



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Slovenia external relations briefing:**

### **Carinthian plebiscite, where the Slovenes stand a hundred years later**

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# **Carinthian plebiscite, where the Slovenes stand a hundred years later**

## **Introduction**

*Due to German nationalism and the inequality of Carinthian Slovenes and the Slovenian language, the Slovenian minority in Austria experienced strong assimilation and their numbers shrank sharply; the logic of the strongest won. In 2013, when Social Democratic Party again became the largest party in Austria, the Slovene minority got a more sympathetic provincial governor, Peter Kaiser, who succeeded the Conservative Gerhard Dörfler. In his inaugural speech, he also said a few words in Slovenian, demonstrating his cooperative approach to the problem. Although the climate in Carinthia has improved, after a century the obligations Austria has to fulfill remain unfulfilled.*

## **One hundred years of Germanisation of the Slovene population**

This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the Carinthian plebiscite, an unusually long-lasting phenomenon that has shaped the history of Carinthian Slovenes. The celebration will certainly be accompanied by many fine words about living together as equals. Carinthian Slovenes - those who still exist as a political community with a national consciousness - wonder whether the celebration of the anniversary is appropriate at all. Before that, the promises from the 1920s should have been fulfilled; or what was already agreed in 1955; and last but not least, in the 2011 Memorandum.

Before the plebiscite, Slovenes were explicitly promised national protection, and it was solemnly promised that the Republic of Austria and the province of Carinthia would be an equal home for German and Slovenian speaking citizens; how the country would forever protect the ethnic and linguistic idiosyncrasies of its Slovenian compatriots.

Regardless of the result of October 10, 1920 - 59.1 percent of voters voted for Austria, 40.9 percent for the Kingdom of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs - there was a clear majority in the then Slovenian-speaking population of Southern Carinthia who wanted to retain their affiliation to the Slovenian community. From the very beginning, extreme right-wing German nationalism

interpreted the results in terms of its impatient ideology that Carinthian Slovenes decided to belong not only to modern Austria and not to the Kingdom of Slovenes, Croats and Serb, but also to Germany.

When Carinthia voted for Austria and not for Yugoslavia in a plebiscite a hundred years ago, a tenth of the Slovenian nation remained on the other side of the border. The German nationalist program ensured that in 1920 only 65,000 Slovenes were still living in Carinthia, Austria, and the subsequent denationalization was even more successful; today, according to official figures, only 13,000 Slovenes live there. The situation is much worse than for minorities elsewhere in Europe, not to mention the case of South Tyrol, where the number of members of the minority has even increased. This is happening in Austria, a country that strongly supports the protection of minorities at universal level, but in its domestic policy everything is different, it does not interpret international obligations towards the Slovenian community in the same way.

### **Austrian legal culture is made possible by subordinate Slovenian politics**

The Austrian State Treaty for the Re-establishment of an Independent and Democratic Austria (AST) is the international legal basis of Slovene-Austrian relations. It contains obligations towards the Slovene minority which were imposed by the victors of the Second World War in 1955. Austria has still not complied with them - on the contrary, it is lowering the level of protection provided for in Article 7 of the Treaty in its national law. Official Ljubljana does not talk about it, its pragmatic position is that it is not good to upset Vienna by notifying the succession of the Austrian State Treaty.

Article 7 of the Austrian State Treaty defines a uniform standard of protection throughout the bilingual territory, but in fact there are very different categories of Carinthian Slovenes. The well-known lawyer Rudi Vouk has produced an analysis that confirms 20 categories: issues ranging from pre-school education to public bilingualism and the media.

However, when the Slovenian community demands the fulfillment of minority rights, it often hears that this is too much of a burden for the German part of the population. Their rights remain unfulfilled because the Slovene minority can apparently get at most as many as the German majority can bear. Unfulfilled promises to the Slovene minority have accompanied Austrian-Slovene relations- formerly Yugoslavian - since the 1920 plebiscite.

One clear example of non-compliance with the Treaty is the placement of bilingual signs, although it should be noted that the situation in Carinthia is also a reflection of the disinterest of the home country. Slovenia clearly does not perceive the ethnic community across the border as its constitutive, inalienable part. Of all minorities - Slovenes in Italy and in the Porabje region - Slovenia was most step-motherly towards Carinthian Slovenes, and its interest in the minority has declined considerably since independence. After all, it was willing to take less than it deserved. The agreement written into the constitutional law years ago provided for around 160 bilingual signs, whereas according to the Austrian State Treaty, 800 of these were to be erected. The example of the village of Sele clearly shows what politics in Carinthia is like.

The agreement on the regulation of bilingual place-name signs from 2011 also contains a so-called openness clause. With the clearly expressed will of the inhabitants, even villages that were not included in the "compromise" of 164 signs can receive bilingual signs. The retired headmaster of the school in Žitara vas, Franc Kukovica, took the openness clause seriously, collected the signatures of the majority of the inhabitants of his home village Sele, but could not convince the mayor, Jakob Strauss. The efforts to get bilingual local signs have degenerated into a judicial ordeal.

### **Has the atmosphere in Carinthia really improved for the Slovenes?**

The *Carinthian heimatdienst*, a collective organization of German nationalism whose main motive is to work against the Slovene minority, used the coming October 10th for a propaganda film that evokes nothing but revulsion. The situation of the national community in Carinthia itself is hopeless, and the prevailing opinion among the minorities is that the situation is devastating. The extermination of the Slovenes continues, the Slovenes are being decimated, Slovenian is disappearing as a colloquial language in families, it is little heard and little visible in public use. Carinthian Slovenes would need the constructive support of their home country, but Slovenia has no cross-boarder strategy. It does not even seem that the Slovenian state would feel like a protector of Carinthian Slovenes.

The prolog to the Carinthian plebiscite autumn was indicated by the visit of Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz to Slovenia in September. They spoke with the host, Prime Minister Janez Janša, about the cooperation of both countries in the pandemic and the fight against illegal

migration. Austria, which is a strong economic partner and the first foreign investor here - the economic relations with Slovenia are of great benefit - learned from Prime Minister that the official Ljubljana is preparing measures to reduce bureaucracy that will accelerate foreign investment.

During his visit the Chancellor mentioned the "plebiscite gift". It is not clear what exactly he had in mind when he said that Carinthia could promise itself a gift before the anniversary year. But minorities already know: the plebiscite donation is the amount of money given here and there by the Austrian Republic, Carinthian municipalities and mayors spend it on the improvement of the road infrastructure and the like. For Slovenian cultural institutions in Carinthia there is seldom anything left over.

However, the high-ranking guest said nothing about the fulfillment of the Austrian State Treaty, Article 7, which lays down the rights of the Slovene minority in Carinthia and Styria, and these obligations have still not been fully implemented. And the big question is whether Slovenian Prime Minister reminded him of this, even though their working meeting and the Chancellor's first visit abroad after February extended into the informal part and ended with him showing friendly relations that simulate Slovenianess at its best by climbing the highest Slovenian mountain Triglav.

During his visit to Ljubljana, however, Kurz did not forget to mention the members of the German-speaking community in Slovenia. For them, Austria is increasingly demanding that they be recognized as a minority.

Austria paid close attention to the issue of the "Old Austrians" immediately after the diplomatic recognition of Slovenia, but approached the matter cautiously and gradually. On the Austrian side, members of the German-speaking ethnic group in Slovenia were usually referred to as *Volksdeutsche*s, while the historian of the University of Ljubljana, Professor Dušan Nećak, treated them as "Germans" and defined them as "remnants of remnants". In silence, the issue became part of a bilateral dialog, although the local public only learned of the final demands in 1997. In 2001 the two countries concluded a cultural agreement to ensure the use of the language and the preservation of national identity. Austria has not made use of this, but is exerting increasing pressure for recognition of the minority.

## **Conclusions**

For Slovenia, a varied year of anniversaries related to relations with its neighbors is on the horizon. Like the centenary of the Carinthian plebiscite, this year was also marked by the recent commemoration of the centenary of the burning of the Slovenian National Hall in Trieste, Italy. Another sad story of tensions between the majority population in Italy and the Slovene minority. Their position in Italy is not an example either. New traces of nationalism, which is on the rise all over Europe, are clearly visible, and it is increasingly affecting the rights and lives of members of the Slovene minority.