

social issues & initiatives

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"In terms of democratic politics we have gone backwards by about 15 years"

Slovenia: Journalist Blaž Zgaga on the media's situation in his country

Barbara Tóth: For years Slovenia was regarded as the Switzerland of southeastern Europe. You are the initiator of a petition against political censorship and pressure in the Slovene media. Do we have to rethink our image of the model country Slovenia?

Blaž Zgaga: Definitely. I remember during the phase of independence Switzerland being cited as a model. The EU needed a former East bloc country that had managed the transition from socialism in an exemplary fashion. And the Slovenes wanted to present themselves abroad as the well-behaved, hard working, industrious and good nation. Many small nations have an almost obsessive relationship to the image that is presented of them in the foreign media. This produced a fine symbiosis. But the reality looks rather different. 571 journalists have signed the petition against political censorship. But it is not only journalists that have problems with the government. 70,000 people took part in a protest by the trade unions in November - that is more than three per cent of the entire population. 70,000 teachers, professors and others signed a petition against an educational reform that deprives public schools of their basis. The education minister answered cynically that those who signed were apparently not aware what they were signing. Slovene judges are threatening to strike, as the government does not respect the freedom of the justice system. Many professional groups feel the effect of the political interventions. These have become almost normal and extend to the lower levels. Not only in the ministries the police, the military, the state police, other public areas are also under pressure. The gap between Slovenia's image and the reality is growing larger all the time.

You complain about the pressure exerted by politics on Slovenia's media. What exactly has happened in the last few months in this sector?

Since 2004, that is since Prime Minister Janez Janša has been in power, almost all Slovene media have been under pressure. In 2005 the Slovene Parliament passed a law that increased state influence on the two public television and three radio stations. Of the 29 members of the programme commission, which is extremely influential, 21 are selected by parliament - and naturally only those who toe the party line were nominated. The result is a decline in the quality of the public media, a number of well-known journalists have left the broadcasters. They have been replaced by young journalists with little experience. In addition, the Slovene press agency is headed by Jansa's former press officer. Along with her journalists from the SDS party newspaper obtained important positions. The agency is very important for Slovenia's daily newspapers. Censorship, manipulation and professional mistakes are frequent. The private newspaper market is also strongly influenced by the government. In 2005 the government bought the daily newspapers "Delo" and "Veer" through the "Laško" beer company. In 2007 this cooperation was ended. And in "Primorske

Novice" the editor-in-chief was replaced, under pressure from three members of the board of directors who are shareholders in the paper and close to the government.. The business manager refused to carry out the change of staff and was subsequently fired. Independent newspapers suffer due to the cancelling of advertisements by companies close to the state. The daily newspaper "Dnevnik" has lost about one million euro a year.

Obviously those in power have a problem with criticism. Has the country, despite all its economic success, forgotten to learn about democracy?

At present it is difficult to start a serious debate about the transitional phase after 1989, as the government ignores all protests whether they are made by workers or intellectuals. I see what is happening now as a sign that we were not and still are not on the right path. We have never had a proper discussion about our past. The political elites were far too busy finding their positions of power and making money to think about the future.

You mention the buzzword "the past": what are the themes that Slovenia still has to examine?

I'm afraid that particularly in the most recent past there is quite a lot that needs to be examined. From 1991 to 1993 thousands of tons of weapons and munitions were sent through Slovenia to Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. According to official sources around 20 ships left the port of Koper. This was clearly an infringement of the UN weapons embargo. But what is even more important: the weapons were sold for millions in cash but a parliamentary investigation found only 10,000 marks in the account of the defence ministry that organised the transport. The minister of defence was Janez Janša. To the present day it is not known where the rest of the money went and who profited from it. A number of Slovenes profited from the bloody Balkan War but this moral scandal has never really been investigated. Slovene politics treats this theme like a case of incest in its own family. Everyone knows that something went wrong but nobody will talk about it as they are afraid what the neighbours will say. One of the most important moral authorities in my country, Spomenka Hribar, warned that this scandal could lead to a collective trauma similar to the mass executions after the Second World War.

Do you also see in Slovenia a danger of nostalgia for the good old communist days?

Of course there is nostalgia. What else should a worker feel who works from dawn to dusk but still needs the help of the Red Cross or other humanitarian organisations in order to survive? The harder the situation for working people grows, the greater the nostalgia will become.

The high inflation rate is also responsible for this situation. On the one hand there are global causes for this, such as the increase in prices for foodstuffs on the world market, but are there also "homemade" reasons for inflation?

Officially the inflation rate is 6.5 per cent, twice as high as the EU average. At the moment we are at the top of the EU only as far as the Presidency is concerned. Food prices have risen by more than 30 per cent. That is a huge shock for low-income groups who have to spend a high proportion of their income on food and basic commodities. One reason for this is that there is too little competition in the small Slovene market - and that politics fails

to react properly. Why did Jansa remain silent when the state electricity company, which has a monopoly, raised its charges by six per cent?

Are Slovenes interested in the fact that their country at present holds the EU Presidency? Apart from the fact that the government has built a conference centre in Brdo, outside Ljubljana at a cost of 15 million euro, the EU Presidency does not affect everyday life. I believe that Slovenes in general are not greatly impressed by the "Presidency". They have other, more pressing problems. Such as how to survive with rocketing prices and stagnating wages.

To summarise, what, in terms of democratic politics, does Slovenia lack most? A trust in the principle of legal certainty. Delays in the courts are enormous, people no longer believe in their rights. We journalists have a lot of rights, according to the law. But what use is this when the courts don't acknowledge these rights and it takes years before a judgement is passed? People lack self-confidence and are afraid of the powerful, as they feel that the state does not protect them, the weaker ones, but others. I have the impression - and I am not alone - that in the last four years Slovenia has taken a step backwards in terms of democratic politics to the situation 15 or 20 years ago. I hope that we won't need the same length of time to remedy this damage.

Blaž Zgaga writes for the daily Slovenian newspaper "Vecer".

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