

REPRESENTATION IN CRISIS AND REDEFINED CITIZENSHIP IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE 2012 MARIBOR PROTESTS

Abstract. *This article summarises the pertinent facts and analyses the outcomes of the 2012–2013 protests, in particular those in Maribor, with the aim of arguing that an acute crisis of representation was the principal reason for the popular discontent which was only exacerbated by the economic crisis, otherwise identified as the crucial context of the protests. Despite a post-protest relapse into neoliberal depoliticisation, a subsequent redefinition of post-democratic citizenship has emerged via innovative forms of direct action. The methodologies used to create this text were partly descriptive and critical analytical, and partly militant research which integrates scientific research with civic political activities.*

Keywords: *uprisings, Maribor, representation, citizenship*

This article summarises the pertinent facts and analyses the outcomes of the 2012–2013 protests, especially those in Maribor, with the aim of arguing that an acute crisis of political representation was the principal reason for the popular discontent, which that was only exacerbated by the economic crisis, otherwise identified as the crucial context of the protests. Yet I explicitly argue that the still on-going crisis of representation in Slovenia has only been worsened by this expression of popular discontent because the outcomes of the protests have been reduced to a few post-protest political parties of which even fewer have made it to representative institutions at the national or local level at which they could not or would not instigate any systemic changes. Moreover, due to the protests' failure to produce any palpable change, the citizens have become demotivated for any future mobilisation with the protests thus having reinforced the grip on power of the very political establishment they had supposedly aimed to destabilise. The principal reason for this turnaround is to be looked for in those political actors that benefited from the protests' outcomes in the long term and had instigated the protests to begin with or at least aptly rode the wave they created.

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However, despite a post-protest relapse into neoliberal depoliticisation, a subsequent redefinition of post-democratic citizenship has emerged via innovative forms of direct action and the enthusiastic yet theoretically well-grounded revival of the local political tradition entailing popular participation in decision-making processes. While these activities merely reinforce the generalised popular recognition of the futility of mass political mobilisation and create frustration with their limited and slow impact in our era of instant gratification, this redefinition of the scope and intent of active citizenship today may well be the most important, if not the only, positive outcome of the protest movement. Before I proceed with facts and arguments, it should be noted that the methodologies used to create this text are partly descriptive and critical analytical, and partly militant research which integrates scientific research with civic political activities through a continuous self-critical self-reflection of political practices in which the theorist is directly involved as a political actor.

Facts and Contexts

56

In late 2012 and early 2013, Slovenia was troubled by a series of local and nation-wide protests, the so-called 'uprisings', directed against various local policies in particular and the political establishment in general. Considering the time distance, it would not be inappropriate to recall the chronology and decisive circumstances of these uprisings. They started with the first uprising organised on 21 November 2012 in Maribor that included around 1,000 protesters and was triggered by yet another publicly exposed abuse of power by the local mayor.¹ The second Maribor uprising followed on 26 November with around 10,000 participants. A day later, on 27 November, the first uprising occurred in Ljubljana, with 1,000 participants. Between 28 November and 2 December, similar uprisings were organised in Jesenice, Kranj, Ajdovščina, Koper, again in Ljubljana (on 30 November), Nova Gorica, Novo Mesto, Trbovlje, Velenje and Krško. On 3 December, there was another uprising in Maribor, organised simultaneously with local uprisings in Celje, Ljubljana, Ptuj, Ravne na Koroškem and Trbovlje. This third Maribor uprising brought out onto public squares and streets some 20,000 participants and was the best attended of all public protests during that winter. The uprisings in the other localities never gathered more than a few thousand people at most (Berkopec, 2015: 8–9). A fourth Maribor uprising followed on 4 December, this time already involving half the level of participation. On 21 December, the first pan-Slovenian uprising was simultaneously

¹ For detailed reasons and circumstances of the protests, see Toplak, 2013. For a broader understanding of Slovenian politics, see Lukšič, 2015.

organised in Maribor, Ljubljana, Murska Sobota, Nova Gorica, Postojna and Ptuj; all together, only slightly over 7,000 people gathered, including some 5,000 in Ljubljana. This uprising was the last protest organised in 2012 and the last in Maribor. After January 2013, the protesters gravitated towards Ljubljana, with consecutive pan-Slovenian uprisings occurring there on 11 January, 8 February, 9 March and 27 April. Between January and April, attendance levels dropped from 8,000 to 1,000 (*ibid.*). The momentum was gradually lost as the demands most vocalised by the protesters were satisfied: the Mayor of Maribor stepped down on 31 December 2012 and the conservative national government was faced with a no-confidence vote on 27 February 2013.

Four years later, despite an apparent economic recovery, a 'protest Mayor' heading up the Maribor municipal administration, and parliamentary elections, according to public opinion polls (Potič, 2016) the discontent across the country with political representation has far from improved. Notwithstanding the emergence of certain post-protest political parties and politicians claiming to embody change, one-half of the electorate would not (know which to) choose from among the existing political parties, satisfaction with the government has reached historical lows. The most popular politicians are, as a rule, the European Commissioner and the Slovenian Members of the European Parliament who are not active on the national political scene. Just like other crises, the crisis of representation has become permanent.

As mentioned earlier, the protests arose at the peak of the global economic and financial crisis that hurt the Slovenian economy somewhat belatedly yet still to the point that it was included on the list of EU countries in need of crisis management by the infamous European troika. This triumvirate included representatives of the European Commission, the European Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In 2012, the unemployment in Slovenia reached its highest levels since 1999, while negative economic growth was recorded in all Slovenian statistical regions (Statistični urad, 2013). Further, Slovenian protesters were inspired by the uprisings happening elsewhere in Europe and the Arab Spring in the Middle East. However, while the economic crisis may have dictated the societal climate causing the expression of popular discontent, behind it loomed more general disillusionment with representative democracy and market capitalism following two decades of the intense social experiment called 'the transition'. The established political parties had finally exhausted public trust, staying in power without any palpable policy orientation differences and seemingly only serving the interests of global capital, deconstructing the welfare state and increasing social inequalities. This universal discontent Slovenians shared with other impoverished and disenfranchised population segments across Europe became

concretised in a myriad of local issues that were less economy-oriented than one would expect, even in a welfare 'time bomb' such as Maribor. Although Maribor, one of the most important industrial centres of former socialist Yugoslavia, had paid a heavy price for the transition by way of the disintegration of its local economy, in 2012 the broader Maribor region was in fact not as affected by the economic crisis as certain other Slovenian regions (ibid.). While the form of expressing discontent was quite unified – mass gatherings in public places, posters bearing critical slogans, shouting and singing, clashes with the police in some places – every locality had its own set of local issues to ventilate. Later on, the pan-Slovenian uprisings condemned the political establishment as a whole, although the local uprisings first targeted specific local political pundits and their controversial behaviour. This 'trend' was initiated by Maribor and its inhabitants' outrage against the municipal Mayor Franc Kangler. The protests in Maribor were a spontaneous public spectacle that broke with the apathy of the impoverished ghost town as an expression of a 'solidary' anger across social strata aimed at the mayor who was considered not Ours² but the Other. While the poor protested against corruption and inefficient local policies, together with his pronounced dialect and corrupt sheriff pose the former mayor had offended the remaining Maribor bourgeoisie and intelligentsia, then torn between modern contempt for the rural mentality and the traditional class egalitarianism (see Mazzini, 2011). Set up along Maribor's most frequented roads by a private company to collect fines for profit, the infamous speed radars further unified the expression of discontent, as if they were simply one test too many for the overly patient Mariborians. The local media's sensationalist reporting of numerous speed violations detected by those radars created a serious concern among many inhabitants of Maribor who then went off to protest just in case they, too, had been caught. However, for many, the protests were clearly also a welcome overture to the merry, tipsy holiday month of December. Maribor had thereby found quite a banal place on the world map of anti-systemic protests that elsewhere had been spurred by more or less tragic events, such as self-immolation and murderous police violence in Tunisia, forced expulsions in France, or dying infants in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Subsequent failed attempts to protest in support of workers from closed down Maribor industrial plants or the protesters arrested during the winter

² *Franc Kangler, born in Maribor in 1965, was the democratically elected Mayor of Maribor for the second consecutive mandate and in the first round in 2010. He was appointed State Councillor (Senator) at the end of 2012 to represent the Maribor region in the National Council, the second chamber of the Slovenian bicameral parliamentary system. This appointment was a strong point of contention as Mariborians resented being represented at the national level by someone like Kangler, who by then was enmeshed in numerous criminal charges. Previously, Kangler had served three mandates as Member of the Parliament on behalf of the Slovenian People's Party.*

uprisings³ showed the pathetic reality of inter-class solidarity in a society where poverty is still considered a shame, as well as the protesters' incapacity to integrate plurality beyond the limits of petit-bourgeois decency or post-hippie, flower-power pacifism.

Protests organised following the relatively hasty announcement of the despised Mayor of Maribor's departure brought about a gradual and sobering realisation among many idealists, truly eager to fight for change, concerning how aptly the administrators of the Facebook website called »Franc Kangler should step down as Mayor of Maribor« (FKSS) had manipulated the crowds for their partial interests once the initial joke had unexpectedly turned into a wholesale insurrection. As soon as there was a realistic prospect of preliminary local elections, a 'protest candidate' emerged in the form of Andrej Fištravec, a university professor of sociology without prior experience in politics. When he was elected, the protest organisers became part of his formal and informal 'circle of confidence' in the municipal administration, with the disappointed Mariborians ever since then being left to watch the inaptness, plundering and nepotism continue as if Franc Kangler had never left.

The Crisis of Representation

59

One immediately observable⁴ impact of the Maribor protests was that the otherwise apathetic post-industrial 'ghost town' appeared to have politically awoken. People took increased interest in politics and heated political debates could be heard not only at public roundtables and in pubs but also at sports events and in beauty salons. A year after the protests, this brimming political climate started to change as people started to realise that, although the resented former mayor was no longer in place, the necessary systemic change was not going to follow and the 'protest Mayor' now in office was only going to implement more of the same political practices that had initially propelled people onto the streets and squares. However, no new protests were to be feared: the circle of cronies of the new mayor, composed partly of the anti-Kangler protests' organisers, had learned exactly

³ One hundred and fifty protesters were arrested in Maribor, of whom twenty-eight faced criminal charges; two protesters were also arrested in Kranj, thirty in Ljubljana, and fifteen in Celje (Berkopec, 2015: 8–9).

⁴ My auto-critical analytical position here is that of a militant researcher since I personally took part in all the protests in Maribor and two pan-Slovenian protests in Ljubljana. I produced newspaper articles and interviews in the course of the protest period for media at home and abroad. I was present at the announcement of Fištravec's candidature for the mayor and was actively involved in post-protest civic activism. Militant research focuses on "auto-reflection and auto-criticism of [activists'] own practices and on questioning of ways and methods by which political practices were connected [by the activists] with production of political theory from within" (Gregorčič, 2011: 35).

where to draw the line of discontent for it not to be crossed, while people were further passivised by their own disappointment and a renewed feeling of powerlessness. The ultimate lesson that “protests only result in new faces with the same old agenda” was not the protests’ only outcome, even though it has undoubtedly been a harmful one for mass civic mobilisation. Four years after the protests, Maribor appears once again to be a resigned political desert, with Franc Kangler’s triumphant return looming at the next local elections. When Mariborians accepted that the protests, so aptly fuelled by the cohesive Facebook anonymity, had only brought a superficial change in the individuals in power, but not in policies, the brief period of repoliticisation was followed by further depoliticisation and political paralysis. It is very probable that an anonymous political initiative will never again be able to mobilise a significant number of inhabitants in Maribor, or elsewhere in Slovenia for that matter. However, beneath this gloomy surface things have changed, even if quite unperceptively for now.

From the political establishment’s perspective, the first acute crisis of representation in the independent nation state of Slovenia was overcome with somewhat flying colours. Following the visible initial confusion and fear, which the protesters did not manage to benefit from, the authorities got a grip quite fast. Eric Hazan (2013: 36–38) points out the inevitable consequences for past insurrections of the insurrectionaries’ willingness to allow for a “transitory period” and “dialogue” in order to avoid chaos, which in reality allowed the political establishment to reinforce its power via some “state of emergency” or hasty preliminary elections. None of this went amiss in the Slovenian protests. To jump ahead to the end, another of the supposed reasons for the 2013 election of Andrej Fištravec in Maribor was there had been no time to find a more suitable candidate,⁵ while the established local political parties were pressing for local elections with their ready candidates and propaganda machines at hand, claiming the town needed a mayor as soon as possible. At the national level, the situation was fully replicated: the right-wing government was manipulated out of power by the non-transparent lobbies riding the wave of protest only to quickly instate a centre government that was not directly elected. The latter was only able to avoid the arrival of the European troika by mimicking its harsh measures from within.

In the course of the protest events, the authorities successfully tested a power technique consisting of insistent claims for legitimate representatives to clearly articulate the protesters’ demands. Such seemingly logical claims that appeared to reveal the authorities’ willingness for dialogue actually

⁵ Andrej Fištravec, upon presenting his candidature in a Maribor tavern on 5 February 2013, emphasised that he was going to run »since no one else would«.

curbed the protests' initially uncontrollable energy which, in turn, visibly inspired the authorities' apprehension and willed the protest movement into the ring in which the authorities dictated the rules of the game. When confronted with the staff, financial, organisational and ideological apparatuses of the political parties, the protesters' ad hoc representatives could only end up hopeless amateurs. This was nothing really new since the Slovenian political establishment had efficiently pushed the protest movement into a corner by a manoeuvre that had already been tested at the global level: the equally dispersed and unarticulated Occupy movement was quite similarly pre-empted (White, 2015). Clearly, the protesters against the inadequate political representation also experienced a complex and unrecognised crisis of representation in their own midst and arguably this was inevitable given that the very concept of representation has become so perverted and flawed. It is quite gratuitous to elaborate on the comfortable 'what if' scenario, yet if the definition (or categorisation, qualification and therefore self-limitation) of the protests' common grounds had been consciously temporarily suspended, not only would the authorities have had nothing and no one in particular to manipulate, the (inarticulate) articulations of the protest agenda only by certain protest groups that reduced the uprisings' overall plurality would also have been avoided. In the absence of definition/articulation, there would have been no reduction. Where instead of individual voices, which competed to shout each other and thereby weakened the choir to the dismay of the dominant interlocutor, the social communication space was filled with a sinister silence of refusal to enter into dialogue led by unequivocal demands, the authorities may have remained as uneasy and helpless as they had visibly been to begin with. This is not an argument against dialogue in general; this is an argument against the kind of dialogue in which those in power lay down the rules of dialogue and which can be observed at many levels of global political and economic relations (UN Security Council, WTO, international aid in general, counter-crisis measures in the EU etc.). Moreover, pluralism certainly has a romantic charge and it may turn a protest agenda into an appealing kaleidoscope, which is supposed to attract the largest possible portion of the public, but that is no more than wishful thinking and, as we have seen in Slovenia, in terms of mobilising the masses it has no real effect.⁶ The emphasis on plurality/diversity actually gets in the way of achieving change because it increases the possibility of internal discord, dispersion and loss of the energy of discontent required for mass mobilisation⁷ (Toplak, 2013: 22).

⁶ *The 'mass' protests in Maribor still gathered but with one-third of local voters, while the other two-thirds remained mute, passive and isolated in front of their TV screens.*

⁷ *An example of how well the Slovenian political power structures understood this reality was the official invitation addressed to all protest groups and movements to engage in a "dialogue" with the*

Elsewhere in Slovenia, the protests did not spread as they might have because the antagonism towards local authorities was less intense than in Maribor and because they were supposed to serve as a tactical diversion to begin with, in order to hinder the concentration of police forces and means of repression. In Ljubljana, the protests were finally usurped and killed off by various (propaganda) artists. One might conclude: "If you want something new, don't do it the usual old way". The »culturation« of the protests needs be interpreted in the context of Slovenia's path dependency (see Pierson, 2000) – Slovenians have historically thought of their community in linguistic and cultural, rather than political terms. However, the protests lost their political momentum by turning into a cultural programme and thus became »normalised«, not only in the sense of predictable collective behavioural patterns, but also in the sense of the castration of popular anger. The powers that be found in the polite, non-violent and therefore generously allowed protests, reduced to symbols and performances, welcome evidence of their democratic grace.

Last but not least, it was easy enough for the political class to overcome the acute crisis of representation because the great majority of protesters had no clear idea of what to do next. The initial protest reflex, upon which the uniformity of the protests had stood and fallen, was that the entire political »elite« needed to be fought as an amorphous whole, or some sort of amalgamated Ruler. It stemmed from a quite correct assessment of the Slovenian party oligarchy, with the political »elite« homogeneously and relatively fiercely countering that reflex by emphasising their differences. By arguing that not all were the same or equally bad, by pleading with the protesters for justice while ignoring it themselves, by some politicians trying to infiltrate the protesters' ranks to benefit from increased popularity while others insulted them by calling them »the mob«, by the Maribor municipal councillors obsessively defending their privacy when visited upon at home by the protesters, as if they were not full-time politicians – with all of this the political class was only acting in line with the premises of classical liberalism, i.e. it defended the rights of a suddenly threatened minority, which

Parliament, including certain extremist initiatives from the so-called civil society sphere that the protesters frankly did not want to be associated with. The authorities, therefore, could not be criticised for failing to promote the "dialogue"; however, the latter was only possible on their own terms and, moreover, it aimed at creating divisions in order to come to terms with the social unrest more easily by opportunistically identifying a non-existent common denominator of the protests as "civil society", i.e. a chaotic plurality in a post-colonial fashion, within which the actors mutually negated themselves. In the Slovenian case, the protesters' alleged tolerant plurality was in fact a misunderstanding that could not be overcome in practice until there was overall recognition that the protests were a class struggle. This argument does not deny the plurality of frustrations, but simply points out that complacent admiration in the illusory mirror of plurality is a waste of time and cannot be a priority, while the threatened power structures do not waste any time reorganising themselves and re-legitimising their access to power.

in the neoliberal paradigmatic version may without prejudice restrict and exploit the majority. Still, the Slovenian political »elite« managed to maintain a heterogeneous image and therefore undo the focus of popular anger onto it as the collective Other that alone would have produced a significant effect. Quite understandably then, the protests' energy deflated following the departures of both the Mayor of Maribor and Prime Minister Janez Janša, in the absence of any realistic and constructive future agenda.

The apparent spontaneity and rapid unfolding of events initially took the political establishment in Slovenia and elsewhere by surprise, but eventually worked against the protesters as a premature outburst. There was no time to imagine and convincingly present an alternative vision of an ideological and institutional societal framework, with the outcome that the mighty energy of the protests ended up only producing a mere reshuffling of the ruling oligarchies. Slavoj Žižek in both his oral Occupy interventions and in writing provocatively called for the revival of communism and the arrival of the new Messiah (Žižek, 2012: 473–475), but we should not interpret this literally in my view. Communism should in this respect be regarded as a metaphor for an efficient threat that would force neoliberal capitalists into a genuine, compromise-seeking dialogue with the majority just as the threat of communism after World War II had forced capital to begrudgingly accept the welfare state (Wahl, 2011: 31–33). Communism has been revoked by Žižek and also Alain Badiou (2013) as an "undying idea" concerning another of its premises: a very clear and well-articulated vision of a future society, a prophesy so to speak that people need in order to imagine what they are fighting for. Indeed, what next? Transforming a political movement into a traditional political party has been recognised as an end of alternative politics (Podmenik: 2013: 10–11), with the Greek Syriza, the Spanish Podemos and the Slovenian United Left being three cases in point. The rules of the partitocratic game cannot be changed from within as the newcomers are surely curbed by the status quo.⁸ Moreover, how to keep the citizens politically active after decades of constant direct and indirect pressure to render them inactive, conditioned as they are into capitalist instant gratification and immediate results?

The Redefinition of Citizenship

The 'protest Mayor' Andrej Fištravec lived up to his electoral campaign promise to establish a "Protest Co-Council", a forum of protest group mirroring, completing and supervising the Municipal Council. When the

⁸ We should, however, closely observe the Icelandic Pirate Party in this respect. The one crucial precondition for any success would be to avoid coalitions by achieving strong enough election results. Again, Iceland is, due to its geographic isolation and distrust in alliances in a particular position in international relations and may even afford a certain degree of autarchy.

45-member Protest Co-Council, also open to public attendance, was finally established in September 2013, its meetings soon turned out to be frustratingly inefficient as most of the attendees, except for the group Initiative for Citywide Assembly, came unprepared for the quantity of municipal bureaucracy and without any constructive proposals. In April 2014, the mayor already had sufficient reason to dissolve the Protest Co-Council.⁹ Considering that one of the groups on the Protest Co-Council that had brought him to power and was by then reaping the seeds of the anonymous Facebook mobilisation as a clique of beneficiaries of public positions and funds, the Maribor protests had run full circle of the crisis of representation.

Given the fundamental elements of Slovenian (political) culture – egalitarianism, corporatism, illiberalism, inability to collaborate, passivity, absence of solidarity, nationalism (Lukšič, 2013: 109–111) – it is hardly a surprise that, four years after the Maribor protests, out of the eight civic groups¹⁰ that had been inspired by Occupy and its Slovenian version *Boj za* and had been active during the protests, only two continued with civic political activities beyond the period of the protests and only one still does so on a continuous basis. The other groups walked into the quicksand of local politics or stopped existing all together. The ‘last one standing’ of the initial grassroots impulse, the Initiative for Citywide Assembly (ICA),¹¹ has started a socio-political experiment that aptly translates local political tradition into contemporary necessities, yet transcends the comparative weaknesses identified in the protest movements.

One of the features setting the Initiative for Citywide Assembly apart is its clearly defined agenda:

We are a group whose aim it is to promote non-partisan political self-organisation at the city district level in the Municipality of Maribor. We are convinced that the civil revolt and various actions of civil disobedience in Slovenia must be followed by new, creative and far-reaching steps towards a kind of development that will empower us to effect change in our streets, districts, local communities, cities, the country

⁹ It should be noted that the same groups had been engaged in an informal coordination body in the course of the protests that was, judging from the meetings I attended in November 2012, dissonant and uncohesive.

¹⁰ These groups were: Društvo Gibanje TRS (Association Movement TRS, Društvo Zofijini ljubimci (Association of Sophia's Lovers, Skupina 29. Oktobar (Group October 29th), Skupina Franc Kangler naj odstopi kot župan Maribora (Group Franc Kangler Should Step Down as Mayor of Maribor), Skupina Inciativa mestni zbor (Group Initiative for Citywide Assembly), Skupina Maistrova armada (Group Maister's Army), Skupina Odprto zavezništvo za Maribor (Group Open Alliance for Maribor) and Skupina Skupaj za Maribor (Group Together for Maribor) (Berkopce, 2015: 19).

¹¹ Notably, the Initiative for Citywide Assembly was the only one of those eight groups that did not support Fištravec's candidature for mayor.

and, finally, the world. The People should play the primary role in shaping and influencing development policies in our cities and nationwide, rather than leaving them in the hands of city councillors and parliamentarians. We are the ones who should be representing our common interests. However, since politicians obviously understand their role in society quite differently, it falls on us to put them in their place and present our positions and demands to them, and in so doing take over the responsibility for the functioning of our communities, the municipality and the entire country. We believe that the solution lies in self-organising, debate, education and sharing information. This will enable us to critically, directly and creatively respond to the degeneration of our political and social system. We have to regain the co-determination and co-management that was taken away from us at the local, municipal as well as national level. We can achieve this by exerting pressure on the ruling structures in various ways – but most effectively through direct democracy. (Initiative for Citywide Assembly, 2014: 2–4)

Ideologically, this agenda entails references to the socialist Yugoslav experiment of self-management suitably renamed self-organisation and co-management given the demonisation of the previous political system along with its vocabulary. Although the ICA agenda claims to be infra-political, this is evidently only the starting level of a very ambitious political intervention, emerging not from some post-protest frenzy for ‘active citizenship’, but a necessity stemming from a lucid socio-political analysis. Clear and prioritised general and specific goals (ibid.: 8–7) have been identified based on this agenda whose implementation has been equally well defined by principles and methods (ibid., 2014: 9–12). The ICA activities mainly consist of facilitating auto-organised regular meetings of interested inhabitants in particular town districts in order for the attendees to express their concerns and identify solutions, and also implement them themselves if that is not possible in collaboration with municipal authorities. The ICA will only provide support for popular self-organisation, which will no longer be needed when the thus empowered and autonomous inhabitants recognise the need for such structured and regular communication and collaboration. At that moment, the ICA has pledged to dissolve itself.¹²

The initiative started out by learning how to facilitate group communication and “training the trainers”.¹³ The early gatherings in town districts

¹² Although they have been offered jobs and political mandates, so far they have declined any formalisation of their status, remaining a mere initiative, while other grassroots groups sooner or later formalised themselves into associations and NGOs or even political parties.

¹³ One of the methodological inspirations was the group communication skills course ‘Group Politics’ that I have been developing for a decade at the University of Ljubljana’s Faculty of Social Sciences.

turned out to be forums to express individual complaints, very much like the 'group therapy' of the public plenums that were organised along with protests elsewhere in the wider region, such as in Macedonia or Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through a well-designed and structured communication process, facilitators of the ICA have subsequently managed to direct the participants towards an increasingly constructive debate on solutions for identified local issues and the organised implementation of those solutions. Still, they had to teach those attending these self-organised councils how to communicate before they could proceed to actual meaningful debate topics, after having learned that themselves in the first place. They also needed to master methods for gathering ideas and reaching a quality consensus that goes beyond a simple majority and ensures that all participants in the communication process accept the adopted solution at least partially and then actively participate in its implementation (Toplak, 2002: 66–85). Here the facilitators encountered in their midst the usual issues of fleeting enthusiasm, differences in vision and character and the generally quite poor tradition of constructive group communication among Slovenians (Toplak, 2015a: 11–13). Moreover, they were confronted with Mariborians' initial distrust and the barriers created by district administrations despite the 'protest Mayor's' nominal support for the ICA efforts. Yet, on the ground, they had to fight for venues for the self-organised councils that would logically take place in public facilities provided by law to inhabitants for such purposes, although some town district authorities, by interpreting 'civic' as meaning 'apolitical', preferred to reserve these venues for politically less charged activities such as tourism associations' meetings, or even for profitable ones.

After four years of continuous voluntary work, the ICA facilitators¹⁴ recall that the initiative was launched very early in the protest period when the coordinators of the Urban Furrows project¹⁵ summoned the first project follow-up meeting in December 2012 to open a discussion on the popular discontent with local politics. The heterogeneous and non-partisan attendance supported the local protests and pledged to create a communication framework for direct action on local issues by founding several working

¹⁴ The assessment that follows was summarised on the basis of two in-depth interviews conducted on 11 July 2016 and 14 August 2016 with Aljoša and Petra Peternel and Gregor Stamejčič and Lucija Govedić, respectively. The interviewees preferred to answer my questions in pairs because they are couples in their private lives. Aljoša and Petra Peternel left the group by early 2016, while Gregor Stamejčič and Lucija Govedić continue to facilitate the self-organised town district councils. Gregor Stamejčič produced an undergraduate thesis entitled *From Rebellion to Democracy: The Process of Self-organization in Maribor* (Od upora do demokracije: proces samo-organizacije v Mariboru), which also served as a source for this text.

¹⁵ The Urban Furrows project was part of the programme Maribor – European Capital of Culture 2012. Inspired and led by the Slovenian social theorist Marta Gregorič, the project was the first attempt to self-organise Mariborians in the area of autonomous sustainable food production. For more on Urban Furrows, see http://www.maribor2012.info/?page_id=2118.

groups: the creative group involved in the protest movement, and strategic groups on the local economy and tourism, welfare, culture, and infrastructure and transport. Soon the groups focused on different issues of particular town districts. Uniformly, the identification of an issue was followed by a search for an expert among the district dwellers who could engage in informed dialogue with municipal authorities, and then for volunteers to implement the adopted solution for a particular local issue. Between 50 and 80 people were present at the initial self-organised district councils, while later on regular attendance levels dropped to around ten. The ICA has admittedly had greater expectations regarding attendance, however, it has been easy enough to gather 50–60 volunteers for a direct action such as simple repair of transport infrastructure or garbage removal etc. It should be noted here that the ICA's communication with stakeholders and the public has been given considerable attention, materialised in regular information, invitations and minutes sent to extensive mailing lists, and it has been publishing a bi-monthly newsletter entitled *Quarter* (as in 'town quarter') since September 2014, also accessible online (Initiative for Citywide Assembly, 2016a). The media has so far largely ignored its activities.

There are now 10 self-organised councils that meet regularly in 11 town districts out of 17 (9 twice a month, 1 only once a month). There are various reasons why all town districts have not been covered yet, but the most important one is the absence of motivated facilitators (little wonder given the workload entailed). The core group of ICA facilitators would not be discouraged by this however; they reportedly 'run a marathon' in rejecting the obsession with instant gratification so typical of the neoliberal capitalist societal paradigm.

The core group of 15 facilitators arranges meetings of self-organised councils on a regular basis. The group is gender balanced and includes people from all walks of life, various formal education levels and aged from 18 to 73 years. Their voluntary work burden used to be up to three meetings per week, but has dropped now to one meeting per facilitator per week. While one facilitator conducts the meeting, a second one takes the minutes, provides a concrete example of how to communicate properly and constructively and they are both responsible for the entire communication surrounding the meeting: invitation, identification of the agenda, meeting minutes, follow-up, necessary liaising, meeting information available on the ICA website etc. The facilitators rotate among the councils annually. The ongoing dilemma is whether it is better to have a facilitator from the district who is familiar with the local issues or to have one from another part of town. In the former case, the facilitator is tempted to not only run the communication process, but also to influence the contents of the debate. In the latter case however, a facilitator unfamiliar with concrete local issues may

misjudge their importance for the district dwellers or insist on the communication rules too rigidly. Inner issues that made some facilitators leave the ICA reportedly also included the lack of spontaneity, occasional autocratic approach to coordination, difficult coaching of inexperienced new facilitators, intolerance of minority opinions and exclusivism, quick satisfaction with partial consensus and the intrusion of partial (ideological) interests in the ICA activities. In brief, despite its pronounced ethical stance the ICA is not immune to the communication deficiencies that plague civic initiatives in Slovenia, no matter the field of engagement.

The Maribor town district administrations currently collaborate quite well with the self-organised councils and the latter were even given formal recognition for their efforts by local authorities. Their greatest success has been the pilot project on introduction of a participatory budget in the Radvanje town district in 2015. The self-organised councillors from Radvanje and the IMZ activists took part in a working group appointed by the mayor on the allocation of municipal funds. The group collected a list of allocation items identified as investment needs in Radvanje and presented it to the Maribor municipal authorities. Although the mayor promised to extend the participatory budget to other town districts if the pilot project were successful, he refused to include the pilot project proposals in the municipal budget, all the while claiming abroad that Maribor was one of the rare progressive cities to be introducing the participatory budget. It was only by insistent civic lobbying that the Radvanje proposals were actually included in the final version of the municipal budget (Initiative for Citywide Assembly, 2016b). Although not all of the pilot project proposals were adopted, this is an important step towards redefining post-democratic citizenship (Crouch, 2013: 93–95). The participatory budget may sound similar to the continuous legitimization of local investments provided in socialist Yugoslavia through the system of “self-participation referenda”¹⁶, yet the inhabitants of Radvanje have been included in the decision-making process at a very early stage and much more creatively, and not merely asked to confirm the decisions taken by the authorities.

Conclusion

Bowler et al. (2007: 360) showed that popular demands for direct democratic institutes are less of an appeal for more active citizenship or greater political participation than an expression of intense dissatisfaction with,

¹⁶ *Self-participation referenda were organised on a regular basis by Yugoslav authorities to legitimise more important public investments.*

and distrust in, politics and the political class. The results of their research on 16 Western democracies demonstrate that

people found lacking in the performance of representative democracy [rather] than they reflected demands for a fully participatory version of democracy. Although we do find that expectations for more opportunities to participate are associated with greater support for using direct democracy, our results also demonstrate that the most consistent factors predicting interest in additional opportunities to participate are political distrust and the idea that citizens must 'keep watch' on their government. (Bowler et al., 2007: 360)

The Initiative for Citywide Assembly in Maribor has therefore been all but predicted by political theory. What could not be so easily predicted is the actual approach to remediating the crisis of representation by direct democracy. There is certainly no universal formula for the successful implementation of systemic change; the approach and the means depend on the circumstances, the aptness of the political establishment to resist change, the level of political education, i.e. the political culture of a particular polity.¹⁷ The Turks stood around Taksim Square silently to symbolically reoccupy public spaces in a traditionally private society, while Mariborians intruded upon their arrogant municipal councillors at their homes and demanded the attention they could not obtain in conventional public forums of a post-Communist society, *the raison d'être* of which had also been the supposed lack of freedom of speech in socialist Yugoslavia, while in the 'free' Slovenia nobody of importance is listening. Nations with a legendary sense of humour such as the Serbs ridiculed their politicians into oblivion, while the uncompromising and autarchic Icelanders sentenced them for corruption and sent them to prison (ironically, the site of the Icelandic parliament in Reykjavik is a former prison). Moreover, circumstances and timing play a crucial role, especially in a globalised world such as ours that hardly allows for autarchy or *na veté*, with the demise of the Greek Syriza attesting to this.

One may imagine that what the Initiative for Citywide Assembly has been doing in Maribor may eventually lead to the parallelisation of political

¹⁷ However, the exchange of experience and comparison of practices was welcome and effective. Throughout the period of the protests there were exchanges with other movements. Srđja Popović came to Maribor to lecture on non-violent protesting based on the experience of the Otpor movement that had forced Slobodan Milošević to step down in 2000. Haldur Thorwason came to Maribor on 8 November 2013 and explained the Icelandic fight with an emphasis on patience and perseverance and optimism and the importance of a clear future vision and a small number of transparent priorities. In their proximity two international conferences were organised with the intent of exchanging information on protests: at the University of Graz in 2013 and by the Initiative for Citywide Assembly in 2014.

institutions up to the point that the established ones would lose legitimacy and participation and die off. Here it is crucial that the parallel institutions do not simply mirror the systemic ones, but are created bottom-up and based on real needs. One such example is the creation in Maribor of the self-organised Council for Protection of Users of Public Assets that emerged from the initial ICA strategic group on public infrastructure when it became clear the activities of the self-organised councils made it obvious that not only public infrastructure contains a lot of pressing issues, but also that its users actually need protection, as demonstrated by the case of a city dweller who was legally charged for publicly criticising a Maribor public infrastructure company and was faced with a disproportionate fine for defamation.¹⁸ Now each self-organised district council has a delegate on this special Council.

The ICA repoliticisation model has so far not yet spread to other Slovenian municipalities. Although the first such public plenum after the period of protests was held in Koper in 2012, the self-organised activities there have been limited to two squats, while a similar attempt in Sevnica was met with a media blockade and usurpation by one of the parliamentary political parties. If the Initiative for Citywide Assembly did innovate by reintroducing the 'good old' Yugoslav self-management under the guise of a new vocabulary, attempting to avoid not only overcharged words but also some of the initial implementation errors (see Toplak, 2015b: 126–129), examples of the similar self-organisation of citizens to exercise counter-power (Gee, 2011: 18) abound elsewhere. Foucauldian heterotopias as "actual emplacements planned by the very institution of society and representing a sort of counter-emplacements, a sort of utopia made true" (Foucault in Gregorčič 2011, 217: 48–49) abound especially in Latin America. Such heterotopian *potencias*, to use Gregorčič's term, as the Initiative for Citywide Assembly, have the ability to multiply, connect, synergise and resonate. While designing new politics, the economy, social alliances and cultural reciprocities they constantly make mistakes, yet also correct them and improve along the way. They thus establish new forms of self-organisation and self-determine the development of their communities (Gregorčič, 2011: 287).

Returning to the introductory argument that the redefinition of active citizenship may well be the most important outcome of the protest movement in Slovenia, there is more to it than the collective potential described earlier. An informed and autonomous citizen can resort to numerous individual forms of protest stemming from the field of infra-politics (Vodovnik, 2013: 126) that may appear intimate, yet may also be very subversive, again in the long run. Growing one's own food, living off the grid energy-wise, vegetarianism,

¹⁸ Rajko Kotnik vs Maribor Waterworks. For details, see for example <http://www.delo.si/novice/slovenija/mariborski-vodovod-nad-obcana-z-astronomsko-tozbo.html>.

refusing other animal-based products, rejecting risky vaccinations, using alternative medicine, auto-didactics, home schooling and active civic self-education, ignoring commercial media, giving priority to inter-human relations rather than greed, bartering, keeping money at home instead of in the bank, making use of cash and of a number of systemic bypasses, which point to the creation of something truly new in the shadow of the seemingly new like alternative computer programs, alternative social and other media, crowd-sourcing, Bitcoin, direct currency exchange or 3D-printing – these private choices and behaviours all have a considerable political impact, albeit indirectly.¹⁹

An active citizen of today may no longer demonstrate their active attitude by engaging in systemic political rituals such as elections, or even in 'threats' to the fundamentally unjust systemic status quo such as voicing protest in the streets, participating in grassroots activities and maintaining an autonomously designed set of values despite external pressures. Transgressing the 'good' (obedient) active citizenship, which primarily results in greater social control, an active citizen may also choose to reject 'democratic' voting without real representation, excessive consumerism, greed and competition, intellectual laziness, invented inter-ethnic hatred, mainstream media debilitation, indoctrinated schooling or, once again, violence in all its forms, including humane treatment of animals for meat consumption. Whether we choose to be active or inactive, our private choices will end up having a political impact and will in turn affect the quality of our individual existence. A non-position on any issue of social injustice is therefore still a position that perpetuates it and allows for its naturalness, normalcy and necessity. However, although slow with results and barely visible on the media map, the heterotopian potencias hold an important advantage over individual repoliticisation, without precluding it, in that they combine the frustration, patience, abilities and energy of a number of people into an example for more people to follow until the new heterotopias irreversibly change the institutional landscape of our societies. They may well be the only, if lengthy, possibility to reform the decaying economic and political system lastingly, without violence and from within.

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¹⁹ I did not include voluntary and charity work in this list because it devalues work as such, reduces the offer of paid employment and transfers some fundamental and self-evident contractual obligations of the welfare state to private organisations and individuals.

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