In one of our missions, the ambassador was said to have a salary of more than 12,000 euros. When we looked into it, we found two things: it could be that people were looking at the sum of the salary on which we pay income tax in Slovenia and the salary abroad, or that they did not notice that the salary amount was given in another currency, not in euros.

With the new act on salaries earned abroad, we would like to see greater motivation for diplomats to be posted abroad. We hope for better regulation of issues related to their partners, schools for their children that are comparable in all the countries where diplomats are posted, housing in safe environments, financial incentives for living in high-risk environments due to war or pollution, and so on. Of course, we want these incentives to be exempt from income tax, or at least for the income tax paid by diplomats to be no higher than it would be in Slovenia.

This is probably another reason why diplomacy as a profession and a mission should be better explained to the general public, isn't it?

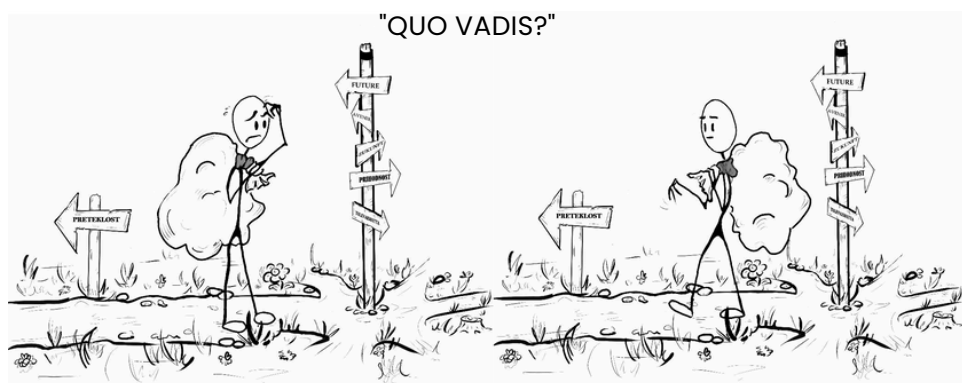
Yes, this is extremely important. I am a committed multilateralist myself and I love this part of diplomatic profession. However, I am aware that the public does not see multilateralism as a necessity, even though we know that it is very important, especially for smaller countries. Everyone knows about our consular activities in cases such as "I've lost my passport; my money has been stolen; I need a visa to go to XY; I'm stuck in XY because of a natural disaster; how can I get back home, etc." Solving these predicaments makes for good stories that many people know and appreciate the services of consular departments. Remember Andrej Šter and his rescue missions during the COVID pandemic?

I would also like to mention the Slovenian companies whose representatives accompany Minister Fajon to countries where they could not do business on their own, or the support they receive from Slovenian embassies abroad, or the deals they conclude through international organisations, such as UNIDO in Vienna. These are also good stories.

I could go on – support for Slovenes abroad, facilitation of Slovene language learning in cooperation with other ministries, care for minorities, crossing borders without identity documents, development and humanitarian aid... When Slovenia suffered devastating floods two years ago, it was we who needed and received this kind of help. And so on and so on. These are all issues that deserve to be publicised, and I hope that this interview in the excellent Diplomatic Bulletin will add a small piece to the mosaic of knowledge about our mission.

PRESENTATION OF THE STRATEGIC FORESIGHT DOCUMENT

The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia (MFEA), in cooperation with the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Bled Strategic Forum, organised a discussion on strategic foresight at the Faculty on 17 February 2025. The Ministry presented its first strategic document of this kind, entitled *Niches and Excellence in Slovenian Diplomacy 2030/2040*. The document is the result of months of work as part of the strategic foresight project, in which diplomats and external experts constructed four possible future scenarios.



Author: Rea Lara Mrhar

The discussion opened with a speech by Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Tanja Fajon, in which she expressed her belief that strategic foresight was also crucial in diplomacy and would continue to grow in importance. "The complexity of today's world requires a different way of thinking and a strategic approach to the future," she said. She also stressed that such approaches and discussions about the future help with multi-level planning, increase preparedness and thus strengthen social responsibility.

She praised the authors for their work on and concept of the document, the key part of which are the recommendations for Slovenian diplomacy under each of the scenarios. The recommendations are not only directly applicable, but also encourage diplomats to think creatively and in depth. The new Foreign Policy Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia, adopted by the Government in December last year, already introduced strategic foresight as one of its innovative approaches. Minister Fajon also stated that the MFEA would continue to use the strategic foresight tool.



Presentation Amb. Stadler/ Author: ZAN

The document *Niches and Excellence in Slovenian Diplomacy 2030/2040* and its drafting process were presented in detail by Ambassador Sabina Stadler, Head of the Service for Strategic Studies and Analyses, who led the project.

This was followed by a panel discussion entitled "Strategic Foresight – A Tool for the Future", which also included Prof. Dr Iztok Prezlj, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, and Blaž Golob, Chairman of GFS Institute. The discussion was moderated by Associate Professor Dr Matjaž Nahtigal, Head of the International Relations Department at the Faculty of Social Sciences.

The panellists agreed that the introduction of the strategic foresight tool within the MFEA was a step in the right direction, opening up new horizons for both diplomats and decision-makers. It should also be used in other government institutions and meaningfully integrated into educational programmes.

The document *Niches and Excellence in Slovenian Diplomacy 2030/2040* in Slovene is available [here](#).

GO BORDERLESS

The European Capital of Culture 2025 Nova Gorica–Gorizia is open! The opening ceremony was spectacular. Over 2,000 performers and more than 50,000 spectators passed through the two cities in an all-day procession. The Presidents of Slovenia and Italy, Nataša Pirc Musar and Sergio Mattarella, shook hands on the renovated Europe Square and announced the official opening of GO! 2025. The mayors of the two cities jointly pressed a button and a great artistic spectacle began on the square in front of Nova Gorica Town Hall that will be talked about for a long time to come.



Opening ceremony of ECoC 2025, Nova Gorica – Gorizia / Author: Jernej Humar

Nova Gorica and Gorizia have begun their journey as the first cross-border European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in the 40-year history of the initiative. Only two cities in Europe are awarded this prestigious title each year by the European Commission. In 2025, those two cities are Chemnitz in Germany and Nova Gorica in Slovenia, which has invited neighbouring Gorizia to join. The capital's slogan is GO! BORDERLESS.

The Nova Gorica–Gorizia Capital of Culture is linked by two threads: red and green. The red or central thread is the border, which raises the fundamental question of our relationship with it.

It can be seen as a border between two countries, two political systems, two cultures, two epochs, and certainly between two peoples, two linguistic groups, two cities that have gone through traumatic experiences in the past but now know how to coexist peacefully. The green thread is the emerald-green Soča River, which has given colour to the overall image of the capital and connects the region from the peak of Triglav on the Slovenian side to the mouth of the Soča River into the Adriatic Sea on the Italian side. It represents sustainability and zero carbon.

During this historic year, a series of theatre, music, literature, visual arts and film events will take place in and around the two cities. All activities will be centred around the official ECoC programme, divided by Programme Director Stojan Pelko into four thematic strands: War and Peace, Creation of the New, Smugglers and Very Green. In War and Peace, the artists will confront the ruthlessness of the two world wars. They will walk the Walk of Peace, commemorating the battlefields of the First World War, and exhibit the delicate drawings that painter Zoran Mušič brought back from the Dachau concentration camp. On the border, a European platform for the interpretation of the 20th century called EPIC is emerging.

Nova Gorica itself is a testimony to the Creation of the New. The construction of this new town after the war was entrusted to Edvard Ravnikar, a student of the architect Le Corbusier. The city tells the story of a visionary with European horizons and of the youth work brigades. The pioneer on the other side of the border was the psychiatrist Franco Basaglia. The lucid theatre director Tomi Janežič is another creator of the new. His Dodecalogy, which uses documentary fiction to tell the stories of families who lived in the city between 1972 and 1983, revolutionised the boundaries of his art.



Author: Ana Rojc

Author: Jernej Humar

Smugglers who used to smuggle goods across the border are now smuggling ideas. Our artists even dance at the intersection of bodies and robots (Borderless Body), tell the stories of generations living on the border (Museums on the Border), lecture on the boundaries of language, thought and literature (Festival of Complexity, Think Tank Train) and shout out the fate of contemporary migrants (Your Border is My Border). Unbound by borders, they extend their reach beyond the shores of the Mediterranean (Biennale of Young Artists of Europe and the Mediterranean) and to the farthest horizons of our solar system (Postmobility).

In Very Green, culture repays its debt to nature by carefully studying the Soča River from source to mouth (Isolabs), listening to the whispers of the most fragile plants and creatures (The Other Radio), pioneering sustainable practices for cultural events (No Time to Waste), promoting locally produced food (Library of Seeds, Laboratory for the Future of Food), while also celebrating the unique heritage of fruit varieties through wonderful books, exhibitions and films (Atlas of Forgotten Orchards, Fruit of the Sun).

However, there is also a fifth 'element' called Cinecittà, which can be found on the cinema screen on a warm summer evening, when eyes meet and magic happens. If you happen to go to a screening, you will know what boundlessness feels like. Only then will you understand why the European Capital of Culture is truly borderless.



Author: Jernej Humar

32ND CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING RACE FOR DIPLOMATS, POLITICIANS AND MANAGERS

On 25 January, the 32nd annual cross-country skiing race for diplomats, politicians and managers took place in Pokljuka. For the first time, the event was held in cooperation with SPIRIT Slovenia, which, together with the Directorate for Economic and Public Diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, organised a round table entitled "Slovenian Innovation in the Eyes of Foreign Investors: How to Identify and Capitalise on Knowledge, Creativity and Innovation".

The discussion was moderated by Nataša Kos, Head of the Cultural and Scientific Diplomacy Department of the MFEA. Government and business representatives gathered to discuss foreign perceptions of Slovenian innovation, the importance of cooperation between business, academia and politics, and how Slovenia's strengths in knowledge, creativity and innovation can be used to attract foreign investment. The roundtable was a prelude to a beautiful winter's day when Slovenian and foreign diplomats, politicians and managers shared the cross-country skiing trails of Pokljuka.



Pokljuka 2025
Author: Peter Markič

This sporting and social event dates back to the founding of an independent Slovenia and was initiated by Dr August Mencinger from Radovljica. He was a member of the first democratically elected Slovenian Assembly, a member of the Health Committee and, for many years, a doctor in various Slovenian sports teams, including cross-country skiing. Having followed the daily goings-on in Parliament, he felt that the many decision-makers should be taken out of Ljubljana from time to time and given the opportunity for healthy exercise and time to talk and socialise in a relaxed atmosphere. The initiative was supported by the then Prime Minister Lojze Peterle, and in January 1992, the first cross-country skiing race was held with the help of members of the Rateče Ski Club and journalist Tone Fornezzi – Tof.

A year later, under the leadership of Vinko Grašič, the father of the Slovenian Olympic athlete Andreja Grašič, the event was upgraded in terms of organisation and content, and moved from Rateče to Pokljuka. For eighteen years, the social part of the annual meeting was held in the Pokljuka barracks. Since 2010, when Pokljuka became one of the most attractive biathlon centres in the world, all events have been held at the Pokljuka sports centre.

Since 1992, the Parliamentary cross-country skiing race has become the traditional cross-country skiing race for diplomats, politicians and managers. Over three decades, presidents and ministers, ambassadors and other diplomats, numerous business people and other public figures have taken part, from Günther Seibert, the first German ambassador to Slovenia, to the legendary EU representative in Slovenia, Ambassador Erwan Fouéré, who returned to Slovenia even after taking over the EU delegation in Macedonia, to presidents of the National Assembly and members of various Slovenian governments from the time of Slovenia's independence to the present day. In 2021, the event was cancelled due to the COVID-21 pandemic. With the exception of that year, the race has been held in all weather conditions, including rain, snow and bitter cold.

This year, on a beautiful winter's day, the race brought together 79 participants in various categories, including representatives from nine foreign embassies in the Republic of Slovenia, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs and other Slovenian ministries, Slovenian Defence Minister Borut Sajovic and a large number of managers.



Competitors of the 32nd Diplomats, Politicians and Businessmen Cross-Country Ski Run / Author: Peter Markič

Minister Tanja Fajon welcomed the participants and pointed out the importance of such meetings in strengthening dialogue and cooperation. She was particularly pleased with the good results of Slovenian diplomats, especially the victory of Ambassador Simona Leskovar and the third place of Minister Plenipotentiary Marko Vrevc, who competed in the 50+ category.

We look forward to Pokljuka 2026 and invite you to join us!



Ministers Tanja Fajon and Borut Sajovic with participants in the competition
Author: Peter Markič

SLOVENIAN DIPLOMATS PARTICIPATED IN THE ADVISORY PROCEEDINGS OF THE INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE TO CLARIFY THE OBLIGATIONS OF STATES WITH REGARD TO CLIMATE CHANGE

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague, in accordance with Article 65 of its Statute, can issue an advisory opinion at the request of the UN General Assembly. Advisory opinions, while not legally binding, carry considerable weight in inter-state relations.

On 29 March 2023, the UN General Assembly, in Resolution 77/276, submitted a request to the ICJ for an advisory opinion on the responsibility of States for climate change. In the proceedings, the 15 judges of the ICJ will have to answer two key questions. The first concerns the legal obligations of States to prevent climate change, and the second concerns the legal consequences for States when their acts and omissions cause harm to developing countries.

A total of 98 States and 12 international organisations took part in the proceedings – the largest number of participants in oral hearings in the history of the Court. Slovenia also participated in the proceedings, with a delegation consisting of Dr Marko Rakovec, Director General for International Law and Protection of Interests, as Agent, and two legal representatives, Prof. Dr Vasilka Sancin and Dr Daniel Müller. This is the third time that Slovenia has participated in ICJ advisory proceedings, having previously participated in proceedings on Kosovo's declaration of independence and on the legal consequences arising from Israel's policies and practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. In the ICJ, Slovenia is acting as an intervening state in the case brought by Ukraine against the Russian Federation for the allegations of genocide, and in the case brought by The Gambia against Myanmar for alleged genocide against the Rohingya. Slovenia thus joins the ranks of countries active in the field of international law and involved in ongoing proceedings before international tribunals.

In the current advisory procedure on the responsibility of States for climate change, Slovenia has taken the position that the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is essential for the enjoyment of other human rights, including the right to life and the right to health. Slovenia also underlined the importance of due diligence in addressing climate change and the need for international cooperation on urgently needed measures.

For many years, Slovenian diplomacy has been promoting the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in the international community. On the initiative of Slovenia and like-minded countries (Costa Rica, Morocco, the Maldives and Switzerland), this human right was recognised by a resolution of the UN Human Rights Council in 2021 and by a resolution of the UN General Assembly in 2022. In its submission to the Court, Slovenia therefore stressed the importance of addressing climate change also from the perspective of protecting individuals, who must be guaranteed this human right. This requires States to take determined action, through preventive and other measures, to enable individuals to fully enjoy all their human rights, including the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment.

Slovenia believes that it is incumbent upon States to strengthen their cooperation in order to address the causes and consequences of climate change more effectively. The climate crisis, as a global phenomenon, is also a human rights crisis that affects the whole of humanity and requires a holistic approach to its resolution, without invoking emergencies that would justify the search for ad hoc solutions through the deregulation of human rights. Without cooperation within the international community, it is impossible to achieve viable solutions.

When it comes to the protection of the individual, it is not the borders between States that are important, but the exercise of due diligence by each State and the pursuit of joint efforts to minimise adverse effects on the environment. Slovenia is already focusing its activities on building alliances to galvanise joint action, such as the recently established Global Alliance to Spare Water from Armed Conflicts initiated by Slovenia.

Slovenia also underlined its commitment to addressing the causes and consequences of climate change, as highlighted by Prime Minister Dr Golob in his address to the UN General Assembly in September 2024, and further explored during a panel discussion with Slovenian experts and policymakers at the forum on the right to a healthy living environment hosted by Slovenian President Dr Nataša Pirc Musar on 30 September 2024.

Following the written submissions, an oral hearing was held at the ICJ from 2 to 13 December 2024, during which States and international organisations had the opportunity to elaborate on their written submissions and respond to the contributions of other States and organisations. More than 100 speakers, ranging from diplomats representing the world's economic superpowers to representatives of small island states, addressed the Court, revealing once again the stark divide between the most developed countries and those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The latter are convinced that the current international legal framework established by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is insufficient to mitigate the devastating effects of climate change.

This is why Slovenia's contribution was important and recognised as such, arguing for the existence of a human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment and for the responsibility of States to step up their efforts to reduce harmful environmental impacts.

The Court is expected to issue an advisory opinion later this year and thus set the legal framework for action to mitigate climate change. If the advisory opinion is positive, individuals will also have a better chance of demanding that States take appropriate action. It will be helpful if the Court can define more precisely the obligations of States to protect the human right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. In Slovenia's view, this clearly reflects the increased cooperation among States in reducing negative impacts on the climate, as well as the sustained efforts of States to reduce them.



International Court of Justice in The Hague/ Author: ICJ

CONSULAR WORK IS ALSO PART OF FOREIGN POLICY

Mateja Blaj and mag. Viki Mlakar

Consular work is an extremely important pillar of Slovenia's foreign policy, although the tasks performed by consular staff in assisting Slovenian and foreign citizens differ considerably from those of other diplomats. Alongside the duties of the country's top diplomats, consular work is the public face of the Foreign Ministry. Just go and ask the ambassadors! Poor consular service or complaints from citizens can cause just as many problems for the heads of diplomatic missions and consular posts as financial mismanagement or some other blunder. That is why it is important that this work is done by people who care about our fellow human beings and our country.

Consular work is a special job that you simply have to love. To make a passport, accept an application for an identity card, help someone register for Slovenian citizenship, interview a foreigner who wants to come to Slovenia or stamp a visa requires extensive and very specific knowledge. You have to learn how to use equipment such as the fingerprint reader, the ID card register or Vizis, you have to get to grips with administrative and other procedures and, as the former head of the Consular Department Andrej Šter would say, you have to have a lot of common sense.

You simply cannot do the job without an affinity for working with people and without empathy. The ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes in a given situation, for example a person in detention or the relatives of a deceased or hospitalised person abroad, or to recognise the intentions of a foreigner who wants to enter our country or who may even be a victim of human trafficking, and to respond professionally, respectfully and effectively, is a craft and an art, just like diplomacy as such, learned from good mentors and through a lot of experience.

On closer examination, consular work involves a great deal of diplomatic skills: working with people and networking, identifying and assessing the character of the person you are talking to, finding solutions in various situations, including when stressed or under pressure, obtaining contacts and information, negotiating and protecting Slovenian interests. Meetings of consuls in the context of their diplomatic functions, whether at official meetings or more informal diplomatic receptions abroad, especially in challenging environments, are always an opportunity to strengthen mutual relations, exchange experiences and useful information, and sometimes just a chance for relaxed socialising with colleagues from other countries.

Last but not least, consular work also encourages our entire Ministry and diplomatic network to use modern tools. As modern consular officers, we are proud to be pioneers in the use of the portable fingerprint tablet and the various systems we use within Lotus Notes and beyond, in the use of modern technology (e-registers) and in the promotion of new concepts and approaches within the Ministry (crisis management centre in the making, modern applications for providing consular and other information in emergencies, SMS notification). The next milestone we are looking forward to is the use of artificial intelligence to support our work. However, we still like to put a stamp on paper and sign our names on documents to authenticate them, for example.

We could fill a book with the concrete examples dealt with by the Consular Department or diplomatic and consular missions, some of which are sad stories and others funny anecdotes, which give rise to a specific kind of “consular humour” that often acts as a valve to relieve the stress involved in our work, as we deal personally with people in delicate real-life situations. And they expect the consul to help them. We think about the best possible solutions long after working hours, even at weekends, and these stories stay with us one way or another.

Our willingness to always try to help is a good way to keep learning. In addition to basic knowledge, diplomats/consuls are determined to find solutions and never give up, even if we have to contact the relevant foreign authorities or go down the same road more than once. The experiences of our colleagues leave no one untouched, such as assisting in the medical evacuation from Gaza, finding evacuation flights in war situations, helping to transport the remains of a loved one from Africa at the height of the COVID quarantine, or interviewing victims of human trafficking (“dancers” from the Dominican Republic or Ukraine) or a woman with a child who was a victim of domestic violence in a foreign country. Sometimes we have to deal with people with mental disorders who find themselves in detention on the other side of the world, for example in the south of India.

An important, sometimes less visible, but essential to the functioning of the Ministry and the entire consular network, is the Consular Department’s work in education and training. Although we are not professional lecturers, almost all of us are involved in the transfer of consular know-how and experience to new generations of diplomats. Twice a year we organise training sessions for candidates for the consular examination and additional training sessions for those who wish to take the diplomatic and higher diplomatic examinations. I would like to add that all employees of the Consular Department attend training courses organised on a smaller scale throughout the year (regional consular consultations), and in the autumn we hold an annual consular consultation, where we invite all Slovenian consuls serving in our diplomatic and consular network.

However, despite the interesting publicity, consuls prefer to work behind the scenes, in anonymity, because it makes our job easier. While many cases are interesting, it is important to remember that they are often very personal stories, even tragedies, that have no place in the headlines, not least in order to protect the privacy of the people affected.

During the COVID crisis, our work was particularly demanding and stressful for all of us helping people cross borders and organising evacuations. Consuls were on duty around the clock and the Ministry opened a call centre. We developed many good practices at that time, which are still useful today.

As a result of such trials and tribulations, the consular staff is a close-knit family; it is no secret at the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs that we are by nature a sociable lot and like to get together informally. The bonds forged in stressful situations last forever, even after some colleagues leave the consular ranks and pursue other diplomatic careers. The gratitude we feel towards the Consular Department in Ljubljana, which guides and supports the work of the diplomatic network, is lifelong.

In recent years, the Consular Department has undergone significant changes in its organisation and activities. We have had to adapt quickly to new challenges and changes at home and abroad. We have already mentioned new technologies, which are still being introduced into consular work in order to achieve optimal results, as demonstrated by a number of projects that the Department’s staff have been implementing and managing in addition to their regular work, where we are also trying to effectively absorb EU funds.

Furthermore, some structural changes were needed in the way consular work was carried out. Two years ago, on the basis of our own experience, mainly from the COVID pandemic, and the experience of foreign colleagues, we formally established a new section dealing exclusively with the management of consular crises abroad. The first results were soon noticed by both the Ministry and the public. The very positive feedback we have received from both gives us additional impetus to help Slovenian citizens abroad who find themselves in trouble as a result of natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods and wildfires, or man-made disasters such as military conflicts or terrorist attacks. We can now proudly stand shoulder to shoulder with the much larger and better supported consular services of other foreign ministries in Europe and beyond.

As well as providing emergency consular assistance, we also carry out seemingly less visible but equally important activities that are essential for Slovenian citizens abroad: registering births and marriages, issuing death notices and personal identity documents, and carrying out other registration procedures. Without these services, it would be much more difficult to live, work or study abroad in the long term.

And we should not forget that the work with clients is not limited solely to our colleagues abroad; we also provide such services in Ljubljana: the Consular Department carries out all the necessary procedures for the authentication of domestic and foreign documents, and recently we have seen a significant increase in the number of clients coming to the counter at Šubičeva Street 10. In addition, we deal with and answer the many questions of people who write to us or call the Department directly.

Their questions concern various areas of consular activity, but mainly visa requirements and the status of foreigners in Slovenia. At the national level, the Consular Department and the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs are the authorities responsible for the implementation of the visa policy. It is a common policy in the Schengen area and in this respect our staff, both in the embassies and in the visa section, have a great responsibility to implement procedures in accordance with the rules and common European legislation. In this respect, we are sometimes the target of unjustified accusations that we are too "rigid" and unsympathetic towards visa applicants or in the implementation of related procedures. Our response has always been a principled one: when we make decisions in this area, we do not make them for Slovenia alone, but on behalf of the other members of the Schengen area. And conversely, we adhere to the agreed rules.

We sometimes feel sad that we are perceived as second-class diplomats, which is far from the truth, and it worries us that there seems to be little interest in working in our field of expertise. A bigger and stronger consular network and up-to-date solutions would ease the workload of consular officers who literally have to be on call 24/7. Human resources are invaluable. As in other areas, the end result depends on a properly motivated, well-qualified and not overworked workforce. As you have read in this article, consular work can be particularly demanding because it involves dealing with people and their problems. This is why we must do everything in our power to ensure that the working conditions, especially abroad, are as good and stress-free as possible. Only in this way can we succeed in attracting new colleagues to the consular ranks, where work, as we have said, can be difficult, but also immensely fulfilling.

Just as a minister is happy when he or she signs an international agreement, a consul is happy when he or she hands over a passport so that a Slovenian citizen can return home or helps evacuate citizens to their homeland. At the end of the day, working with people and phrases like "thank you for your help" are worth more than any title.

SECOND CONCLAVE – THE FUTURE OF EUROPE

From 17 to 19 January 2025, the Bled Strategic Forum team participated in the second Conclave Public Conference, held in Brussels under the auspices of the EuropaNova think tank. The Bled Strategic Forum (BSF) is EuropaNova's partner in the organisation of the conference, which brings together policy makers and experts to draw up concrete recommendations for the implementation of EU and European Commission priorities until 2040.

This year's conference discussed geopolitics, including security and defence, science and technology as key drivers of competitiveness, and the governance and financing of European ambitious plans, with special guests Antonio Costa, President of the European Council, and Mark Rutte, Secretary General of NATO. In a special debate moderated by BSF Secretary General Peter Grk, the then Prime Minister of Belgium Alexander De Croo spoke about the challenges facing the EU after the election of the new US administration and the future of Europe.



SG BSF Peter Grk, Conclave 2025

The panellists agreed on the importance of a strong transatlantic relationship, which will come under pressure from the new US president's transactional approach. With President Trump's sceptical approach to multilateralism, rising protectionism and preference for bilateral alliances, the unity of the alliance will be at stake. The future of the Euro-Atlantic partnership will face major challenges in aligning interests, sharing burdens and sustaining economic cooperation. The future of European defence and security must be more robust and integrated. Changes in armed forces and defence industries will be key, including ensuring greater European autonomy and cooperation in innovation to boost European competitiveness, economic growth and investment in resilience. It will be important to ensure wider security and to protect external borders from illegal migration. The conference discussed the importance of multilateralism and new EU partnerships with emerging countries and groups of countries (BRICS, etc.) and highlighted the need for reform to make international organisations more effective in a changing geostrategic environment.

Europe faces a major challenge in maintaining its global competitiveness, particularly vis-à-vis the US and China. If these issues are not adequately addressed, Europe's economic, scientific and technological decline will have a long-term impact on its social stability and political cohesion. It was underlined that the digital development gap requires an immediate and comprehensive European strategy to unify industrial policies, financial capabilities and governance models. The conference called for the prioritisation of investment in R&D and a new generation of industrial policies that simultaneously address environmental and digital transformations and their wider impacts on society. It identified the need to strengthen supply chains, expand Horizon Europe and improve access to capital investment, to simplify regulations, strengthen interdisciplinary research and global research partnerships, and to complete the single capital market. The creation of a European sovereign wealth fund or a competitiveness fund should also be considered.

The debate on financing the EU's ambitions and governance challenges has highlighted the need for greater EU ownership in setting and financing priorities. Strengthening the EU's financial capacity is not only a question of political integration, but also of the stability and resilience of countries in the face of the many economic crises and shocks that contribute to the worryingly high debt levels in some Member States. If the EU is to finance its ambitions, it must simplify the structure of its budget, increase it substantially and align spending with strategic objectives. With regard to governance and the erosion of trust, the conference highlighted the need to address the lack of democratic dialogue between people and the polarisation, partly exacerbated by social networks and artificial intelligence tools. The focus should be on redefining the European narrative and dialogue to promote hope and unity and to offer a vision that gives citizens a sense of optimism beyond economic success.



HALF A CENTURY SINCE THE TREATY OF OSIMO

In the diplomatic history of Yugoslavia and, by extension, modern Slovenia, the 1975 Treaty of Osimo is considered one of the most important diplomatic and political achievements and a model of diplomatic negotiation. The Treaty was signed in the Italian town of Osimo in November 1975 and ratified two years later.



Signing of the Osimo Agreements, Osimo, 10 November 1975
Author: unknown

It defined the interstate border and abolished the 1920 Rapallo border. Following international recognition in January 1992, Slovenia had its western border confirmed on the basis of the principle of succession to the former state. This was crucial for the further development of Slovenian-Italian relations.

From the end of the Second World War, more precisely from the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947 until the conclusion of the Treaty, this was one of the outstanding international issues regularly dealt with by the United Nations Security Council. For NATO, the area along the border represented a potential flashpoint for inter-bloc conflict. At the heart of the issue was the status of the city of Trieste and the question of Zone A, which was administratively assigned to Italy under the 1954 London Memorandum, while Zone B was administratively assigned to Yugoslavia.

Negotiations took place in secret at Strmol Castle from 1973 and were officially framed as a discussion on strengthening economic cooperation between the two countries, thus concealing their true significance due to their high political sensitivity. The chief Yugoslav negotiator was Boris Šnuderl. The negotiations were a great learning experience for Slovenian diplomats, as well as an opportunity to apply and demonstrate the skills they had already acquired.

DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS – IN FOCUS

LITTLE DIPLOMATS – AN INITIATIVE OF THE CONSULATE OF THE REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA IN SHANGHAI

Little Diplomats is an event that brings diplomacy and multiculturalism to children in Shanghai, a powerhouse of the global economy, while broadening their horizons in various fields. The project was initiated by the Consulate of the Republic of Slovenia in Shanghai and implemented together with local partners China Central Television High School Student Channel and De Yi Shuangxin as part of the International Cultural Exchange 2025 programme.

Through presentations and personal interaction with representatives from consulates of different countries, as well as a variety of activities, Chinese children learn about foreign countries, their culture, history, places of interest, natural landmarks and traditions.

The event showcasing Slovenia brought together 78 children aged 6–14 in the auditorium of Shanghai Jiao Tong University. In a multimedia presentation for children, the entire Consulate team took part in presenting Slovenian culture, traditions and history. In the second part of the event, the children took on the role of young journalists and eagerly asked questions about everything that intrigued them about Slovenia. They then presented Chinese culture through their artistic performances and skills. In addition to learning about Slovenia, the project also teaches the children public speaking skills and how to interact in a multicultural environment.



Little Diplomats event participant
Author: GK Shanghai



Head of the Consulate Mira Lesjak with co-organisers and young participants of the event / Author: GK Shanghai

The next event we are preparing at the Consulate of the Republic of Slovenia in Shanghai as part of the International Cultural Exchange 2025 project is a workshop by Slovenian pianist, producer and composer Tine Grgurevič a.k.a. Bowrain with Chinese children. The event builds on the first project by combining the exploration of Slovenian identity with learning about culture and art.

SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED

- 25 January: (Cross-country) skiing race for diplomats, politicians and managers, Pokljuka
- 8 February: Opening of the European Capital of Culture GO! 2025 (Nova Gorica–Gorizia)
- 17 February: Presentation of the MFEA Strategic Foresight Project at the Faculty of Social Sciences

IN THE PIPELINE

- 20 May – World Bee Day
- 22 May – Slovenian Diplomacy Day
- 29–30 May: Africa Day

INSPIRATIONAL QUOTE

»If a man knows not to which port he sails, no wind is favourable«.

Seneca

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