

VANISHING NATION: DISCUSSING NATION'S REPRODUCTION IN POST-SOCIALIST SLOVENIA

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Introduction

The mid-19th century historical debates on the political inception of the Slovenian nation featured numerical “smallness”¹ as the most indicative characteristic of the Slovenian population. Despite many other attributes, mostly described as “favorable” – e.g. cultural and religious homogeneity, language uniformity – the early builders of the national discourse understood this smallness as a “serious political disadvantage” (cf. Cvirn 1995: 73; Domej 1995: 87, 92). This assertion was further implicated in many historical attempts to reinforce the Slovenian statehood, be it in the framework of politically differently conceptualised Yugoslav states² or finally in the 1990s, in the period of establishing an independent Slovenian state.

In this article I argue that the public interpretations of fertility behavior in the period of consolidating the Slovenian independent state uncritically espoused a 19th century concept of national population. The classic concept was used mostly in

discussions on nationalism as a political philosophy and it referred to a people with shared linguistic, cultural, historical experience, material conditions, and descent; organic ties to peoples’ territory and environment were considered peoples’ natural rights to such places (Kreager 1997: 155). The imperative that such “natural wholes” had to be “home-produced” (Kreager 1997: 156) and re-produced is also characteristic for post-socialist rhetoric on production and renewal of “biological Slovenians.” Moreover, the ideological notions of the “ancient past of the Slovenian nation” have corroborated those interpretations on declining fertility in Slovenia that had adopted the central assumption of the classical theory of demographic transition.³ The theory was firmly grounded in the notion that each and every country successfully moves from a pre-industrial to a post-industrial state of demographic equilibrium, i.e. from the state of the population’s high fertility and high mortality to a state of the decline of the population growth. Evolutionary-designed demographic theory was also convenient for

¹ According to Public Censuses of the 1931 and the 2002, the numbers of declared Slovenians are 1,397,650, and 1,948,250 respectively.

² In chronological order, the Yugoslav states were: the State of Slovenians, Croats and Serbs, established in October 1918; the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, constituted a month later; the Kingdom of Yugoslavia from 1929; the Democratic Federative Yugoslavia from 1945; the Federative Republic of Yugoslavia from 1946, and in 1963 established the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia.

³ Szreter (1993: 661) asserts that demographic transition in its classic theoretisation was a general theory, stipulating that a strong population growth initially occurred in the period of industrialisation because fertility remained uncontrolled and at a high rate, while mortality declined due to improved food supplies and living standards. The latter were seen as the consequence of improvements in agriculture, transport, manufacturing, and progress of the medical sciences.

commentators on the “transitional orientation” of the new Slovenian state from the “primitive Balkans” to the “civilised Europe”.

The “smallness” of the nation’s body

A clearly conveyed idea of Slovenian statehood, authored by a handful of Slovenian intellectuals in 1848, considered of prime importance the project of constructing the Slovenians as a “historical nation.” According to historian Cvim (1995: 73), after 1848, German political writings had successfully launched the argument that the Slovenians represented only a minute particle of humanity which was doomed to extinction – i.e. to submergence in the sea of German-ness - precisely because of its smallness, cultural backwardness, and notably because Slovenians were obstructing Germans in their spatial expansion towards the Adriatic sea.

The all-European “national revival” activated not only Slovenian intellectuals in their efforts to bring into force the idea of Slovenia as a political entity of the hitherto dispersed Slovenian speaking population in the Empire’s historical lands, but it also substantiated the creation of a new orientation in Slovenian historiography – the construction of national history (Kos 1985: 11). In their enthusiasm for bringing to light everything of the greatest significance for the Slovenian national past, the heralds of Slovenian longevity even developed a specific type of scholar – the patriotic historiographer who should not be preoccupied only with the national history, but also had to study the language, folk ways, and customs of the people, and who had to be a poet and a national agitator at the same time (Kos 1985: 11). Davorin Trstenjak was the first who explicitly mentioned the numerical smallness of the Slovenian nation:

The Slovenian nation is meagre in number. Hundreds of years of inconvenience heavily disturbed it. All disasters notwithstanding, in the face of other bigger nations having vanished from the world scene, it still remains safe and sound.” (Trstenjak 1863: 234; author’s translation)

The size of the national population has been an unavoidable topic in most “domestic” studies on Slovenian population and related themes ever since. The numerical smallness of the Slovenian nation was not only a statistically verified fact in Austrian censuses; furthermore, many Slovenian scholars have focused on discovering the reasons for such an alarming national situation, or have even tried to invent measures for its improvement. According to the archaeologist Niederle, the main reasons for such a seemingly precarious national situation were on the one hand, the Slovenian emigration abroad, and on the other hand, the errors of statistical data collected in the Empire. Small numbers notwithstanding, Slovenians should not fear radical decline if they only know how to strengthen the national consciousness in people, and improve their civilisation within their political territory – the Carniola (cf. Niederle 1911: 117-118). Similarly, the argument of one of his contemporaries, Mačkovšek, was that the Slovenian lowest population increase among the Austrian Slavs was due to their Alpine country, poor economy, emigration, and territorial losses. He argued for a just national struggle for the return of the lost millennial Slovenian settlement lands (Mačkovšek; in: Niederle 1911: 246, 250).

These first “Slovenian” interpretations of the official statistics on the national populations within the Empire were accompanied by appeals for eliminating such a threatening decrease of the Slovenian population, propagated by medical doctors and eugenicists in the 1920s and 1930s. According to these scholars, the numerical smallness of the Slovenian nation was not its only disadvantage; they considered that the quality of the “national organism” and the “national health” also needed to be brought under scrutiny. Of particular concern was the alleged basic biological characteristic of a nation – its persistent “rebirth and replacement” (Zalokar 1918: 6). The statistics on fertility, mortality, and migration were consulted and analysed with regard to various environments and areas settled by Slovenians. The one single purpose of these efforts was to

diagnose and improve the circumstances for the sake of a better “quality of national posterity” (Zalokar 1918: 7). Many questions pertaining to “reproduction” turned out to be worthy of study in the “nation’s perspective,” provided that they helped change the status of Slovenian people into a sovereign nation.

Scholars in different scientific disciplines have systematically tracked the demographic movements in Slovenia since the end of World War I. The first basic study on the historical development of the Slovenian population since the 18th century was published in 1936. In his effort to determine and evaluate the proper number of Slovenians in their scattered historical lands of settlement across different periods, Fran Zwitter assumed that the development of the population should always be studied as “an integral part of a holistic historical development” (Zwitter 1936: 88). His appeal was of singular importance also in the context of the ensuing studies conducted during the period of Socialist Yugoslavia (e.g. Šifrer 1963; Vogelnik 1965), which uniformly interpreted the trend of fertility decline among Slovenians in accordance with the paradigm of modernization, and the theory of demographic transition. Fertility decline was taken to be a typical characteristic of the “developed”, i.e. “western” countries, and thus a positive sign of an ongoing “progress” of human civilization. Yet the commentators of the population movement did not question the linear and evolutionary conceptualised theory of demographic transition; they uncritically

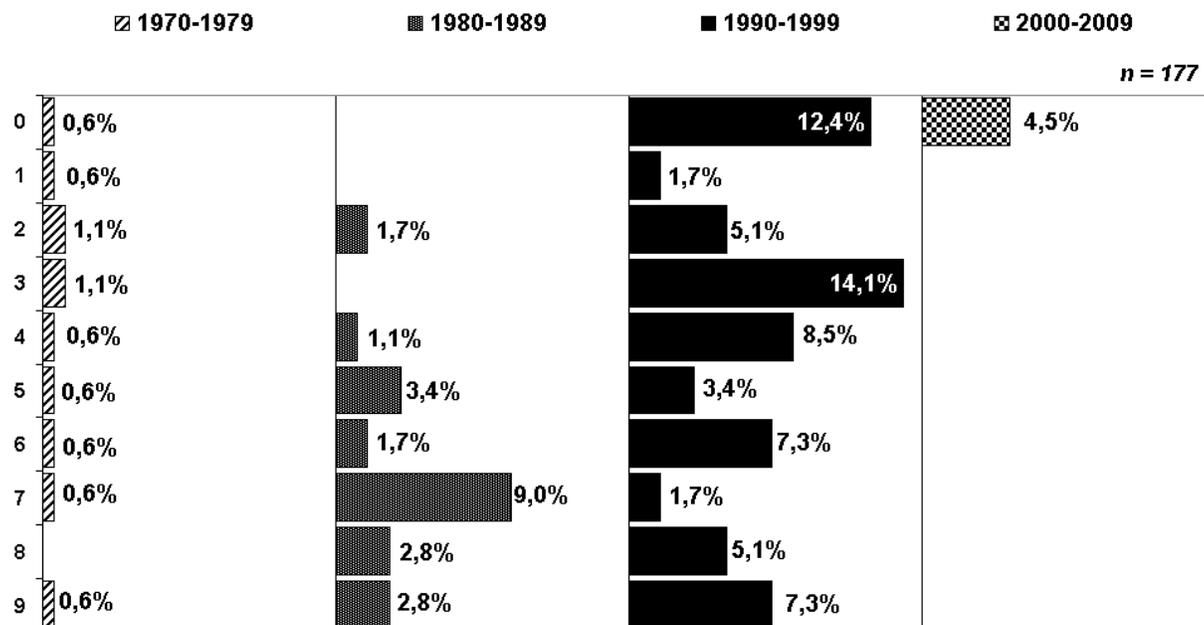
and somewhat automatically applied the theory on “domestic ground.”

National press on Slovenian fertility

The assumption that the public discussion on Slovenian statehood of the 1990s adopted the anachronistic notion of the national population not merely as a historical and cultural phenomenon but as a “natural” fact was tested by reviewing and analysing press-clippings from the Journalist documentation *Delo*, the most extensive journalist archive in Slovenia. I analysed 177 articles (the folder *Natality*) published between 1970 and 2000. I first sought to find discernible time patterns in the press interpretations on fertility in Slovenia, and consequently identify the constructed image of the national population. The hypothesis was that following the declaration of independence in 1991, the Slovenian popular press paid more attention to the fertility issue than before, and that this issue was represented in a specific way. The decrease in the fertility coefficient was no longer interpreted as a statistical fact confirming the notorious assumption of the theory of demographic transition, according to which low fertility values of a given population are typical for the “developed European populations.” Quite on the contrary, the slow population growth in Slovenia was conveyed alongside the concern for the “biological threat to Slovenians”.

The reviewed articles show the following picture:

Figure 1: The percentages of articles on fertility in Slovenia by the years and decades



There is every indication that the nation's reproduction is the privileged topic of the consolidation of the independent Slovenian state. Nearly two third (66.6%) out of the total analysed material belongs to the 1990s in comparison with the 1980s (22.5%) and the 1970s (6.4%). Yet, the characteristic interpretations of the fertility issue per single decade show the following observations.

The 1970s: declining births - a syndrome of "progress"

The most salient characteristic for the reporting on fertility in the 1970s is the apparent small number (one per year) of articles compared with the subsequent periods. All articles focus on the decreasing fertility in Slovenia and the reasons for it are explained in two significant ways: as a proof that the level of cultural and economic development that has been attained (i.e. responsible parenthood, legal abortion, increased number of employed women, etc.) in the Socialist Republic of Slovenia is similar to that in the "developed Europe;" or

in the negative sense, stressing the shortcomings of such progress as the self-centered and negative ideology of consumerism. Typical observations were:

Regarding low infant mortality we are among the most developed countries in Europe. (*Delo*, 24 May 1969)⁴

We have sufficient evidence to be satisfied that with the cultural and economic level attained we created in people a higher responsibility for children: as it is in the countries of similar growth, parents decide to have one child only once they secure good living conditions. (*Delo*, 24 December 1972)

The "economic and cultural progress" also represented the main frame of interpretation of the fertility situation in Slovenia within the Yugoslav federation. It was pointed out

⁴ All quotations are the author's translation.

time and again that the fertility decline in the most developed federal republic in Yugoslavia leads to a smaller proportion of its inhabitants in the total population of Yugoslavia. In this regard the typical comparison among the Yugoslav republics usually took the following turn:

The truth is that people from poorer regions have more children than those with higher incomes... In Slovenia only 15.8 infants are born per 1,000 inhabitants, a reason for concern particularly because we are a small nation... Regarding births, Kosovo takes the first place in Yugoslavia; here, the growth of population is the most noticeable: 25 infants per 1,000 inhabitants!" (*Tedenska tribuna*, 21 February 1973)

In the 1970s, the fear of the imminent disappearance of Slovenians was only sporadically mentioned. More frequent and characteristic were references to surveys, or to research reports produced by individual experts (half of all the articles). In their reporting, the journalists usually emphasized those research results that showed optimistic projections: the Slovenians with their low fertility statistics follow the economic trends of the "developed world" (*Delo*, 27 October 1973); Slovenians are not endangered because the gross reproductive coefficient still remains 1.1, which implies that the "biological reproduction" is more than secured especially when compared to Vojvodina or Croatia with coefficient value below 1 (*Delo*, 27 October 1973).

Although some demographers stressed that Slovenia had become an immigrant country for the first time in its history and that labor immigrants from other republics might contribute to the Slovenian national body (*Tedenska tribuna*, 21 February 1973), rare were those who addressed the "composition" of the population: "Every fourth employed person in Slovenia is not of Slovenian nationality; for the first time in the history of Slovenia, more people

immigrate than emigrate" (*ITD*, 15 January 1974).

A similar reflection can be extracted from the proposed action programs for the improvement of fertility in Slovenia that were reported on at that time; the proposed programs for the most part remained restricted to calls for separate and single measures. Most frequent among them were appeals for improving women's reproductive health care in general, and for providing more suitable living conditions for young families, in particular; yet a holistic population policy was not clearly elaborated (*Komunist*, 24 November 1972; *ITD*, 15 January 1974; *Delo*, 7 June 1977).

The 1980s: "We are a mere million"

Significant for this period is the transposition of issues: more attention was given to "catastrophic" consequences of the fertility decline in Slovenia and strong appeals were voiced for urgent, holistic population measures. The reported reasons for fertility decline were assumed widely known and taken for granted as such. Those that pointed out the historical achievements of economic growth in most European societies were repeatedly mentioned. Fertility decline in Slovenia was mostly interpreted as an inevitable consequence of the gradual restriction of planned births and was still consistently explained in two contexts, the Yugoslav and the European.

However, in comparison with the previous decade when the "side effects" of belonging to the "developed world" were particularly exposed, a series of new alleged reasons for fertility decline were invented including inappropriate attitude towards life (the non-ethical right to abortion); labor immigrants from the other Republics of Socialist Yugoslavia in the 1970s; and last but not least, the absence of a holistic population policy. These putative reasons were portrayed as the main culprits of an imminent national catastrophe and often exposed in headlines: "Slovenians are aging" (*Večer*, 14 July 1984); "Simple reproduction is endangered" (*Teleks*, 10

January 1985), “We are a mere million” (*Teleks*, 10 January 1985); “We are a greying society” (*Delo*, 26 February 1987); “Is the nation passing away?” (*Nedeljski dnevnik*, 19 April 1987); “The roots of the nation are seriously sapped” (*Nedeljski dnevnik*, 7 May 1989); “Euthanasia is unnecessary among Slovenians” (*Delo*, 12 December 1989). Moreover, they were corroborated by the statistical evidence and population projections showing the declining number of births.

The most salient newly identified reason for the low fertility in Slovenia in the 1980s was the labor immigration from the Yugoslav Republics. The birth rates among the immigrants allegedly led the experts into underestimating the seriousness of the threat of the “vanishing of Slovenians.” While at first the population experts cautiously pointed to the fact that the higher population growth in Slovenia in the last two decades compared to the average growth in Yugoslavia was attributable to the influx of immigrants (*Delo*, 12 June 1982; *Večer*, 14 July 1984), later on, at the end of the 1980s, they more and more openly conveyed their concern for the vanishing of “Slovenian culture and identity” (*Dnevnik*, 19 November 1988).

A similar logic was incorporated into the very reasoning on the need for a population policy. The experts’ calls for a holistic population policy were not primarily founded on the paranoid notion of the “extinction of Slovenians” but were rather in line with the social consequences of low fertility in Slovenia. However, it seems that they could not completely avoid the slippery ground of defining the criteria for membership in the national population despite their appeals for urgent population measures, mostly as part and parcel of an entire socio-economic growth of the nation-state (*Nedeljski dnevnik*, 19 April 1987). Some journalists took nearly for granted the assumption that immigrants were not a solution because they would allegedly make the Slovenian identity gradually disappear.

Some justified this thesis with allegedly “western reasoning.”

Considering previous experiences and reactions of western European authorities on immigration from the “South”, this solution is not popular at all. A majority of European countries tackle the low fertility problem with a calculated population policy. (*Teleks*, 10 January 1985)

It was reported time and again that for maintaining the natural regeneration of the Slovenian population, every woman should give birth to 2.2 children. In this respect the majority of criticism and comments pertained to the living conditions in Slovenia, ranging from the poor conditions for employment of young people, lack of suitable housing, day nurseries and kindergartens, to the calls for a prolonged maternity leave (one year), and financial rewards for families with more than two children. However, the reporting on both, the holistic population policies and the single measures for improvement of the living conditions for people in Slovenia, increasingly, though implicitly, related to ethnic Slovenians only.

The 1990s: against the “reproductive laziness” of Slovenians, and for the “efficient surveillance over migration”

Nearly seventy percent of press material accumulated was produced during the third decade under consideration, the period of consolidating the sovereign Slovenian nation-state. Of special interest is the year 1990 when the so-called professional bases for population policy were created and reported on. The measures addressed “autochthonous” Slovenians, people born in Slovenia, and immigrants who had worked in Slovenia for at least five years and had obtained permanent residence permits (*Teleks*, 1 February 1990). However, it was stressed that the policy was not intended to attract non-Slovenians to come to Slovenia nor to encourage so-called nationally mixed marriages (*Teleks*, 1 February 1990). The policy proponents suggested that the expert

reports that served as a basis for immigrant policy should also be articulated. As the President of the committee of experts working on the Slovenian population policy in 1990, put it: “We anticipate measures that will not attract a major influx to Slovenia but will stimulate increased reproduction of the Slovenian population” (*Teleks*, 1 February 1990). It was also reported that big families should become a norm again, therefore some authors of the expert documents proposed a special tax for non-parenthood, a measure allegedly well known abroad (*Jana*, 14 February 1990).

These propositions were met with substantial disapproval, particularly from the public. Almost fifty percent of total press clippings in 1990 conveyed critical views. Most critics openly pointed to the non-scientific, demagogic character of the proposed assumptions. The dilemma – why, for whom, and in what circumstances the fertility decline is a problem at all - was exposed for the first time (*Delo*, 5 April 1990). The majority of reviewers of the expert platform characterized its content as predominately driven by the electoral concerns. They insisted that the experts’ suggestions for the improvement of fertility in Slovenia was a step back not only to some oversimplified notions of socialist ideology but also to premises clearly belonging to naturalism and mercantilism, and therefore “toward the Middle Ages” (*Mladina*, 16 February 1990):

Emphasizing the quantity of people instead of their quality is typical for socialism, which is a society of goods exchange and therefore blind for fetishism of goods and also money as the specific good... Such population naturalism cannot grasp that over two hundred years, four hundred thousand Slovenians may be of more value than two or three million on this day (*Teleks*, 15 February 1990).

Last but not least, surfaced the comments pointing to the anti-pluralist orientation of the proposed population measures:

This project is clearly directed against the plurality of the society, against the different life-styles of communities, and therefore against the autonomy of women... The Slovenian development will obviously rest on a kind of specific man-enterprising and woman-housekeeping” (*Večer*, 24 February 1990).

The 1990s were characterized by discussions on foreigners, which were represented in three significant ways: firstly, as the likely candidates for filling in the imminently emptied-out Slovenian territory; secondly, as the “old,” former Yugoslav immigrants who came to Slovenia before its independence and who were denoted as the main culprits (together with their descendants “in proliferation”) for the fact that the spreading “reproductive laziness” of the autochthonous population of Slovenia was obscured (*Delo*, 23 June 1993); and thirdly, as those belonging to the new wave of immigrants in 1993, mostly war refugees from the former Yugoslav Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The latter provoked excessive fears, especially among the reading public. Some individuals also voiced extremely alarmist tones:

The late Yugoslavia had the infamous role as an accelerator of this Southern-style ‘multiplication’ [the Kosovars], and it is justly the first victim of the modern plague on two feet. Slovenians have renounced their own descendants to leave their territory to illiterate, uncultured, and lazy thieves” (*Delo*, 2 July 1994).

Such individual letters to the editor were not met with the number of counter-views comparable to 1990. Quite on the contrary, the key dilemma of whether to include the foreigners in the debates on population policy or not occupied the population experts throughout the 1990s. In line with

the commonsensical notion that the old economic immigrants from the former Yugoslavia enjoyed a wider range of rights than the Slovenians themselves, some argued for an effective surveillance over immigration waves and called attention to the fact that foreigners cannot be expected to “take care of Slovenians” (*Delo*, 7 January 1995). A minority insisted that immigration is the solution for the fertility decline in Slovenia provided that the newcomers prove themselves able to integrate into the system. Yet nearly all, on cue with the xenophobic atmosphere in Slovenia, insisted on an “easier” and “cheaper” solution: investing in “reliable natives” by means of stimulating their reproductive behavior.

Conclusion

The promoters of the first Slovenian political entity, to paraphrase Šumi (2000: 121), had sought to arrange diachronic and contextually diverse phenomena *ex aequo* to construct the great mythic monads: “Slovenian-ness,” “Slovenian,” and “nation.” The creators of the new Slovenian identity after 1991 adopted this romantic concept of the Slovenian nation, and automatically equated it with the concept of the “fully fledged” (Hroch 1996: 36) nation-state. The analysis of the media discourse on declining fertility in Slovenia in the last three decades proves this observation.

The review of the national press on fertility issues in Slovenia in the 1970s showed that journalists discussed the fertility decline in Slovenia within the framework of the theory of modernization and demographic transition. Interpreting the low fertility situation within the Yugoslav and the European contexts, the media produced a relatively autonomous image of the Slovenian community, either as the most developed Yugoslav Republic or as sufficiently comparable to many already “developed” European countries.

In the 1980s, however, the press represented the consequences of low fertility not only as a side effect of the process of modernization, but also as the result of an insufficiently

conscious regulation of fertility trends in Slovenia. The calculated statistical indicators were to “lull” the experts in their estimation of a still non-alarmist fertility situation in Slovenia. In this regard, the press pointed to the labor immigrants from other republics of the former Yugoslavia, the segment of population that compared to the romantic concept of nation was not “naturally tied” to the community in which they either temporarily or permanently resided.

In the 1990s, the press rhetoric increased the menace of the numerical smallness of Slovenians to the point that the “real national substance” was endangered. The repeatedly reported disclaimers, like for example: “I am not a nationalist, but I am concerned for my endangered nation” (*Slovenske novice*, 17. 2. 1993), seem to have boiled down the official Slovenian ideology of trans-national European orientation to mere nationalistic values. Creating the positive self-presentation usually corresponded with a negative image ascribed to the others. Illustrative were the reports, which in the period of the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia ascribed the low fertility in Slovenia to non-Slovenians, notably to former Yugoslav labor immigrants and refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Irrespective of the political orientation of the daily newspaper under review, the xenophobic attitudes towards foreigners reached their peak with the assertion that “foreigners cannot solve the problem of the vanishing of Slovenian population,” the diagnosis which also failed entirely to provoke any perceivable resistance in the public spheres.

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