



Weekly Briefing

**Slovenia political briefing:
Celebrations of the 30 years of independence
and the related political debates**

Helena Motoh


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Celebrations of the 30 years of independence and the related political debates

Summary

At the end of June, Slovenia is celebrating 30 years since its founding by the proclamation of independence from the former Socialist Federative republic of Yugoslavia in 1991. Although a reason for celebration, the anniversary also brought about debates on the roles current political leaders and parties played in the independence movement and attempts to appropriate the struggle for independence and the positive results thereof.

History and background

Although the independence of Slovenia happened against the backdrop of many other similar political and societal developments in Eastern and Central Europe at the turn of the ninety-nineties – notably the fall of the Berlin Wall, Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and the fall of the Romanian regime – this international context represented only a part of its complex history. The interior developments and the growing critical civil society and cultural movements contributed a great deal of intellectual and societal basis, upon which the political independence movement was formed in the late 1980s. The situation in Yugoslavia was progressively tense as well since the passing of its long-term president, Josip Broz-Tito in May 1980. The replacing structure of the rotating presidency along with the growing nationalist orientations of the new generations of the Yugoslav League of Communists' leaderships in the separate states made the divisions along the lines of nationality/ethnicity much more prominent. Two models of solving the tensions collided: the centralist model, where the federation structures would become more centralized or at least the federal-level structures would keep to their power, and the (con)federalist model, where the separate states ("republics") of Yugoslavia would become more independent of the central policies and organs. With the harsh economic crisis in the early eighties, the distribution of budget and the fiscal and economic policies became a heated issue as well. In 1989 the Slovenian parliament adopted amendments to the constitution, allowing for the gradual change from a one-party system to a multi-party system and the self-determination principle. For Slovenia, the deciding shift was made at the

14th Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in January 1990, where the Slovenian delegation proposed their vision of the reforms: human rights, multi-party system and direct elections, freedom of speech and abolishment of the verbal delict, reform of the federation etc. Faced with harsh opposition, the Slovenian delegation decided to leave the congress, followed by the Croatian delegation, effectively ending the united rule of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. A number of political parties and movements were established in a year between 1989 and early 1990. First political party, Slovenian Peasant Union, was followed by Slovenian Democratic Union (SDZ), Social-Democratic Union of Slovenia (SDZS), Slovenian Christian Democrats (SKD), Green Party of Slovenia (ZS) and Party of Craft and Small Business (SPOS). At the first democratic elections in April 1990 these parties joined in a “democratic coalition” (DEMOS). The pro-reform Communist Youth League was reorganized into a political party (later: Liberal party) as well as the reform-oriented part of the League of Communists of Slovenia who were renamed into Democratic Reform Party. DEMOS coalition won the elections and the first government was sworn in May 1990. The very high turnout of the first elections (83.5%) was repeated at the vote for independence, the referendum that took place on December 23rd 1990, where 95% of the 93.2% turnout decided for independence. The remaining half year until the independence was scheduled to be declared was marked by increasing insecurity and political tensions, caused by the threats from the side of the central government and military leadership in Belgrade. Declaration of Independence was adopted in the Parliament on June 25th 1991. The independence ceremony in the Square of the Revolution (now: Square of the Republic) took place the following evening, on June 26th, followed by ten days of military conflict between the Yugoslav People’s Army and the newly established Slovenian army, then called “Territorial Defence”, ending in a cease-fire and the Brioni agreement in early July 1991.

The continuity and discontinuity of the 1990s political situation

While the independence struggle and the resulting establishment of an independent Slovenian state is generally viewed as a positive chapter in the nation’s history, the inner struggles of the political elites of the present in many ways still go back to the developments of the early 1990s. Many of the strongest political parties of today are heirs to the early political parties, claiming or denying the continuity when opportune. The currently leading Slovenian Democratic Party of Janez Janša is heir to the Slovenian social democratic party, which was a changing union of two political strains – the trade-unionist social democratic faction and the democratic faction (later also temporarily as democratic party) which stressed human rights

and liberal democracy. The initial clear Social Democratic character of the party was reverted in early 2000s, when the party started positioning itself further and further towards the right side of the political spectrum. Other current parties go back to their 1990s counterparts as well, New Slovenia being the heir of the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats tracing their heritage back to the Democratic Reform Party etc. At 30-years anniversary the continuity or alleged continuity of Slovenian political relations is very important for many of the current leading politicians also on the personal level. Young political leaders in 1991, many of the current protagonists came to the front in 1990 and 1991 and have – at the upcoming end of their political careers – a prominent interest to tell an edited and perhaps simplified story of their political involvement in the independence process. Among the prominent political leader of this generation, we find the ministers of the first government and members of the first parliament. Then a protagonist of the liberal wing of the Communist Youth League, Borut Pahor, is today the president of Slovenia, while another former Communist Youth League member (by then already a Slovenian Democratic Union member) and the minister of Defence in the first government, Janez Janša, is now the Prime Minister. Lojze Peterle, then the leader of the Christian Democrats and the Prime Minister of the first government, is now Slovenian member of the European Parliament. Several other protagonists of the first government are being brought back to high positions under the current government, for example Jelko Kacin, the Minister for Information in the first government, who has been given two consecutive leading positions during the Covid-19 epidemic. Dimitrij Rupel, the first government's Foreign Minister, and Igor Bavčar, then the Minister of Interior, but now in prison for corporate crimes, have started reappearing in public functions under the current government. The trend that has been dubbed in media as the rehabilitation of the “independence” generation, however, also includes the intentions of presenting a desired view and an edited version of the independence movement and the following ten-days-war. While attempts such as establishing the Museum of Independence have been made earlier, the 30-year anniversary of the independence provides an opportunity to re-tell the history of the very complex and multi-faceted series of political and social events in early 1990s. Several important episodes of the independence process were remembered recently in a series of public ceremonies. At the end of May, two events were celebrated on the same day with the leading politicians eventually split between the two. One was organized by the 1990-1992 Prime Minister Lojze Peterle, as a meeting of the members of the first government in Brdo. The location was chosen as Brdo was the meeting place of the DEMOS coalition in April 1991, where the final decision for independence was allegedly made. The choice of the date for the celebration was not explained, but collided with another ceremony in Maribor, which was attended by Prime Minister Janša, who thus did not join the Brdo

ceremony. The ceremony in Maribor remembered the beginning of military conflict between the Yugoslav People's Army and the newly established Slovenian army in May 1991, where the army pressed for the Slovenian army to close down the training centre resulting in kidnapping of a Slovene military officer and death of a local resident, deliberately ran over by a Yugoslav military tank during the following demonstrations. A clear preference was made by the current government to stress the military side of the independence struggle more than its political or civil society aspects, having commemorated primarily the significant military developments in the Ten Days' War. Perhaps the most widely debated of the many ceremonies, however, was the main official ceremony on the Square of the Republic on the evening of June 25th. The celebration, which also marked the beginning of Slovenian presidency of the Council of the European Union split the political circles. Virtually all opposition parties and prominent former high-level politicians boycotted the celebration, while Milan Kučan, the first president of Slovenia, attended but publicly displayed the emblem of the Cyclists' protest movement. The Friday (Cyclists') protest movement organized a parallel almost 10,000 people demonstration at Ljubljana main square, dubbing it the Alternative celebration.

Conclusions

Despite virtually all speakers at the many celebrations of the 30th anniversary of Slovenian independence were keen on stressing the unity and cooperation as key elements of the independence struggle, the reality of a completely split political scene in Slovenia reminds us that the independence process was a far more complex and multi-faceted process than the contemporary edited versions would have the public believe. This also serves as a reminder that the continuities and discontinuities of the current political elites with those of the early 1990s still largely shape the political reality of Slovenia today.