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Slovenia

# A wave of xenophobia and intolerance

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### **IV: A demonstration against xenophobia has been organised in Ljubljana on February 2001. Could you explain the reasons for that demonstration?**

**AK:** Last year in Slovenia we faced a huge wave of xenophobia and intolerance against immigrants. This sentiment, that could be felt in general public opinion and mood, was in reality the result of state policies on immigration.

Namely, the state was, and still is, dealing with the problem of migration and illegal immigrants in an exclusively repressive manner. Illegal immigration is regarded as a state (national) security problem and not as a social and political problem that has to be seen and treated in the context of becoming part of a world economy in the process of globalisation of production and exchange.

The whole problem was left in the hands of the police, who became the exclusive interpreter of the problem. A very dangerous alliance of police and media was established that saw the illegal immigrants as criminals, disease bearers and almost a contagious danger.

The result of all this was the xenophobic mood that legitimated the police excesses (from the killing of an Iranian citizen at the border to awful mistreatment of immigrants that were apprehended) and produced fertile soil for a fascist movement and for the establishment or reinforcement of a radical neo-fascist political force.

The situation became and still is very dangerous, especially if one is familiar with the Slovene situation. First of all, in the last ten years there have been tendencies to politicise and instrumentalise the repressive apparatuses. This was the case in the army and the same is true for the police. Some political forces on the right are trying to establish their base in these institutions.

The director of the Slovene police acts in the same manner. He tries to avoid any conflict with his subordinates and tries to unify the police against the minister of interior, government and so on. At the same time he is trying to present police not as a professional institution but as the force of the nation and ally of the common Slovene people.

Secondly, we must take into consideration the socio-economic structure of Slovenia that was established in the last ten years. Slovenia more and more survives on the transfers and financial flows of the global economy.

On the ideological and political level it is seen in the aggressive emphasis on a Central European identity (Mittel Europa) and in the adoption as development models of states such as Switzerland, Austria, Luxembourg, Liechtenstein, Singapore and similar. Such a parasitic socio-economic structure is the real nursery for xenophobia and intolerance.

The resources are limited and static and every newcomer (foreigner) is a threat for the existing privileges. By the way, Slovenia's prime minister for the last eleven years (Janez Drnovšek) is a professional accountant. So Slovenia is a very good environment for the Bossi [Northern Italian right-wing separatist - ed.] or Haider [Austrian far-right leader - ed.] type of nationalism. Obviously the vacuum was too dangerous so we had to intervene.

### **IV: What were the groups and organisations that participated in this demonstration and what were the demands that were made?**

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**AK:** The demonstration was organised by the Office for Interventions, the body for co-ordination of different activist energies. OFI is a Slovene experiment whose aim is to co-ordinate the small leftist groups and individuals that do not find a place in the contemporary Slovene political space. That space is completely colonised by political parties that structure and homogenise it through grand stories on which they build a false conflict and dynamics that helps them to control and divide the society. Such grand stories as about World War II, and resistance fighters and collaborationists, liberal values against conservative based in Catholic doctrine, and so forth.

What is common to both blocks is Slovene nationalism, the 'end of history' [absence of ideological contestation - ed.], attachment to the market economy, free trade and [labour market] flexibility, admission to NATO and the European Union.

OFI co-ordinates those forces that are antagonist to this fundamental consensus, on which the Slovene social and political space is organised, structured and controlled to the benefit of a new economic, social and political elite. Currents that are present in OFI are those from the 1980s (organisations and individuals that bear the new sensibility that appeared in those years and are disappointed by the way things were codified and developed. These are people and organisations from the peace movement; those who are fighting for the rights of women, homosexuals and the disabled) and the new currents that evolved from the international movement against capitalist globalisation.

There are also those who appertain to "timeless currents", such are the anarchists. So the demonstration was a mixture of different currents and different sensibilities. Their common point is their exclusion from power and the demonstration was meant to be the medium for those who, thanks to their exclusion from power, cannot express themselves otherwise. Through this we built our solidarity with immigrants that are caught and imprisoned because of the simple fact that they are dreaming of a better world.

What is, in my opinion, the most important thing was the fact that we managed to organise a demonstration that was international and that had a clear political message. There was a considerable international presence: from Austria, Croatia and especially from Italy with a contingent of 200 members of Ya Basta! [direct action group best known for its uniform of white overalls and confrontation with the police - ed.].

In this way we managed to leave the terrain of philanthropy by stressing the connection between the organisation of capitalism and control over global capital flows and by declaring and experiencing the new type of citizenship - planetary citizenship.

### **IV: What were the reactions of public opinion and the newspapers? What has been the response of the government to these demands?**

**AK:** The Slovene media tried to marginalise the demonstration. Some of them were talking about 300 protesters (in reality there were about 2,500 protesters) and they sent journalists that have no skills in covering such events and such problems. So they were talking about the demonstration as if it was a kind of public festival and not a serious political event that is going to (in the long run of course) change the political landscape in Slovenia.

The fact that the media marginalised the demonstration is in line with the role and self-perception of the media in Slovenia. They understand themselves as the initiators of events (they have the impression that they decide what is going to happen and what is happening). On the other hand they are completely integrated in the power structure in Slovenia. So they did not really understand the event, because it was produced outside the existing political space in which they play a considerable role.

What has to be recalled is the fact that we claimed that the media were responsible for the xenophobic mood in the

public by their non-professionalism and uncritical collaboration with the police. So the dislike is mutual. Now, after the demonstration, the media are trying to make up for what they have missed. So now they are regularly dealing with the issue of immigration. While this is a forward step, it is still only a small step because the media's treatment of this issue is to make trite observations about it.

The government responded to our demands for open borders, universal rights and planetary citizenship by even harder repression of immigrants. New police forces at the border, an even harder regime in the detention centres for immigrants and aggravation of the conditions and chances of immigrants and asylum seekers in Slovenia with a regressive change in the law on asylum. They also want to prevent such demonstrations as ours happening again by a new restrictive law on public gatherings.

#### **IV: What danger does a reinforcement of repression represent for the different social forces of Slovene society?**

**AK:** Immigration is the field in which the repressive police apparatus is growing and is becoming more and more brutal. Its practices are hidden from the eyes of the public. In dealing with illegal immigrants the police are developing a conduct that has nothing to do with the values of human rights and dignity.

On the systemic level the police have gained a huge space of discretion, so it is practically out of any political or civil control. This apparatus, brutalised in this grey zone is going to be sooner or later used against other levels of society.

At the border areas (especially with Croatia) a police state is being established. Under the pretext of the control of migration flows the police develop new tactics of surveillance, denunciation, information that are going to be useful in the control of the whole society.

It is obvious that the conflict between immigrants and local inhabitants is produced artificially. The state and media manufactures a discourse on illegal immigrants as a threat to national security in order to hide the real danger.

This is the anti-social neo-liberal politics that managed to dismantle the social state and to reduce individuals into commodities that can be sold for the profit of their owners. The spread of xenophobia in the Slovene public is functional for the Slovene economical-political elite. One must know that Slovenia is in the last phase of its economic restructuring. This is the last stage in establishing the market economy. This process requires the further flexibility of work, privatisation of all those sectors that are still in public hands, and liberalisation of the agricultural market. All these correspond to the procedure for admission to the European Union. We can expect some level of social conflict in those processes.

I already mentioned the response of the government in the adoption of the new (quite repressive) law on public gatherings. This law is going to prevent any serious attempts to resist the final phase of establishing the market economy.

This law forbids any demonstration that would be held near the buildings of state and political power or would disrupt public transport and it gives discretionary powers to the police to intervene, ban, charge, and punish in the course of a demonstration.

#### **IV: Isn't it contradictory that a regime which has been installed after huge demonstrations for democracy, which resulted in the settlement of a so called democratic system of government, is building a repressive apparatus which the former regime was unable to use?**

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**AK:** A critical assessment of the so-called democratic changes in the 1980s and in the beginning of 1990s has not yet been made. There is a lot of mystification, a combination of national mythology and the ideology of parliamentary democracy. No analyses of social and political forces that were active in these days, and no analyses of the material transformation of society in past two decades have been done.

Well, it is obvious that the previous regime (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) lost its capacity to mediate the social conflict. New channels to direct those conflicts were established. They were transformed into ethno-national conflict.

In other parts of former Yugoslavia these new ways to mediate conflicts and antagonisms were completely devastating. In Slovenia they proved to be functional, even successful. Slovenia was successfully transformed into a parliamentary democracy; it adjusted its economical and social space to the world market with success. I mean "successfully" in the sense that there was almost no resistance to it and that repression was not really needed.

What one can notice lately in Slovenia is that the consensus or rather hegemony that ruled in Slovenia for the last decade is slowly fading away. You cannot build hegemony on the danger of Serbian nationalism and on the need to enter the EU and NATO forever. So the state propaganda (especially pro-EU and NATO) is more and more aggressive and brutal. All this shows the erosion and emptiness of governing consensus. The crisis of hegemony means more repression, more force.

### **IV: What is the role of the EU?**

**AK:** The EU is applying enormous pressure on the states that are candidates for its membership. It wants them to stop immigration through its borders. So these countries assume the role of buffer zones. There is also a lot of blackmailing in this.

These states are supposed to apply the Schengen (pact for harmonisation of entry and movement of visa nationals - ed.) regime on their borders with third countries even before they have become members of the EU. This leads to the situation that in Slovenia we are encircled by the Schengen wall. There is a Schengen border between Slovenia and Italy, between Slovenia and Austria, and a "self-imposed" one between Slovenia and Croatia.

In the last case the situation is very painful. This was once one state and this border really cuts into relations between people on the both side of the border.

Those who live in the border area meet ever more vigorous police surveillance and harassment but for the EU, as the Italian and German interior ministers recently stated, this border is still not European.

### **IV: Which future do you see for Slovenian society in terms of civic, social and economical rights?**

**AK:** As I have already said, Slovenia is now in the last phase of structural adjustment to the regime of the market economy. Through this process we expect aggravation of living conditions of those parts of society that were not yet targeted by market reforms; particularly small peasants who will not survive Slovenia entering into the European agriculture market. In the process a lot of small peasants are going to be proletarianised.

We also expect further labour market flexibility. Here the majority of the work has already been done. Considering the corporate structure of the regime (political control of unions and peasants' organisations) we do not expect any serious resistance to these processes.

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The real political task in Slovenia is to organise an antagonistic (political) subject that will have to be founded in the new type of citizenship. The ideological apparatus of the state managed to construct the organic link between Slovene nation and capitalism (history began with the new state and so on), between citizenship and a democracy whose real aim is a market economy. This is a deadlock for any resistance.

The good news is that the recent events we were talking about show a gap in this construction. Of course we are still very far from the day when we could say that the regime is in crisis. But in the case of immigration its vulnerability is clear. Migration in the context of globalisation, the fact that they want to stop it regardless of the level of repression, these are the real threats to the social and political equilibrium of the system.

People that are coming from all around the world, demanding their social and political rights independently of their ethnic origin and race, represent the imminent change of citizenship, of social and political existence.

We hope that when the time comes we are going to be strong enough to resist the new reactionary mechanisms to mediate antagonisms and to live under massively new forms of economic, social and political life, which are going to be founded in respect of universal rights. The 1980s must not happen again.