Instrumental Value of Elite Memories on Past Violence during the Emergence of a New State: Slovenian Experience

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Because of their infrequency, revolutionary times possess the characteristics of quasi-experiment. The independence of Slovenia from Tito’s Yugoslavia and the emergence of the new Slovenian state (including nationwide referenda on withdrawal from Socialist Yugoslavia, in December, 1990, and the formal declaration of the new state, June, 1991) constitute an example.

Building a new state has been carried out by the old and newly emerged elite groups with strong support from the international political community. During the transition, the members of the old elite were engaged in skirmishes with their descendents and, above all, with the newly emerging elites in a struggle to (re)gain political power within the framework of a multi-party political system. In explaining such a struggle during a period of political transition, social scientists usually rely on structural determinants while neglecting less visible, but not less decisive, factors. We touch upon one of those factors, the trauma of emerging from subordination to the past regime of some members of the new Slovenian elite. Their traumatic experiences have been in many cases the key factor for entering political life during the transition period. That is, some members of the new Republic of Slovenia political, but also economic and cultural, elite were—due to their inclination toward the independence of a socialist republic of Slovenia within the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia or their lack of loyalty to the federal state official regime or other reasons—marginalized and subjected to two kinds of observable pressures:
first, to direct pressure from former Yugoslavian repressive bodies; and, second, to pressure from official authorities of the Republic of Slovenia who were loyal to the socialist regime.

The subordination of the Slovenian formal and informal/marginalized elite within the former Yugoslavia led to unprocessed, partial, and hence contradictory “historical” conflicts that have been preserved in memories and are still felt in present days. Thus, it is essential to take them into consideration not only during the regime change but also in any analysis of contemporary Slovenian political situation, for these memories are rather regularly triggered in the public sphere, framing contemporary political culture and feeding today’s discernable distrust of political authorities in Slovenia.

The data collected in face-to-face interviews in 1995* with 1041 elite members belonging to the Slovenian elite in 1988 (before the change in the political system), to the elite in 1995 (after the political regime change), or to both help us to understand this situation:

First, the rate of elite retention during the period 1988–1995 in Slovenia was between 70 and 80 percent. The 1988 outflow rate was 23 percent; the 1995 inflow rate was 31 percent. The highest was in the economic sphere and the lowest in politics, with culture somewhere in between. These rates seem high in comparison to other Southeast European transition countries, and it might be an artifact due to nonrandom sample designs across countries, nonresponses, field-work limitations, funding restrictions and the size of overall population of each country. Remember that Slovenia has only 2 million residents! Nevertheless, the substantive reason for the rate magnitude was probably a strong situational pressure before the regime change. Accomplishing a unique historical mission—the establishment of a new independent state of Slovenia—required a rapid consolidation of opposing elite groups. This initial elites’ union was soon broken, and political struggles for power brought about many hot public disputes on the elite retention issue, especially around elections.

Second, 37.3 percent (or 389) of the elite individuals who were interviewed reported injury in their lives accompanied by violent political memories of political maltreatment, imprisonment, or confiscation of their assets and/or property. Deeply affronted, they may have wanted revenge upon the people (or their descendants) who were linked to the political regime that had caused injury to them or their families. In particular, this collective trauma has been recollected within the noncentral cultural elite

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(by 47 percent in 1988 and 44 percent in 1995). In an atmosphere imbued with (past) political violence, it is not difficult to find a fair amount of hidden resentment.

Third, the self-image of the injured/maltreated elite members was harmed due to their subordination and the sad memories of past violence, possibly yielding a latent tendency for a more radical political change. The interviewed elite members showed a strong reluctance even to name themselves “elite.” On the average, only four out of 10 (38 percent) identified themselves as members of an elite. The proportion was higher among the members of cultural elite because their accomplishments tend to be individual and personal (45 to 48 percent), and least among the members of economic elites (28 to 31 percent).

Fourth, in 1995, a majority, 85 percent, of elite members opted for relatively moderate social change while only 14 percent opted for radical change. The share of the latter was considerably higher among those who had experienced some type of political violence within the socialist political system. Obviously, only a part of those tensions has been resolved by initial building of a democratic state.

The unresolved part of “trauma” still exists. Its inherent public and personal distrust orients towards the past—instead of to the possibly less traumatic future of the young state—many of the current elite maneuvers, predominately on domestic grounds. At the international level, Slovenia has reached enviable results: it became a member of the European Union in 2004 and entered the EURO monetary system in 2007. The fear of losing some of sovereignty recently gained has been “diminished” (or doubled) by inclusion into security alliances, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004. This often contested issue has been frequently pointed out in the Central and East European (CEE) countries and is usually interpreted as a historical replication of an older track of foreign (vassalage) dependence. So hidden psychological and social mechanisms of the past violent discourse are still potent and may again determine/cause the burst of past “traumas” some time in the future.

Therefore, a deeper study of instrumental value of such traumatic elite memories is required in order to understand (or even predict) an irregular but periodic appearance of this vulnerable layer of political culture. Unresolved violent tensions among elite factions are especially characteristic of unstable political regimes, for which the building of a stable polity and state requires a longer period of time. Further research in this area may stimulate the formulation of a general theoretical framework on

national conflict emergence and its possible escalation, which may help the key international actors to develop better tools for peaceful management of such conflicts.

Of possible related interest: Chapters 3, 7, 52, 57.

Suggested additional reading

