

Economic crisis and the crisis of national identity in Slovenia: toward a new notion of social order

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This paper addresses the influence of the economic crisis on national identity in Slovenia. It first analyzes the creation of the contemporary national identity following independence in 1991 that was established in relation to a negatively perceived Balkan identity, which represented “the Other,” and in relation to a “superior” European identity that Slovenia aspired to. With the economic crisis, the dark corners of Slovenia’s “successful” post-socialist transition to democracy came to light. Massive layoffs of workers and the bankruptcies of once-solid companies engendered disdain for the political elites and sympathy for marginalized groups. The public blamed the elites for the country’s social and economic backsliding, and massive public protests arose in 2012. The aftermath of the protests was a growing need among the people for a new social paradigm toward solidarity. We show that in Slovenia the times of crisis were not times of growing nationalism and exclusion as social theory presupposes but, quite the contrary, they were times of growing solidarity among citizens and with the “Balkan Other.”

Keywords: economic crisis; Slovenia; national identity; solidarity

Introduction

The economic crisis in Slovenia, along with a lack of vision among the elite for the country’s future, spurred a political crisis that challenged the national identity. After gaining independence and joining the European Union (EU), Slovenia found itself in a historical moment when it had to rethink what kind of society it aspired to be. Slovenians’ self-image as hard-working and honest was challenged by the economic crisis, when national financial and corruption scandals erupted. Massive worker layoffs and the bankruptcies of once-successful companies considered national icons changed the way many saw the national elites and helped spur widespread protests. The civil society demonstrations that swept across Slovenia were a response to the power elite’s blatant disregard of everyday concerns in a climate of austerity, growing poverty, and rising unemployment.

These observations, analysis of public opinion polls, selected case studies, and literature reviews lead to three linked claims about the nature and consequences of the economic crisis in Slovenia.

The first is that the implications of the economic crisis in Slovenia should be understood in wider sociopolitical terms, mainly as a crisis of democracy. Numerous corruption

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scandals in both politics and the economy that came to light due to the economic crisis have eroded trust in the political system, existing political parties, and democracy as an equitable political system.

Second, the economic crisis did not lead to increased xenophobia, exclusion, or growing nationalism, as social theory presupposes. On the contrary, it was a time of growing solidarity among citizens and toward the main Balkan “Other” in Slovenian nation-building, including workers from other ex-Yugoslav republics. Yet this does not mean people all of a sudden became open, inclusive, and pro-migrant; Slovenians sympathized with workers who had lost their jobs, regardless of their ethnic origin, and blamed the corrupt political and economic elites for the country’s cratering economy. The general sentiment was not that workers from the Balkans were stealing Slovenian jobs, but that political and economic elites were responsible for the poor working conditions of both migrant and domestic workers.

Lastly, these circumstances challenged Slovenian national identity in relation to the two contexts that define it – the Balkans and the EU – and sowed mistrust in the relationship between the citizens and political elites. Numerous financial and political scandals tarnished the image of Slovenia and its elites in the eyes of Slovenian citizens, who after 2007 could no longer identify with the state. As a consequence, the designation “European,” which was applied to the elites, acquired a negative connotation and in some ways replaced “Balkan” as an epithet. At a certain point, it no longer mattered who was in power, left or right, since all of the established political elites were rejected by the people, as shown by the mass protests in 2012, opinion polls, and the frequent general elections that ensued in the following years when newcomers were preferred over established politicians. On the other hand, horizontal ties among citizens strengthened in confronting the elites, including in the context of the discourse of workers exploited by these elites. The identity labels “European” and “Balkan” are no longer antonyms or unambiguous, but have been shifting from insult to compliment and back.

Slovenian national identity: between Europe and the Balkans

At the beginning, we shall make a short overview of the theoretical platform of identity, followed by an outline of the development of Slovenian identity after 1991, to understand its foundations, the accompanying nation-building process, and the evolution of various identity narratives.

Özkirimli (2000, 226–233) offers five basic assumptions about identity: (1) there is no generally accepted theory of identity; (2) it is difficult to talk about one identity; (3) with a coherent discourse it is possible to connect various forms of identity; (4) identity is active only when it is constantly reproduced; and (5) different constructions of identity help us understand a redefining of identity. According to constructivist understandings, identities are not (primordially) given, but socially constructed. This means they are permanently contested social facts (Brubaker 1996) and a result of discursive processes in which political actors grant and accept meanings (Risse 2004, 267).

The nature of identities is primarily historical, which means they appear, persist, and disappear depending on social, economic, and political circumstances. The process of identity formation depends on the size of the community – the larger the community, the greater the likelihood that an identity is constructed, secondary, and forced (Čapo Žmegač 1994, 19–20). Identity is established by a process of constructing the “Other,” which is positioned diametrically opposite, therefore “Us” and “Them” are mutually exclusive (Zambelli 2010, 60). Those who are part of “Us” are not necessarily identical. There are differences among “Us,” but similarities blur and neutralize their influences (Bauman 2002, 223). Our shared

characteristics are much more important than anything that divides “Us,” enabling “Us” to decide on a common position. “They” may share some characteristics with “Us,” but they differ in at least one crucial respect and that makes genuine solidarity less likely.

National identity is a particular type of social identity based on a self-definition of the community as a nation in the sense of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991). Constructing a national identity is part of the process of nation-building where “nationalism makes nations” (Ichijo and Uzelac 2005, 10), while the nation-state, which promotes the principle of ethnic unity above any other loyalty, has been the only success story of a community in modern times (Bauman 2002, 219).

Slovenian national identity has its roots in the national awakening in the nineteenth century and was based primarily on the cultural identity of the rural population. Crucial for building the Slovenian nation was a national consciousness based on culture, including the Slovenian language, folk songs and literature, customs, religion, education, political culture, and ethical culture, which means a culture of personal integrity and behavior (Mandelc 2011, 133). Since during socialist Yugoslavia national identities were not a matter of public debate, their renewal and reaffirmation were crucial when Slovenia started to move toward independence. As Kuljić (2012, 127) put it, at the fall of the Berlin Wall the homogenization of socialism through the working class was replaced by collective national identities.

After gaining independence in 1991, Slovenia needed to establish new frameworks for its future development and social order corresponding to its renewed national identity. The most developed republic in former Yugoslavia, its aspirations lay in narrowing the gap with Western European countries, while distancing itself from its Balkan history and neighborhood. The builders of the new Slovenian national identity started to rely on a discourse of “Europeanness” versus “Balkanism” to ensure the legitimacy of the struggle for independence. The latter had a great influence on the formation of a new Slovenian citizenship, which was ethnically based and thus placed all non-Slovene residents in an inferior position (Zorn 2007). Hence, Slovenian identity was constantly framed by the dichotomy between East and West, the Balkans and Europe. National identity became “an instrument of historical differentiation and consolidation of cultural distinctions in the region” (Vidmar Horvat 2009, 27). Both discourses were encouraged by growing Slovenian nationalism, which reached its height at the end of the 1980s with the dissolution of Yugoslav “brotherhood and unity” and the eruption of nationalism in other Yugoslav republics, most evidently in Serbia with Milošević’s aggressive nationalistic politics. Slovenians perceived themselves as a hard-working, honest, progressive, and economically successful nation compared with the stereotype of the “backward, nationalistic, and lazy” Yugoslavia. Even Slovenian pop band Agropop released a song in 1988 “Only a million” (Samo milijon nas je) about “the humble, small but good, honest Slovenian people.”

Slovenian academics (e.g. Musek 1994; Komac 1998), however, rejected Slovenians’ self-image as humble and obliging as a stereotype with no basis in reality. On the contrary, Komac (1998, 143) noted that many studies had confirmed aggressiveness, dominance, adventurism, and other more dominant characteristics of Slovenians.

According to Schöpflin (2010, 55),

[i]dentity excludes and includes, otherwise it would not be an identity that could sustain itself. Exclusion then, is a necessary and unavoidable aspect of human existence and it is not the fact of exclusion as such that is problematical, but the particular forms of it in particular situations.

Slovenian nationalistic discourse went as far as to label citizens of other Yugoslav republics as inferior and, at the time of the independence process, even as state enemies, despite

Slovenia having welcomed many workers from other Yugoslav republics, especially since the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s (Mandelc 2011, 146). Despite sharing the Yugoslav ideology of “brotherhood and unity,” workers from other republics were treated as culturally different and perceived as a threat to national identity (Vidmar Horvat and Učakar 2014). With independence, xenophobia toward immigrants from the former Yugoslavia spread in different spheres of public and private life. Public discourse of Balkanism and stigmatization of everything from the former Yugoslavia were used to homogenize the Slovenian national body that wanted to forget its Yugoslav past.

It is important to stress that the pejorative image of the Balkans was not just a Slovenian construct, but was more broadly present in European discourses. As Todorova (1994) demonstrated, from the beginning of the twentieth century the Balkans had been rediscovered and reinvented by politicians and academics as something backward, violent, and uncivilized, with the discourse of Balkanism representing the Balkans as the dark Other vis-à-vis Western civilization. The region, which is geographically inseparable from Europe but culturally constructed as the Other, has often been used as a repository of negative characteristics on which the positive and self-congratulatory image of Europe was built (Todorova 1994). In constructing this image, Western politicians had help from Balkan politicians who implicitly accepted the pejorative connotations of “Balkan” by straining not to be identified as such.

Slovenian politicians were no different. They wanted to detach their young country from the negative image of the Balkans, especially once violence erupted in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Still, the “new” Slovenian identity paradoxically needed the “Balkan Other,” from which it could differentiate itself. Once the wars in the Balkans were over, reconstruction started and in 2003 the EU gave the Balkans the prospect of EU membership. Slovenia’s bipolar identity became handy as its politicians started to portray the country as a bridge between the EU and the Balkans, and thus an important actor in the European and wider international community.

After independence, Slovenia searched for a new “home” in the international community. A “return to Europe” became its main foreign policy goal, similarly to other post-socialist countries in Europe that identified with Western values, norms, and the Western international community. Intensive cooperation with and ultimately full membership in Western organizations were important elements of this new strategy, which enjoyed broad political and public support.¹

The prospect of membership in the EU gave a new perspective, not only to the elite political project, but also to Slovenian identity. An important factor in Slovenian citizens’ enthusiasm for the EU (as in other small European countries) was nationalism, which was related to the perception of national and European identity, and the interplay of both evolved to form a new post-independence identity. All leading Slovenian politicians and creators and protectors of the new Slovenian state saw EU membership as fulfillment of the national identity (Mandelc 2011, 144). While euroskeptics and europhiles debated protection of the national interest within or outside the EU, Vidmar Horvat (2009, 26–27) argues that the Europeanness of Slovenian identity was never in dispute. Belonging to Europe and the EU would also cement Slovenian superiority in the Balkan region and finally cast off any taint of its Balkan identity.

Accordingly, Slovenia, one of the former Yugoslav republics, a small country of two million, had long been deemed a success story, seemingly without the major transition problems that had plagued other former Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Fink-Hafner and Robbins 1997; Gow and Carmichael 2000). This self-regard was

largely spread and promoted in the 1990s, while it slowly dissolved in the first years of the new millennium, and hit rock bottom with the global economic crisis.

The economic crisis and a failed transition

From autumn 2008 onward, the global economic crisis hit Slovenia hard, although there was little public dissent, even against ensuing austerity measures. Even global protest movements, such as “Occupy” and “15O” made barely a ripple in Slovenia, although they were embraced by activist youth and alternative social movements and groups.²

It was not until massive layoffs in the construction industry brought to light the misery of many manual laborers, mostly migrant workers from the former Yugoslavia, that people’s behavior began to change. The public reacted with expressions of solidarity and empathy, along with resentment of the economic elite. Further on, a specific context of intersecting legacies of transition, “perforated democracy” (Mandelc and Učakar 2011), economic crisis, corruption, transformations of identity, and a clash of opposing future development models, which emerged in autumn 2012, paved the way for the most massive and widely embraced protests since Slovenia’s independence.

The global economic crisis revealed a crisis of the elites and cast a dark shadow on the Slovenian identity that had been constructed through independence. Namely, with independence Slovenia had to cultivate elites who would take responsibility and accountability for governing the country. As Gow and Carmichael noted (2000, 211), before independence in 1991 Slovenians were always part of a larger entity and therefore “they did not need to be responsible for their own destiny to more than a limited extent.” After independence, Slovenia had to accept responsibility for its destiny (Gow and Carmichael 2000, 212), which proved harder than initially thought. At the beginning, the prospects were good, since the common goals of independence and EU membership kept the nation and its elites together, and spirits were high. Once the old political elites, such as long-term President Milan Kučan and Prime Minister and President Janez Drnovšek, left the political stage, however, the problems of the botched transition erupted. The nation could no longer identify with its political and economic leaders, who lacked a future vision of the state and proved incapable of accountable governance.

The economic crisis brought to the surface many deficiencies of the system and overall structural problems, legacies of a transition that had not been as successful as it had long been portrayed. Skeletons of the political and economic elites started to fall out of the transition closet. Two of the biggest Slovenian state-owned banks revealed large losses and could no longer back the adventures of politically connected Slovenian managers who tried to perform manager buyouts of formerly state-owned companies (Istrabenz – Igor Bavčar, a member of the Liberal Democracy Party, former minister for EU affairs; Laško – Boško Šrot, brother of an influential politician, Bojan Šrot, from the Slovenian People’s Party), or the adventures of the construction barons who drew from the national construction budgets of highways and other major infrastructure projects, which in 2008 culminated in the “Clean Shovel” (Čista lopata) affair (SCT – Ivan Zidar, Vegrad – Hilda Tovšak, Primorje – Dušan Črnigoj; all now in prison, except for Zidar, who claimed health problems). The Catholic Church also contributed its share to the big hole in the banking sector with speculative investments made by the Archdiocese of Maribor.

Politicians, too, were mired in corruption scandals. Srečko Prijatelj of the Slovenian National Party was the first sitting member of parliament to be sentenced to prison after being convicted of extortion, bribery, and weapons trafficking. Prime Minister Janez

Janša was involved in a scandal concerning an order for armored personnel carriers. Janša denied everything, but in 2013 he was found guilty of corruption and sentenced to two years in prison. The ruling was overturned in 2015 and sent back to the lower court.

Slovenia as a state committed several serious transgressions in the area of human rights, ranging from institutionalized racism toward the Roma (Krek 2005) to discriminatory treatment of ethnic minorities (e.g. Komac 2007) and especially non-EU labor migrants (Mandelc and Učakar 2011). The most drastic violation of human rights happened in February 1992 with the act of so-called erasure of more than 25,000 (supposedly “non-Slovenian”) permanent residents,³ mainly nationals of other Yugoslav republics who had been living and working in Slovenia. Their exclusion from Slovenian citizenship led to the loss of their permanent-resident status and transformed them into foreigners, living illegally on Slovenian territory with no political, economic, or social rights. They were labeled traitors, aggressors, and opponents of Slovenia, and remained representatives of the Balkans. Their “erasure” was an intentional act of the state (Jalušič 2007), and the “Erased” have continuously been used as a scapegoat, especially in the nationalist rhetoric of right-wing political parties. The case of the Erased was largely and deliberately overlooked in the 1990s (Jalušič 2007), with some individual stories coming to light only in 2001. It took almost another decade to change the prevailing public sentiment toward them in a way that some reparatory legal provisions became possible (Učakar 2010).

This important shift in public perceptions coincided with the onset of the global economic crisis. The state, which since independence had been seen as a guardian of equity and justice, came to be regarded as a systematic violator of human rights (with regard to the Erased), and a politico-economic cartel of corrupt elites who do not share the values they were supposed to defend.

Growing dissatisfaction with democracy

People’s perception of corruption and the “politics–economy” nexus led many to question the Slovenian success story of the 1990s, as shown by the nationwide public opinion survey Politbarometer.⁴ From 2006 to 2008, more than half the respondents thought politicians had more heavily interfered in the economy than before 2004, while around 11% thought less so. And in 2006, 43% thought there was more corruption and clientelism than before the elections in 2004, while 10% thought there was less. The negative assessment rose until 2008, when 57% of respondents felt the current situation was worse than in 2004 and 9% that it was better.⁵

Politbarometer from December 2010 showed a drastic decline in “satisfaction with democracy” in Slovenia in the wake of the scandals that surfaced between 2008 and 2010. Every year since 1996, with the exception of 2005, more than half of the respondents had said they were not satisfied with democracy. But after 2007 the share of the dissatisfied grew steadily, to 87% in 2014.

The great economic collapse that happened during the global economic crisis was thus perceived not as an imported global phenomenon, but as the result of a dysfunctional state, economy, and politics. The predominant public response was dwindling trust in the current political system, particularly party politics and the government (Politbarometer January 2013), but also in other institutions such as the judiciary or the Catholic Church. According to Politbarometer (July 2012), trust in Catholic institutions was always lower than in other state or nongovernmental institutions, but it started to decline in 2008 and plunged in 2011, when the investment speculations were revealed.

Public unrest

Dissatisfaction with Slovenia's young democratic system and disappointment with the political and economic elites resulted in widespread public uprisings. Between November 2012 and March 2013, Slovenia witnessed the most massive street protests since its independence, involving more than 10,000 people in Ljubljana alone. The protests were peaceful, but the government and parliament secured themselves behind cordons of highly armed police forces, further widening the gap between the power elite and the population. Protests also erupted locally in Maribor, the second largest city in Slovenia, where the economic situation has been tough since the start of the post-socialist transition. People began protesting against the mayor as the epitome of corrupt and unjust structural conditions, where private profit had continuously been put before the common good and principles of social solidarity. The first protest ended with police violence, and people in Ljubljana and across Slovenia immediately organized in support, at the same time addressing other local as well as national elites in the fast-spreading, nationwide uprising.

From a distance, the protests might seem to have been against the austerity measures proposed by the government after the global economic crisis hit. But that was only partially the case. The primary reason for people taking to the streets was political – the political and economic elites who had exploited the weaknesses of the post-socialist transition and contested the national identity. The global economic crisis only brought these anomalies to light and created specific circumstances that had forced people to think about the country's future. It was only when economic reforms were coupled with a political crisis, and the political elite could no longer disentangle itself from the deteriorating economic situation, that the protests took place on a national scale. The demonstrations were thus a response to the political and economic elite's blatant disregard for the real-life problems of the majority in the context of the looming crisis, austerity measures, growing poverty, and rising unemployment. Therefore, it must be stressed that, rather than being demonstrations against austerity measures as was usually incorrectly portrayed in foreign media, the protesters throughout Slovenia quickly joined in calls for the resignation of the political elite they considered illegitimate. Moreover, they were protesting against an elite that had disrespected moral propositions that regulated the values and behavior of national identity and contradicted the general perception of the "European" identity of Slovenia.

When the government changed during the protests and Prime Minister Alenka Bratušek from Positive Slovenia, a newcomer in parliament, came to power, the momentum for the uprisings dissipated, despite the continuation of the same austerity measures that had lowered the social status of many. The economic situation continued to worsen, but the protests stopped, despite great efforts by some groups to mobilize the wider public.

Politbarometer from 2008 to 2014 showed that, despite the economic crisis and austerity measures, respondents were not afraid of losing their jobs. In addition, their material status did not change much although they were spending less. They also believed the economic crisis was going to deepen, yet their personal happiness remained relatively high throughout the period. In July 2012, 51% of the respondents told Politbarometer they supported the austerity measures imposed by the government while 42% did not. Clearly, the protests were chiefly based not on anti-austerity sentiment, but on a more profound frustration with the Slovenian political elites who had threatened the "Slovenian dream" with their corrupt and irresponsible behavior, a perception shared by most people. In January 2013, 76% of the respondents supported the protests and only 19% did not.

Resentment and mistrust of the established political elites were also evident in the next election results. As shown in Figure 1, parliamentary elections became very frequent as

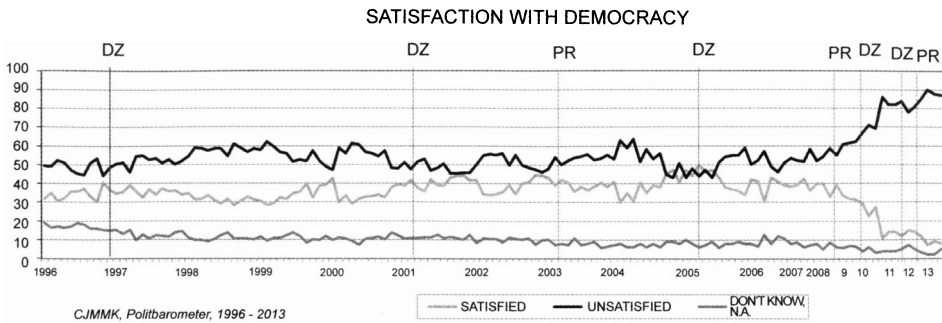


Figure 1. Public (dis)satisfaction with democracy. Note: DZ marks the parliamentary elections (Državni zbor), PR the presidential election. As dissatisfaction with democracy rose, parliamentary elections became more frequent.
Source: Politbarometer (January 2014).

dissatisfaction with democracy grew. Since the resignation in 2011 of the government of Prime Minister Borut Pahor, a Social Democrat, only new political parties have won the largest shares of votes. First, in 2011 Zoran Janković, the mayor of Ljubljana, established the Positive Slovenia party and won the national election. However, when he failed to create a majority coalition government, former Prime Minister Janez Janša, who had placed second at the national election with his Slovenian Democratic Party, formed a short-lived government. Broad popular protests against Janša's government and political and economic elites triggered a government crisis in January 2013, when the coalition collapsed and the new leader of Positive Slovenia, Alenka Bratušek, managed to form a majority government. In April 2014, Bratušek stepped down as prime minister due to rivalries in her party, which triggered an early election in July. The campaign was joined by several newcomers established just before the elections: Party of Miro Cerar, Alliance of Alenka Bratušek, United Left, Verjamem (I believe), and Solidarnost. The Party of Miro Cerar won the elections by a wide margin, reflecting Slovenian voters' desire for change, although the reserved new prime minister has pursued more moderate politics. One surprise of the last elections was the success of the United Left, which advocates a socialist economy. As we argue in more detail below, the rise of a socialist party would not have been imaginable before the corruption scandals, when Slovenia was seemingly on an exemplary path to a neoliberal future⁶ when everything linked to the country's socialist past was to be buried.

In January 2013 Politbarometer found that the public's mistrust of political institutions, especially the prime minister, the government, and parliament, had not experienced such a drop since 2000.

The whole system of representative democracy came under question. In Slovenia, two decades of independent statehood have seen the establishment of numerous political parties, whose power and public appeal have ebbed and flowed. However, rather than consolidating stable party politics with solid programs, the political elites seemed more interested in retaining power. Slovenia has therefore faced a regression of its political culture, accelerated by a deepening of the economic crisis, combined with passivity in reorganizing, democratizing, and reforming state institutions. Reports on the corruption, nepotism, fraud, crime, and other unethical behavior of representatives of the political and economic elite have recently been multiplying, and consequently eroding trust in basic democratic institutions. A Eurobarometer survey from February 2013 showed that only 47% of people in Slovenia thought that voting in national elections was an effective way to influence

political decisions, representing the lowest share in the EU, where the average was 70% (European Commission 2013). Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index detected the highest perception of corruption in Slovenia in 2013 in the last 10 years.

Mistrust in the democratic system rose to a level where sociopolitical change was seen as so essential that almost one-third of the respondents advocated a revolutionary change. Politbarometer posed the question: "Which of these is closest to your opinion?" Answers were: (1) revolutionary action is necessary to radically change the entire functioning of our society; (2) our society must be gradually improved by reforms; or (3) our society, as it is now, should be "vigorously defended against any changes." The resulting answers are shown in Figure 2. The majority of respondents (60%) chose "gradual reform," while a smaller but still substantial share (30%) chose revolutionary action and a radical change of society.

After the unrest, Politbarometer (July 2013) found a prevailing mistrust in traditional, parliamentary political parties, a commitment to deep structural reforms, and a genuine sympathy for the uprising movement.

Growing horizontal solidarity

Before we focus on how the economic and political crisis has affected Slovenian identity, we must look at other public sentiments that were developing against the background of the dwindling trust in political and economic elites. We argue that while vertical solidarity and identification with the elites diminished, solidarity among citizens was growing and, even more importantly, new forms of solidarity with the "Balkan Other" were gaining momentum.

First, there was the case of the Erased. As Učakar (2010) showed, the anti-Balkan discourse that laid the foundations for the Erasure had shifted by 2008. In opinion polls from



Figure 2. Public opinion on societal change. Source: Politbarometer (November 2013).

2006 to 2008, more than half of the respondents supported a Constitutional Court ruling in favor of the Erased to settle their citizenship (Politbarometer December 2008).

Second, as Vidmar Horvat and Učakar (2014) noted, the images of corrupt managers and politicians were accompanied by news of massive layoffs and the abuse of workers. Numerous stories came to light about bad working and living conditions of migrant workers. These were mainly people from the former Yugoslavia, living in extremely precarious situations, working overtime, and receiving less than minimum wage or not being paid at all. In the wider public, this caused general distrust in state institutions, which were unable (or unwilling) to create a society with good, well-paid jobs (Vidmar Horvat and Učakar 2014). The general belief that Slovenia was a country that respected human rights and cherished hard-working people was shaken.

As the public lost trust in political and economic elites, it did not splinter into factions and turn against migrant workers as job-stealers, as might have been expected. Instead, the plight of migrant workers became a symbol of poor working conditions for everyone (Vidmar Horvat and Učakar 2014). For instance, in 2011 a strike by crane operators at the Port of Koper was joined by a spontaneous walkout of workers employed by external providers of port services (*Stavka v Luki Koper* 2011). All the workers demanded a safe working environment, equal pay for equivalent work, equal rights for all workers, and the end of divisions among workers. In this sense, the strike fostered solidarity beyond divisions that mark a hierarchical labor market (*Stavka v Luki Koper* 2011). The strike's most important outcome was the commitment to sign a collective contract for all dock workers, regardless of whether they were directly employed by the port or by a subcontractor (*Stavka v Luki Koper* 2011).

As this case showed, fears of "Others" do not always increase during times of social insecurity. Contrary to some theorists' observations (Wimmer 1997; Delanty 2008; Brubaker 2011) that racism and xenophobia surface in wider society as a result of economic and social crises, it seemed that in Slovenia some new form of solidarity among workers was emerging. As Vidmar Horvat and Učakar (2014, 87) put it,

in transitional Slovene society, the prime time of xenophobia was when economic prosperity was on the rise, as was the promise of growth and development of society within the new contexts of the EU. Cultural rather than economic factors were turned into tools of exclusion and ethnic paranoia.

However, with the global economic crisis, numerous stories about mass violations of workers' rights and illegitimate layoffs were publicly revealed, and public sentiment shifted to the side of the most vulnerable, regardless of their ethnic origin. This does not mean the public suddenly became very pro-migrant; however, it did not blame migrant workers for the economic crisis or for the personal misfortune of individual Slovenian citizens, such as losing a job. The "Balkan Other" became the "Balkan Us." Slovenians were acting sympathetically with all the workers who had lost their jobs and blamed the corrupt political and economic elites for the poor economic situation of their country and the misery of the exploited workers.

Public opinion on the social conditions of workers (Politbarometer April 2008) drastically changed in the mid-2000s. In June 2006, 51% thought that the social situation of workers was worse than before the previous national elections in 2004, and 12% thought it was better. By February 2008, the share of those who thought the social situation of the workers was worse had risen to 73% and only 7% thought it was better than before 2004. This was a period of the public revelation of workers' exploitation in big construction companies, which led to great disbelief in the Slovenian success story from the 1990s.

Furthermore, the longitudinal all-national project Slovenian Public Opinion (Toš and Vovk 2014, 10), which also focused on Slovenian national identity, was detecting interesting shifts in national attitudes toward the “Balkan Other” as well. When asked whether legal migrants to Slovenia should have the same rights as Slovenian citizens, in 2003, 36.7% of respondents agreed and 43.8% disagreed. However in 2013, 50.2% of respondents agreed and 30.2% disagreed (Toš and Vovk 2014, 16).⁷ When asked how strong were the disputes between Slovenians and immigrants, the respondents in 2006 and in 2013 answered as shown in Table 1 (Toš and Vovk 2014, 35).

We can see that the exclusionary mindset that had paved the ground for Slovenian independence in the 1990s and was still current before the economic crisis had shifted after the public protests in 2013 toward a more open attitude toward immigrants, who before the 2015 refugee crisis were seen mainly as workers from the Balkans. From the answers to the two questions above, we cannot say that Slovenian society is fully accepting of multiculturalism and is completely tolerant toward foreigners, especially foreign labor. However, progress in accepting migrant workers from the Balkans is evident. Moreover, the perception of tensions between Slovenian citizens and immigrants changed from 2006, when the majority thought that there were conflicts, to 2013, when the majority thought there were almost no disputes or conflicts (if we interpret the answer “not very sharp” as “almost no disputes or conflict”).

After independence, Slovenia had to change from a one-party, self-managing socialist system to a Western capitalist system, and this shift represented a challenge for national identity. Yet the data show that the initial support for the capitalist model seen in the 1990s later dropped in favor of a more equal redistribution, solidarity, and equality. Since 1992 Politbarometer has measured people’s attitudes toward capitalism versus socialism with a question about whether the differences in personal income should be larger to encourage greater productivity or should be small. In 1992, almost 33% of the respondents thought income should be equal, while 35% thought that greater differences in personal income boosted productivity. Throughout the years, this ratio has been changing, and in 2008 almost two-thirds (64%) thought that income should be equal and only 14% believed that differences in income encouraged productivity (Figure 3).

Politbarometer (December 2008) measured a public sentiment that was loudly expressed in the mass uprisings of 2012, namely, deep disappointment with the state’s political and economic order, and a shift toward the former socioeconomic socialist system. A direction that would not have been imaginable before the crisis, due to the negative public narratives toward Yugoslavia, became a legitimate mainstream discourse after the crisis. After the protests, in July 2013, Politbarometer found that the idea of a new party for “solidarity and a social state” was supported by the majority (54%). Greater support for a socialist party was also expressed in the last elections of 2014, where the new United Left party entered parliament and was a surprise in national, local, and European elections.

Table 1. How strong are the disputes between Slovenian citizens and immigrants?

| | 2006 | 2013 |
|--------------------------|-------|-------|
| Very sharp | 11.1% | 3.5% |
| Sharp | 38.3% | 26.3% |
| Not very sharp | 41.0% | 49.2% |
| No disputes or conflicts | 5.5% | 12.1% |

Source: Slovenian Public Opinion, 2013 and Toš and Vovk, 2014.

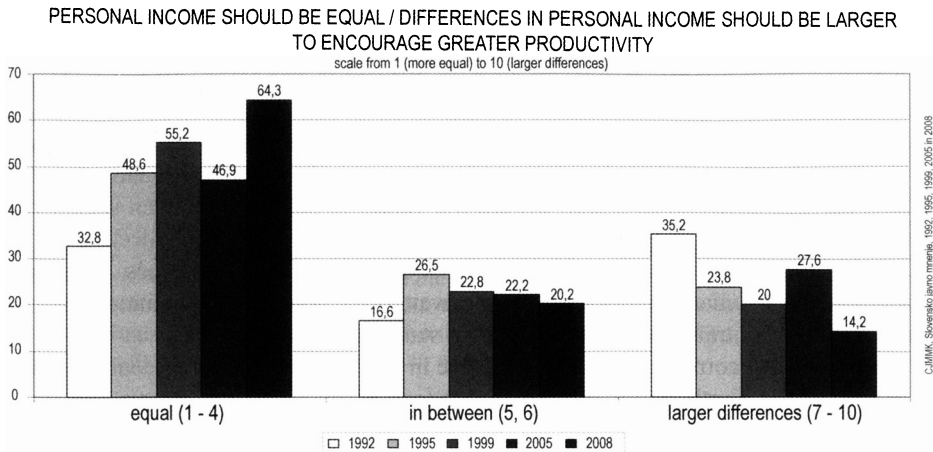


Figure 3. Support for equal or unequal personal income.
Source: Politbarometer (December 2008).

Shifting of European and Balkan identity traits in the Slovenian national identity

As we explained in the second section, after independence, Slovenian national identity was built around its positioning in Europe and in opposition to its Balkan vicinity and history. The elites (political and economic) were always linked to the European project and to Western values, while everything linked to the Balkans carried a pejorative connotation. But the vertical ties with the elites were significantly loosened by the economic and political crisis. And since the elites were representatives of the West and of European values, the public started to express a greater inclination toward the repressed identity traits of “brotherhood and unity” relevant in its Yugoslav history.

The public perception of Slovenia was that it had come “back to the Balkans,” since problems of crime and corruption were seen as part of the Balkan identity, not a European one. Citizens sought a change in the whole political apparatus, to establish a new framework for a national identity that would embrace their own values and moral standards. The political and economic crisis damaged not only the vertical ties, but also the nation’s self-esteem. According to Slovenian Public Opinion (Toš and Vovk 2014, 10), Slovenians expressed a significant drop in attachment to their country, but also to their hometown, region, Europe, and the whole world from 2003 to 2013, while the biggest fall was in the category of attachment to Slovenia. The number of those claiming to be very attached to Slovenia fell from 48% in 1994 to 46% in 2003 and 35% in 2013 (Toš and Vovk 2014, 10).

A significant decline in respect for the country and the dignity of the Slovenian identity can also be detected by other questions and answers. For example, the respondents had to say to what degree they agreed with these statements:

- (1) There are certain facts regarding contemporary Slovenia that embarrass me.
- (2) Slovenia is generally better than most other countries.

On the first statement, from 1994 to 2013 most answers moved from disagreeing to agreeing or strongly agreeing, while the opposite happened regarding the second statement (Toš and Vovk 2014). The prevailing opinion that Slovenia was better than most other countries in the 1990s had declined by 2013. From 1992 to 2003, the share of very

proud Slovenians was never below 53%, but in 2003 it fell to 48.6%. The share of those who were not very proud grew from 2.7% in 2003 to 8.5% in 2013, and those who were not proud at all from 0.9% in 2003 to 2.8% in 2013 (Toš and Vovk 2014, 17). In such an environment, it is normal that the nation would search for new identity traits. The 2012 protests not only demonstrated public dissatisfaction with those seen as responsible for the crisis, but they also tried to salvage the community's moral worth and reputation. Opinion surveys have shown a shift toward the values of solidarity or even socialism in the past few years. A nostalgic look back at socialist times when a firm collective identity was a given, compared with an atomized capitalist order based on loose values, is causing a redefinition of Slovenian identity, but we must wait to see how the new political elites will balance the identity traits and construct a more stable social order.

Protests against corrupt elites also took place in other former Yugoslav countries (Štiks and Horvat 2015). Furthermore, during the floods in Serbia as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2014, solidarity in the Balkans, including Slovenia, proved to be a new connecting element (Bancroft 2015). There were also some signs of solidarity by humanitarian groups in the face of the 2015 refugee crisis. We have not seen a rise in xenophobia, but rather a quest for lost "brotherhood and unity."

Conclusion

After the country's independence in 1991, Slovenian national identity passed through several stages. First, defining itself as non-Balkan and a "superior" European identity helped to gain legitimacy for Slovenian independence. The "superior" European identity prompted many human rights violations that occurred after independence, of which the Erased is but one. Second, EU membership confirmed the European identity of Slovenia and Slovenians as a progressive, hard-working, honest nation. Third, this self-perception crumbled when the economic crisis unearthed anomalies of the post-socialist transition, with many corruption scandals that led up to the very top of the political pyramid and shifted the national identity back to the negative perception of an essentialized Balkan identity.

Public attitudes toward politics and democracy in general changed after the economic crisis broke out. General mistrust of democracy and politics rose substantially after the 2008 parliamentary elections, where only new parties won and a new socialist party entered parliament, which would have been unthinkable before the profound crisis of Slovenian national identity.

Although a certain historical distance is needed to show significant shifts in national identities, we can still see changes in Slovenian society's perception of shared values: a growing discontent with the governing elites and democracy, and a rising sense of solidarity, especially toward the working class. Because the wider public could identify with the migrant workers who had been exploited by their managers in the same way as Slovenian society had been exploited by its elite, the general sentiment was more sympathetic to the abused "Balkan Other."

Notes

1. For the first free elections in 1990, the Communist Party chose the slogan Europe Now!
2. The protests began on 15 October 2011, and then continued by "occupying" the Ljubljana Stock Exchange.
3. The so-called 150 movement's slogan was "We are not goods in the hands of banks and politicians" (see <http://www.njetwork.org/Nismo-bлаго-v-rokah-bank-in>). As one of the reasons

- why it did not gain wider public support, Jereb (2011) argues that the form of protest was imported from abroad and thus failed to match the specific context of Slovenia. For more on the Erasure, see Dedić, Jalušič, and Zorn (2003) and Zorn and Čebren (2008).
4. Politbarometer is a poll conducted by The Public Opinion and Mass Communication Research Center (CJMMK) at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana since 1996.
 5. After 2008 Politbarometer included questions about the influence of the economic crisis on people's life and work.
 6. During the transition period, Slovenia was the slowest of the 10 Central and Eastern European candidate states to adopt a neoliberal economic system, with key firms remaining in the state's hands. Under EU pressure successive governments have carried out privatizations over the past decade, which have not been very popular with the Slovenian electorate.
 7. Since 2015 and the mass migration from the Middle East to Europe along the "Balkan route," many refugees and migrants have crossed Slovenia. As a consequence, many Slovenians no longer think of migrants solely as Balkan migrant workers.

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