

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF THE SLOVENE ETHNIC MINORITY IN CARINTHIA

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The Slovene ethnic minority in Austria represents a very interesting laboratory for the study of political participation. The primary function of ethnic minorities' political participation is to retain their integrity as a group and to counteract their underprivileged and/or marginalized position within a society.

Carinthian Slovenes participating in the 1920 Carinthian plebiscite made a political decision about the state they would henceforth live in. Soon after the plebiscite, they revived their political organization, The Catholic Political and Economic Association for Carinthian Slovenes, later renamed The Political and Economic Association for Carinthian Slovenes. Although they participated independently in elections between the two world wars, they had good connections with social democrats and communists. Thus during the First Austrian Republic their candidates ran quite successfully in municipal, provincial- and parliamentary elections, as well as in elections for the Carinthian Agricultural Chamber (Jesih 2007: 24–27).

After 1945 Carinthian Slovenes established their own political organizations, their own political party, and participated independently or on the lists of other Austrian political parties in all types of elections (Nečak 1982, Jesih 1999, Stergar 1979).

Slovene candidates are still most likely to succeed in municipal elections and elections to the Agricultural Chamber. In other, provincial and national elections, the electoral system makes it practically impossible for candidates of Slovene political parties to be elected. If Slovenes seek a place on the list of major parties, they are usually assigned a token, appointed position.

A fundamental cause of disagreements within the minority leadership during the last two decades of the twentieth century was whether minority members would form independent lists or participate on the lists of the major parties. Preoccupation with this issue sometimes overshadowed political initiatives to achieve minority rights.

Austrian minority protection laws do not provide for direct minority participation in decision-making. A most important body, the advisory council in the office of the Austrian chancellor, is only a consulting body. Electoral legislation in Austria does not allot

minorities seats in communal councils, the provincial assembly, or national parliament. Scholars claim that by constantly altering electoral legislation the Austrian state has further impeded the election of Slovene representatives. One such change of the electoral system in the Carinthian provincial assembly in 1979 prevented the possible success of a Slovene party, the Carinthian United List (Marko 1995: 268).

This does not mean that individual members of the Slovene national minority have not participated in politics equally with other Austrian citizens within the democratic institutions of the Republic of Austria. It is difficult to prove to what extent their participation was limited due to their minority affiliation.

The Slovene national minority in Carinthia has been organized by the Catholic-oriented National Council of Carinthian Slovenes (NCCS) and the left-oriented Association of Slovene Organizations (ASO). The first incorporates a majority of the agrarian rural population and part of the Catholic intelligentsia, while the second incorporates a significant segment of left-oriented intellectuals. These organizations arose from the historic, international, and political conditions at the end of World War II. Their legal status within the formal institutions of the Austrian state is not precisely defined. Until today these two organizations have organized the political, economic, and cultural life of Carinthian Slovenes.

Despite ideological differences, both organizations soon realized the need to present common standpoints. This became evident when they issued a joint memorandum in 1955. Regardless of the fact that both of these minority organizations sought allies among majority political factions in Austria (the NCCS allied itself primarily with the Austrian Peoples' Party and partly with church structures, while the ASO looked to the Social Democratic Party of Austria and the Communist Party of Austria, and today also to the Green and Civil society movements) both successfully coordinated their political activities in relation to the Austrian State especially from the mid-1960s, when the NCCS formally normalized relations with Slovenia and Yugoslavia.

Although both organizations are recognized as representatives of Slovene minority interests, their status remains legally undefined. While article 7 of the Austrian State Treaty extends the right of the Slovene and Croatian minorities to their own organizations, the Law on Ethnic Groups of 7 July 1976 established an advisory council in the office of the Austrian chancellor as a body through which the Slovene national minority cooperates with political parties and state authorities (Klemenčič 2006: 97–98). Within the minority itself there were practically no serious discussions until the 1990s as to whether the

minorities' organizations or the advisory council is more representative. Aside from discussions among elites, no pressing need can be detected elsewhere within the minority for any change of this dual structure (Jesih, Wakounig, and Nećak Lük 2002).

Austrian politicians tried in vain to form para-Slovene organizations, the purpose of which was to lessen the legitimacy of both main organizations, the NCCS and the ASO, as well as to depreciate their importance by diverting political participation to an alternative, joint organization. The unproductive struggle between the minority organizations for political supremacy since the beginning in the 1990s has in fact benefited anti-Slovene forces. Meanwhile, efforts to implement essential regulations protecting minority education, culture, and the Slovene language have remained largely unfulfilled and this failure only accelerates assimilation. It appears that the takeover of political power in Carinthia by Georg Haider's Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) in 1999 has hindered the two minority organizations in their quest for attaining rights protecting the minority. Minimal concessions by Austria to minority needs have been used to set one organization against the other. The main problem faced today by the Slovene organizations is the lack of human resources due to assimilation and emigration of members of the Slovene national minority.

Carinthian Slovenes doubtless consider themselves part of Austrian society; as Austrian citizens they express their loyalty to the country in diverse ways. However, they have difficulty finding effective forms of integration into the Austrian political system that would allow for the preservation of their ethnic subjectivity. The NCCS and ASO sought allies in political parties until 1976, when the three major political parties signed an agreement to deal with Slovene minority problems on a unified basis, leading both organizations to adopt a distinctively negative attitude towards all political parties. This deepened the ambivalent political participation of members of the Slovene minority where they have to decide between their ethnic affiliation on the one hand and participation in major political parties on the other.

Even though the majority of NCCS members are simultaneously members of various political parties, it still ardently encourages independent political participation and activity within a Slovene political party. Recent developments suggest, however, a slight opening for closer cooperation with political parties. On the other hand, the ASO now advocates a policy of integration into established Austrian political parties (Zveza slovenskih organizacij na Koroškem 1998). One

could say that at least on paper it is quite successful. This is attested by the election of Ana Blatnik, vice-president of ASO, to the Austrian State Council. She also serves as a member of the Parliamentary Assembly of The Council of Europe.

The establishment of the Green movement at the beginning of the 1980s triggered shifts in the attitude of Austrian political parties towards minorities. The Greens have supported all the demands of the Slovene and Croatian minorities. Cooperation of the Slovene party with the Greens brought Karel Smolle into the national parliament.

A minority faction within Austria's Social-Democratic Party has become a serious political force during the recent years. Nevertheless, party members recruited from the minority have failed to prevent the party's pursuit of a minorities policy with the other major parties. The active support of this policy by the Austrian Freedom Party, along with the acquiescence of the other major parties, suggests that the nationalistic orientation of the Freedom Party represents only the tip of the iceberg. German nationalism still strongly influences policy toward the Slovene national minority (Zveza 1998). The preeminence of the minority issue in pre-election debates of Austrian political parties further confirms this situation. An anti-Slovene attitude linked to German nationalism motivates some voters in Carinthia. On the other hand, it is difficult to expect the minority as a whole or in large part to affiliate with one political party exclusively; when, however, such a linkage occurs, it will sooner or later cause internal conflicts within Slovene Carinthian the political party.

Ethnic pluralism in politics is therefore unsuitable both from the viewpoint of majority political parties and from the viewpoint of proponents of one, minority political party. Carinthian Slovenes will not give up on political representation through elected bodies at state and federal levels on the basis of ethnicity. It is also probable that the majority parties will not object to a provisional solution, which will not attract a substantial number of minority members. The political environment therefore provides possibilities for the Slovene minority and its political participation.

The Republic of Austria pays no regard, within the democratic institutions of the political system, to the political differences among members of the Slovene national minority. The latter are thus forced at all levels of political participation to decide between minority, state, and ideological options. This holds true for all forms of political participation. Such structural constraints on political participation could be classified as a special aspect of discrimination, as well as a method, which could contribute to the process of assimilation of Slovenes in

Carinthia. However, recent developments indicate dissolution of this duality in the organizational structures of the minority.

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