

Local Politics, Personal Emotions: Support for Civic Action in Slovenia

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Introduction

“I am very sad and angry” (*Zelo sem žalosten in jezen*). To individuals outside of postsocialist Slovenia, this invocation of personal emotions may have an unusual ring as a statement used in local politics. Yet in the late summer of 2000, in Ljubljana, Slovenia, a very masculine-looking actor in his late forties opened the question-and-commentary session at a press conference dealing with potential restoration work to a local monument with this very thought. The invoking of personal emotions in public life, as by Peter—this actor¹—in regard to a Baroque fountain, occurred fairly frequently in the summer of 2000 among male members of a local civic group that sought change in city politics. The phenomenon of the use of personal emotions in Slovenian local politics took on a key role for this group’s very successful involvement in local politics. Their popular discourse on, and practice of, invoking personal emotions in civic political activity formed an integral part of their mobilizing, multi-faceted, postsocialist conception of “national character” in order to muster popular support.

What does it take to galvanize a postsocialist society into action? Given Slovenian civil society’s ten-year track record of general reluctance to engage in politics, what does a local NGO in postsocialist Slovenia need to mobilize the local population for its cause? Judging by events in the summer of 2000, these needs can be most easily met by raising an issue large enough to suggest a conflation of personal and national identity, through the contemporary dynamics between “appropriate” emotions, the conception of national identity, and personal sense of self.

The story noted above occurred during the culmination of a civic group’s work in the capital city of Ljubljana to rescue the fountain, known as *Robbov vodnjak*, from contested remote-site conservation work by governmental preservation agencies. When Slovenian governmental preservation bodies reintroduced a 1982 plan to relocate the Robbov fountain to a new wing of the National Gallery, concerned local residents formed a civic group to put a halt to this proposal. Their group, *Civilna iniciativa za ohranitev Robbovega vodnjaka* [Civil Initiative for the Preservation of the Robbov Fountain], began its efforts by lobbying various governmental agencies. Initially a group of allied individuals, predominantly men active in the intellectual cultural sphere, this association expanded its circle in the summer to involve local residents, including Peter, the actor. The Robbov fountain issue took on some

controversy due to the fact that the plan was proposed and was implemented by governmental preservation agencies, including the *Uprava za varstvo kulturne dediscine* and *Restavratorski center RS*, although the heated debate overtly concerned questions of professional competence, not politics.

With training in architectural conservation and related professional interests, I was intrigued by the subject matter. The Robbov Fountain is not difficult to defend, thanks to its remarkable characteristics. Standing in the center of the old town, between St. Nicholas Cathedral and City Hall, the Fountain is a *chef d'oeuvre* of the Venetian school of Baroque sculpture. Its remarkable characteristics have drawn admiration over the centuries and even inspired Napoleon I to consider exporting it to France as loot from his newly established Illyrian Provinces.

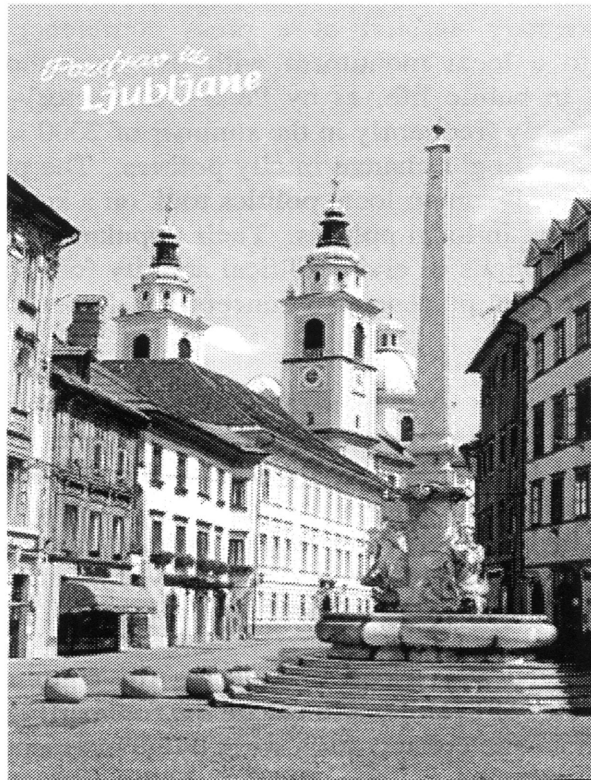


Fig.1: *Mestni trg* (Town Market Square) and *Robbov vodnjak* (The Robba Fountain) in Ljubljana, Slovenia, as portrayed on a 1990s Slovenian postcard.

The *Robbov vodnjak* boasts unique characteristics in its iconography, artistic execution, historical presence during 250 years, and its continuing role in everyday citizens' lives. The stunning fountain was created as the new city fountain in 1751 by the well-known Baroque sculptor and architect, Francesco Robba. Like its counterpart in Rome's Piazza Navona, its centerpiece includes three larger-than-life male figures that symbolize three heavenly rivers and also possibly three rivers in Slovenia; the three statues, made of precious Carrera marble, rise out of a limestone basin that is filled with fantastic creatures spouting water (Komelj 2000). Above this scene, a high limestone obelisk extends towards the sky, and is topped by an apple-shaped feature.

The Robbov fountain is also a masterpiece of intricate iconography that is expressed in its overall physical forms, as well as in several layers of symbolism. Physically, the shape of its basin, two interlinking triangles, mirrors the city's seal. On the symbolic level, the fountain's iconography includes a complex interplay of doubles—as in the two triangles of the basin—and triads. A triad of mini-fountains surrounds each of the three figures, which also display a binary interplay between the masculine and the feminine. The fountain's intricate iconography is mirrored in its architectural role in the downtown area. Its creator, city architect Francesco Robba styled the fountain to stand precisely between the Cathedral and the Renaissance-era City Hall, at the intersection of three main streets in *Mestni trg* Square, making it visible from several vantage points. As interpreted by Zorko and Rozic, the fountain links the sacred and the secular through its obelisk, which stands between the Cathedral's two spires (Zorko 2000). Since its completion in 1751, all major urban planning work has respected the fountain's key role in the overall urban composition of downtown Ljubljana (Fister 2000). Today the *Robbov vodnjak* monument, the older of these two central monuments, counterbalances the statue of France Preseren, a Slovenian national poet, and together they physically and symbolically define the downtown area.

In response to the onset of preparatory conservation work in early August, which began with the erection of a fence and workers' hammering at the fountain, the Civil Initiative mobilized public support for their cause through a variety of avenues, including displaying posters, gathering signatures, and holding press conferences. Interested individuals, including Peter, students, and professionals, were drawn to the Civil Initiative's activities, and its petition table drew numerous passers-by, who asked for information and expressed their interest in lending support. The group was able to muster remarkable public support for their cause, in opposition to government-sponsored work to remove the fountain. The Civil Initiative's activities took on great momentum as they rallied public support for their cause, demonstrated by the collection of several hundred signatures within the course of a few days. Thanks to fortuitous circumstances—including official oversights such as the procurement of a necessary building permit, and to their own rapid efforts—the Civil Initiative

succeeded in achieving its short-term political goals. By late August, their efforts had proved successful, as their work put a halt to governmental plans.

Yet the Civil Initiative suffered from an inability to be pro-active—an inability captured in Peter's statement that the Civil Initiative used to open the public question-and-answer session at the press conference given by the National Preservation Agency. This short episode was not isolated. A few days prior to the press conference, where Peter expressed his opposition through his "sadness and anger," he had explained how he had considered chaining himself to the monument, but then decided not to. Noting that he would have only looked ridiculous to passers-by, as well as have achieved his own arrest and the loss of 8,000 tolar (for the chain and padlock). The burly defender of the fountain excused his non-action as having been an unrealistic fantasy. In dismissing an action frequently employed in Western democracies by grassroots activists, this Slovenian appeared to deny himself the validity of a potential protest. His rejection of this very legitimate, personal political statement comes across as almost amusing and suggests that with it he shortchanged himself of potential political power. Yet his ultimate decision, did not seem out of place in the Civic Initiative, but was instead emblematic of its operations. Indeed, Peter's act encapsulates a complex conceptualization of emotional elements of "national character" that play a central role in directing the local political activity of Slovenian civic activists.

National Character and Political Engagement

A popular sense of "national character" and "traditions" plays an integral role in how average individuals engage in everyday politics, as Ladislav Holy's analysis of the Czech historically-guided transition through the 1989 Velvet Revolution reveals (1994). In Slovenia, as in the Czech Republic, a sense of national identity did not die under socialism, but rather served as a mainstay for much of socialist domestic and foreign politics, demonstrated by Katherine Verdery's findings for the case of Romania (1991). I argue that the complex constellation of elements in postsocialist "national character" extends far beyond a sense of history and tradition. To include specific emotional ways of being that are a direct inheritance from socialist life, individuals express personal emotions in local politics by pointing to the multi-faceted origins of this "national character," despite Slovenians' sense of a static national self that stems from the nineteenth century. As revealed in the Robbov fountain controversy, personal, emotionally charged discourse plays a powerful and defining role in local politics in Slovenian postsocialist society. In seeking to understand the specifics of the contemporary Slovenian understanding of "national character," I link recent work in anthropology on emotion as a cultural construct in the political role played by popular understandings of national character. With Gary Palmer and Debra Occhi (1999), I share an interest in the cognitive role that emotions can play in discourse through their ability to influence the human reasoning process. I find this focus a potentially productive avenue to understand the workings of local discourse on

the role of “national character” that surfaces in informal discussions on contemporary Slovenian politics.

Personal, yet “National,” Emotions in Local Politics

Standing out as one of the few issues in local politics that garnered extensive public support in the past ten years, the flurry around the Robbov fountain begs explanation. The public’s willingness to voice an opinion may seem at first glance to suggest nostalgia for the lost Baroque Era that the monument beautifully represents. The Robbov fountain is the only major Baroque-era monument in recent Slovenian history to be threatened with outright removal. Yet given this and that independent Slovenia has never removed any socialist-era monuments, public concern over the Robbov fountain does not seem to reflect a new-found nostalgia for a lost era that could serve as a bud for a new sense of national identity. The continuing undisturbed and uncontested presence of a host of socialist monuments—which have yet to suffer from vandalism²—throughout Slovenia, including all parts of the capital Ljubljana, further suggests that a different logic is at work. Rather, I argue that the public response suggests a conflation of the private and public, as these related to senses of identity and emotional expression drift into a well known popular discourse around “national heritage.”

In a discussion several months subsequent to the events of late August, Peter explained his interest in the preservation of Robbov fountain to me. Discussing the reasons for his emotional response, he noted that they arose because “this is continuing...this is repeating itself.” In Peter’s view, the government’s proposals for the Robbov fountain represented a continuation of the attacks on Slovenian heritage that took place under socialism. Peter pointed out that such attacks against Slovenian sites of cultural significance have been occurring for the past several decades. Twenty-five years ago, he heatedly noted, government agencies targeted *Navje*, the cemetery where several members of the Slovenian literary pantheon are buried. In the new postsocialist era, as in the socialist one, such destructive proposals are based on unprofessional, almost absurd arguments on how best to “protect heritage.” In his defense of the Robbov fountain, Peter referenced the actions of the former federal government during the socialist era, by invoking a long-standing, unofficial political discourse on the disappearance of Slovenia’s cultural “wealth.” In the summer of 2000, passers-by to the Civil Initiative’s petition stand echoed similar beliefs with exasperation. As one elderly woman put it, “*Ja, kaj pa nam bodo se vzeli?*” (Well-, what *else* are they going to take from us?). With such statements the public recycled a long-standing trope from socialist-era unofficial discourse that interpreted any destructive action toward a piece of “cultural wealth”—be it removal of a piece of literature from a school reader or a removal of a marble statue—as an attack on the Slovenian people itself. For Peter and the elderly retiree, their criticism of the government’s action was now directed against a postsocialist, incompetent government agency.

This constant attack on national heritage, figures as a historical expression of protest from the socialist era, with its contents having been modified in 2000 for new circumstances. Launching into his emotional attachment to the fountain, Peter described the monument as “*vec kot dediscina*” (more than heritage). In fact, he went on to say, the fountain was almost a member of his family. Like many of the pedestrians passing by the Civil Initiative’s petition table last year, Peter lives in the immediate proximity of the fountain. While his comments potentially contain a hint of the theatrical, his belief that the ensemble represents a part of his everyday life was echoed in newspaper statements on the iconic nature of the Robbov fountain for local identity. Such collectively made statements go beyond the romantic rather suggest the official slippage between public and private space found under Yugoslav socialism, through a blurring of former official discourse on historical events, particularly of the Second World War and other related emotionally-charged periods and all heritage issues surrounding them. Such nebulous boundaries are reminiscent of socialism’s deliberate confusion between public and private spaces. As a result, the personal could be made highly public as the public was intended to become part of the private. In the case of the Robbov fountain controversy, however, this nebulosity was invoked to make a public monument a part of private space, as understood both personally and nationally. In appropriating strategies from official socialist discourse, Ljubljana residents’ contemporary unofficial discourse on public space insists on the inclusion of personal emotion in support of their cause. In their case, the historically long-standing “sadness and anger” relates to potential attacks on national “cultural wealth.” This unofficial rendering of one public space as part of the private realm, thanks to the space’s iconicity and role in everyday life, inspired a powerful response by the public to governmental efforts, and, I would argue, represents the only element powerful enough to galvanize the Slovenian public.

How did this “sadness and anger” work within the Civil Initiative itself? As noted above, while emotionally highly charged, much of the Civil Initiative’s actions were marked by a certain paralysis on the personal level. Discussions with members of the Civil Initiative, including Peter, clarified the workings of this apparent contradiction. Peter noted that the combination of sadness and anger occurs frequently in his life, in the public as well in the private, and therefore seemed extremely appropriate for the Robbov fountain debate. Independently, core members of the Civil Initiative concurred and commented on the appropriateness of this emotional constellation in the context of the national press conference. “Sadness reins in anger,” one member explained to me. The Civil Initiative member continued, “For that reason, [Peter] didn’t chain himself to the monument. Anger without sadness is unrestrained, and then potentially dangerous in its excessiveness.” This member went on to cite the emotional element of sadness in the Slovenian “national character,” as evidenced in the *triste* nature of Slovenian folk songs. Another Civil Initiative member continued, building on the former’s comments with a clever word play, “In fact, by not *chaining himself* to the monument, [Peter] *linked himself* to the Slovenian national character, which is always marked by sadness.” Smudging the distinction

between perceived national character (originating from nineteenth-century ideals) and personal emotions related to national heritage (stemming from socialist-era histories), this Civil Initiative member invoked the well-known trope of “sad self,” that figures in Slovenian self-description, as praise of Peter’s Slovenianness in his political activities.

The practice of civic political involvement points to a complex, evolving constellation of elements in an allegedly static “national character” and, perhaps more significantly, delineates the type of civic political activity possible because it shapes the interaction possible between private and public concerns. For the *Robbov* fountain issue, this blurred distinction between public and private in unofficial political discourse took on a very different nature than its politically effective socialist model. Having unconsciously appropriated a socialist technique for political control, Civil Initiative members inverted this strategy by unconsciously incorporating new meanings into a long-standing, supposedly static, “national character.” In striving to express themselves as closely to their understanding of “national character” as possible, these male Slovenians viewed certain moments of lack of political action as statements of self-empowerment. While appearing to self-emasculate politically, they understand themselves to be acquiring power, as the political effectiveness of their actions was not their sole central goal; rather, the way of being—that is, their expressing themselves as true Slovenians functioned as a key part of their primary political statement.

Conclusion

In a country where historical family affiliations can exert equal influence over a career as can personal professional competence, the boundaries between individual and collective identity fall subject to a blurring in many arenas. Specific to its postsocialist context, the Slovenian conception of personal and national identity, as expressed in both the practices and discourse of the Civil Initiative, reflects the appropriation of socialist official discourse into NGO activity. The remarkable mustering of public support around the *Robbov* fountain preservation initiative underscores that the cultural constructs which cognitively guide political discourse and practice include an array of elements; in postsocialist Slovenia, these both allow for and demand the confusing of the personal with the public. Suggesting a deep politicization of private life, this example of a successful rallying of public support for a civic cause in recent Slovenian history illuminates the point that emotional engagement, as a historically shaped practice, cannot be ignored in the cultural practice of contemporary political life. With its particular construction of political practice, the example of the Civil Initiative points to one conception of postsocialist civic engagement that both parallels as well as challenges its socialist origins.

Notes

¹The actor's name has been changed in this article.

²I interpret the respect shown by the general population to socialist-era monuments as a sign of continuing support for the previous socialist system or aspects thereof, although this topic is rich enough to merit a study unto itself. I argue that this support figures as a central part of the multi-faceted, postsocialist Slovenian sense of "national character," which is discussed in the second half of this article

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