

Slovenia: from Communism toward Democracy (1980-2000)¹

Slovenes are faced with two basic problems in modern history: the issue of democracy and the national issue (which political elites usually place in the foreground). The development of democracy was only partially determined by our own selves, in so far as its primary characteristic was the induction of mutual intolerance and the exclusion of those with different opinions.² The position of the Slovene nation during the individual state formations was usually evaluated "in retrospect" from the standpoint of current political needs, while the newly formed situation was at the same time euphorically praised. This is how after World War I, Austria suddenly became "the jail of nations" even in the eyes of those Slovene politicians and intellectuals who, only a few years prior, claimed to be loyal to it. After World War II, a similar fate befell the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Naturally, a negative thought pattern developed concerning the former state; even after the collapse of socialist Yugoslavia, which became synonymous with 'Balkanism', 'Byzantinism', etc. It was a state, which during the time of its existence, economically and politically limited the Slovenes and prevented their attaining independence, and in a cultural sense kept them on a lower cultural level, i.e. in a different cultural circle, one to which the Slovenes were not supposed to belong. This was all the easier since Yugoslavia was a communist, or rather a socialist state and thereby an excellent target for a double criticism: national as well as ideological. A selection of politicians and intellectuals today is especially concerned by the American way of understanding the position and role of Slovenia in the region; they see us as being "pushed" back to the Balkans. It was quite a shock when in the beginning of 1994, the special envoy of the American President Bill Clinton, Madeleine Albright, who came to Europe to explain the initiative for a Partnership for Peace and classified Slovenia as a "Balkan democracy" together with Romania, Bulgaria and even Albania³. Since then, Ms Albright is more careful in her statements, which does not however, essentially change the global American view.

The development of democracy does not always correspond with the current position of the Slovene nation; it often even stands in opposition to progress in resolving the national issue.

Critical assessment of the two problems is slow in forming, and it is even slower in becoming a part of the historical consciousness. Here I am referring to the acknowledgement that Slovenes did not only suffer the negative sides, but were also faced with a positive experience. For example, in the multinational milieu of the Danubian monarchy they were able to form, besides the regional, also a national consciousness; Slovenes acquired political culture and, at least in limited form, became accustomed to parliamentarism; they achieved a sort of informal cultural autonomy in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, despite it being centralistic and non-democratic; communist Yugoslavia

¹ Repe, Božo. Slovenia: from Communism toward Democracy (1980-2000): [predavanje]. Denver, 2000.

² The Slovene political mentality developed in its basic elements at the end of the 19th century and grew from the fact that opponents have to be either totally subjugated or forced to be part of the national enemies' camp. This remains a basic characteristic in all three political camps (catholic, liberal and socialist or communist) throughout the political history of the 20th century. The exception is the period of attaining independence during the second half of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s. As far as parliamentarism is concerned, only the "fragmentary" development of particular periods from the second half of the 19th century onwards can be discussed. The Slovene parliament, in the modern sense of the word (with a universal franchise and multi-party system), is in operation without intermission for only 10 years as of yet; this is also a time - probably the only one in Slovene history - of "absolute" independence, as before, it had only local significance or it was subordinate to bodies above the national level, as will also be repeated once incorporated in the European Union (more on the subject: Božo Repe: Pravne, politične podlage, okoliščine in pomen prvih demokratičnih volitev, Kolokvij Državnega zbora Republike Slovenije "Razvoj slovenskega parlamentarizma", Ljubljana, May 9th, 2000 (the compilation is currently in print).

³ Clintonova odposlanka Albrightova v Sloveniji, Delo, January 15th, 1984

rendered it possible for the Primorska (coastal) region (i.e. one third of the Slovene population and more than a quarter of the territory) to be joined with Slovenia; and last but not least, Slovenes were given federal status, a constitution, their own national assembly and other state agencies, and under the specific circumstances of the Communist Party state, implemented the delayed processes of modernization that former elites either could not or wanted not to bring to effect, for example, the agrarian reform, industrialization, separation of Church from State, women's emancipation, a more balanced social structure.⁴

What differentiates the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s from the previous periods is the simultaneousness of the two processes, i.e. the gradual democratization (which ended in the installment of a multi-party system) and the fight for national emancipation (which ended with the formation of the Slovene state).⁵ Among the political elites and factors of development in the 80s there were, in fact, differences concerning priorities. The League of Communists, for example, was quick to find common ground with the opposition as regards Yugoslavia, but much slower as to the issue of democratization. The majority of alternative movements, in part also the League of Socialist Youths, placed democratic civil rights before the national issue. The Slovene Democratic Alliance and some other parties conceded the same importance to both issues.⁶

Differences were existent even after Demos (Democratic opposition) came to power in the spring of 1990, since it was evident that a part of the political forces primarily wished to consolidate their position in power, take control over the social capital, while independence would follow later. Nonetheless, it can be assessed that the political gravitation in Slovenia at the time leaned towards the simultaneousness of both processes. In Yugoslavia, generally speaking, a strong opposition to both processes is discernible; and as regards international circumstances, the western forces, especially the USA, supported democratization but were against secession⁷.

The independent Slovene state was a result of political and social changes in the 1980s. These took place in the context of a global crisis of communism, disintegration of the bipolar division of the world, disintegration of the Soviet Union and a deep political and economic crisis in Yugoslavia, as well as a crisis in the relationships among the different nations within the state. Independence would not have been possible without these external changes and likewise, the internal process of democratization would also have been very different. Incorporated among the basic internal characteristics, upon which Slovenes themselves could influence, was a relatively open political scene which enabled a circulation of ideas and meetings between those in power and those in opposition, a strong civil society, supremacy of a reformist movement within the Communist Party and a high level of consent concerning basic national issues. The processes of social democratization and of national emancipation were tightly intertwined. This situation

⁴ More on the subject in abridged form: Božo Repe: *Slovenci v XX.stoletju*, Katalog stalne razstave Muzeja novejše zgodovine v Ljubljani, Ljubljana, 1999, pp.19-36.

⁵ Leopoldina Plut-Pregelj, Aleš Gabrič, Božo Repe: *The Repluratement of Slovenia in the 1980s* (with an Introduction by Dennison Rusinow), The Donald W. Treadgold Papers No.24, The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, February 2000.

⁶ *Koga voliti? Programi političnih strank in list na pomladnih volitvah v Sloveniji*, Ljubljana, March 1990, Jugoslovanski center za teorijo in prakso samoupravljanja Edvard Kardelj, Ljubljana, 1990. See also: *Nastajanje slovenske državnosti*, Slovensko politološko društvo, Ljubljana 1992.

⁷ The USA held this position until the final collapse of Yugoslavia, most decisively in the spring of 1991. American Secretary of State James Baker had, only a few days before the proclamation of Slovene independence in Belgrade on June 21, 1991, told Slovene representatives that the USA wishes to retain the unity of Yugoslavia and that they will not recognize the independence of Slovenia, nor would any other country do differently, but that they wish to help with the democratization of Yugoslavia (Note of the discussion between the President of the Presidency of the Republic of Slovenia Milan Kučan and James Baker III, Secretary of State of the USA, Belgrade, June 21st, 1991, Arhiv Predsedstva Republike Slovenije, see also Warren Zimmermann: *Origins of a Catastrophe*, Random House, New York 1996, p.71).

enabled a smooth transition from the one-party to a multi-party system and successful preparations for attaining independence. Consensus between the socialist government and the opposition was settled upon through a confederation status, a fact that is nowadays all too often forgotten. Even when Demos came to power the evaluation of a confederation as the maximum achievement possible under such circumstances did not alter. It was only after the Yugoslav National Army attacked Slovenia that the standpoint and situation shifted.

The new political ideology, which developed following the proclamation of independence and is shared by the majority of the political parties, could be labeled as a "rush towards Europe". The course proceeds in accordance with the Latin proverb "more haste, less speed". Characteristically, it presents the so-called Europe as an internally non-differential notion, which can generally adapt to particular political interests (following a self-serving principle, for example, educational systems that correspond to a particular line of argumentation would be used, and the same holds true for the relationship between Church and State, etc.). In this "rush towards Europe" Slovene politicians are, as always throughout history, overly compliant, even servile, and agreeing to - albeit questionable - smaller (closing duty-free shops, instating visas for Balkan states) or larger concessions (the so-called Spanish compromise⁸) as a sign of "good will". Following the proclamation of independence, there was a continuance of shifts in the Slovene political sphere, polarization was re-established and parties continued to fall apart and merge. This process is ongoing already more than a decade. The 10-year economic balance demonstrates that, on the whole, Slovenia underwent a successful transition and it continues to make progress; although, at the price of high social differences and unemployment, which is turning increasing numbers of young people, educated people, into second-rate citizens, as well as many other side effects, all influencing the augmenting unbalanced social structure. One of the basic characteristics of Slovene society is its tendency towards 'particracy', a growing ideological intolerance, and due to the small size of the country, the formation of clientages and clans. The once powerful civil movements have been sucked into the various parties and no longer play an important role. In psychological terms, self-assertion should be added, a belief in self-sufficiency and prejudices towards anything different, all of which only strengthened after attaining independence (it is easy to substantiate through historiography, how difficult it was for "the Carniolan mind" to get used to the "different" character of those people from the Prekmurje and Primorska regions, integrated into Yugoslavia after World War I and II; prejudices and stereotypes about regional affiliations proved to be one of the most persistent elements of the psychosocial make-up of Slovenes). Another discernible syndrome conditioned by history and arising from the lack of state tradition is "snitching" on the opposing political option abroad and the search for an external arbiter for internal conflicts. Where Slovene politicians previously turned to Vienna and Belgrade, they now turn to Brussels⁹

⁸ In 1993, Italy, as a condition for not impeding the signing of the Association Agreement between Slovenia and the European Union, demanded different concessions of Slovenia. The key one concerned the property issue of Italian refugees - after World War II - from Istria and the Slovene Primorska (coastal) region (this issue being already resolved with Yugoslavia). The direct Italian demands were initially comprised in the so-called Aquileia Agreement, signed by Secretary of State Lojze Peterle, but refused by the Slovene parliament. In a milder and more general version (the so-called Spanish Compromise, made after the Spanish Intervention), parliament passed the Italian demands in April 1996. Slovenia obligated itself to open the real-estate market after the ratification of the Association Agreement for all those citizens of the EU, who lived in the territory of Slovenia for at least three years (at any time in the past). Even though Prime Minister Janez Drnovšek, as well as President Milan Kučan, interceded on behalf of the Spanish Compromise, they later labeled it as an example of conditioning and extortion (Kučan even did so in his speech before the European Parliament).

⁹ The most recent instance, but not the only one, was the pursuit for arbitration with the so-called Venice Commission - the "Democracy through Law" commission of the European Council - concerning the election system just before the elections in October 2000. The conflict was instigated by the Prime Minister at the time, who did not agree with - an otherwise perfectly legal - decision of the Parliament.

One of the consequences of the newly formed situation within the state was that Slovenes were again faced with dilemmas and situations from the turn of the century or even earlier; this is when they were marginalized, during either the Yugoslav or communist periods, and for which it had appeared that they would never need dealing with again. Incorporated among these is the extraordinary persistence of regional identities, which in many ways prevents the development of a nation; at the same time there is a revival of former regional centers beyond the present Republic of Slovenia (Graz, Klagenfurt, Trieste), which became gravitational points for a large part of the working force from bordering regions, having also a growing importance in education. Relations between the larger neighboring nations (Germans and Austrians, Italians, Hungarians) and Slovenes, which could be characterized as having been traumatic for the past centuries, are being established anew (or old models in new disguise). The transitional character of the country, its economic periphery, the influence of different cultures and a linguistic endangerment seem permanent features in the historical development.¹⁰ This demonstrates that the processes experienced in this state during the last decades are superficial and that the permanent features did not change in their essence after attaining independence.

An evaluation of the formation and the 10-year existence of the Slovene state, as well as the democratic processes within, are for the moment only transitional, as were the estimates of past situations. A more objective evaluation can be established once Slovene society is integrated in the European Union; what the integration process contributed and how Slovenia will be able to handle the loss of a national state, while it is actually still enduring its puberty, shall only then be clarified. Doubtless, the Slovene State was a tremendous and necessary historical achievement, especially as regarded from the circumstances in Yugoslavia during the 1980s. Nevertheless, the fact remains that independence was achieved at a time when the classic national state, based on 19th century patterns of the national economy, defense system, foreign policy, proper currency and other attributes ranging to a legitimate aviation company, is in decline in Europe. This is also at a time when the (national) state, at least in the west, no longer represents the determining factor in protecting democratic rights, since these are of course becoming universal (correspondingly, the criteria of "non-interference in internal affairs" of a particular country is being abandoned). New solutions are needed for these new challenges, although it seems that this type of realization hardly affected Slovene social sciences. History is still in great measure evaluated from the viewpoint of a national state, arising from the belief that the Slovene state should be the ultimate goal of successive Slovene generations, even though historiography does not offer empirical proofs for such claims. Historians critical of this sort of approach are labeled as "a-national".¹¹ This sort of claim is of course logical in a political sense, since it offers the possibility of appropriating the so-called "independence capital", be that in an historical sense (demonstrating the "far-sightedness" of particular political forces or individuals in various historical periods) or in view of the current political situation. Scientifically speaking it is also very convenient as it limits research to finding the earliest possible "proofs" justifying a Slovene state-forming mentality. There is no need to take much interest in the broader historical context, various sources can be interpreted "in retrospect", there is no need for comparisons with other and similar nations, and it is possible to avoid confrontation with the determinations of researchers concerned with the social sciences of other nations. However, this of course only occasions putting off a problem that will have to be faced sooner or later anyway.

¹⁰ Peter Vodopivec: Glavne poteze in stalnice v slovenskem zgodovinskem razvoju in poskus zgodovinarjevega pogleda v prihodnost, Slovenija po letu 1995, razmišljanja o prihodnosti, Fakulteta za družbene vede, Ljubljana, 1995, pp. 30-37

¹¹ The evaluation that there is "an extremely loud and influential a-national movement" present in Slovene science, was noted by Dr. Stane Granda, Zgodovinski časopis, 1999, volume 53, No.4, pg.612).