

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES, SLOVENE NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND THE FOUNDATION OF THE SLOVENE STATE

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The Slovenes formed both their country and their national identity under Austria-Hungary. Until the end of the nineteenth century, they perceived themselves mainly as residents of historical provinces whose formation can be traced back to the Middle Ages (i.e., as Carniolans, Styrians, Carinthians, or Istrians), and at the supranational level as loyal subjects of the Habsburg Monarchy. The national program created in 1848 did not extend beyond demands for Slovene autonomy and the use of their own language.

Some Slovene intellectuals were convinced that Slovenes should follow the Germans because they were a higher and better developed nation. This attitude was called *nemškutarstvo*, indicating a preference for the German language and culture, and it was strongly rejected by both the Catholic and liberal political orientations. The uncompromising defense of the national position also had an influence on internal politics. The Slovene political mentality that developed at the end of the nineteenth century grew from the idea that opponents must either be totally subjugated or be classified among national enemies. This remained a basic characteristic in all three political camps (Catholic, liberal, and socialist/communist) throughout the twentieth century. One exception was the period when independence was attained during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

As far as parliamentarianism is concerned, only the “fragmentary” development of particular periods from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards can be discussed. Slovenia’s national parliament (in the modern sense, with universal voting and a multiparty system) has been in operation uninterruptedly for only eighteen years. The majority of this period was also a time (probably unique in Slovene history) of “absolute” independence, because earlier Slovene legislative bodies had only local significance or were subordinate to other bodies, as is now again the case with European Union membership.¹

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, the idea of “trialism” prevailed (according to which Austro-Hungary was to be divided into German, Hungarian, and South Slav parts, the last to include the Slovenes, Serbs, and Croats in the monarchy). With the disintegration of

¹ For more on this subject, see Repe (2000: 27–28).

Austria-Hungary and inclusion into the newly established Yugoslav state, the Slovenes faced the dilemma of whether to preserve their national identity or instead become a part of the new “Yugoslav” nation. Another turnabout was that the Austrians (or Germans) were now a minority, and the Slovenes had assumed the role of the majority (Dolenc 2004, Ferenc and Repe 2004).

The Slovenes did preserve their language and cultural autonomy, and their Austrian (or Habsburg) identity was replaced with a Yugoslav identity (Čepič et al. 2005). Under communist Yugoslavia, the status of the Slovenes actually improved: they were granted the constitutional right to self-determination, including the right to secession. However, hardly any thought was given to the latter until the mid-1980s, when Yugoslavia was shaken by a huge economic crisis and the centuries-old fear of the Germans and Italians had gradually faded.

Alongside appreciating their national identity, Slovenes today still maintain strong regional identities. That of Prekmurje is believed to be the most distinctive, partially because the people of this region were secluded in the Hungarian part of the monarchy for centuries. In contrast, supranational European identity is still weak and in a formative stage.

Although accepted by most historians, the development described above often conflicts with national myths and ideological-political interpretations. One such myth originates from the belief that the Slovenes were the original settlers of the area they now inhabit, as a homogeneous nation, and that the Slovene language and literacy stem from that period. Among the diverse popular theories of the origin of the Slovenes (Etruscan, Illyrian, Venetic, etc.), the “Venetic theory” has attracted the most attention. Another myth concerns the continuous identity of the Slovenes from the sixth century onwards, the lost state of Carantania, and the eternal longing for it. Part of this search for links can be observed in symbols; for example, the suggestion that Slovenia’s coat of arms incorporate the Carantanian panther— according to Joško Šavli, the very symbol of every Slovene (Šavli 1993; see also other articles by the same author). The central theme of this story is that the Slavs (in the mythic variation, the Slovenes themselves) inhabited their present territory as Avar subjects towards the end of the sixth century, and then managed to establish their own state, to be later enslaved by the Germans. They remained under German domination until World War I (and Carinthia, the “cradle of the Slovenhood,” remains so forever).

Such mythology seems typical of all central European (as well as other) nations, which are believed to have had a kind of state (later lost) in the early Middle Ages—even though nationality played no role during those times (see also Vodopivec 2006: 53). In reality, observes Peter Štih, people’s identities were different in those times. People living north of the

Karawanken Mountains perceived themselves as Carantanians, and were also addressed as such by their Bavarian and Langobard neighbors, whereas those living to the south of the mountains were called Carnolians. They were both of Slavic origin, yet by no means Slovenes (Štih 2006: 32–33). Štih further claims that the Carantanians were first made into Slovenes only at the time of Linhart (the term *Slovenes* was first mentioned in Trubar's Catechism of 1550, and the term *Slovenia* even later, in an 1844 poem by Jovan Vesel Koseski); to speak about Slovenes in the early Middle Ages is nothing less than nationalizing history in retrospect; it is the creation of an imaginary picture of national history before it even started. As outlined at the beginning, regional identity prevailed among the Slovenes until the end of the nineteenth century. It is nonetheless a fact that the Carantanians can be seen as ancestors of the Slovenes, although not the only ones.

A particularly strong myth is related to the powerful feudal family of the Counts of Celje. Centuries later, the three stars from their coat of arms is found in the coat of arms of the Republic of Slovenia; even earlier, these stars were a part of the “composite” coat of arms of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.² The Counts of Celje are believed to have been of Slovene origin, and the principality of Celje to have been a Slovene medieval state. According to the nineteenth-century author Janez Trdina, Herman of Celje—who also governed Bosnia and Slavonia—actually founded the grand Yugoslav (medieval) state. According to some other authors, only South Slavs would have lived under their leadership in the southern parts of their territories, had the Counts of Celje not become extinct. Vlado Habjan believed that their extinction represented the loss of a family that could have acted as a cohesive social force and the potential founder of a (Slovene) state (Habjan 1995; see also other articles by the same author).

The strongest myth that contradicts the historical fact of Slovenes as people with a regional identity, and strives to establish them as a nation in retrospect, persisted well into the twentieth century. This is the myth about the Slovenes' continuing “national rise” (Prunk 1992). It was nourished by the belief that the Slovenes had been longing for their own state since time immemorial, and declared it for the first time in the *Zedinjena Slovenija* (United Slovenia) program in 1848. In the years to follow they strove to realize this goal within various historical circumstances, and finally succeeded in 1991. In fact, only a small number of intellectuals stood behind the program, whose objective was not the founding of a separate state, but a union of Slovenes within a self-governed unit with its own national assembly. Nor did the trialist program from the beginning of the twentieth century strive for an independent Slovene state

² Vlado Habjan, Tri zlate zvezde ne modrem ščitu simbolično kažejo našo trojno usodo: predlog k izbiranju grba Republike Slovenije, *Delo* 20 November 1990, 11

(which, for example, the Czechs demanded for themselves), but for internal division of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy into three parts.

The one-month existence of the transitional State of the Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs in 1918, with its seat in Zagreb, was claimed to demonstrate the existence of Slovene aspirations for statehood (even including elements of international recognition). Although the Slovenes had their own government within it, they failed to establish their own parliament. The State of the Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs (or SHS) first began to be mentioned as an expression of Slovene aspirations for statehood in the 1970s, and achieved its peak after independence with the thesis on “the Slovene attainment of independence in 1918” (Perovšek 1998). Between the two world wars, political programs did not extend beyond a demand for autonomy; during World War II as well, the objectives of both the partisan and the anti-partisan side was a united Slovenia within a federal Yugoslavia. However, only the partisan side actively fought to achieve this aim and consequently managed to bring about a shift of the Slovene border towards the west. It is true, however, that there were some diplomatic attempts in this direction among emigrant politicians as well. Depending on numerous factors, the issue of the borders of a united Slovenia remained open; to a great extent, it was a subject of international decisions—for example, the decision by the allies to restore Austria within its borders before its annexation by Nazi Germany, as well as their benevolence towards Italy, and, according to some historians, also the communist orientation of the national liberation movement. In spite of those facts, idealized programs according to which the borders of Slovenia were to be extended to as far as the Hohe Tauern range and the Tagliamento River emerged even during the war. The demand was to preserve the historical borders of Slovene settlements as they were at the beginning of the twentieth century, before the assimilation of Slovenes within Austria and Italy. The national liberation movement sought to reform Slovenes’ national character, and change the “nation of servants” (the image of the Slovenes from major literary works of the time, from Prešeren to Cankar) into a “nation of heroes,” which was even a point in the program of the Liberation Front.

In addition, Slovene political programs within communist Yugoslavia did not extend beyond federative and confederative status. Yugoslavia seemed to be a safe refuge from the worst national enemies: the Germans and the Italians.

Within professional circles, the discussion of this “national rise” peaked shortly after independence in 1992. After the 2004 election win by Slovenia’s center-right coalition, these discussions were revived. A distinctive political connotation could be observed, according to which the “peak” of the national rise and Slovene history in general was the

attainment of independence. This still appears to yield political advantage and seems to be a kind of ethical-political criterion for top political functions (Repe 2001: 11). However, few of today's political parties and politicians can be linked to Slovenia's attainment of independence. With its thesis about the "spring" parties (those believed to have favored Slovenia's independence and democratization in the late 1980s and early 1990s), the current ruling political block strives to obtain some sort of political capital from such undefined "mythization" of its (alleged) role.

The Slovenes established a different attitude towards each state formation they became part of. In the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the formerly glorified Catholic Austria with its beloved Emperor Franz Joseph was referred to as a "prison of nations," although Austria enabled the Slovenes' continued existence and preservation of their national identity; it facilitated their (albeit slow) economic development and taught them modern political manners, including parliamentarianism. After its downfall, a similar negative characterization was applied to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, following the collapse of the idealized image of the "three tribes of the same nation." Although the Slovenes had received a university, prospects for economic development, and informal cultural autonomy, they did not have political autonomy. If not a myth, it is at least a stereotype that (according to Anton Korošec) "the Serbs govern, the Croats discuss, and the Slovenes pay" (Perovšek 2004, 427). In a slightly different form, this reappeared in the communist Yugoslavia that the Slovenes left because it had become an obstacle to their development, after the fear of the centuries-old German and Italian enemies gradually faded after the 1970s. Self-managed socialism—"the best system in the world"—became totalitarianism, formerly beloved Comrade Tito became a dictator, and the myth of brotherhood, unity, and socialist patriotism turned to dust.

A new myth emerged in its place: this time the uncritically idealized goal was the notion of "Europe."³ It presented Europe as internally undifferentiated, able to generally adapt to particular political interests. By following self-serving principles, for example, educational systems corresponding to particular lines of argumentation could be held up as examples, and likewise for church-state relations: adherents of religion in schools can cite Austria or Italy as a European example to be followed, whereas their opponents cite France, and so on. In their "rush towards Europe" Slovene politicians were, as always throughout history, overly compliant, even servile, and prepared to make smaller or larger concessions as a sign of "goodwill"—closing duty-free shops, introducing visas for Balkan states, recognizing an "Old Austrian" minority, and so on.

³ Božo Repe, *Gospodarji dveh tretjin Evrope: slovenski miti*, *Delo* 30 October 2003.

Over time, a number of personalities, especially writers, who actually created the Slovene national community, experienced a similar transformation of their image. Now the “new era” personalities are attempting to correct this complex.

Especially within history as taught in schools, there has been a tendency to “nationally adopt” various personalities that were not of Slovene origin, but were born or lived within Slovene territory (e.g., the musician and composer Jakob Gallus or the chemist Fritz Pregl), or those that were Slovenes by birth, but had no affinity to their nationality (e.g., the inventor and mechanic that was christened Johannes Puch, but has been transformed into Janez Puh).

With the formation of an independent state, the dilemmas addressed above were not solved. Namely, the independent Slovene state was a result of political and social changes in the 1980s. These took place in the context of the global crisis of communism, disintegration of the bipolar division of the world, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, as well as a deep political and economic crisis in Yugoslavia accompanied by a crisis in relationships among the various nations within the state. Independence would not have been possible without these external changes. The relatively fast progress of events took its course in many fields, including the question of identity. It was easy to abandon the Yugoslav identity, to develop a negative thought pattern concerning the former state—which after the collapse became synonymous with Balkanism, Byzantinism, and so on. Yugoslavia became a state that had economically and politically limited the Slovenes, prevented them from attaining independence, and kept them at a lower cultural level—that is, within a different cultural circle than the one to which the Slovenes were supposed to belong. This was all the easier because Yugoslavia was a communist (or rather, in Marxist terms, socialist) state and thereby an excellent target for a double criticism: national as well as ideological. From this experience in the 1990s originated the fear and opposition against establishing any institutional ties with the Balkan states. It was the general opinion that such a process might cause the country to slip from its status as a state “bordering on” a conflict area into the group of countries constituting that conflict area. In any proposition (e.g., stability pacts), politicians saw an aim to “push” Slovenia back into the Balkans to help stabilize and democratize the region. It was quite a shock at the beginning of 1994 when President Clinton’s special envoy Madeleine Albright, who came to Europe to explain the initiative for a Partnership for Peace, classified Slovenia as a “Balkan democracy” together with Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania.⁴

⁴ Clintonova odposlanica Albrightova v Sloveniji, *Delo* 15 January 1994.

After joining the European Union and reestablishing political, economic, and cultural ties with the other former Yugoslav republics, fear disappeared (but not prejudices and a feeling of political and cultural superiority). On the other side, squeezed between the Germanic and Romance world, the Slovenes seem to be reviving national dilemmas from the end of the nineteenth century. The first negative signs from the past already appeared while negotiating for European Union membership, which ended with Slovenia signing the “Spanish compromise.”⁵

Doubtless, Slovene statehood was a tremendous and necessary historical achievement, especially viewed from the circumstances in Yugoslavia during the 1980s. Nevertheless, independence was achieved at a time when the classic nation state, based on nineteenth-century patterns of the national economy, defense system, foreign policy, currency, and other attributes (ranging as far as a national airline) is in decline in Europe. This is also at a time when the (nation) state, at least in the west, no longer represents the determining factor in protecting democratic rights because these are becoming universal.

At the same time, the question arises whether a state that views culture as the foundation of national identity (the concept “Slovene economy” long ago ceased to exist) and takes corresponding measures really supports (or is hindered by) Slovene backwardness. The sociologist Grega Tomc believes that we are facing the “Dežman case” once again.⁶ According to Tomc, in two generations’ time there will be young people that ask themselves:

... why should I drag up that “Slovenhood” if it is lagging behind so much and nothing interesting seems to be going on? Of course this will not be a conscious decision. There will simply be a growing number of Slovenes that will not support Slovene culture in their homes; a kind of silent assimilation will take hold. Nothing radical will happen at all; we will just

⁵ In 1993, Italy demanded various concessions from Slovenia as a condition for not opposing the signing of the association agreement between Slovenia and the European Union. The key demand concerned the property of post–World War II Italian refugees from Istria and the Slovene Littoral, despite the fact that this issue had already been resolved with Yugoslavia. In a milder and more general form drafted after Spanish intervention, Slovenia’s parliament accepted the Italian demands in April 1996. Slovenia changed its constitution and obligated itself to open its real-estate market after ratification of the association agreement to EU citizens that had lived in Slovenia for at least three years.

⁶ The politician Karel Dežman (1821–89) believed the Slovenes should accept the stronger and better developed German identity because they themselves were too weak to be able to follow such progress.

not be creative enough in comparison with the foreign environments. (Tomc 2007: 42)

The uncritically self-satisfied Slovene politicians believe that the Slovenes reached the peak of their history by attaining independence and forming a state, and that growth in gross national income (which, by the way, is less a result of innovativeness than of service and similar activities) indicates that Slovenes are on an upward path. However, critical intellectuals caution that the way backwards, from citizen of an independent state to a mere provincial man, is an equally realistic option if Slovenes continue to persist in today's prevailing traditionalism, seclusion, and prejudices and do not manage to activate sufficient intellectual power (cultural, educational, and scholarly) to carry out the modernization processes that they have been unable to catch up with for over one hundred years.

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