

"Immigrant crisis" of 1999–2001 in Slovenia: Fabula, Plebs and Lex



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Slovenia is a small country covering an area of a bit more than 20.000 square kilometres. The population is nearly 2 million. Over 90 % are Slovenes and the others are mostly of Croatian, Serbian, Moslem, Italian and Hungarian origin. Slovenia is situated at the edge of central and Western Europe. Its neighbouring countries are Italy to the West, Austria to the north, Hungary to the north-east and Croatia to the east and south. As the main route from the Balkan states and the middle east to the European community passes through Slovenia the country is quite interesting when it comes to the migration studies.

In the nineties, Slovenia experienced two "crisis periods", both related to migration problems. Both crises, the so called "refugee crisis" in the period between 1992 and 1993, and the "immigrant crisis", which culminated at the beginning of the year 2000, were marked by the fact that they caught the state and its institutions completely off guard. I will

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concentrate on the second "crisis period", between the years of 1999 and 2001, when the migration turbulence divided the official policy and the Slovenian public into advocates of solidarity with the immigrants on one side and those, who purposely spread the desire for the removal of the immigrants on the other side.

During the first years of Slovenian independence, the number of registered illegal border crossings was around 4000 to 5000 cases per year. In 1993, the first significant increase was registered in the police statistical data, when the number almost doubled, which was mostly due to the wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the following years, the number of illegal border crossings again dropped and leveled at approximately 4000 cases per year. In the second half of the nineties the number began to rise steadily. In the year of 1997, the number of registered illegal border crossings doubled in comparison to the year before; in 1998, the number was already four times higher than in 1996 (General police directorate, Sector for borders and foreigners. <http://www.policija.si/si>).

The so called second "immigrant crisis", which was marked

mainly by illegal immigrants and political asylum seekers, originated in the year of 1999, when the police registered 18695 illegal border crossings, while 744 people submitted an application for political asylum (until then the average number of applications per year has been 110 people). The Slovenian policy on political asylum approval has always been very restrictive. In the year of 2000, the police statistical data registered the largest number of illegal border crossings, since the number of illegal immigrants increased to 35914; furthermore, the number of political asylum applications also increased substantially (9244). Only 13 of them were approved. In the following year, the police adjusted its protection of the state border to the "state of threat" level, and immediately began to perform additional actions in order to prevent illegal migrations; therefore, the number of illegal immigrants decreased by almost 50% in comparison to the previous year (20.871). In 2002 the police statistics registered 6926 illegal border crossings (General police directorate, Sector for borders and foreigners. <http://www.policija.si/si>).

The animated public discussion of the immigrant issue in Slovenia

was stirred in the fall of 2000, when the number of "illegals" and asylum applicants reached the highest level until then. In the mass media, except from rare exceptions, a distinctly stigmatic and discriminative discourse was formed, which presented a new dimension of the immigration problem to the Slovenian public: the so called "immigrant crisis" was invented. The media discourse was really only a summary of other discourses – the institutional, which was displayed in the public statements of some state officials – as also the so called "voice of the people", which was presented by the initiatives of some locals who were opposed the settlement of the immigrants in their communities. This resulted in many public xenophobic statements and records of hate speech (e.g. Kuzmanija, A. T., 1999).

In the beginning of February, several major changes occurred in the high tension and distinctively anti-immigrant atmosphere. The xenophobic and racist discourse, which permeated the Slovene public, called to action the group of citizens with a leftist-anarchist political orientation, which presented itself to the public as the Office for Interventions. The public appeals of the Office for Interventions and other non-governmental offices for tolerance and solidarity toward illegal immigrants and asylum seekers were soon joined by the intellectuals, some political parties, the highest level state representatives, and thereafter, also the broader public. On February 21st, the Office for Interventions and the Italian movement for a more just globalization process "Tute bianche" together organized a

"Manifestation against intolerance – for solidarity with immigrants of all kinds" in the capital of Slovenia, Ljubljana, which was attended by the largest amount of people since Slovenian independence in 1990.

The change in the "anti-runaway atmosphere" was also displayed in a noticeable media turnout; the daily newspapers started to publish articles, which condemned the immigrant criminalization and attempted to view the immigrant problem in a more reflective fashion. This was followed by a calmness in the media, when it seemed that the "immigrant crisis" never occurred. Due to appendices to the existing asylum law, which additionally tightened the procedure for asylum approval, and also due to tightened border security, the number of asylum seekers and illegal migrants significantly decreased in the year 2001; at the same time, the attention of the media was redirected towards other issues such as preparations for the execution of upcoming referendums regarding the entrance of Slovenia into the European Union and NATO alliance.

In our opinion, the study of the "immigrant crisis" in Slovenia in the period from 1999 to 2001, shows quite clearly, that the state agencies and institutions were not prepared for it, since the response was either too late or inappropriate. The institutional policy towards immigrants in Slovenia was and still is following the guidelines of the emerging common European immigration policy, which is mainly restrictive; nevertheless Slovenian policy was quite successful at capturing the "spirit of the times"

displayed by the emerging European migration policy. Slovenia therefore responded by establishing supervisory policy measures with a tighter external (visas, entrance restrictions, databases of unwanted and dangerous persons, stricter legislation...) and internal control (repatriations, deportations, movement restrictions, setup of collection centers, restriction of access to personal documents and restriction in healthcare, social and educational care). In the nineties, the restrictive orientation was encouraged and approved by those political forces that doesn't care about otherwise – in the Europe -fashionable "politically correctness", and are openly expressing their intolerance towards "others and those that are different". The Slovenian "voice of the people" was not much different in this period: the local public initiatives were mainly twofold, either openly hostile toward foreigners, (who are supposed to be thieves, liars and cheaters and are threatening the weak and feeble local population), or speculative and manipulative by bargaining and blackmailing the state to achieve their local and political interests.

Slovenia experienced the "immigrant crisis" in the nineties due to the fact, that it was not prepared for it. The Slovenian laws, which deal with the field of (illegal) immigrants and asylum seekers, undoubtedly contain the controversial issues. Both, the civil-society and non-governmental organizations, and also some of the experts, were calling the attention to those issues. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the above-mentioned

laws assured a certain level of rights and protection to asylum seekers and illegal immigrants. Thus the problem is not the inappropriateness of the laws dealing with the mentioned problem, but more so, the actual execution of the procedures, and mainly, the fact that illegal immigrants and asylum seekers are not properly informed in regard to their lawful rights or the fact that the realization of these rights was hindered.

Another important characteristic of public speech and political rhetoric in Slovenia is the low level of reflective and analytical thinking. The latter is true for the majority of journalistic texts and public positions of professional politicians. Most often, they asserted that Slovenian legislation and

practice in this field, are completely compliant with European standards and demands, but they never wondered whether the European standards and the fundamental migration policies are appropriate. Again, “Europe” acted as a conspiring form that puts an end to all critical thinking.

The so called developed countries created contemporary consumer societies and are now surprised and scared, because the uninvited immigrants from the south and east are trying to share their wellbeing. The immigrants are a part of the global migration flows, and were made illegal by the developed countries with their restrictive laws. In the periphery of the world, the passports became contemporary bibles; on the other

hand having a passport doesn’t necessary mean their owners can travel freely around the globe. The customs officers and border police on the state borders of the world center (to use Immanuel Wallerstein’s term) became the contemporary St. Peters, guarding the gates of the apparent heaven. Nevertheless, more and more signs suggest that in the eyes of the migrants enchantment or fascination with the West is diminishing and their big expectations are replaced by caution and uncertainty. (Illegal) immigrants and asylum seekers in Slovenia have been exposed to this “de-fascination” much more than to solidarity and support.

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