Kosovo in the Yugoslav 1980s

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"Kosovo, My Land"? Slovenians, Albanians, and the Limits of Yugoslav Social Cohesion

https://doi.org/10.1515/soeu-2021-0002

Abstract: The author examines the Kosovo crisis in the context of the pluralisation and democratisation of Slovenian society in the 1980s and early 1990s. This issue became a catalyst not only for the repositioning of structures of party leadership in relation to Belgrade, but also with respect to general public debates. By charting individual stages of the critical decade of 1981–1991, the author presents Slovenian perceptions of Kosovo's political, economic, and social issues, first through the works of neo-Marxist critics and later through the activism of a group of left-liberal intellectuals, which included the provision of legal support and a high-profile social action related to the violations of Kosovar Albanian human rights. The author discusses the constraints encountered by this brief attempt to establish a pan-Yugoslav civil society initiative. At the same time, he shows how the complexities of the Kosovo crisis were used to coalesce the Slovenian nation into flight from Yugoslavia.

Keywords: Kosovo, Slovenia, self-management socialism, human rights, dissolution of Yugoslavia

Introduction

"Yugoslavia is falling apart in Kosovo and in Slovenia" (Repe 2002a, 164), chanted the enraged Serbian crowd gathered on 28 March 1989 in Belgrade at one of the mass demonstrations typical of that time, the so-called *mitinzi* or street protests, during what has come to be known as the "antibureaucratic revolution" (Vladisavljević 2008). As the economically most depressed and nationally most polarised part of Yugoslavia, Kosovo had long been, in the words of Branka Magaš, a seismograph registering the impending earthquakes that increasingly threatened the

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frail federation (Magaš 1993, 190; Petritsch, Pichler, and Procházka 2004). But how did Slovenia, the northernmost Yugoslav republic and farthest from Kosovo, get involved in the Serbian-Albanian drama (Pavlović, Draško, and Halili 2019)? How was the still extant discourse of Slovenia stabbing Serbia in the back and switching to the Albanian side generated? Ljubljana's congress centre, Cankarjev dom, where Slovenes rallied in support of the Kosovo Albanians, has become the ultimate site of memory regarding those events. In particular, Kosovar Albanians living in Slovenia later made direct references to the Slovene "support" of 1989 and the intertwining aspirations for independence of the two peoples. Kosovo's declaration of sovereignty in 2008 (Ljubljano smo branili v Prištini, 16 Feb 2008) constituted one such point. What can the various, even conflicting, sequences of Slovenian engagement with the problems of Kosovo reveal about the heightened political and social processes taking place during the 1980s, both at the level of the single federal units and of Yugoslavia as a whole?

The notorious assembly held on 27 Feburary 1989 in Cankarjev dom in support of the striking miners in Trepça in northern Kosovo was one of the most controversial moments of this turbulent year in Yugoslavia. It included a speech by the president of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Slovenia, Milan Kučan (It Is Yugoslavia Being Defended, 27 Feb 1989). In the following, I will show how Slovenian left-wing intellectuals, who were extraordinarily active in the 1980s, as well as the party leadership, tackled the topic of Kosovo, and what this reveals about the broader understanding of Yugoslavia and its crucial problems within the Slovenian leftist milieu (Figa 1997, 163–82). The perception of Yugoslavia was changing and shaped nascent conceptions of Slovenia's own relations with the common state and its system. These changes need to be considered in the context of the increasing political fragmentation that followed Tito's death in May 1980, both among and within Yugoslavia's constituent republics and autonomous provinces (Ramet 2002; Soso 2002; Repe 2002b; Jović 2003; Vurnik 2005; Lusa 2012; Flere and Klanjšek 2019). Since my study deals with the relationship between the economically most highly developed and the least developed parts of Yugoslavia, it also examines the latter from the socioeconomic perspective of the crisis of socialist self-management and in light of shifting views on the Yugoslav political economy and the concurrent global structural changes (Suvin 2016; Samary 2017; Kirn 2019; Bing 2019).

The aim is to explain the Kosovo problem as a generally under-researched *motive* for Slovenia's breaking of ties with the Yugoslav federation. Within only one year, a rapid turnabout occurred that saw the entire Slovenian political spectrum plunge into the Kosovo issue at the beginning of 1989, only to sacrifice it completely to Slovenian national interests as all things Yugoslav were "forgotten" and replaced by a new, post-Yugoslav paradigm. Given that Kosovo featured quite

strongly in the increasingly open Slovenian media space of the 1980s, the press is an important source of analysis. Also relevant are the records of the Socialist Alliance of Working People (*Socialistična zveza delovnega ljudstva*, SZDL) which, precisely in the case of Kosovo, broke out of character as the transmitter of the League of Communists (*Zveza komunistov*, ZK) and for a brief period became a forum that fostered a view shared by the broadest Slovenian public—until the multiparty paradigm prevailed and, consequently, the political manipulation of the Kosovo issue ensued. Another significant aspect in the context of the Slovenian democratic transition is evidence corroborating the activities of Albanian parties and Slovenian-Albanian civil society initiatives, which played an important role in keeping the international public abreast of the profundity of the Yugoslav crisis.

Kosovo as a Metaphor

Historically tied to the neighbouring central European region as well as to the slightly more distant western European countries, Slovenia, following the adoption of the 1974 constitution, embodied the paradigm of Yugoslav federalisation with its republics even shutting off behind their own borders. This had repercussions in economic and cultural areas (Borak 2002; Pirjevec 2011). For this reason, distant Kosovo for a long time remained out of the limelight in Slovenia, and arguably the strongest link was maintained by the community of Kosovar Albanians living in the northern Yugoslav republic. Mostly on account of the inflow of workers from the 1960s onwards, the community grew to around 18,000 Kosovar Albanians with permanent or temporary residence in Slovenia by the end of the 1980s (Berishaj 2004, 145).

Student demonstrations stirred Kosovo's capital Pristina in the spring of 1981 (Limani Myrtaj 2021, in this issue). After their suppression, members of the Slovenian Secretariat for Internal Affairs (*Republiški sekretariat za notranje zadeve*) helped to "pacify" the province together with police officers from other parts of the country. According to Slovenian communist politicians, the disastrous economic situation and resulting "economic nationalism" were the main causes of the unrest, heralding the troubled times to come after Tito's death. They rejected theories of an international conspiracy organised by Albanian communist leader Enver Hoxha (Jović 2003, 287, 289; Hadalin 2011). Foreign diplomats noted that some of the more liberal Slovenian communists did not wholeheartedly support the Serbian information blockade and excessive use of force in suppressing the protests (Ramšak 2017). However, had they come forward as representatives of the federal authorities, this would have provided Belgrade with further legitimation

for interference in the internal affairs of the republics. And that was a scenario the Slovenians definitely wanted to avoid.

The strengthening of the federation, dictated by western financial institutions in response to the debt crisis, and the aggravation of the macroeconomic situation soon after Tito's death, were coupled with aspirations to unify the country's educational programmes, which originated in Serbia. Both developments made it difficult for the Slovenian Communist Party to preserve the levels of autonomy that had been the guiding principle of all postwar communist leaderships in Slovenia (Repe 2001, 22–9). The constant dispute with Belgrade, particularly in connection with economic issues, was stirred within closed circles by members of the older Slovenian communist elite such as Jože Smole and France Popit. Despite allegations in later Serbian media constructs to the contrary, they had long remained loyal to the idea of Yugoslavism. The discord soon spread to the general public. The continuing decline in the standard of living and its departure from the standards of neighbouring Austria and Italy contributed to brew an explosive mixture of economic, political, and, increasingly, cultural arguments that presented Yugoslavia as a misbegotten notion (Zajc 2019, 112). In this context, commentators in the Slovenian press started to wonder "who in Yugoslavia was contributing more and who less", and a new symbolic geography of Slovenian self-positioning began to take shape. According to Milica Bakić-Hayden's (1995) concept of "nesting Orientalisms", this conceptualisation saw the Slovenians on the opposite side of the "civilisational" map of Europe to those parts of Yugoslavia marked by an Ottoman past (Zajc 2017, 771).

For Slovenian opinion-makers, the Autonomous Province of Kosovo became the most apposite metaphor for what was wrong with Yugoslavia. First of all, it was Slovenia's antipode in economic terms: while in 1980 Slovenia's GDP was double the Yugoslav average, Kosovo's amounted to barely one quarter (Beshota 1982, 32). The link between these two realities was the federal fund for financing the development of economically less-developed republics and regions. The share of these funds allocated to Kosovo increased from 30% in the second half of the 1960s to almost 50% in the second half of the 1980s, with Slovenia contributing around 2% of its own GDP. Originally projected as a "compulsory loan" scheme, transfers via the fund began to increasingly assume the features of a grant; in the end, Kosovo managed to repay only 4% of the funds received (Borak 2002, 115, 258, 269). The non-transparent and inefficient operation of this basic mechanism for balancing Yugoslav regional development sparked demands in Slovenia for a stricter control of investments by the resource providers. However, in the early 1980s the Slovenian public did not deem the situation completely unrepairable, placing hopes for a resolution of the severe economic and social situation in Kosovo on increased productivity and enforced work discipline (Toš 1997, 389,

630). It was only later that the Slovenian party leadership became wary of further transferring funds to the "underdeveloped" parts of the country when in the rift between Serbia and Slovenia—first cultural, then also political—accusations of who in Yugoslavia was using whom began to fly in all directions (Kmecl 1987).

At the same time, a group of radical neo-Marxist critics in Slovenia voiced opposition to both "Slovenian techno-bureaucratic imperialism" and all Yugoslav nationalisms, as well as unitarianism, insisting on a strictly class approach to social problems (Zajc 2017, 772). Adopting Althusser's structuralism, the core of this group—sociologist Rastko Močnik and philosopher Slavoj Žižek among them—had identified in the late 1970s reform of so-called career-oriented education (*usmerjeno izobraževanje*) a deviation from the principles of socialist self-management and uncritical subordination to the requirements of capitalist markets, into which Yugoslavia was closely integrated (Ramšak 2019, 155–60). The dispute about the "development of undevelopment", as the socioeconomic situation in Kosovo was labelled, was taken up in 1982 by a younger generation of critics mostly active within the Socialist Youth League of Slovenia (*Zveza socialistične mladine Slovenije,* ZSMS), such as Srečo Kirn, Bojan Korsika, Igor Bavčar, and Tomaž Mastnak.

Contrary to popular opinion, the shortcomings of the fund for the underdeveloped province lay not in the fact that the "contributors" had no control over the financial aid they provided, but that the Kosovo (Albanian) bureaucracy misused it to maintain their "give-and-take" relationships, that is for defending their own position to the detriment of the working class for which the aid was supposed to be collected (Kreft 1982, 126). Rejecting the typical excuses about the historical roots of Kosovo's economic backwardness, and consistent with their strict Marxist views, the Slovenian critics considered the province's main problem no less serious than the one that held the whole of Yugoslavia in its clutches: the irreconcilability between the laws of developed commodity production on the one hand and the development of socialist self-management relations on the other (Kirn 1982, 61). As long as this transitional situation was not remedied and self-management fully implemented, the gap between the developed and underdeveloped regions would, according to the critics' interpretation, continue to exist or even increase. They also believed that the statist method of financing through the fund for the underdeveloped regions was misguided and only served to strengthen bureaucracy which, in the given circumstances, usurped all levers of decision-making and management. When these levers started to slip out of hand, the Kosovo Albanian bureaucrats would follow a tried and tested recipe and harness "if not nationalism, then at least the national romanticism of the majority nationality in Kosovo—the Albanians". This is precisely what got out of control in 1981 (Kirn 1982, 80).

Slovenian Marxist intellectuals thus showed no partiality for the demands that Kosovo become a republic instead of being an autonomous province within Serbia. On the contrary, they understood this aim as an expression of the interests of the regional elite which was creating "'the Kosovo people' and a corresponding public of 'intellectual workers'" in a "corporately populist" fashion (Kreft 1982, 121). Although achieved through the condemnable manipulation of the "class-indistinct mass", this was nevertheless "a belated but historically necessary awakening of the Albanian people", wrote Srečo Kirn in the Slovenian journal of critical thinking, *Časopis za kritiko znanosti* (Kirn 1982, 80). Moreover, the process took place in an atmosphere of strained relations with the Serbians and Montenegrins and in catastrophic socioeconomic conditions, complicating the situation further. Instead of resorting to unilateral condemnation, the Slovenian critical Marxists believed that political decision-makers should take into account all of the abovementioned aspects and that rash action and use of force "directed solely and above all against Albanian nationalism" would be destined for a historic defeat (Kirn 1982, 80).

In fact, the course of events in Kosovo led to the latter scenario, causing the Slovenian political elites to fear that statist interventions might compromise the federal constitutional order of which Slovene economist Edvard Kardelj was the chief architect. Thus, when in 1985 Milan Kučan, as the head of a special commission of the Presidency of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (*Centralni komitet Saveza komunista Jugoslavije*, CK SKJ), confirmed the view that Serbia, in terms of its constitutional position, was not equal to the other republics because of Kosovo, he elicited some criticism back home, while at the same time failing to oblige the Serbian leadership in power in the pre-Milošević era. When the Slovenian and Serbian delegations met in 1986, it was already obvious that Kosovo was one of the issues about which the two republics held dramatically different opinions (Repe 2015, 101–2). The aspiration of the leading Serbian communists for constitutional change was driving the two republics towards opposite ends of the axis reaching between the "reformers" and the "preservers" of the constitution. Slovenian communists represented the most resolute core of the latter as staunch defenders of Kardelj's legacy (Jović 2003, 295).

Nevertheless, this discord between Slovenian and Serbian communists in the mid-1980s was still primarily political and only acquired a prevalently nationalist connotation towards the end of that decade. On the other hand, Kosovo was becoming a point of contention between Serbian and Slovenian opposition intellectuals who had previously shared a number of views on the democratisation of Yugoslav society. At a notable meeting held in Ljubljana in November 1985, at which Dobrica Ćosić, Mihajlo Marković, and Ljubomir Tadić represented the Serbian side, their Slovenian counterparts made it clear that they wanted their own

republic to become "Europe" and expected the same from Serbia. In order to achieve this, the Slovenians argued, the Serbians would first have to resolve their dispute with the Kosovar Albanians. The Kosovo issue, according to the interpretation of Slovenian oppositional intellectuals connected to the journal *Nova revija*, was balkanising the whole of Yugoslavia (Zajc 2017, 773). However, the Serbian interlocutors were quite impervious to such arguments. Given that there were also other disagreements over the nature of the post-Tito "third Yugoslavia", this meeting went down as the point of divergence between the forces that would later, each in their own republic, provide the conceptual basis for key political moves (Repe 2001, 19).

Slovenia as a Sort of "French Judiciary"

The first citizens to actively intervene on the part of Slovenia in the increasingly exacerbated interethnic situation in Kosovo in the second half of the 1980s were not overtly oppositional, yet critical, intellectuals—mostly legal professionals—who had long persevered in their efforts to preserve ties with their colleagues in Belgrade and in other Yugoslav republics. They insisted on a pan-Yugoslav approach to human rights issues. Fresh ground was broken in 1986 by Ljubo Bavcon, a professor at Ljubljana's Faculty of Law. When an amendment to the republican penal code was adopted in Serbia in that year allowing acts of common crime to be treated as anti-state activity in instances where the ethnic origin of the victim differed from that of the perpetrator, Bavcon publicly remonstrated against this subjectivisation of criminal law. He stressed the strong possibility of political misuse, arguing that the change would likely add fuel to the fire of nationalism (Magaš 1993, 55). An initiative to establish a council for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms (*Svet za varstvo človekovih pravic in temeljnih svoboščin*) emerged from among a circle of prominent Yugoslav lawyers. Bavcon saw little support for this idea apart from by the Slovenian authorities, specifically the SZDL, under whose auspices the council was then founded in March 1988. This was before the arrest of "the Four" known as "JBTZ" in Slovenia, referring to the initials of the surnames of the four charged journalists and military officers: Janez Janša, Ivan Borštner, David Tasić, and Franci Zavrl. They were sentenced to between six months and four years imprisonment for betraying military secrets. The trial was political and sparked great public uproar. It was an important event for the development of the liberal democratic opposition in Slovenia and led to the foundation of Bavčar's better-known Committee for the Protection of Human Rights (*Odbor za varstvo človekovih pravic*), which until 1990 would take the lead in

pressing for democratic pluralisation (Nekaj podatkov o Svetu za varstvo človekovih pravic, 8 Nov 2007).

With repression in Kosovo growing, more and more Kosovar Albanians began to turn to Bavcon's council for assistance, and a systematic collection and analysis of field data became crucial for informing the domestic and foreign public of the mass human rights violations in Kosovo. The main source of data were Kosovar lawyers who managed to send judicial documents through various channels; towards the end of 1989, a delegation visited "the French Judiciary", as Slovenia was labelled. Among the delegates was Bajram Kelmendi, the successful defence lawyer for Azem Vllasi who had opposed Slobodan Milošević's grab for power and been arrested in March of that year. Although Slovenian legal professionals and other intellectuals had no intention of becoming agents for "the Albanian cause", as speculated by the politicised Serbian press, and wanted to gain a complete view of the developments in Kosovo, the numbers spoke for themselves: of the 394 people charged under article 114 of the penal code (threat to the territorial integrity of the state), into which Serbian investigators tried—even by falsifying evidence—to squeeze as many criminal acts as possible, no less than 84% were of Albanian nationality. The Slovenian and Kosovar lawyers agreed that the investigative procedures conducted by the Serbian State Security Service included blatant cases of torture, denial of protection of the law, and other severe violations of human rights (Magnetogram razgovora s kosovskimi odvetniki, 16 Nov 1989). In their statements, prepared in Slovenian as well as English, Bavcon and his colleagues emphasised the inaccurate interpretation of the applied articles of the penal code, and after the declaration of the state of emergency in Kosovo and the incidence of so-called "isolations" of politically exposed persons, they openly began to describe the situation as a severe violation of the constitution (Sporočilo, 9 March 1989).

Although the Kosovar Albanian lawyers no longer believed in the work of the Yugoslav Human Rights Forum (*Jugoslovenski forum za ljudska prava*), the Slovenian side— especially international law expert Danilo Türk—insisted that the body to which Türk himself belonged should be made acquainted with the gathered evidence. He believed that the ideologically connoted charges of "counter-revolution", "irredentism", and "nationalism" could by no means justify the unequivocal violations of human rights, and expected that Serbian jurists would share that view (Magnetogram razgovora s kosovskimi odvetniki, 16 Nov 1989; K vprašanju internacionalizacije problematike človekovih pravic na Kosovu, 4 March 1989). But from the end of 1988, when Ljubo Bavcon received a letter from the prominent Belgrade lawyer Veljko Guberina, it became painfully obvious that when it came to the Kosovo issue, the rudiments of the pan-Yugoslav rule of law had failed. In his letter, Guberina informed his "esteemed colleague" that there

were not several truths about Kosovo, but only one: what the Serbs were facing in Kosovo was the same as the Slovenians had experienced in 1941 when the German, Italian, and Hungarian fascists had occupied their country, threatening their very existence. Bavcon and other Slovenian intellectuals, he maintained, would only be able to adopt the correct frame of thinking about the solution to the Kosovo crisis if they understood what Kosovo meant to Serbia (Pismo Veljka Guberine, 7 Nov 1988).

Pan-Yugoslav Civil Society?

A very useful insight into the changing perception of Kosovo and the whole of Yugoslavia can be gained by observing the Socialist Youth League (ZSMS), which during the turbulent 1980s in Slovenian public life represented a space for articulating various alternative social concepts and an intermediary space between the League of Communists of Slovenia and the public. Everything discussed from a less than homogeneous ideological point of view and in the most provocative, iconoclastic, and dynamic ways found its route to the general public through media outlets supported by the ZSMS, from the more theory-oriented journals (*Časopis za kritiko znanosti*, *Tribuna*) to the student-run *Radio Študent* and the popular youth magazine, *Mladina* (Patterson 2000). Known for its anti-authoritarian and anti-militarist stance, the latter was a thorn in the side of the Yugoslav People's Army in particular. In regard to developments in Kosovo, *Mladina's* approach was in diametrical opposition to that of the leading Belgrade media, which increasingly launched one-sided and incendiary reports (Vučetić 2021, in this issue). *Mladina* journalists would regularly report from the field, as in the case of the notorious massacre in the Paraćin army barracks in September 1987—a mass shooting carried out by a 20-year-old Kosovar Albanian conscript that left four soldiers dead and five wounded, after which the perpetrator committed suicide. The event triggered a wave of anti-Albanian hysteria in Serbia. *Mladina's* approach, however, was very different, as its journalists explored the broader context of such social pathologies which shocked all of Yugoslavia.

Yet as the 1980s drew to a close, critical Marxism increasingly faded in relation to western European (social) liberalism conceived in the sense of political pluralism and respect for human rights and the rule of law (Spaskovska 2017, 176). Not only was this political principle adapted to the ZSMS's programme, it was internalised by some of the previously most zealous Marxists themselves. Under the pressure of Slobodan Milošević's politics in the late 1980s, the credo of a "return" to central Europe began to spread from the bourgeois circles of *Nova revija* to the liberal core of the ZSMS and to the general public. A declaration issued by the

ZSMS on September 1988 underlined that the representatives of the future Slovenian political mainstream had had enough of "inter-tribal conflicts" and the isolation of Yugoslavia, which should "join Europe" as soon as possible (Spaskovska 2017, 176). In terms of the perception of the Kosovo issue, this indicated that the emphasis on social categories had been replaced by a "culturalisation" of the Serbian-Albanian conflict, which the Slovenian left-liberal milieu was no longer able to grasp or proactively intervene in (Kirn 2019, 210).

In such an atmosphere, in the wake of the mass protests of 1988 triggered by the mentioned "Trial of the Four" (JBTZ), which soon struck a clear anti-Yugoslav vein, the escalation of the Kosovo crisis in the beginning of 1989 was the next catalyst for the conception of an independent Slovenian nation. The dramatic strike of 1,350 Kosovar Albanian miners in Trepça in northern Kosovo, prompted by the abolition of the autonomy of the Province of Kosovo, made headlines in all Slovenian media. The latter had their own reporters in the field due to lack of trust in the state news agency, *Tanjug*. The idea to hold a protest meeting in Slovenia upon the announcement of the introduction of a state of emergency in Kosovo was first brought up at the home of Ervin Hladnik Milharčič, a journalist for *Mladina* who had just returned from Kosovo (Zborovanje v Cankarjevem domu, 27 Feb 1989). The proponents first considered organising street demonstrations, but when the president of the ZSMS, Jožef Školč, informed the Slovenian party leadership about this plan, the latter proposed a "protest assembly" in the Cankarjev dom cultural centre under the patronage of the Socialist Alliance of the Working People (SZDL), rather than encouraging more volatile forms of demonstration (Repe 2002a, 164).

In the "standard" chronology of the process of Slovenian democratisation and independence, the gathering in Cankarjev dom on 27 February 1989 is recorded as the first joint action by the communist authorities and its mass organisations together with the emerging opposition as well as numerous civil society organisations, and joined by the Croatian and Serbian sections of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights. The unanimity across the Slovenian political spectrum was probably motivated by fears that the "antibureaucratic revolution" staged by Milošević and ongoing in Serbia and Montenegro could be exported. Plans to spread this movement to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia had been mentioned by one of the political leaders of the Kosovar Serbs, Miroslav Šolević, later in April 1989 (Magaš 1993, 182). These fears were accompanied by anxiety over the possibility that a state of emergency could be proclaimed in Slovenia as well, where the Yugoslav Army especially had long been waiting for an opportunity to "put things in their place". The assembly's underlying message was that the Kosovo scenario could be repeated in any other part of Yugoslavia, but most resonant was the warning issued by the president of the

Central Committee of the League of Communists of Slovenia, Milan Kučan: in Trepça's "Stari trg" mine—where the 50 Kosovar miners still striking had barricaded themselves 850 m underground—not just the rights of the Kosovar Albanian community and the autonomy of Kosovo were at stake, but also the Antifascist Council for the People's Liberation of Yugoslavia (*Antifašističko v(ij)eće narodnog oslobođenja Jugoslavije*, AVNOJ), that is, socialist Yugoslavia's very foundations (Scenarij zbora, 27 Feb 1989). The declaration "Against the Introduction of the State of Emergency, for Peaceful Coexistence" was signed by more than half of Slovenia's two million citizens.

Although solidarity with the "suffering" Kosovar Albanians was not the only motive for the assembly, a fact which may be gleaned from some of the statements by leaders of the emerging opposition parties, the Slovenia-based Albanians soon started to measure time in terms of "before" and "after" Cankarjev dom, so unreservedly did they interpret this gesture as the Slovenian political and intellectual elite taking "their side" (Berishaj 2004, 144). A diametrically opposite reaction, set in a much longer temporal context and accompanied by unrestrained emotion, started to pervade Serbian public opinion. The apparent act of "switching" to the Albanian side was seen as a betrayal of the Serbian-Slovenian alliance which went back to the times of the First Yugoslavia. Serbian responses intimated that the Slovenians were displaying ingratitude for the shelter that thousands of Slovenian families, banished from their homes, had found in Serbia during the Second World War (Jović 2003, 425). Footage from Cankarjev dom broadcast by Television Belgrade showing socialist youth representative Školč wearing a yellow Star-of-David badge and provocatively declaring that anyone could become a Jew in such a multinational state—thus alluding to the Holocaust—further inflamed the Serbian public already mobilised by the Milošević regime (Clark 2000, 51). As Dejan Jović (2003, 458) notes, in this heated moment the curtain of Yugoslavism fell and a counter-offensive against Slovenia started to unfold under the banner of Serbdom. The decline in the level of public discourse is probably best reflected in the anonymous letters with offensive content that began to arrive at Slovenian institutions and were directed at high-profile individuals such as Milan Kučan (Sprejem amandmajev k ustavi SRS, Oct 1989).

The protest assembly in Cankarjev dom was the starting point of a broad campaign over the next weeks and months, which was joined by a series of nationally and internationally known Slovenian intellectuals and activists such as Peter Božič, Matjaž Hanžek, Dane Zajc, Marko Hren, Jaša Zlobec, and Mile Šetinc, who subsequently founded the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights in Kosovo (*Odbor za varstvo človekovih pravic na Kosovu*) together with Albanians resident in Slovenia. The committee sought, on the one hand, to change the stereotypical views that Slovenians had of Albanians, which often hardly differed to

those held by Serbians, and on the other, to inform the international public about the developments in Kosovo where an information blockade had been imposed. From there, information was delivered to Ljubljana through underground channels and then forwarded to authoritative foreign media such as *Le Monde, The Guardian, La Stampa,* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, thus assuming a higher level of credibility than if it had been disseminated through Kosovar Albanian emigrés alone. Several members of the committee appeared as guests at the Council of Europe and in the US Congress (Kosovo – moja dežela, 25 May 1990, 291, 300). The disintegrating federation's northern republic thus became a safe haven for the operation of numerous politically active Kosovar Albanians, who in the beginning of 1990 established the Democratic Alliance of Kosovo in Ljubljana (*Demokratična zveza Kosova v Ljubljani*) and from there covered those parts of Yugoslavia where their activities were officially banned. They also published the newspapers *Alternativa*, *Republika*, and *Demokracija autentike*, which found their secret way to Kosovo in thousands of copies (Berishaj 2004, 144) .

Slovenian solidarity with the persecuted Kosovar Albanians reached its peak during the trial against Azem Vllasi, mentioned above, and his miner co-defendants, which began at the end of October 1989 in Titova Mitrovica—today's Mitrovica—in northern Kosovo. In the same month, the ZSMS published a series of articles written by Vllasi's spouse, Nadira Avdić-Vllasi (1989), in order to gather funds for his defence in court (Vllasi 2016, 462). A general collection to the same purpose had already been organised in Slovenia, but the funds were eventually used for covering the material costs of the four prominent Slovenian lawyers who provided expert advice to their Albanian counterparts defending the impoverished miners rather than Vllasi himself (Dopis odvetnika Petra Čeferina, 14 Dec 1989). Besides obstructive action on the part of the local judicial authorities (Končno poročilo odvetnika Petra Čeferina, 11 May 1990), the Slovenian lawyers reported on violations of the rights of the defendants and attempts to influence witnesses, which continued throughout the political trial in which penal law and law enforcement agencies were grossly abused (Prošnja, 16 Oct 1989). The Slovenians identified their Kosovar colleagues as "the most endangered and persecuted of European lawyers" (Poročilo odvetnika Petra Čeferina, 2 Nov 1989). Although Belgrade newspapers commented that "for Slovenians nothing comes for free, not even their love of Albanians" (Pošto 100.000 albanskih $ u Ljubljani?, 13 Dec 1989), the lawyers' successful *pro bono* engagement gained them much favour with the Slovenian public (Čeferin 2012).

Concurrently with the activities to internationalise the Kosovo issue via the Slovenian window to the world, the Slovenian members of the Committee for the Defence of Human Rights in Kosovo wanted to change the clichéd image that their countrymen had of Albanians, which was, in their opinion, largely the

result of the uncritical adoption of Serbian propaganda. The newly stressed Albanian trait, which corresponded to the new Slovenian self-perception, was entrepreneurialism, the flourishing of which was—in both cases—supposedly stymied by the rigid armour of Yugoslav socialism. Referring to John Kenneth Galbraith, Slovenian author Peter Božič in an interview titled "Kosovo – My Land" observed that indeed the similarity between the two independence-seeking nations was obvious:

> The most important value in Slovenia has always been not only to be hardworking, but also able to turn out something, to behave economically. The Albanians excel in this wherever conditions allow them to. Undeveloped Kosovo is the result of a systematic Serbian-Yugoslav policy; it is not a matter of incompetence and the backwardness of the people of Kosovo. That much has become clear to us. (Kosovo – moja dežela, 25 May 1990)

The interview's title is a direct allusion to the 1986 advertising campaign "Slovenia, My Land" which, even more than to attract foreign guests, served to awaken patriotic feelings among the Slovenian people and aroused much disdain and derision in other parts of Yugoslavia (Repe 2011).

In the spring of 1990, Božič offered proposals for better opportunities for Slovenians and Albanians outside the framework of Yugoslavia. This was after the elections had been won by the Democratic Opposition of Slovenia coalition (*Demokratična opozicija Slovenije*, DEMOS) whose main objective was to gain independence for the Republic of Slovenia. Its position, namely that the solution of the Kosovo issue should not be attempted within the common state formation, had been clearly pointed out by the bourgeois opposition immediately after the protest assembly in Cankarjev dom. Slovenia's future first minister of foreign affairs, Dimitrij Rupel, had presented the argument that Yugoslavia as a federative state of eight equal components was falling apart; consequently, there was no point in continuing to deal with its "individualities". Instead, Rupel suggested, an active approach should be taken towards the development of a common *Slovenian* political programme (Zapis o sestanku zbora v Cankarjevem domu, 3 March 1989). And that is how things turned out: only the first of the further meetings among the organisers of the assembly in Cankarjev dom was dedicated to the question of how to respond to the enormous pressure emerging in Serbia in connection with the Slovenian protest. The countering of economic sanctions—the boycott of products made by Slovenian companies instigated by the Serbian Socialist Alliance—as well as the prevention of the "rally of truth", which aimed to gather crowds of Serbian protesters in Ljubljana on 1 December 1989, were left to the outgoing Slovenian Communist Party (Čepič et al. 2010). At all subsequent meetings there was now talk of a joint Slovenian national programme, about which, however, there was no consensus at that point, least of all with regard to the implementation of the full

sovereignty of the Slovenian state. The newly formed opposition party, the Slovenian Democratic Alliance (*Slovenska demokratična zveza*, SDZ), then published its "May Declaration" which, unlike the Basic Charter of Slovenia adopted by the SZDL, did not see any possibility for Slovenia's further existence within the Yugoslav state (Majniška deklaracija, 8 May 1989; Zapis 7. sestanka Koordinacijskega odbora, 16 May 1989; Temeljna listina Slovenije 1989, 29 May 1989).

Conclusion. The "Slovenian Truth" About Kosovo

When in 1990 an opinion poll was conducted among the population of Slovenia about which "truth about Kosovo" they felt most inclined to believe, 2% of the respondents declared "the Serbian", a not much higher share (4.5%) said "the Albanian", and no less than 50% answered "the Slovenian" (Toš 1997, 764). This article has shown how the intricate problem of Kosovo was represented in various phases and among the different circles of Slovenian left-wing intellectuals, which significantly affected the perception of the general public as well. At the same time, taking a position in relation to Yugoslavia's southern region meant having to decide Slovenia's own stance with regard to Yugoslavia and self-management socialism, which was losing credibility as the economic crisis worsened. Meanwhile, a sense of the need to protect human rights was steadily growing, with Kosovo yet again an example of what should never happen in a democratic socialist system. Zealous Marxist intellectuals, legal scholars, and civil society activists, not to mention politicians of the Slovenian branch of the League of Communists, were put to the test by Kosovo being the single most important accumulation point of all the problems facing Yugoslavia. With their integrative approach, they wished to persevere and resolve the burning issues of the Yugoslav federation long after the bourgeois opposition had withdrawn from these efforts. Despite the increased emphasis on human rights vocabulary, the ideas of Yugoslavism and self-management had not yet become completely alien to this endeavour.

Regardless of assumptions about the causes of the Kosovo crisis, the general consensus in Slovenia was that the human rights of Kosovar Albanians must be protected as a principle not to be overridden by any measures taken by Serbian or federal authorities. However, the formation of the "Slovenian" truth about Kosovo was equally influenced by concern about the consequences that upsetting the federal constitutional order might have for the autonomy or independence of the Slovenian republic, becoming most acute at the beginning of 1989. Behind the united front on Kosovo, presented by the entire spectrum of the Slovenian establishment as well as alternative civil society actors in February 1989, was the shared

fear that Slovenia could be next. Serbia, on the other hand, interpreted this stance as Slovenians of all political persuasions clearly switching to the side of Albanian separatists. In 1995, Susan Woodward described Milan Kučan's statement at Cankarjev dom in very linear terms as a critical step towards integrating the rights of territorial governance with individual rights and freedoms, paving the way towards Yugoslavia's disintegration; however, as I have shown, this is not entirely accurate, at least with regard to the Slovenian reformed communists (Woodward 1995, 98).

The perception of Kosovo as the scene of a "proxy war" between Slovenia and Serbia, as Woodward defined it (1995, 98), certainly reflected the perspective of the DEMOS politicians, but after gaining power in May 1990 they began to view the issue as just another chapter of the Yugoslav story, now over and done with. By then, the impulses to separate from "the Balkans" and "join Europe" originating from these circles had also shaped the dominant ideas of that part of the ZSMS moving in the direction of classical liberalism and whose members had taken on important social positions. A new paradigm began to prevail in which Slovenia, preferably apart from Yugoslavia rather than within it, would join the "civilised" world of Europe, while the most problematic parts of the crumbling common state could rely only on Slovenia's most sterile "assistance".

During the disintegration of the Yugoslav state, the complex issue of Kosovo became one of the key factors to drive the Slovenian elites towards a peculiar sort of isolationist nationalism or, as Miha Kovač, a ZSMS activist and later one of the few Slovenian members of the Association for a Yugoslav Democratic Initiative (*Združenje za jugoslavensku demokratsku inicijativu,* UJDI), observed towards the end of the 1980s: "The more independent they [the Slovenians] are, the less disturbed they are by the absence of democracy in Yugoslavia" (Magaš 1993, 147). And just as rapidly as Kosovo had made the headlines of Slovenian newspapers, it disappeared from them soon afterwards. The realisation that with the implementation of Slovenia's own national programme Kosovo quickly ceased to be "my land" remained the concern of a rare few. "For three days, I witnessed Slovenian chauvinism, Slovenian lack of solidarity with the Kosovo writers arrested during that same time," wrote the Slovenian and cosmopolitan writer, poet, and journalist Maruša Krese about Slovenia's international literary festival *Vilenica* in 1990. "There was no response to that from the Slovenian writers, not a single word" (Villa 2017, 181).

Research Funding: The author received financial support from the Slovenian Research Agency (research core funding programme no. P6-0272), and funding for the research project J6-1800 "Adriatic Welfare States. Social Politics in a Transnational Borderland from the mid-19th until the 21st Century".

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