

Slippery When Wet

By BORUT GRGIC

October 7, 2004

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/0,,SB109709849474638413,00.html>

LJUBLJANA – Change comes slow to Slovenia. Ever since independence – back in 1991 – a single party, the Liberal Democrats, led the way. Having managed to sneak out of the Balkans, and put themselves on track for the European Union and NATO, Slovenes may as a nation have preferred political stability until they were assured of a slot in both clubs.

No more. The little Alpine Slavic republic joined those Brussels-based institutions in the past year, and over the weekend, the opposition Social Democrats defeated the Liberals. Don't let the names confuse you: The right replaced the left. For the Spaniards to throw out their incumbents, it took the terrorist bombing of the Madrid trains. For the Slovenes, the spark was, in a word, fish.

As Washington and Europe ponder ways to fight international terrorism and the spread of WMDs, the pols in Ljubljana are engaged in another battle: How to secure their claimed bit of the Bay of Piran. Back when Yugoslavia collapsed, Croatia and Slovenia failed to settle about a percent of their land and sea border, including a key outlet for Slovene vessels heading out to international waters. Ljubljana argues that Slovenia always had access to open seas – and that Slovenia is a maritime state. Croatia denies this. As far as Zagreb is concerned the only legitimate sea border in the Adriatic is the one between Croatia and Italy.



More than Slovene (maritime) pride is at stake. Croat border cops are expelling Slovenian fisherman from what Zagreb claims are Croatia's territorial waters – and what the fishermen and Slovene politicians claim are international waters. The European Union insists that the two countries settle this on their own; the International Court of Justice, the Hague body whose main job seems to be settling border feuds, has not issued an opinion.

Just days before the election, Prime Minister Anton Rop boarded a fishing vessel in Piran to demonstrate his unyielding commitment to protect Slovenia's "vital interest," and pledged to chase out the Croats from the Bay. Days later, the prime minister declared that Slovenia would think twice about letting Croatia into

the EU if Zagreb didn't stop its bullying over Piran. The "Fisherman Rop" incident turned into Slovenia's version of George W.'s famous "Mission Accomplished" jet landing on USS Abraham Lincoln: In other words, a political stunt that backfired.

At the time, Mr. Rop was looking for anything to turn the race his way. Locked in a close contest with his fiercest opponent, Janez Jansa, he figured it was a good idea to stick his hand in this nationalist hive. It didn't work. The nationalists stayed faithful to their man, Zmago Jelincic, snubbing the prime minister. The mainstream opposition went after Mr. Rop for needlessly – and predictably – angering the Croats.

For the fact is that most Slovenians, minus the radicals, are sick of the unending bickering with Croatia, be it over fish, border posts, or Ljubljanska Banka. They prefer improved relations in order, mainly, to be welcomed on the sun-drenched Croatian coasts for their summer holidays.

Beleaguered at home, Mr. Rop looked for help from Brussels, calling in the EU's foreign policy supremo, Javier Solana, to mediate with the Croats. Whether this visit was agreed ahead of time or not, Mr. Rop came across as desperate. Mr. Solana wasn't sympathetic either, making it clear that neither he nor the EU want any part of this local fight. That was a slap in the face for the prime minister, and a big embarrassment on the eve of Election Day. Mr. Rop's Liberal Democrats came in second in the national poll, trailing almost eight percentage points behind the Social Democrats. It was the biggest upset in the short history of this country. In the last election, Mr. Rop's party beat the Jansa grouping by 24 percentage points. The turnaround is, in no small part, thanks to the Croatia and Solana flaps; more than that, though, it's a rebuke of the hapless Mr. Rop.

A new crowd in power might turn down the heat on this little spat. But Croatia also needs to realize that finding a mutually agreeable deal with the Slovenes is in its own best interests. Here's an idea: Croatia could temporarily acknowledge Slovenia's access to international waters and in return Slovenia lobbies for Zagreb to join the EU no later than 2009. The two also agree to revisit this question five years after Croatia enters the EU. The Croats have good reason to nurture allies in the club, like the Slovenes: With the EU so scared of Turkey's bid, there's talk in Brussels that enlargement will take a backseat after Romania and Bulgaria join in three years.

And if both Slovenia and Croatia belong to the EU, borders, presumably, won't mean much anyway. That might just let future politicians – even in the Balkans! – settle on the final lines without having to worry about any serious nationalist backlash.

Mr. Grgic is a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council in Washington and a foreign policy advisor in Ljubljana.