

'Slovenia, a little-known but advanced country' from La Libre Belgique (31 March 2001)

Caption: On 31 March 2001, the daily newspaper La Libre Belgique emphasises the efforts made by Slovenia in order to enable it to accede to the European Union.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 31.03.2001. Bruxelles. "La Slovénie, méconnue mais avancée", auteur:Verhest, Sabine , p. 7.

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Slovenia, a little-known but advanced country

The tiny former Yugoslav republic is making major strides towards membership of the European Union. However, it is not attracting as many investors as hoped

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Slovenia? When it is not mistaken for Slavonia ⁽¹⁾ or Slovakia ⁽²⁾, people often cannot find this small republic on a map. The wish of this little-known European doll's house to join the EU enjoys the support of only 34 % of people in the Fifteen, placing the country at the bottom of the 'popularity' ratings for candidates from the East.

Nevertheless, according to Jean-Michel De Waele, a researcher from the Université libre de Bruxelles, 'Slovenia has a lot going for it'. It has a population of only 1.9 million — 'this will only help its integration' — and 'it has a remarkable level of political and economic development compared with other candidates'. In fact its per capita gross domestic product is around 70 % of the Community average, while in the case of Bulgaria it is only 23 %. Its success is due to 'significant historical wealth', says Mr De Waele. 'It was once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and later on it was always the wealthiest part of Yugoslavia.'

It has now become 'a functioning market economy' that 'should soon be able to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union', according to the European Commission. Resolutely optimistic, Slovenia hopes to complete accession negotiations in 2001. But despite 'external signs of wealth' in a pleasant little town like Ljubljana and the efforts made in important areas (such as the environment, agriculture and energy), major progress is still required, starting with reform of public administration and speeding up of privatisation, two priorities for Janez Drnovsek's government. The State continues to exert considerable influence in some sectors of the economy, notably in banking, dampening any enthusiasm foreign investors might have.

Looking southward

Having said that, while investors are relatively lukewarm about Slovenia, the country itself does not think twice about injecting money into the south, to Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The war in the former Yugoslavia and the loss of its traditional markets has led it to conquer new ones, especially in the EU. But stability in Zagreb, the relative calm in Sarajevo and the end of the dictatorship in Belgrade have for some time been leading it to restore its political and trade ties with its former partners. This realignment is shown in its foreign policy, which has long consisted in turning its back on the Balkans. So Slovenia, which is a keen player in the Stability Pact for South East Europe, is trying to serve as an example for its neighbours.

(1) A region of eastern Croatia.

(2) A Central European country whose capital is Bratislava.