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NOVEMBER 13, 2017

Everything Goes Together in the Same Wrong Direction: Interviews with Slovenians Not Named Melania Trump or Slavoj Zizek

by JOHN SUMMERS

(1) Ali Žerđin, 52, is one of Slovenia's best known and well-traveled journalists. He edits *Sobotna priloga*, the Saturday supplement of the major daily newspaper *Delo*.

John Summers: The signature of political economy in Slovenia has changed: self-management is gone; success and failure are now matters for individuals to bear; ownership of business enterprise is more concentrated; unemployment fluctuates between seven and nine percent; few native Slovenian companies remain, the major exception being KRKA pharmaceuticals; and a structural problem in housing looms. Slovenians live in homes they own (thanks to privatization) but there are not enough private savings accounts or high incomes to enable the next generation to purchase their own residences. Even if all this is true, privatization seems to have prevailed. A post-socialist republic was born in 1992 and carries on. Are Slovenians happier now, more creative, freer? Has post-socialist society been a

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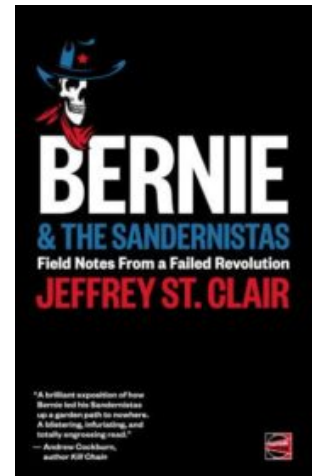
success?

Ali Žerdin: In 1992, the privatization concept was adopted (but key privatization processes did not start until 1995). The privatization law, as adopted in 1992, was a compromise between two models. The first model, proposed by deputy prime minister Jože Mencinger, would assure the conversion of the political capital of the technocratic part of nomenklatura into economic capital. The second model, proposed by Jeffrey Sachs, gave much more power to the political class. Former socially owned companies were to become state owned, and a special “development fund” was to be responsible for corporate governance. Shares of this fund were to be delivered among all citizens, but the government would—in the name of all owners – appoint the board of directors of the development fund.

A compromise made possible that directors and workers became owners of smaller portion of shares of specific companies. The state took another 20 per cent of shares through two government-controlled funds (pension fund and compensation fund). A special private investment fund was the third element of new ownership structure.

As a result, in 1998, nearly 1.5 million people in Slovenia were owners of at least one stock. After 2000, a process of concentration started, and today less than 250.000 people are owners of shares or other financial assets.

The key point of privatization was dispersion and gradualism. So, Slovenia avoided shock therapies that were typical for other ex-communist states. The key problem of privatization was lack of knowledge of abuse of the securities market, regulation of competition, etc. Some institutions



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responsible for the securities market and the protection of competition existed, but they were not strong enough.

In terms of the new economic elite, around 2000 power was divided among “old boys” (the technocratic fraction of nomenklatura), the new financial elite (special investment funds), the managers appointed by the government (directors of pension and compensation fund, directors of two state-owned banks and insurance company, directors of railways, telecom, electricity companies, infrastructure companies, highway company...). However, a significant portion of shares was owned by workers, ordinary people.

I would say that privatization was well regulated. But the process of concentration of shares was much less regulated, and it was much less fair. Key irregularities occurred between 2000 and 2008 when so-called tycoons started to concentrate shares of companies. They went to the bank, they abused their good (political?) contacts with management of banks, they received unsecured loans. And after 2008, they were insolvent. The national economy collapsed after 2008.

So – in the second half of the nineties we were talking about success story. But second circle of transformation was much more traumatic. Due to the fact that a significant part of the national economy was (and still is) controlled by the government (infrastructure, biggest bank, biggest insurance company, telecom ...) the shift of political power in 2004 represented an enormous shock for business. Namely, a leftist liberal-democratic coalition was replaced by a right-wing coalition. In the network of interlocked directors, nearly all central directors were replaced by newcomers. The majority of newcomers were politically loyal to new ruling coalition. Some of “old” directors decided for very risky

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management buy-outs (MBO) to avoid attack of right-wing ruling coalition. Consequences of some of the MBO attempts were catastrophic.

In 2008, after the next shift of political power, a left-wing ruling coalition took power. It was led by social democrats (some of them were members of the reformist wing of the Communist Party). After 2008, it became obvious that some very powerful cores existed inside of the state-owned economy, in particular an energy companies' network with an ambition to build new coal-fired power plant became very active and harmful. These powerful cores were not controlled by the government. Substantial parts of government were controlled by (state owned!) energy companies.

Are we happier? Before the referendum on independence, one of our politicians said that life would be harder after independence but that we will feel much better. Basically, that was true. We live much better today—but there exists deep discontent, due to lack of fair play, lack of rule of law, and much bigger social differences.

JS: What have been the distinctive cultural forms to emerge in the last 25 years? I understand that Slovenia is not large enough to give birth to a full-scale culture industry. But has literature, painting, or art changed, in substance or style, coincident with privatization? During my interviews here, I have been unable to discern whether there is now an independent intelligentsia, structurally autonomous from the state and the universities, surviving by virtue of being supported by their audiences. As I understand, the government subsidizes literature, and, more and more, the young are going into the universities rather than the

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JESSICAH PIERRE

unemployment department. Where is the cultural nerve center of Slovenia?

AZ: Very vibrant cultural forms first appeared at the end of seventies and at the beginning of the eighties. I'm talking about punk movement and all cultural innovations directly or indirectly associated with punk (Laibach, Neue Slowenische Kunst, Irwin). Changes in art forms announced changes in social structure. Probably my observation is biased because I was part of this story. I started to work as journalist at Student Radio, punk'n'roll, jazz, and world-music radio. After 1990, I have not seen any substantial cultural innovation. I expected that something interesting could happen in the autonomous cultural center Metelkova (former military barracks squatted in 1992 by young activists, artists), but it didn't happen.

The independent intelligentsia was much stronger and much more independent in the eighties. It was embedded into a progressive, civic society network. But Slavoj Žižek and his circle decided for an international career, and some intellectuals became part of new political elite. It's a paradox, but there did exist a strong infrastructure for independent intellectual activity 30 years ago in the weekly newsmagazine *Mladina* and some student newspapers and semi-scientific reviews (*Problemi*, *Nova revija*, *Revija 2000*, *Časopis za kritiko znanosti*.) The present infrastructure is much more fragile. The budget for science has been kidnapped by the national institutes in public and private universities. There is not much space for outsiders. There are no "enlightened capitalists" who would sponsor such intellectual production.

Academic intellectuals are occupied with bureaucratic collecting of points. My supplement is part of the problem. I

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do not have budget to pay for articles produced by independent intellectuals. So, the supplement is a forum of dialogue, but participation in this public debate is not paid. In the past, when circulations were much higher, payment was not a problem. Today, we are not able to assure the survival of independent intellectuals.

Yes, the government subsidizes literature. But there are only few authors able to survive only from fees for their novels. Some authors are also editors, some are also lecturers. Subsidies are low.

There are some young (less than 40) film directors, but I wouldn't say that they form a cultural nerve center. On one side, there exists pretty good cultural infrastructure – Cankar Cultural center in Ljubljana, Kino Šiška, an independent cultural center. The autonomous cultural center Metelkova is an alternative or underground cultural center. In the eighties, cultural production was flourishing despite a lack of venues, but new venues did not result in more vibrant culture. Somehow, the authoritarian regime had some positive impacts on creativity.

JS: Can you say more about your supplement?

AZ: Delo, my newspaper, was founded something like fifty years ago; it is considered a significant place for public debate. I have no idea what will happen in the future because we have a new owner who is completely without experience in publishing. He is a manufacturer of some very special parts for the car industry, and decided to buy a newspaper because of influence, not for profit. The chief editor is a PR officer.

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ANN GARRISON

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THOMAS KNAPP

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JILL RICHARDSON

JS: Working for whom?

AZ: He used to work for the owner. Now he works at the newspaper.

JS: When did this happen?

AZ: In January 2016. The results are devastating for the newspaper—not in my part, because I do not allow him to interfere in my job. But if we are speaking about the daily paper, then the results are devastating.

JS: Because the political line has shifted? Because there is now pressure to exclude certain stories? Because of a decline in quality?

AZ: First, it is a matter of professionalism. Second, we are without an editorial policy. There is an idea to protect the interests of the owner. But this idea was never elaborated; it was never said that we are here to protect the interests of the owner. But it is like that. Still, the lack of professionalism is the key problem.

JS: And it is manifested how?

AZ: It is manifested in a way that we do not know what is the key event of the day. In today's copy of the newspaper, we have some business man sitting, and around him is a picture of some other business people, without any substance. So page one is a disaster. Usually, we do not even have a good photo. Photographers are not told what to do. But this guy from public relations who became chief editor heard somewhere that photos are significant; so he decided them to make bigger.

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Ecology Over Economy

JS: In the U.S., we have examples of the same thing happening, the most egregious of which is in Las Vegas, where the newspaper (Las Vegas Review-Journal) was respected until it was bought by a casino magnate named Sheldon Adelson. He installed as his chief editor one of his many employees who know nothing about journalism; it has been devastating for newsroom morale.

AZ: Sometimes I get depressed. I decided to establish a museum of the press. Here are some examples of front pages. I am desperate, so I collect old newspapers.

(2) Aleksandra Kanjuo-Mrčela is Professor of Economic Sociology at the University of Ljubljana and the President of the Slovene Sociological Association.

Aleksandra Kanjuo-Mrčela: Many very stupid things are coming from America. And we are taking them!

JS: Like privatization.

AKM: I was really very naïve. We used to have self-management. We used to have not state ownership, but social ownership. People had autonomy in enterprises, meaning that real decision-making was made by managers in companies, and those managers were in a way patriarchs, responsible to the workers. We had something much closer to workers' ownership than any other form. And I thought we would use this opportunity to convert our factories, our businesses, into worker-owned businesses.

JS: Self-management operated at every level, including at a major pharmaceutical company like KRKC?

AKM: Yes, everywhere. The only thing workers could not do

was to sell the company. Of course, managers had much more power than ordinary workers, but we had a lot of forms of participatory decision-making—and we lost everything.

JS: What role did labor unions play in this system?

AKM: The trade unions were weak. Their logic was totally different.

JS: Because the unions represent only the workers, whereas the self-management councils represent the enterprise per se?

AKM: Yes. We had both, and several different kinds of systems of self-management. What we had was something in between trade unions and workers' ownership; workers were not able to sell the companies. But our system was much less centralized than any other country in the world. That was our potential, which gave me a naïve hope that during our transition we would convert something that was psychological ownership already into formal ownership rights.

JS: In the structure of the self-management system, how autonomous was finance? How much control did the collective have over the finances of their enterprise?

AKM: You must know that the managers were closely connected to the political leadership of the country.

JS: And to the banks.

AKM: Yes, of course. At the same time, the managers were not directed by them. KRKA was very autonomous. KRKA was internationally recognized as a good pharmaceutical company. The success of the factory was their success. It was

not like in state-owned companies, in which all the profits went to the government to redistribute.

JS: There were no shareholders.

AKM: We had no word for shareholders at that time.

JS: So, privatization meant the loss of democratic control?

AKM: Yes. And lots of potential was squandered. I went to the factories to speak to some workers. I tried to give them the idea that they should buy their companies. They were given certificates and, with them, the pre-right to buy their companies as insiders. So they had the opportunity. Yet most of them said, 'why, the company is already ours?' All financial decisions had gone through self-managed budgets, and they always had to approve the decisions of the managers. For example, at KRKA, the workers had to approve the proposals to redistribute profits into research and development. They re-invested what they earned in the future development of their companies. They felt that the companies were theirs. But in the end, they cashed in their certificates. People in KRKA were very loyal to their company, which was very successful. They had the opportunity to purchase shares, and at the beginning, some did. But in the end, they sold their shares.

JS: To whom?

AKM: To managers, to other people. At least KRKA is still domestically owned, in a combination of owners and shareholders. But other companies were sold to foreigners. I think it is only a matter of time before KRKA, one of the last Slovenian held companies, is sold.

JS: To whom? A European conglomerate?

AKM: Yes. The other big pharmaceutical company was Lek, and it was a clear example of how the same level of success of the business could lead companies to different directions. Lek was sold to Santoz. Profits are going somewhere else.

JS: The psychological aspect is interesting. It reminds me, in a very different context, of native Americans to whom it was put that they should sell their land. They replied by saying at once that we don't own it and that it is already ours. Transforming something held in common into a commodity is a psychological process as well as an economic one.

AKM: And when you do that, then people begin to treat it as a commodity. Before, they felt “this is ours.” Now they felt “this is mine.” This financialization of the individual accompanied privatization. We got this urge to be competitive and sell before others sold. There were really devoted managers, at KRKA for example, who tried to keep ownership within Slovenia. Of course, they were guarding their own influence as well as protecting Slovenian interests, but doing so in a good combination. Other managers tricked employees and organized their ownership in order to buy shares and concentrate ownership power.

JS: The organization of the university: how does it figure in the transformation?

AKM: It has not changed. Our university is still public. We have four public universities. We are fighting for money, and a lot of our funds are coming from European Union, and we are fighting for research money. But still, the majority of funding comes from the state, and college is still free. We still

don't charge, up to doctoral studies, but even there, it is heavily subsidized.

JS: In some countries that have undergone privatization, social psychologists have taken note of the emergence of collective mental health problems, such as mass depression. Has Slovenia been afflicted with any such new forms of cognitive dissonance or emotional dysregulation coinciding with the transformation?

AKM: We didn't directly measure the connection. But what I do know is that stress and depression and psychological problems are on the rise, as well as the use of anti-depressives in Slovenia. It is a sign of lowering standards and a reduction in autonomy. During socialism, we often told ourselves that we were a fake, that we were not *really* self-managed. But now we actually, factually do not have self-management. There is no longer even a formal framework for self-management. That is so depressing! There is no real chance that we will ever go back.

JS: Why not?

AKM: In that time, we were close to understanding the mechanism of leveraged buy-out. We were closing to understanding that people who were working and producing capital should be eligible to use their experience as collateral to buy their companies. Now we are ages away from that understanding. Now we all understand that Slovenians need money to buy an enterprise, and there is no way that people can, individually, do it. Neo-liberalism won.

JS: Do you call this process neoliberalism?

AKM: Yes, although the word is over-used word now.

JS: Has the family structure and its social dynamics, such as marriage, also changed, coincident with privatization?

AKM: Maybe if we had been more of a collectivist society, we would have been more successful in privatizing in the right way.

JS: You mean maybe you were right that collectivism was weaker, more fragile, more of an illusion all along?

AKM: Yes, definitely. But when you are not in power and do not have enough knowledge to use in the situation . . . some people were really smart in using the situation. At that time, between 1990 and 1993, the government wanted advisors from abroad, because we were creating a new capitalism. We invited Jeffrey Sachs to help us. He was for shock therapy. In fact, there were two streams of economists in Slovenia at that time. The old school was headed by Professor Jože Mencinger, who wanted incremental change, using worker buy-outs and investing in the psychological ownership. Then there were the other, younger economists, the neoliberals, who wanted shock therapy, who wanted Sachs to help them change the system and introduce a real capitalist economy. They were fed up with the old system. They thought that we were not successful enough, that we were not rich enough, that we were not Western enough. I thought that when we went to change the system, we wanted more economic freedom along with increased political freedom. Everything happened at the same time in Slovenia. We got economic transition, we got political transition—the introduction of a multi-party system—and we got independence from former Yugoslavia. It was a time of big, big changes.

In 1992, we got a mixture, a compromise between old and

new economists. (Sociologists were not listened to at all.) We got this combination of mass privatization (giving certificates to all citizens, forming a stock exchange—with funds to develop financial markets—private individual checking accounts at banks). At the same time, insiders had the opportunity to use their certificates to buy their companies on preferential terms. That was the law. In the first round of privatization, most of the people did use their certificates to purchase shares in their companies. But after that, neoliberalism grew stronger along with the younger generation of economists, and the whole mentality changed. In the second round of privatization, ownership in shares concentrated in the hands of people who are now in jail for fraud. I talked with some of the managers and tried to convince them to organize their workers' ownership, to do ESOPS, some sort of structure to hold ownership of the shares. I was completely unsuccessful. Workers saw me as an academic, and not even an economist, and as someone who was trying to politicize their lives. And from some of those who are now in jail, I saw in their eyes that they thought I was such a naïve person, that there was such an opportunity for them to make a lot of money, and here I was trying to sell them nice stories about workers' ownership.

JS: What was Jeffrey Sach's role?

AKM: His role was bad. I hated him. We were warned about him. He was selling recipes in an environment he didn't have the first idea about. He was so irresponsible. He destroyed the opportunities of our people to live a better life. He left us, he left the Polish people, too, in disaster, and went to Africa. He's awful.

JS: A group of economists invited him?

AKM: Yes, he helped them. They formed their political power upon him. It was the prerogative of neoliberalism, not humanism.

JS: You don't believe that privatization was a collective choice, but that it was snuck in as an image of the future that was impossible to risk, because all the richer countries had supposedly also made this same choice?

AKM: Yes, we bought the American dream.

JS: In transitions from one mode of work to another, we often see an expropriation of social intelligence, a disruption in the generational transmission of skills and crafts in the labor process. Has there been a disruption in such social intelligence?

AKM: Most managers were not equipped to navigate a totally new economic environment and to plan for the future, and many companies simply collapsed. Those that were bought by foreign owners quickly closed down. The management of the small percentage of companies that survived was wise enough not to destroy the organizational knowledge.

JS: Did poverty increase or decrease?

AKM: Poverty increased only a little, because we managed to maintain enough of the socialist ethos. The numbers themselves are not so very bad, but we are using all our savings and buffers now. And when those funds are gone, the new generation will have nothing. For example, right now 85 percent of Slovenians live in their own apartments; they own their apartments.

JS: Because ownership was granted 25 years ago with

privatization?

AKM: Yes. Now, because wages are decreasing, they are slowly selling them. The next generation will not be in a situation to use any form of ownership in the future. Using saving from before, without having made investments to replace the savings, is a big problem.

JS: Basic necessities, like heat, water, electricity, medical insurance, where do they fall in this situation? Who pays for your health insurance?

AKM: People who are regularly employed—and the majority of people are still regularly employed—and the quality of employment is still not so bad, as compared with our neighbors—have their insurance through their employer. Our starting position was really the best in former Yugoslavia, and former Yugoslavia was in a better starting position than most other Eastern European countries. We were well developed, with high labor and social standards. So if you are regularly employed, then your health insurance is paid by both your salary and your employer. More and more people, however, are not regularly employed—meaning, a full-time salary with open-ended commitments—and this is especially true for younger people. The future is not so bright for them. But people don't talk about these things, people have internalized this neo-liberal philosophy, and they really do believe that, if they are unsuccessful, then it is their own fault. Younger people are more like this than older people. There is a fraction of the younger generation who are reading Marx again, which is good. But still, this is a very tiny fraction.

JS: What has happened to rates of political participation?

AKM: We have referenda on everything, and usually they are won by the political right, because their voters are more disciplined, and their leaders often initiate them. It is hard to get people to come out and vote *against* new propositions. The best that happens is they defeat the proposition, and nobody wins. That gets old quickly.

JS: The development of referendum as a political tactic is interesting. In a way, the conservatives are calling the bluff of those who want democracy. But the referendum enables the conservative forces to isolate one part of the voting process and to treat it as a marketing campaign, at which they tend to be very good. Is there any sentiment here for the kind of nationalist populism that has roiled the United States and Britain?

AKM: Conservative sentiment in Slovenia is not the same. It is nationalistic, religious, and anti-migrant, anti-feminist, and anti-gay. But on the 1990 referendum to join the European Union, we had the highest majority of all the countries. We were not divided.

JS: It was a matter of national survival.

AKM: I think many people voted yes because people felt that we belong to Europe, that we were already Europeans—and that we are *not* Balkan. Slovenia and Croatia are really very preoccupied with the danger of being seen as Balkan. In 1991, I was in London, and I heard our ambassador to Britain answer a question from a professor about Slovenia's position on the Balkans. Our ambassador said, "we have nothing to do with the Balkans."

JS: The transition from Yugoslavia was much smoother here than it was for the other republics.

AKM: Yes, because the Yugoslav army did not have a lot of Serbians living in Slovenia. Bosnia and Croatia were enough of the battlefield.

JS: Have there been any large-scale, visible, collective social protests since independence? Have you had people in the streets?

AKM: Against measures to reduce social welfare, yes, against attacks on labor rights, as well. There was a big one around 2012.

JS: Led by young people?

AKM: Yes, but there were also older generations. It did not take place only in Ljubljana, but also in other cities, which was quite surprising. But, unfortunately, not much changed. And some changes were just postponed.

JS: From idealist to cynic?

AKM: Ja, ja.

JS: What is the relationship between the Bologna reforms of higher education and privatization?

AKM: The logic of entrepreneurialism is the same: the idea that you can do everything as a good enterprise, with corporate techniques of measurement.

JS: So, the intention is to subjugate the university and its systems of autonomy to the new kind of political economy brought about by privatization?

AKM: Yes. It is very hard, because I am very close to some of

the people who run the university, and I know that it is hard to find a good balance. The rector of the university, a friend, knows what should be done. At the same time, he himself is ranked, along with the university, by American corporate standards. He has to meet expectations. Otherwise, our university will not be respected in the eyes of other universities in the international community, and our students will obtain diplomas that lose value. He wants to do the best for the students. And he cannot jeopardize the position and labor opportunities of the students. Everything goes together in the same wrong direction.

(3) Slavko Gaber, 59, joined the new government in May 1992 as Minister of Education and remained in this key position for 10 years, leading the invention and implementation of the new republic's sweeping curricular reforms. One of his more popular innovation awarded all school-children the right to three floating holidays per academic year. They are still referred to "Gaber days."

JS: The historic national identity of Slovenia looks northward to Austria and Germany.

SG: Yes, we are the crossroads of West and East, that is our perception.

JS: Is Slovenia a Balkan country?

SG: For the majority, no.

JS: The identity crisis that has damaged your southern neighbors was solved long ago.

SG: Yes, we have escaped the fissures that were much more dramatic even in Croatia, not to speak of Bosnia. Luckily, our

nationalists were never as strong as theirs.

JS: Let's talk about higher education, in particular the system of measurement and assessment. Did it exist before the Bologna reforms?

SG: It already existed, but actually, if I reflect on what has happened, there is this odd tendency whereby the more a process resists measurement, the more we try to measure it.

JS: Where is this tendency coming from?

SG: It is coming from the West. It goes with the crisis of the capitalist type of production, which is losing ground in terms of the question: where can we still make huge profits? That is why they invited higher education into this quality assurance system. Now all the measurements are more detailed. Reaching full professorship today is much more demanding than it was fifty years ago,

JS: The introduction of new layers of social competition has had the effect of shrinking the horizon of scholarly imagination?

SG: Yes.

JS: And some form of this tendency appeared at the beginning of your time in the new government?

SG: Yes, this was one of the issues: are we going to privatize education? There were ideas that we were supposed to do it. My response was, no. We would maintain a solid level of the welfare state that included access to education. Public education remains strong here.

JS: Were the advisors who came here suggesting that you

privatize education?

SG: Yes, some of them. Officials from the International Monetary Fund came into my office three times. And they didn't believe that I didn't want money. They said, but you have very ambitious programs. You will need money.

JS: *They wanted to make loans?*

SG: Yes. And I said, "no, thank you." And luckily for me, it was also the Prime Minister's firm position that we were going to take loans only when and to the degree that we need them. We would do as much as possible on our own. That meant our reforms would take three years, as opposed to one year with foreign money. But that was how we survived.

JS: *Slovenia was already well developed, industrially, with a strong education system, in 1992. How did your position come about?*

SG: The Prime Minister invited me to a meeting one day, and said look, "I see that you have a very active group of opponents of the current system. I have decided to offer to you and your group the chance to come and implement your ideas." I was 34. That same day, I went back to my circle and said, here is an interesting proposal. Are we going to engage or not? After three hours of discussion, we decided, yes. In the last half-hour of discussion, we considered this meant our hands would be dirty. The next day, I met with the Prime Minister and accepted. We knew that this reform could not be out of our textbooks, that we would have to make a number of compromises. We might have to go for the second or third best solution. We had already taken the liberty of conceptualizing legislation in the majority of educational

fields. But I traveled around the country, discussing reforms with students and parents in order to reach a basic agreement in our nation about the way forward. (I was young then, I had energy.) People didn't want to hear that all they had done in education over the previous thirty years was crap. I said, okay, no rush. But we are now running inside competitive Western economies. We will get nothing from them, don't have illusions. But we will survive. This was the philosophy of the cabinet. And with the exception of two members of my original group of 20—both of whom left after the first three months—my original cohort survived all the battles of those years.

JS: Did you have any foreign models to which you looked?

SG: Yes. Finland, Scotland, Denmark, and, to a degree, France.

JS: What did they share in common, from your perspective?

SG: They were good! I wanted to collect all their experts from these countries to come and help us adapt their ideas to Slovenia.

JS: Nothing from the United States.

SG: No, not really. You were too far away, culturally. My idea was Europe, but not the corporatist, Austrian and German type of education. We then believed—and, in this respect, it is completely pro-American—that liberty allowed people to breath and to decide what they wanted from their lives. Corporatism was strong here, due to socialism. We had been strongly against bureaucracy but not against proto-totalitarian elements inside the nation, inside the relations

that we had with one another.

JS: Did the cultural function of education take a new form with the birth of Slovenia, then? For example, at one point in American history, schooling was devised to make citizens. Then it changed in order to make workers and capitalists for a new political economy. These tensions are still with us, and sometimes they find expression in culture wars over textbooks. How did you handle such tensions? You had to determine a new curriculum. That must have been difficult.

SG: Religious schooling was a very small minority in Slovenia. After independence, the Catholic Church wanted to put priests into the public schools. It was a huge battle. I said, never, you are not going to enter. None of the churches will be there in the classrooms, nor will any of the political parties. We legislated this in the 1991 Constitution. The church takes care of the souls, and the state is there for the well-being of the citizen. We received 70 percent support for this position that ruled out a new ideology, once Marxism was gone. This was one of the flashpoints. Another one was: how far are we going to instrumentalize education? This is still going on. Business interests wanted us to adopt a completely vocational approach. This was then an issue that spoke to the large question of what kind of a country do we want to be?

JS: But what was the cultural function of schooling? To produce a new Slovenian identity?

SG: To educate, basically. Knowledge is power, as stated by Francis Bacon, was our motto, and this is still the prevalent conception in a number of respects. One, yes, power in terms

of profession and economy. But power also in terms of securing our autonomy, equipping our citizens with the power to take care of ourselves.

JS: This is the thinking behind offering instruction in German, Italian, and English in the public schools?

SG: Yes, we are aware that we are a tiny nation, and without foreign language capacities, we would have to stay at home and watch TV. More than 80 percent of upper-school students learn at least one foreign language.

JS: Earlier today, you mentioned to me that when you were attacked in your reform program, they called you a “pragmatist.”

SG: Well, we were strong enough politically to defend this approach. As Minister, I did not interfere to dictate the content of particular fields. A group of 500 experts worked toward changes in the curricula for three years. We twice invited all the teachers in the country to comment. Each of them received a proposal for the new curriculum on the table. They suggested changes. This is how we got educational reform to work.

JS: You achieved a consensus through a participatory process?

SG: Yes.

JS: Are you able to identify how the curriculum changed substantively in connection with the political change from socialism to post-socialism?

SG: Yes. Before, there was a subject that was upper-secondary obligatory: Marxism and self-management, which was the basic ideology. This went away. This change took place even

before I became Minister. We broadened the curriculum to feature philosophy, sociology, civic culture, and psychoanalysis. Previously, they were not part of the approved curriculum.

JS: You must have been in a great position both to identify and to replace the governing myths of Slovenia. All societies need secular education, and alongside it, collective myths to hold them together. Often, those myths are expressed in monuments and statues. We are fighting over some them now in the United States. Did you have such conflicts as you attempted to transition to a new society?

SG: We experienced a civil war during the Second World War. My uncle was one of the commanders in the partisan movement. So, there is a strong tradition of pride that we resisted Nazism. Thousands of people died, you know. The Catholic Church collaborated. The Communist Party came out of the Second War War as the strongest and best organized force. They also did horrible things. We saw independence [in 1990] as a natural culmination of the same tradition of resistance. We defended ourselves against the German army back then, and we decided to govern ourselves, against the Communists, in 1990. I am in favor of acknowledging the lies we faced.

JS: Did the new textbooks recognize the atrocities in the history?

SG: Yes.

JS: How long did it take to get the black marks of Slovenia's history into the textbooks? Certainly, it didn't happen right away.

SG: Why not? The process that we launched helped us decide. It took us several years to change the curriculum, but the experts we gathered were instructed to propose at least three examples of curricula from the Western world, in combination with the question: Who are we? Historians quarreled for almost a decade. It is still not solved, of course.

JS: Is free expression considered a right in Slovenia?

SG: Yes. It is basically a European Constitution. We have 90 percent of the German Constitution in our own.

JS: What's the 10 percent that is left out?

SG: I don't know. There is a strong pro-German element in Slovenia. And Germany's Constitution survived Nazism, you know. So, it must be good.

JS: Slovenia seems to be a largely prosperous, stable, confident, small republic.

SG: Yeah. But no thanks to your one-time Secretary of State, James Baker. He came here and told us to our face: You will never survive. Stay with Milošević was Baker's idea. Stay in Yugoslavia. We wanted more freedom.

JS: You received no help from the United States?

SG: Not when we needed it. We were confronting both the United States and United Kingdom; their foreign secretary was also against us. The Germans were our friends. Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Germany's foreign minister at the time, was our friend, and he remains a hero here. Why? His Germany was the first important foreign country to acknowledge our independence. I was there, watching our

flag raised, when we were accepted into UNESCO. I was our representative. It was very emotional for me. We voted on the same day, on the same ballot, both to leave Yugoslavia and enter the European Union: June 25, 1991.

(4) Luka Lukic, 34, is a journalist and investigative reporter, focusing on exploitation and corruption in state-owned enterprise. He works for Radiotelevizija Slovenija (aka National RTV), the only public broadcasting organization in Slovenia operating both radio and television stations.

JS: In America, the businessman is the heroic archetype. Who are the heroes in Slovenia? Who are the official men and women to emulate? Professors, journalists, politicians, businessmen, singers, poets, novelists, painters? Who are they?

LL: We are adapting to the American archetype of the businessman. Realistically, anyone who works in the field of culture is broke, more or less. Either he or she must work full-time at something else, or he or she is financed by the state, and that somehow reflects in the work, because the work is basically ordered up. I think now there are a lot of small businesses, startups, these are the people who are portrayed as role models.

JS: Entrepreneurs.

LL: Yes.

JS: Innovators.

LL: Yes, exactly.

JS: We have a lot of innovation districts but not a lot of innovation.

LL: Basically, we have everything America has—only twenty years later. So, now we are in the late 1990s. It's globalization.

JS: Are your entrepreneurs concentrated in tech?

LL: Some in tech, some in other fields. For example, a few years ago, we had a couple of economists who started their own burger joint. They were portrayed, ideologically, as examples of persons who finished their degrees, could not get a job, yet still they could succeed. There was a meta-narration behind it.

JS: A glorification.

LL: Yes. Burgers did not exist in Slovenia apart from McDonald's, and now they came to us with this idea of only Slovenian meat, only Slovenian vegetables, the happy cows, and so on.

JS: You probably have craft breweries now.

LL: Oh yes, it's like "the high school teacher who has a sideline making his own beer." I try to avoid reading about such stories. I mean, starting a burger joint is really not that much of a success. Make it work for two decades—then I'm interested in what you have to say. But then it's not innovation, if it is 20 years old.

JS: And there is not enough of a public to support independent magazines and newspapers?

LL: No. Slovenia is a small market bordered by a language spoken by only two million people. There were attempts in the direction of approaching journalism in a deeper way, and they all failed miserably, more or less.

JS: So where does public debate happen?

LL: That's the million-dollar question. Social media, basically. Conflicts and controversies are not reported there, though, in a way that make them ripe for discussion. The band, Green Day, had a concert here a few months ago, and in between songs the front man yelled "Fuck you, Donald Trump!" So, there is a video of the outburst and a quarter-inch of text. Okay, great, but how can I relate to that? Why would I care about his opinion?

JS: And it's a spectacle.

LL: Yes, exactly.

JS: Do you have a cultural memory of a more robust public sphere?

LL: In the first years of Slovenia's independence, in the 1990s, there was a lot of political debate on broadcast television and in newspapers. But now the debates are weaker and not worth bothering with. It is a coffee-time, chit-chat. I don't know what happened.

JS: One explanation could be that there are not divisions over major issues.

LL: I think the problem is different; it is that the major issues are all blurred, they are not pin-pointed. The issue of privatization is discussed in terms of, well, all state-owned firms are bad, and the argument drifts into the same direction of anecdotes saying, "well, my aunt, she works in a state-owned company and none of them work, they just drink coffee and receive high salaries." But it's not true.

JS: You are now working on a project about state-owned companies.

LL: Yes. Because, I accidentally fell into the subject, and I realized that most state-owned companies rely on the brutal exploitation of workers. Take the Port of Koper. Last year, it made 40 million euros in profit; the state received nine million in dividends. It's a majority-state-owned company. The state controls the Port, owns more than two-thirds of it. Okay. The Port of Koper employs 800 people. The rest, about 1,200, are migrant workers, employed by a private company that functions as a mafia. Slovenia, in effect, has a gang-master system that requires overtime in brutal amounts. And this is where it gets interesting: they are paid and taxed at minimum wage, and the rest in cash. I have obtained the contracts between the government and this company and this company and its workers, and when you add up the numbers, you realize that the government is losing a great deal of tax revenue, the dockworkers are losing pensions that they will need to repair their bodies later in life, and all the profit goes to the company. If the workers were paid on the books for their actual labor, then state would have received 20 million euros last year, not nine. The Port is so strong that it is almost like a government within a government, almost like an autonomous body. The government attempted to reform the management of the Port, and there were riots in protest, and the government backed down. The same pattern now spreads in all state-owned companies.

JS: And the diminishment of the state's responsibilities and coffers will wind up producing social pathologies later?

LL: Yes. This could not have happened before privatization, because in Yugoslavia the trade unions were strong. Now

they are weak.

JS: What percentage of the workforce is unionized?

LL: I believe it is less than 18 percent. During and after the transition, there was a high pressure put on trade unions, which were accused of being ballast from socialism.

Whenever you started talking about worker's rights, the response was always, "we're not in socialism any more." The fact is that those rights evolved under capitalism!

JS: The direction of history was supposed to have traveled from capitalism to socialism to communism. Now it seems to have gone backwards.

LL: Yes, and I think that consumerism has had a great negative impact on Yugoslavia. In the last years of socialism, you could not go to a store and buy a bottle of cooking oil if you did not bring an empty one along with you to return. In my household, the empty bottle of cooking oil was carefully preserved, so that I, as a child, would not be able to accidentally break it. God forbid! Forty-minutes-drive away was Austria, where we could go and purchase all the toys that we saw advertised on television and in the movies. The movies themselves came very late, years after their original release. And every weekend there would be a long line of traffic on the border with Austria where Slovenians would go to shop.

JS: Or to Italy?

LL: Yes, to Trieste. There were shops, with goods advertised only in Slovenian, that were open only on weekends, for the traffic coming over the border.

JS: That has changed now?

LL: All this has changed. Every bigger town in Slovenia now has its own shopping center.

JS: What about Internet shopping?

LL: There are two barriers. One, most people in my generation still have this fear of our credit cards being stolen or abused online. Two, respect for the concept of intellectual property here is still under-developed. In Yugoslavia, we grew up on piracy. So, it is hard for us to believe that we have pay for an app. Most of the post-socialist states have such gaps.

JS: You are 34. The concepts of individual consumer credit and personal financial portfolios in Slovenia are younger than you.

LL: My generation has gotten the worst end of the bargain. When Yugoslavia ended, our parents bought up the state-owned apartments for the price of a used car. Today, if I want to purchase my own apartment, I would have to put myself into personal debt until I turn 60. And I must try to buy, because 90 percent of apartments in Slovenia are occupied by private owners. Rents are through the roof, as the market for renting apartments is almost non-existent. I live with my parents. I have to drive two hours every day to Ljubljana to commute to work. I will not be able to sell this dream to my daughter.

(5) Ajda Sokler, 20, is a third-year student at the University of Ljubljana, studying sociology and Slovene language.

JS: Why are you studying sociology?

AS: I wanted to study law. I had great grades and would probably be accepted. But then I talked to my friend, who didn't pass the third year on Faculty of law, and this conversation was enough for me to choose something else. I was told a lot that I have a great voice and a good sense of public speaking. So, I chose the Slovene language and needed another subject to become more "employable." I was just not brave enough to choose something demanding and something I had not been totally prepared for. I also did not have anyone who would convince me to go in other, more risky directions. So, there it is my final decision – sociology. I was confused as most of the people are at that age – not much is done to prepare young people for taking such a decision. But I suppose we are still lucky to choose.

JS: *Are your parents graduates of college?*

AS: No, they are both graphic technicians. Actually, I am the first one of my extended family (including my grandparents, uncles) that is going towards graduation.

JS: *From your perspective, what role does college play in the Slovenian economy? Do you expect to receive a job?*

AS: Studying is very accessible and being a student in Slovenia is sometimes beneficial (I think that you can get work very easily, and it can also be very well paid; students often work as if the ones that are fully employed and in this way, they also might get their first underpaid job that they are too qualified for; some are also using this status so they can work with student's referral). But having a degree means very little, especially if you got a degree in social science or humanities. I know that only studying will not get me a job that I want. It seems like you have to have connections,

experiences – that is what gets you a job. And here is this famous slogan: Slovenia is such a small country. In most cases it seems like a proper statement. Soon you realize that you deal with the same people all the time. They just revolve around the circle they are involved in. So, having connections is fundamental. They will get you somewhere if nothing else will – like being very successful in your field of study. And this is a *strong believe* among us, students. A degree is necessary, but at the same it means very little. Our economy is out-of-date – very few are getting jobs they are actually qualified for. Young people are leaving the country, and the population is getting older and older. That is what most people would tell you. Our economy is not ready for educated young people (one very popular individual solution is self-employment – you have to be “innovative” and “ambitious”). Universities are actually just extending youth, and this period where you cannot be independent, and what is very common is that people stay at home until their thirties. There is a lack of stability, solidity. My mum had me when she was 24; she had a job, flat, car, and she got married. When I will be at her age I would just finish my master’s and *try* to start my adult life. One of the participants of this year’s *Annual Sociological Conference* verbalized our situation very nicely saying that sociologists (or people with a degree in social science) are highly educated secretaries. Personally, I am not very worried about not getting a job. Besides studying, I also work at the Radio Student (I am trying to get some practical skills) and some other associations. I know that with just a degree, I will become just one of many. When I look around I mostly see lost people with a lack of will to do something about their future. They are convinced into having this inherent quality – “unemployability.”

JS: You are among the first full generations of Slovenians born after independence. How might we understand your generation's attitudes toward the future? Does the future seem open and full of possibility? Or narrow and scary?

AS: True, my generation is fully born in independent Slovenia. And I think that many do not believe in this country. Many believe the possibilities are abroad so they go – so will I. But I would also like to come back because of the standard of living and life in general. And I would say that we (my generation) want some serious changes and are sick listening to the same people for 26 years. This people are solving some old personal resentments on and on. Same stories all the time, same principle – one good turn deserves another. This popular discourse is leaning towards new faces and approaches in politics – “Trumps” in Europe are raising. Our current president that talks about “reconciliation” has a political opponent in this year's presidential election that is addressing his voters saying he is a fresh wind, a part of a new generation that is not carrying the past. I think we are not taking politics as seriously as we should. Political scene has been totally devaluated.

JS: Do you feel a sense of national pride?

AS: It is a rare feeling. Personally, I felt it only when explaining foreigners who we (Slovenians) are. Otherwise, I would say no, I do not.

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