

social issues & initiatives

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"Slovene cultures of waiting and fear"

Since 1989 Slovene society has been one of waiting for the end of socialism, waiting for independence, waiting for international recognition, waiting for economic prosperity and political democracy, waiting for the “normalization” of the rest of the ex-Yugoslav states, waiting for NATO and EU membership, waiting for the implementation of the Euro...

The last of these three projects are the most revealing of the general dynamic underlying all. Thus, Slovenia's membership of NATO was projected as inevitable. None of the parliamentary parties opposed membership and some leading foreign and domestic politicians publicly stated that there was no need for a referendum on the issue. In contrast, diverse segments of civil society campaigned for a democratic debate on the issue in which all sides would be given equal consideration, and the right for a referendum. This was a question deeply related to Slovenia's constitution as this prescribes Slovenia's policies to be peaceful and non-aggressive.

After the right to a referendum was won and the referendum actually carried out, the result (a 2:1 in favour of NATO) revealed a huge flaw in Slovene democracy. On the one hand, journalists, artists, intellectuals, and segments of civil society either critical of NATO or just desiring proper democratic debate on the issue, were viewed with suspicion, the object of both denunciation and special lists of “dissidents” compiled by the ministry of Foreign affairs under the supervision of the Liberal democratic party minister Dimitrij Rupel. On the other hand, there was no correlation the opinions of civil society and the supposedly representative nature of the parliamentary parties.

The climate leading up to EU membership was also in a way traumatic. Analysing the climate leading up to it, the Slovene sociologist of culture Mitja Velikonja characterized it as one of “Eurosis” – a pro-European hysteria precluding the recognition of different available options and their rational debate. The referendum on EU membership was conducted together with that of NATO membership so that it was not easy to separate the two. And if the final result did differ from that regarding NATO, it can only be characterized as worthy of any totalitarian state as some 89% voted in favour of membership.

Not surprisingly, EU membership in 2004 and the adoption of the Euro in the beginning of 2007 was seen as a natural and inevitable as were the other reforms characterizing society made in the name of the “Europeanization” of Slovenia: the dismantling its industrial base, the progressive privatization of the health service, education and social security system, the tightening of population control and implementation of restrictive border regimes. Concurrently, the culture of waiting characterizing the last two decades was sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, accompanied by an understanding that what was needed was just a little bit more time and sacrifice. After the implementation of project X or Y all

would be much better than it was before. In fact, a Golden Age was just around the corner. Until then, however, good citizens should wait, be quiet, patient and tighten their belts.

There is today, however, one crucial difference in relation to all the previous years of waiting. All the projects currently implemented have not brought about a Golden Age, so that all the promises of the past and demands for sacrifice seem somewhat empty. Faced with this, the state has attempted to foster allegiance and unity through a new project of economic fear - the need for newer and even wider reforms of the economy by which various social gains from the past would be eroded and Labour even more left to the mercy of Capital.

Yet this project of economic fear is neither as radically new nor as grandiose as its predecessors, so coupled with it come a political culture of fear. Thus, and since the rule of the right wing government dominated by the right wing Slovene Democratic Party, there has been a notable increase (sometimes state sponsored) in racism, homophobia and patriarchal attempts to reverse women's rights, the increased criminalization of various youth subcultures, and the persecution of various ethnic minorities.

For instance, the “erased” are a group of ex-Yugoslavs whose basic human rights were denied with Slovene independence with the government choosing to ignore the ruling of the constitutional court that these rights should be restored in full and without exception. In late 2006, an extended Roma family comprising of some 30 individuals was evicted from their home and this demolished after protests from the Slovenes living in the village of Ambrus and demanding a removal of their neighbours.

Such ethnic cleansing has been matched with the disciplining of the media, various cultural institutions, and economic enterprises. Following economic takeovers and changes in legislation the biggest Slovene newspaper Delo and the state TV and radio can all be said to be closely aligned to the ruling Slovene Democratic Party. Indeed, journalists not wanting to tow the line, or various liberals and left-wingers working in various state sponsored or state owned institutions – as was the case with former Delo editor Ervin Hladnik Milhari or the new directorship of the Slovene Cinematheque - have been coldly replaced with frequently incompetent but politically loyal appointees, without any regards whatsoever for professionalism, imperatives of a democratic society, or its wider welfare.

If Slovenia has witnessed an alarming increase of intolerant and racist discourse in civil society, the media and politics, then other worrying developments include an even further narrowing of public space. For example, the current Foreign minister Rupel (who retained his post by opportunistically transferring his allegiance from the Liberal democrats to the right wing Slovene Democrats and today a regular contributor to Delo) has intervened to prevent the work of critical journalists. Some individuals working in the arts, cultural events and institutions perceived as liberal or left have been deprived of state subsidies. Finally, the Slovene philosopher and one often seen as the ideologist of the current regime, Tine Hribar, made a revealing statement concerning his own views and those of the prime minister Janez Janša and his ministers of justice and public administration. Hribar supports their desire to cleanse Slovene public life (especially the universities) of former

communists, but adds that this process should be selective rather than all-encompassing. The implications of this is that former communists loyal to the new regime should not be cleansed whereas it is also easy to imagine that the general process of cleansing the universities could effect any left and liberal intellectual forcing them either to join the ranks of the ruling party or leave their academic posts altogether.

Commenting on the replacements already affecting various institutions, the oppositional liberal democratic parliamentarian Slavko Gaber characterized these as a “tsunami”. Indeed, the Slovene ombudsman for human rights, Matjaž Hanžek, has stated that while the previous left-liberal democratic dominated government did not do actually do much to change the human rights situation in Slovenia, it at least acknowledged and accepted the plurality of opinion. For Hanžek, the current government reacts hysterically to dissent and does not in the least accept the democratic right to have a view different from its own. Tellingly, the government responded to Hanžek's international report on the worsening human rights situation in Slovenia by saying that Hanžek was tarnishing Slovenia's image abroad. This is a reaction worthy of any totalitarian state inasmuch as it sees the upholding or denial human rights as a function of the state rather than vice-versa.

Of course, the silencing of individual dissent, the climate of economic insecurity fostered by neoliberal capitalism, and the promise of new reforms making the economy even more flexible (i.e. Americanizing it) has the effect of promoting clientelism and self-censorship, hence disciplining large sections of the population who are afraid of voicing criticism lest they not be publicly denounced, lose their jobs or other means of survival.

After the years of waiting, and with no materially tangible fruits of the promised Golden Age to celebrate, the state has resorted to solve the problem of Slovene social stratification and democratic pluralism through the fostering of an organic and populist unity. Thus, seemingly indigenous and populist Slovene cultural forms with a positive attitude towards slovenliness are promoted against syncretic and critical culture directed towards more specific and discerning audiences.

Confronted with individual and social alienation, calls for spiritual and metaphysical unity have made a truly spectacular return. Thus, there has been a marked increase in the way in which representatives of the Catholic Church are called upon as social and cultural commentators not just in religious affairs but in general and for just about any subject there is. Consider also the case of the famous Slovene architect Jože Plečnik - a catholic but also individualist religious man achieved much of his work together with secular liberals (such as T.G. Masaryk). Plečnik is also a potent symbol of Slovene cultural success across large segments of the population. Yet Plečnik is currently being made into a possible candidate for beatification as a catholic saint, his work thus subsumed to the mission of furthering the glory of the church. Indeed, the state is making the catholic church into one of the most economically and politically privileged civil society players in general.

Co-joined to the damnation of the “enemy within” and rewards for the faithful, comes the strategy of unifying diverse opinion and various social strata through the official fostering of populism and “hollow nationalism” that recalls the the way in which the eminent theorist

of decolonization Frantz Fanon once characterized the failure of post-colonial states. Thus, one way in which morally and economically bankrupt regimes, climates of an uncertain present, and unfulfilled promises for the future, are overcome is through recourse to a celebration of an ideal past when the people and the leaders were one singular victorious will. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that Slovene independence is currently being promoted not just in explicitly militaristic terms but also as a time in which society was characterized by the unity of all. Another untruth concerns the way by which independence is celebrated as a value and ends in itself rather than the way in which it was actually first suggested, namely as a means through which to ensure the recognition of human rights, democracy, demilitarisation, and economic welfare for all those living in Slovenia regardless of their social status, sexuality or ethnic affiliation.

Also symptomatic of this process of selective historical memory, for instance, is the way in which former dissidents under socialism quickly became opportunistic turncoats ready to trample their former ideals in the name of the realization of ethnic teleology and *raison d'état*. In his capacity as the first minister of internal affairs of independent Slovenia, Igor Bavar, the former chairman of the committee for the defence of Human rights, self-consciously declared a policy of suspending the human rights of certain ex-Yugoslavs remaining in Slovenia after 1991. Both Janez Janša and Tine Hribar can be characterized as vocal anti-communists. Thus critical of the former communist regime as well as its legacies, their anti-communism conveniently occludes the fact that both Janša and Hribar were once members of the communist party itself and therefore participants in its apparatus of power.

Of course, one may wonder about these instrumentalised attitudes to history, seemingly disjointed allegiances between the suppression of internal social, political and ethnic difference on the one hand, and “Euro-Atlantic integration” on the other, especially as this integration must (by default) acknowledge the diversity of cultures and political opinions across (although not necessarily within) the various states entering these processes of integration.

Nonetheless, there is a certain dialectical logic to all this mixture. Fear is a way through which to silence dissent at home, while integration is a way through which Slovenia enters democratic dialogue with the member states of the new alliances it has joined and thus presents itself as *de iure* (but not *de facto*) democratic and tolerant of others, their opinions, policies, and hopes for the future.

Alongside this, NATO and EU membership also sends other wrong messages to Slovenia. Namely, membership retroactively legitimises the way in which the break of ex-Yugoslavia was conducted. As already stated, independence was presented as a means for a better society rather than the ends of a state. At the same time, and in contrast to the ethnic-nationalist extremism fuelling the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo, Slovene nationalism could be seen as civic, benign and progressive. This view was only reinforced by the fact that Slovenia was “rewarded” with EU membership, while other ex-Yugoslav states have been “punished” by still waiting for accession.

Parallel to this, population control in the form of residency permits, visas and a Schengen border regime existing between Slovenia and Croatia as well as the rest of ex-Yugoslavia, has the effect of further cutting into existent transnational ties across all of south-eastern Europe. It also reinforces the view of the nation-states of these regions as being comprised of self-enclosed and discrete national cultures with no common hybrid cultural traditions or histories. NATO membership is a retroactive endorsement of NATO's intervention in Kosovo that precludes finding common ground between the Albanians and Serbs (as homogenized into a collectively guilty party for the crimes of their leaders). At the same time, majority Slovene public opinion opposes an independent Kosovo. Given the fact of Slovene independence, this is nothing more than a racist assumption as to who has the "real" right to nation-state of their own and who does not.

An opening to the West, the closing towards the East, the establishment of homogenized cultures and nation-states, narrows international and democratic space down to individuals most representative of these cultures and states in effect thus legitimizing ideologies of racism, nationalism, Eurocentrism, and what ideologists of Western hegemony such as Samuel Huntington call the "the clash of civilizations": beware the ethnic/sexual/class/political Other; a common European history is worth more than a common Balkan one; spiritual heritage means more than secular practice or ecumenism.

That all the above reinforces a certain type of integration against other local, regional and international alternatives, can be seen by imagining what would happen if Slovenia rejected EU and NATO membership. Such a rejection could take place either from the standpoint of a most narrow regressive isolationist nationalism or a principled regionalism and internationalism (such as insisting that EU membership is resolved within a packet for all ex-Yugoslav states as well as those of the former Soviet bloc). Either way, a current mystifying comprise between the rise of domestic exclusionism on the one hand, and selective European integration on the other, and that characterizes many EU states and societies today, could be broken. The repercussions of being confronted with the actual realities of our current forms of socio-economic and political life could be so wide that they could force many to rethink the military, political, cultural, economic and nation-state principles on which EU regional integration as well as globalization are currently being pursued. Needless to add, this is a frightening prospect of those with a stake in the current order.

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