

CHANGING FACES OF SLOVENIA

POLITICAL, SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND NEWS MEDIA ASPECTS OF THE CRISIS

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Abstract

The study indicates that political, economic and social faces of Slovenia have changed substantially during the half-decade of the crisis. While the ability of citizens to influence important political decisions has been curtailed on both the national and transnational level, instability has become endemic and social solidarity has been eroded. By using quantitative and qualitative content analysis the study analyses how the unfolding crisis has been communicated in the media in the 2008–2013 period with respect to the dynamics between structure and agency as well as regarding the key (inter)national features and contours of the crisis. The study indicates Slovenian news media hardly served as an integrative force and a common forum for an inclusive and open debate. Namely, results of the quantitative content analysis indicate that journalism communicated the “causes” for the crisis by portraying it as something purely accidental, while rarely pointing at the possibility of its systemic nature.

Similarly, “solutions” have been predominantly portrayed within the prevailing paradigms or through the neoliberal prism favoured by holders of political and economic power. Qualitative content analysis of how Slovenian news media communicated the decisive breaks and formative moments of the unfolding crisis shows they mostly relied on event-orientation, simplistic juxtapositions and naturalisation of the established power divisions on national as well as international levels.

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Introduction

The financial crash of 2008 that spread with blistering pace throughout the world and shook the global capitalist order has been but first of many major shocks that followed in the consecutive years. They affected societies in unprecedented fashion and as of yet no end seems to be in sight. It is virtually as if crisis has become the permanent state of things, with uncertainties and built-in societal instabilities becoming part and parcel of many peoples' everyday lives. Whatever solutions are offered to solve the emerging problems inadvertently produces new ones, these tendencies being summarised by Streeck (2014, 10), when he indicates that "for every hydra head that is lopped off, two more grow in its place." Many governments around the world accordingly look clueless and in a state of blind panic (*ibid.*), whilst articulations of the unfolding crisis are fully embedded in intertwined political, economic, and social exclusions and newly unfolding dependencies (Beck 2013).

After the fall of socialism in Central-Eastern Europe a quarter of a century ago and the largest single expansion of the European Union in 2004, manifestations of what Beck (2013) calls "risk capitalism" are becoming fully evident. As insecurities brought on by the crisis are being dealt with the "blindness of economics" (*ibid.*), the expectations of catastrophe re-determine public perceptions and the foundations of political power and society are disturbed. Indeed Vidmar Horvat (2014, 101) suggests that we should name "this emerging structure of feeling the conditions of internal postcoloniality" in a sense, that EU's transnationalisation of injustice and promotion of financial oligarchy results in mutual self-understanding and solidarity among humiliated states. It appears that the old institutions and rules are thus no longer able to solve the problems and are in need of a change (Crouch 2004).

Formerly seen as "the most prosperous republic within former Yugoslavia" (Dahlgren 2013, 1) and a successful transitional state, Slovenia is now regarded a "peripheral country" in the EU (Financial Times 2014). Since the start of the crisis it has been in turmoil, which even in the context of a global crisis can be interpreted as one of a kind. In less than five years a country of two million people has had four governments with four different prime ministers (PMs), two pre-term general elections, a globally-aligned protest movement called 15-O that symbolically occupied the Slovenian stock exchange, vast "all-Slovenian people's uprisings" against the political and economic elites, a former PM in jail, and a significant restructuring of power relations within the institutional political arena. The manifold political as well as socio-economic difficulties are exceeding those of the early transitional period after the disintegration of Yugoslavia and fall of socialism. In recent years Slovenia departed from the initial transitional model of "gradualism" (Mencinger 2005) and started adopting policies that indicate a "neoliberal turn" (Stanojević 2014) as several social and economic structural reforms have furthered weakened the welfare state (Močnik 2010; Leskošek and Dragoš 2014) and normalised flexible labour arrangements (Ignjatović 2012). These changes have seriously undermined social cohesion, as the rising social inequalities and increasing poverty have emerged as built-in societal dynamics (Leskošek and Dragoš 2014).

While the gap between decision-making processes and citizens appears almost unbridgeable in the (trans)national context (Splichal 2012) and socio-economic repercussions of the crisis reveal that cooperation among people is increasingly

being based on exclusions (cf. Leskošek and Dragoš 2014), Slovenian media and journalism have not remained intact, facing troubles of attention, authority and revenue (e.g. Vobič 2013; Erjavec and Poler Kovačič 2013; Prodnik et al 2014). Core values of autonomy, accountability and originality have been pushed further to the margins, whilst journalism is being “pauperised” in its strive for profitability, efficiency and productivity (Splichal 2014). These processes indicate journalism’s growing troubles in contributing to the realisation of communication rights: it is unable to provide citizens with an access to the public sphere and help them connect to the decision-making processes (Splichal 2002). That is why it is crucial to investigate how Slovenian news media communicated the unfolding crisis in order to understand its character comprehensively.

The main objective of the study is therefore to explore what interpretations of the crisis were encouraged and which discouraged in the leading Slovenian news media. By sketching highly antagonistic, unstable and turbulent years in the Slovenian political realm and major socio-economic repercussions of the austerity measures, waves of privatisation, and the adopted structural reforms in Slovenia, the study identifies key discontinuities of the unfolding crisis as orientation marks for the analysis of news media outputs. By using quantitative and qualitative content analysis the study analyses how the unfolding crisis has been communicated in the media in the 2008–2013 period with respect to the dynamics between structure and agency as well as regarding the key (inter)national features and contours of the crisis.

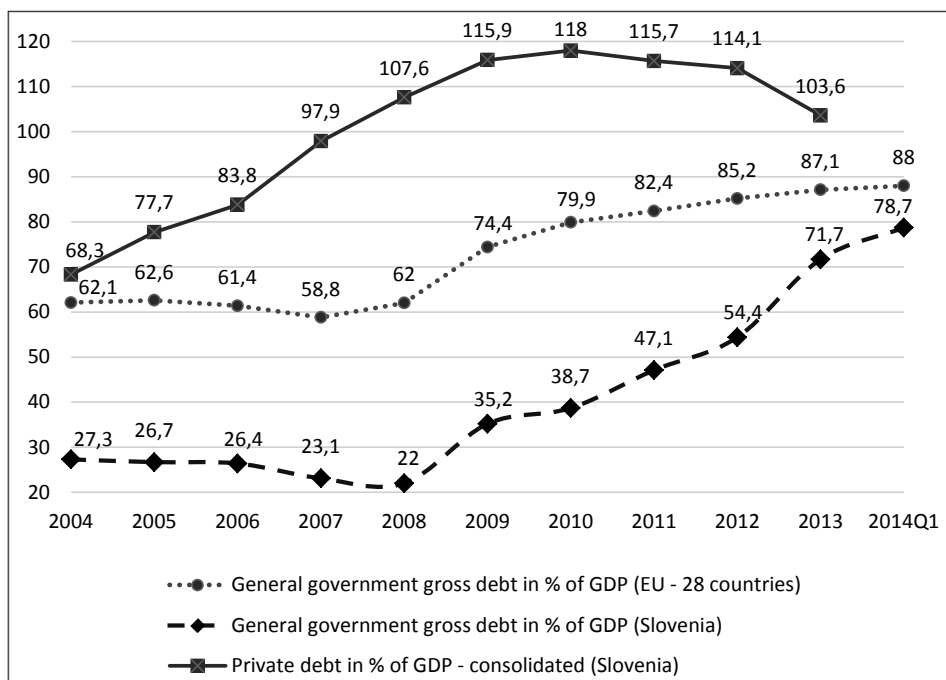
The Crisis in the Political and Economic Realm

During transition from self-managed socialism to capitalism, a “gradualist” model of transition rather than a “shock therapy” prevailed in Slovenia (Mencinger 2005). Gradualism, which was consistent with soft changes in the political realm without formal lustration of politicians (Splichal 1995), advocated pragmatic economic policy with step-by-step construction of market institutions and first wave of privatisation, which allowed substantial political interventions in the economic sphere (Mencinger 2005). While calls for economic policy using “exogenous shock” of EU accession for structural (neo)liberal reforms were becoming louder (i.e. Rojec et al 2004), the pre-crisis Slovenia recorded its most extensive private debt accumulation during its first centre-right government between 2004 and 2008 (Figure 1). Banks’ business models were based on heavy borrowing on international financial markets and aggressive lending was used to launch the second wave of privatisation (Močnik 2010; Bembič 2013; Stanojević 2014).

Private indebtedness, which expanded exponentially between 2004 and 2010, was followed by rising government debt of Slovenia (Figure 1). Amongst the most important reasons were the state injected funds in mostly state-owned banks, which were overburdened with bad debts to private companies. While Slovenia was significantly less indebted than EU-28 average before the crisis, its debt skyrocketed since 2008, reaching 78.7 percent of GDP in the first quarter of 2014. Even though this was still below the EU-28 average (88 percent), the most concerning trend was the highly accelerated rise of indebtedness and deepening of the public deficit. With credit-rating agencies substantially downgrading Slovenian bonds and contributing to the rising prices of borrowing in international markets (Bembič 2013), Slovenian

debt is bound to increase further. Within the global financial and economic crisis this specific local context provided a fertile ground in which “conditions for the neoliberal turn” (Stanojević 2014) flourished, as “anti-crisis measures” based on austerity policies have continuously been adopted. As a result, the last half-decade has unsurprisingly been marked by highly antagonistic, unstable and turbulent years in the Slovenian political realm.

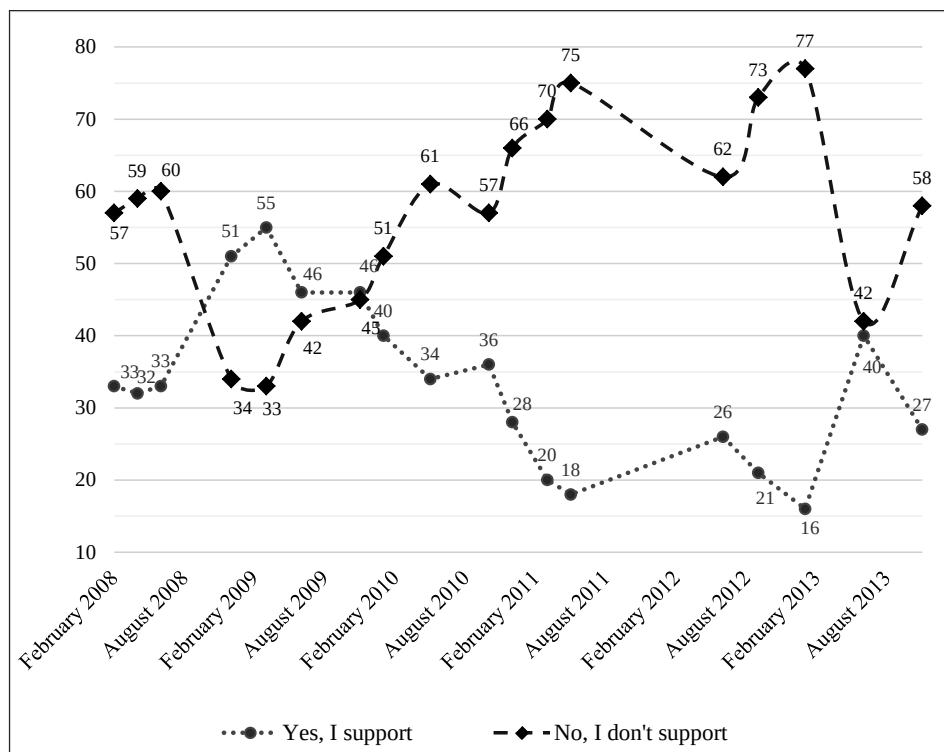
Figure 1: Private Debt and Government Debt of Slovenia (Source: Eurostat)



The longitudinal research Politbarometer (2008–2013) indicates that citizens show low support for political actors and institutions, particularly for political parties. Support for different governments has steadily been falling since the country entered the EU, with only slight oscillations (Figure 2). The support has for example risen when the centre-left government was formed in November 2008, but at that time implications of the collapse of Lehman Brothers have only started to appear. In October 2008, just weeks after his Social Democrats (SD) won parliamentary elections, the future PM Borut Pahor stressed: “We are aware that uncertain times are upon us. Slovenia cannot only follow the measures of the EU, but needs to make its own crisis management plan.”

Already in autumn 2009, however, when a wave of organised trade union protest erupted in Slovenia (Vrhovec 2010), support for the government started to crumble. Pahor’s government reacted to the crisis with a series of unpopular emergency measures, such as interim support for companies and redundant workers (Stanojević 2014), while also formulating a programme of structural reforms connected to the labour market and the pension system. These reforms followed the repercussions

Figure 2: (Non-)support for the Slovenian Government 2008–2013 (Source: Politbarometer)



of the first Greek bailout and under the pressure of an increasing public budget deficit, when first warnings from the EU institutions were addressed to Slovenia. Government failed to reach an agreement with trade unions and finally attempted to impose the structural reforms unilaterally. Tensions culminated in a rejection of all proposed structural reforms on a triple general referendum in June 2011 (Bembič 2013), which eventually led to the dissolution of Pahor's government. Meanwhile, in 2011 a series of protests were organised in the three largest towns as part of 15 October international protests, criticising the modus operandi of capitalism and institutions of representative democracy. Protesters symbolically occupied the Slovenian Stock Exchange until early 2012, where "democracy of direct action" was practiced in pursuit of exposing practices of social and political exclusions.

The first Slovenian pre-term parliamentary elections in December 2011 brought a marginal victory for the newly established party Positive Slovenia (PS), led by Zoran Janković, former businessman and incumbent mayor of Slovenian capital Ljubljana. Janković ultimately failed to construct a government coalition however and Janša's Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) subsequently formed a conservative right-wing coalition. When the government was formed, Janša (Dnevnik 2012) noted that "Slovenia is in economic crisis and partly in social crisis, but the political crisis is now over." The first plan of the newly founded coalition was to enforce strict austerity measures – for instance, the Public Finance Balance Act alone amended

dozens of laws – aimed particularly against the public sector and social benefits. This paved a way for strikes in the public sector in spring of 2012 and shrinking of support for the government and other political institutions (Figure 2). During the winter of 2013, non-support for the government grew to a record-high of 77 percent. When the Commission for the Prevention of Corruption (CPC) issued a report stating the leaders of two biggest parliamentary parties, PM Janša and opposition leader Janković, had violated anti-corruption legislation (CPC 2013), the “all-Slovenian people’s uprisings” – mass street protests first against the mayor of Maribor and later against the entire political establishment in Slovenia – reached its peak and gained political force. Uprisings across the country called for solidarity and righteousness, while refuting practices of political elites and strengthening of the neoliberal paradigm (Zavratnik and Kurnik 2013). Under increasing public pressure Janša lost a parliamentary vote of confidence and his government fell apart in late February 2013.

A declaratively left-wing government, led by a political novice Alenka Bratušek, was formed in March 2013. With Moody’s Investor Service downgrading Slovenia’s sovereign rating and with “Troika” looming, the newly founded government started to rehabilitate the banking system by commencing the transfer of bad debts to the “bad bank” and introduced packages for consolidation of public finances, which also included implementation of “the golden rule” in Slovenian constitution. In an interview for CNN (2013) Bratušek responded to the question why Slovenia does not ask for “EU help,” before the crisis deepens even further, by stating that “we can solve our problems ourselves” and that “we don’t need help, we just need time.” However an inner-party clash in PS between Janković, former president of the party, and Bratušek, broke out in April (Krašovec and Haughton 2014). Janković was pushing for a return to the PS presidency after it was “frozen” a year earlier when CPC issued the incriminating report. In May 2014, when Janković won the vote at the party congress, Bratušek resigned after only 13 months at the helm of the government (*ibid.*). Slovenia entered another period of political upheaval as no attempts to form a new government coalition were made.

There were vast shifts in the political realm before the second pre-term parliamentary elections in July 2014, which saw the lowest turnout in the history of the independent Slovenian state (51.73 percent) (State Election Commission 2014). The changes were to a large degree down to the social and political perturbations that started in earnest already in 2011 and continued in the winter of the uprising two years ago. The political landscape already started to alter before the 2014 European Parliament elections in May, with some new parties and notable public personalities entering the election race. It was only after the European elections, however, that the Miro Cerar Party (SMC) was officially formed, just five weeks before the general elections.

Miro Cerar has been a prominent persona in Slovenian public life and legal advisor to Parliament for years. As a well-known law professor he often acted as what Bourdieu (1998) defined a “fast-thinker,” offering cultural fast-food made up by generally agreed on clichés. His party predominantly used the rhetoric of the “rule of law” and moral recuperation during the short election campaign, but throughout the focus firmly remained on the image of Cerar himself and his “personal wholesomeness” (Crouch 2008, 28). Although SMC topped the public opinion polls even before the party was officially established, it was somehow surprising

that a newcomer received more than a third of the votes (34.5 percent). In fact, SMC received the second largest share of votes since the independence of Slovenia.

In the 2014 elections some “old” parties suffered big defeats, while certain “new” actors emerged, using the card of the uprisings and popular dissatisfaction with the wider consequences of the crisis. Together with SMC the biggest surprise was the relative success of the underdog United Left, a coalition of three left-wing parties and social movements emerging from the protests, with the pre-election public opinion polls indicating it was far-fetched to expect they could enter Parliament (Politbarometer 2014). With almost 6 percent of the votes (State Election Commission 2014), the coalition marginally missed out on the fourth place. The centre-right SDS was considered a loser of the elections, but still managed to come in second (20.7 percent) (*ibid.*), because of their loyal voting base and charismatic leader Janša, who was formally convicted of corruption before the elections and even started to serve jail time during the election campaign.

On the election night the current PM Cerar (Delo 2014) emphasised that “Slovenia needs to remain a credible member of the EU and other international integrations. It needs to respect the guidelines of the EU out of the crisis and within these recommendations find the best ways to accomplish its goals.” After the elections, however, few clear policies have been presented aside from the “controlled” third wave of privatisation (Krašovec and Haughton 2014), turn to “flexible-security” in the labour market and additional austerity measures.

The Crisis and Socio-Economic Repercussions

After the fall of socialism Slovenia retained a somewhat higher degree of social cohesion than other Central and Eastern European countries. This was due to “softer transition” as approaches of the “liberal ideologists and their consultants” have been refuted by the political elite (Močnik 2010). During the 1990s Slovenia started to transform its welfare system through a “welfare mix,” combining conservative-corporate and social-democratic models (Kolarič et al 2009). Restructuring of the economy still retained a rather high degree of sensitivity to the interests of labour because of powerful trade unions (Stanojević 2006). On its “path towards the EU” and after the accession, however, Slovenia’s adoption of social and economic reforms mostly came at the expense of the working people and social welfare.

Firstly, labour and trade unions have accepted lowering of the wages so accession into the EU could be realised, since this was portrayed as being also in the interests of labour (Močnik 2010; Bembič 2013; Stanojević 2014). The second wave of privatisation commenced after Slovenia entered the EU, when the first right-wing government led by Janša came to power. The privatisation process coincided with Slovenia’s entry into the Eurozone and was carried out through managerial buyouts, with the ultimate aim of constructing a new economic elite (*ibid.*). According to Stanojević (2014), the tipping point came in mid-2006, just before Slovenia adopted Euro as its currency, when fixed exchange rates intensified competitive pressures on local companies. Privatisation also overloaded companies with debt, leading to intensification of labour, while the external monetary shock created further pressures on labour (*ibid.*).

Secondly, processes of “abolishing the welfare state” (Močnik 2010) saw the state withdrawing from its provision of certain social services, which shifted the burden

to non-state sectors, mainly private non-profit organisations and family, resulting in a palpable increase in social inequalities and pauperisation of a substantial part of the society (e.g. Filipovič Hrast et al 2012; Leskošek et al 2013; Leskošek and Dragoš 2014). Already fragmented social cohesion has been further undermined with the “anti-crisis” austerity measures that considerably affected the functioning of the pension system, public education and public healthcare (Močnik 2010). According to the Statistical Office (2004–2013) the risk of poverty rate has grown from 12.5 percent to 14.4 percent in the last half-decade (Table 1). Lowering of wages also strengthened “in-work poverty,” whilst temporary jobs and forced self-employment became normalised during the crisis.

Table 1: The Risk of Poverty Rate according to the Activity Status in Slovenia 2005–2013 (Source: Statistical Office of RS)

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
At work	4.6	4.8	4.7	5.1	4.8	5.3	6	6.5	7.1
Employed	4	3.5	3.5	3.8	3.5	3.6	3.8	4.5	4.6
Self-employed	13.1	17.7	16.3	18.6	17.2	21.4	23.4	23.8	27.9
Not at work	19.2	18.7	18.6	20.5	18.6	20.8	21.4	20.9	22
Unemployed	24.9	32.8	35.9	37.6	43.6	44.1	44.6	46.9	46.2
Retired	16.8	16.8	16.5	17.9	17.4	18.3	18.4	17	17.5
Regardless of activity status	12.1	11.6	11.5	12.5	11.2	12.6	13.4	13.5	14.4

The risk of poverty has risen strikingly among the self-employed; amongst them the number of those who opted for it “because they did not get the employment contract” doubled in the last decade, to more than a half of all self-employed workers (Eurostat 2013). This indicates larger transformations through which regular full-time employment is being increasingly substituted by more flexible labour in which workers are subjected to greater exploitation (Močnik 2011). Such changes are being normalised due to the rising prospect of unemployment and even long-term unemployment (Table 2). Notably, Slovenia exceeded EU average with respect to long-term unemployment in 2013 according to the Employment Service of Slovenia (2013), as more than half of the unemployed were registered for at least a year.

Table 2: Level of Registered Unemployment in Slovenia 2005–2013 (Source: Statistical Office of RS)

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Registered unemployment	10.2	9.4	7.7	6.7	9.1	10.7	11.8	12	13.1
Registered unemployment for at least a year	4.8	4.6	3.9	3.4	3.3	4.6	5.4	6	6.1
Registered unemployment for at least two years	2.8	2.7	2.5	2.2	2.1	2.2	2.9	3.4	3.7

While the number of registered unemployed almost doubled in the period 2008–2013, registered unemployment among young people (15–29 year-olds) more than doubled during the crisis, rising to 19.1 percent (Statistical Office of RS 2008–2013). The younger generations are facing temporary work conditions, prolonged financial reliance on their parents, institutionalisation of lower incomes and increasing expenses for a reasonable degree of social and economic independence (Ule et al 2011).

During the crisis trends in international migrations shifted as well. In the first three years after entering the EU the number of immigrants tripled, while the rise of emigrants to abroad was not that severe. These dynamics, however, changed substantially with the start of the crisis; in 2010 more people left the country than moved to Slovenia (Table 3).

Table 3: International Migration with Respect to Slovenia 2004–2013 (Source: Statistical Office of RS)

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Immigrants from abroad	10,171	15,041	20,016	29,193	30,693	30,296	15,416	14,083	15,022	13,871
Emigrants to abroad	8,269	8,605	13,749	14,943	12,109	18,788	15,937	12,024	14,378	13,384
Net migration	1,902	6,436	6,267	14,250	18,584	11,508	-521	2,059	644	487

Although the rapid growth of emigration to abroad stopped in the following years, data indicates that almost half of the people leaving Slovenia are in their twenties and thirties. These are first signs of a “brain drain” as particularly high-skilled professionals are looking for ways of leaving the crisis stricken Slovenia (Redek et al 2011). The amount of daily migrants from Slovenia to neighbouring countries also rose dramatically; while in 2003, for example, there were more workers migrating daily from Austria to Slovenia (480) than the other way around (470), in 2011 the number of Slovene immigrants jumped by 65 percent (1,400) compared to the previous year (849) (Statistical Database of Statistics Austria 2014). On the other hand, people immigrating from abroad mostly came from the republics of former Yugoslavia, particularly from Bosnia and Herzegovina (Pajnik and Bajt 2011). In 2010 most of them got employed in construction (41 percent), which is a sector that would collapse without cheap and hard-working labour (ibid.). Shrinking immigration from abroad happened especially because of sweeping bankruptcies of construction companies after 2010. They were down to a combination of anti-crisis measures, which radically restricted infrastructural investments, and failed attempts of managerial buyouts during the privatisation wave, resulting in a complete collapse of the construction sector. In many ways this was a symbol of the crisis in Slovenia.

Media and Journalism: Communicating the Crisis

After independence the Slovenian news media environment transformed considerably. Societal ownership of the media was eliminated while liberal conceptualisations of participation, property and communication were adopted (Splichal

1995). In this context, the foundations of Slovenian journalism shifted, substituting the objectivity paradigm tied to historical materialism with the “high-modern conception of objectivity,” where journalists claim to provide accurate and impartial renderings of reality that exist external to journalism and its contributions in defining the public agenda (Vobič 2014). Simultaneously, the structural position of Slovenian media was profoundly transformed through the processes of “imitative revolutions,” which resulted in a kind of “political capitalism” (Splichal 2001) where tendencies of privatisation and commercialisation coexisted with maximising and/or exercising state power over the media. These systemic dynamics have made news media particularly vulnerable to uncertainties brought on by the crisis and have made the work of journalists as representatives of the public more difficult under the economic and political pressures that followed.

Since the start of the crisis, particularly since 2009, the problems of the Slovenian media market, where the largest commercial television broadcaster gets about three fourths of the advertising pie and where circulation of newspapers has been in decline in the last decade (Milosavljević and Kerševan Smokvina 2012), have become more salient through a serious decline in advertising incomes and continuation of journalism’s troubles of attention. Lacking a viable plan to increase incomes news media have turned towards decreasing expenditure instead, primarily through cutting production costs (Vobič 2013). Research offers further disturbing evidence of the larger process that Splichal (2014, 63) calls “pauperisation of journalism,” which is characterised by the proliferation of profit-driven standardisation of newswork, demands for greater productivity, and normalisation of precarious labour. These trends have important implications for journalists’ practices and consequently news media constructions of social reality.

Insights into media communication of “causes” and “solutions” for the crisis as well as their coverage of major themes and tropes of the crisis and its (inter) national character are crucial for a more profound understanding of the role of journalism during Slovenia’s political, economic and social turmoil of the last half decade. Therefore, in this part the study analyses how Slovenian news media communicated the unfolding crisis in order to investigate the character of citizens’ linkage to societal life constructed in the newsrooms. By using quantitative and qualitative content analysis the study focuses on communication of the crisis on news websites of four mainstream news media in the period 2008–2013: the public broadcaster RTV Slovenia (Rtvslo.si), the largest commercial broadcaster Pro Plus (24ur.com), and the leading national serious newspapers (Delo.si and Dnevnik.si).

First, by using quantitative content analysis the authors conducted systematic investigation of social characteristics that can be inferred from texts (Splichal 1990, 18), in this case news items. According to the research problem Google engine was used to search each news website with the following keywords: “economic crisis,” “financial crisis,” “social crisis,” “moral crisis” and “world crisis.” According to these criteria 1604 news items were identified in the analysed news media between 1 January 2008 and 31 December 2013. Additionally, within the population a sample of news items containing nouns “solution” and “cause” in all six cases in singular, dual and plural was created. Then, according to the context of 200 words before and after the keywords, they were coded with respect to interpretative categories of “causes” for the crisis, i.e. imminent, endogen, exogen, external disturbances,

and not concrete, and “solutions,” i.e. radical, reformist, status quo, neoliberal, and not concrete, by distinguishing national, international and both levels.

Second, by using ethnographic content analysis (Altheide 1996), oriented to understanding the construction of meaning and verifying theoretical relationships, the authors conducted an in-depth analysis of news media coverage with respect to the key discontinuities that have influenced the course of the unfolding crisis in Slovenia (Table 4). The authors take into consideration Streeck’s (2014, ix-x) reflection that “it is inevitably more or less arbitrary where one situates the beginning of a process, because history is always interconnected and everything has a prehistory. There are decisive breaks and formative moments, however.” Nine such discontinuities can be identified in the previous two parts of the study.

Table 4: Nine Discontinuities of the Unfolding Crisis in Slovenia 2008–2013

Event	Period	Items
Lehman Brothers bankruptcy	15–19 September 2008	33
Government of PM Borut Pahor takes office	21–25 November 2008	21
First Greek bailout	29 April–6 May 2010	10
Slovenian pension reform is rejected on referendum	3–7 June 2011	15
“15-O” Occupy Movement starts in Slovenia	13–17 October 2011	17
Signing of the European Fiscal Compact	29 February–4 March 2012	4
Slovene parliament adopts the Public Finance Balance Act	9–13 May 2012	24
The largest “All-Slovenian people’s uprising”	6–10 February 2013	48
Moody’s downgrades Slovenia’s sovereign rating	30 April–6 May 2013	16

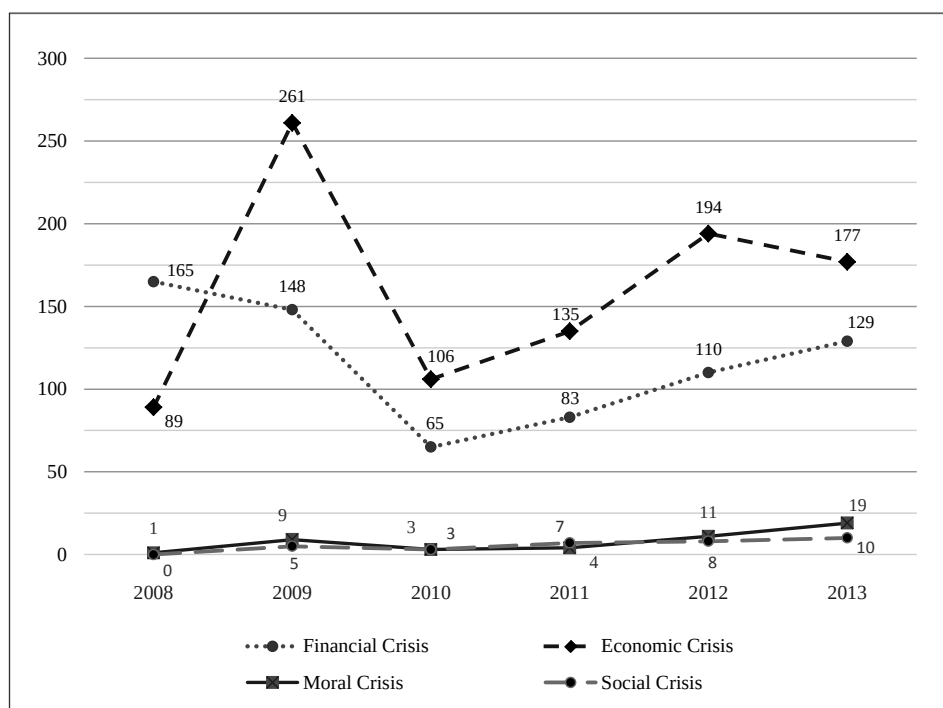
Thereafter, rather than aiming to construct a representative sample of news media’s communication, the study follows recursive and reflexive movement between concept development-sampling-data, collection-data, coding-data, and analysis-interpretation (Altheide 1996, 16). By using Google search engine, data collection for the ethnographic content analysis was restricted to news items of the four media websites, which included the specific keywords for each of the nine identified discontinuities five working days around the event in question (Table 4). The analysis of 188 news website outputs around the identified events is in this manner aimed at revealing how these discontinuities were framed by the media, which interpretations were encouraged and which discouraged in the news with respect to the crisis – to its origins and possible solutions. By focusing on both Slovenian and international perspectives the study attempts to analyse news media’s communication of the crisis with respect to the dynamics between structure and agency as well as relations between the nation state and international political and economic environment.

News Media and the Crisis: Causes and Solutions

Quantitative analysis shows that the crisis was predominantly characterised as “financial” and “economic” in the media, while the phrases “moral crisis” and “social crisis” were – regardless of their modest growth – not frequently used in 2008–2013 (Figure 3). A couple of oscillations can however be identified: while

media communicated the crisis as “financial” in 2008, repercussions for the economy prevailed when the crisis was portrayed the year later. It is rather difficult to explain why a downfall in the frequency of “financial crisis” and “economic crisis” happened in 2010, but it coexisted with PM Pahor’s slight optimism that year: “We have seen the worst of the crisis, but the crisis is not over yet” (Dnevnik.si, 14 January 2010). His optimism quickly faded however, on New Year’s Eve 2010–2011 he stated that “the economic crisis is not over yet, this is not even the beginning of its ending, but it is certainly the end of its beginning” (Dnevnik.si, 31 December 2010). In 2011 the use of both “financial” and “economic crisis” started to rise again.

Figure 3: Character of the Unfolding Crisis in Slovenian News Media 2008–2013



Accidental, Not a Systemic Crisis. The quantitative content analysis of the sample of gathered news items shows that exogenous causes are most frequently presented as being of central importance on both the national and the international level (Table 5). Exogenous causes do not relate to the capitalist production system, but mainly refer to individual behaviour, demographic trends and regulation flaws, according to which it can be argued that the crisis is communicated predominantly as an accidental occurrence and not a result of systemic contradictions of capitalism. What is regarded as “a few bad apples” perspective is saliently reflected in the media through the use of phrases like “irrational bankers,” “lust for profit” and “moral hazard,” when referring to the origins of the unfolding crisis in the United States. Additionally, media also used wordings such as “tycoons” and “tycoonisation of Slovenia” with respect to the second phase of privatisations in pre-crisis Slovenia.

Table 5: Causes for the Unfolding Crisis as Communicated in Slovenian News Media 2008–2013

	Imminent causes	Endogenous causes	Exogenous causes	External disturbances in market self-regulation	Causes mentioned, but not concrete
National	0 (0.0%)	2 (1.3%)	31 (19.5%)	7 (4.4%)	4 (2.5%)
International	5 (3.1%)	18 (11.3%)	43 (27.0%)	4 (2.5%)	6 (3.8%)
National and International	4 (2.5%)	13 (8.2%)	13 (8.2%)	3 (1.9%)	6 (3.8%)
Total	9 (5.7%)	33 (20.8%)	87 (54.7%)	14 (8.8%)	16 (10.1%)

About one fifth of the causes for the crisis communicated in the news can be considered as endogenous, meaning they are connected to the prevailing production system and the unequal distribution of goods and risks, but not to the internal logics of capitalism. Furthermore, approximately one tenth of the causes are presented as external disturbances in self-regulation of the markets, which in the case of Slovenia referred mostly to the “public sector being too big,” “slow structural reforms” and “business environment being unfriendly to the needs of the market.” Only 5.7 percent of causes for the crisis communicated in the news media are interpreted as being imminent to capitalism as a production system, which can be viewed as a critical appraisal.

Status Quo Solutions. The quantitative content analysis shows that in more than a third of the cases in which solutions are mentioned they do not refer to any concrete actions, sometimes even being tautological, such as “the true answer are true solutions out of the crisis” (Table 6). Otherwise, 28.8 percent of the solutions fall within the established institutional arrangements without changing them in any way. With respect to the national level, for instance, they are explicated with phrases such as “removal of political elites,” “pre-term elections as a solution” and “ethical and effective state management.”

Table 6: Solutions for the Unfolding Crisis as Communicated in Slovenian News Media 2008–2013

	Radical solutions	Reformist solutions	Solutions within the status quo	Neoliberal solutions	Solutions mentioned, but not concrete
National	2 (0.4%)	5 (1.0%)	46 (9.3%)	36 (7.2%)	61 (12.3%)
International	7 (1.4%)	47 (9.5%)	67 (13.5%)	30 (6.0%)	83 (16.7%)
National and International	3 (0.6%)	16 (3.2%)	30 (6.0%)	13 (2.6%)	51 (10.3%)
Total	12 (2.4%)	68 (13.7%)	143 (28.8%)	79 (15.9%)	195 (39.2%)

Similar shares fall in the categories of neoliberal and reformist solutions. On the one hand, neoliberal solutions, such as reducing the public sector, labour flexibilisation or lower taxation, are slightly more frequently communicated on the national level with the aim of “boosting the economy” through a “minimal state.” On the

other hand, reformist solutions are more frequent on the international level. This group of solutions questions the “current model of capitalism,” but not the capitalist mode of production, and was communicated through phrases such as “extensive redistribution,” “progressive taxes” and “strengthening of public services.” Within the sample, radical solutions calling to go beyond capitalism are rare, but “crisis of capitalism as a system” has been thoroughly discussed during the “all-Slovenian people’s uprisings” on the online platform Revolt and Alternatives within Delo.si, where users were invited to “search for alternatives for a better tomorrow.”

Discontinuities of the Unfolding Crisis in the News Media

The ethnographic content analysis of news items concerning the identified discontinuities (Table 4) shows that Slovenian news media were mostly event-orientation and relied heavily on elite sources to interpret the crisis. While opinions of non-elite sources were present in cases of newsworthy events but were commonly overshadowed by reporting on the event itself, power holders appeared as routine sources interpreting social implications of the analysed events.

Lehman Brothers Bankruptcy: Somebody Else’s Problem. When covering the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, the dominant mode of communication in our sample was conveying movements of stock indexes, most prominently Dow Jones and the Slovene SBI20, as well as the measures taken by the US government. The discussion of possible effects on Slovenia was limited to the movements on the stock exchange. The possibility of a more fundamental impact on the economy was mentioned, but hardly discussed. On the day that Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy, the first optimistic comments could already be found, with Rtv slo.si (15 September 2008) for instance entitling an interview with a Slovenian stock broker in the following manner: “The brave are already buying, the mass is still waiting: Higher trading volume on the Ljubljana stock exchange may be a sign that an upturn is close.” Similarly, two days later the future finance minister Janez Šušteršič was optimistic about the dangers of a global crisis similar to the Great Depression: “I do not believe the fear to be justified. In the world of today we have multiple centres of economic growth alongside the USA and Western Europe. Furthermore, economic policy has more experiences with managing crises” (Rtv slo.si, 17 September 2008).

The analysed sample gives an impression that the crisis was unfolding somewhere else and that impact on Slovenia will be moderate. With domestic factors of risk like the overleveraging of companies not mentioned and with experts and stock traders most frequently acting as news sources, it appears that editors and journalists were lacking the required insight into the developing crisis to adequately inform citizens.

Borut Pahor Government Takes Office: Cautious Optimism. The nominally social-democratic government of Borut Pahor took office at the end of 2008, at a time when the effects of the global crisis hit Slovenia. After relatively high economic growth in the first half of the year GDP growth was negative in the fourth quarter of 2008. It is no surprise then that the PM declared he will devote himself wholeheartedly to “solving the financial crisis,” also by “limiting his travels abroad when only necessary” (Rtv slo.si, 22 November 2008). The proposed programme of the new government did not entail austerity measures. Quite the opposite, a need to

decrease government spending or problems with public debt were not mentioned, only meetings with representatives of employers and trade unions regarding their “expectations” in a time of “economic uncertainty” were scheduled. The new PM announced that measures to “prevent effects of the recession,” with financial stimuli to businesses, decreasing “the burdens” by reducing mandatory social services payments and tax cuts (Delo.si, 22 November 2008). While in retrospect 2008 signifies the beginning of a deep and long-lasting economic crisis for Slovenia, media reporting of the time does not give that impression since the confidence of the newly appointed government that it will be able to restore growth without resorting to painful measures was not challenged.

First Greek Bailout: Slovenia-Centric Perspective. Reporting on the first Greek bailout was done from a Slovenia-centric perspective. Two prominent questions raised were whether Slovenia could face a similar situation in the future and whether it could expect that the money contributed to the bailout by the state would be repaid in the future. Although not as prominently as later, the threat of the “Greek scenario” was already invoked by some economists to justify their demands for strict austerity measures. One claimed that “we can see in the Greek case what happens when financial markets lose confidence in a state” (Rtvslo.si, 29 April 2010). On the other hand union leaders attempted to use Slovenia’s participation in the bailout as an argument against austerity measures: “If the state can take on debt to help Greece, it can also take on debt when it comes to the Slovenian worker” (24ur.com, 5 May 2010). In-depth analysis of the sovereign debt crisis in Europe was non-existent as media often resorted to stereotypes, for instance stating that “dodging taxes is a national sport in Greece” (Delo.si, 2 May 2010). PM Pahor used a similar reasoning when defending the austerity measures as a condition for the bailout, with media reporting that he “cannot expect the Slovenian worker to pay the Greek worker, if the latter is working less” (24ur.com, 6 May 2010). Although Slovenia was feeling the effects of the huge contraction of GDP in 2009, the bailout loan under conditions of strict austerity for Greece still seemed far away. The threat of the “Greek scenario” for Slovenia was usually discarded or was only occasionally used as an argument for implementing neoliberal measures. The fact that the Slovene government vigorously defended austerity measures imposed on Greece implies that they still believed Slovenia to be safe from the need to call on outside help to finance its public debt.

Referendum on the Pension Reform: Infantilising Citizens. By 2011 the tone of the Pahor government changed considerably as it decided to implement a series of austerity measures: reducing welfare payments and introducing stricter control of recipients, increasing the flexibility of the labour market, raising the pension age and introducing measures to combat illicit work. These austerity measures were facing increasing opposition from unions, student organisations and the parliamentary opposition and a number of the government’s reforms were rejected by referendum. The cautious optimism of the government from the time it took office gave way to fatalism, since the pension reform was communicated not as a choice, but as a necessity to stave off disaster. It seemed that citizens really had little say in the matter, with Herman van Rompuy, the acting president of the European Council, quoted as saying: “Even if the pension reform is rejected on the referendum it will

soon be on the agenda again, because Slovenia has committed itself to adapt its pension system" (Rtvslo.si, 3 June 2011).

Politicians and economists quoted in the media were unanimous that pension reform is unavoidable and lamented the lack of understanding from citizens, who were unable to grasp this fact. After the referendum one economist noted that "the rejection was irrational" (Delo.si, 5 June 2011). Rejection of the pension reform was portrayed not as an autonomous political decision, but as failure to grasp the basic facts of life. Accordingly, the referendum was sometimes referred to as a "blockade" (Delo.si, 6 June 2011). As another economist said, "I hope that we are at least mature enough to take the step towards a system of individual pension accounts" (ibid.). Through the voices of politicians and economists media infantilised citizens: "Slovenians stick their tongues out at the EU" (24ur.com, 6 June 2011). Citizens were not to be trusted with important political decisions, but the PM made it clear who was: credit rating agencies, EU institutions and international financial markets. As 24ur.com reported, credit rating agencies stressed that "they expect a more drastic pension reform," with PM viewing this information "almost with fear" (24ur.com, 7 June 2011). Journalists did not reflect on such claims, but offered a platform on which elites could explain to citizens the true meaning of their vote, leaving opponents of the pension reform voiceless.

15-O Protests: "Against." The media coverage of the global protests that started on 15 October 2011 was characterised by a strong focus on the demands of protesters. According to the analysis, media identified the protests with left-wing political positions, declaring them to be against "economic elites" (Delo.si, 15 October 2011), "against capitalism" (ibid.), and "against the violence of capitalism, unemployment, inequality" (Delo.si, 18 October 2011). Journalists reporting on the protests did not explicitly voice their support, yet were using expressive language. 24ur.com (16 October 2011), for instance, communicated protests as against "capitalist greed" in Slovenia, while Delo.si (13 October 2011) emphasised their transnational character: "They want to univocally tell politicians and financial elites that they are not merchandise in their hands, but want to decide themselves about their future as human beings." Journalists were also making extensive use of protest slogans like "99 percent" and "financial capitalism" and have in several instances included hyperlinks to global and local activist websites and social media profiles.

While reporting of the protests was generally favourable, the framing of protests as being largely "against," left much room for interpretation. Journalists were reluctant to go beyond reporting the facts with respect to the scale of the protest and slogans being chanted, whilst interpreting the protests in the context of austerity policies pursued in Slovenia and their socio-economic repercussions. The task of interpreting the protests was left, on the one hand, to experts, union leaders and politicians, and, on the other hand, to the protesters themselves. Yet the former did not dominate the debate, since protesters were given opportunities to voice their position: as guests in public television talk shows, newspaper interviewees and as sources through relatively extensive quotes.

Fiscal Compact: Austerity in the Shadows. Coverage on the signing of the European Fiscal Compact – the treaty which ratified stricter budget discipline and close coordination of economic policies in the Eurozone and beyond – was extremely sparse in Slovenian media, at least judging from the collected sample,

which contains only four news items. They lack independent analysis and only summarise the views of trade unions, who organised protests prior to signing of the compact, and statements of Slovenian and German governments. In two cases the views of the unions were juxtaposed to views of advocates of austerity, but in two other cases the pro-austerity position was presented unchecked with highly biased titles, "The Greek virus has been contained" (Delo.si, 29 February 2012) and "The Fiscal Compact will ensure the debt crisis will not happen again" (Rtvslo.si, 2 March 2012). In this sense the news media were favouring the official sources: their claims are not identified as opinions, but acquire the appearance of facts, while the claims of unions are treated as opinions. The claim that the Fiscal Compact prevents further accumulation of debt was, for example, not attributed to a source, while contrary claims that the treaty serves to deepen the crisis, were explicitly attributed to the unionists.

The Public Finance Balance Act: Resistance is Futile. While the outcome of the referendum on pension reform did lead to the fall of the Pahor government and early elections, it did not signify a change in policy. On the contrary, the government of Janez Janša that succeeded it was committed to a programme of strict austerity. The Public Finance Balance Act was perhaps the single most radical austerity measure, since it amended more than forty laws. It is therefore surprising that it passed in an atmosphere of relative news media resignation, under insistence of the coalition parties that "austerity is necessary and there is no other option" (24ur.com, 9 May 2012). The aim of the act was according to the SDS parliamentary group leader to do away with "ballast in the public sector" (ibid.). This was also the reason that the ruling party focused on reducing public expenditure rather than increasing income: "The opposition suggested raising taxes, but this would only cover up the luxury in the public sector" (ibid.). The news media discourse in favour of austerity combined fatalism and moralising. PM Janša also added a moral dimension to this non-choice: "No community can exist for long if a part of that community believes that somebody else will pay their bills" (24ur.com, 9 May 2012). The opposition in parliament claimed that they "do not oppose austerity measures, only their degree and form" (ibid.). The majority of public sector unions decided to cease their strike after some measures were softened and claimed that it was because of a sense of "responsibility towards all people in our country" (24ur.com, 10 May 2012) although they did not see austerity as the right response to the crisis. The only total rejection of austerity measures came from a group of 15-O activists. Their protest in front of Parliament did not receive much attention from the media; only Rtvslo.si (10 May 2012) reported their views and also embedded an anti-austerity video made by activists.

"All-Slovenian People's Uprising": A Sporting Event. The analysed protest is the largest of a series of protests that broke out in late 2012, which were sparked by allegations of corruption brought against several notable politicians, including the mayor of Maribor, the Prime Minister and the leader of the parliamentary opposition. Demands of the protesters in early February 2013 received less attention than in the coverage of the 15-O protests. Since two protests were taking place on the same day, one framed to be against corrupt political elites in general, but particularly against the government of Janez Janša, who was facing accusations

of violating anti-corruption legislation, and the other, organised by a civil society organisation with strong ties to Janša's SDS, reporting of the protests resembled a sporting event. The two protests were not framed in the context of the unfolding crisis, but rather as a competition, where the winner would be the one that managed to mobilise more people. Delo.si reported that anti-government protesters were "louder" (Delo.si, 9 February 2013) than pro-government protesters, while 24ur.com (8 February 2013) even went as far as to rent a helicopter to obtain aerial footage of the two protests and compare their relative sizes. In the days preceding the protests much attention was given to the allegations that SDS demanded from members of the party that they submit names of at least three people they were going to bring to the pro-government protest.

The trope of a competition between pro-government and anti-government protest forces became the dominant mode of news media coverage. In several instances the two protests were even interpreted as a symptom of a fundamental and irreconcilable social conflict. For example, 24ur.com (9 February 2013) lamented "It is as if we have returned to the past, we are again in conflict and divided," while a commentator at Delo.si (10 February 2013) wrote about "two Slovenias" and "a deep cleavage that cannot be resolved." Save for one instance no connection was made between the anti-government protests and the implemented austerity measures. Rather, much attention was devoted to the attempts of SDS to secure participants for the pro-government protest and to different controversial remarks made by Janša in his address to pro-government protesters, where he also referred to the anti-government protesters as "left fascists." In this way the protests were largely depoliticised in the media. Focus was on the actions and strategies of the actors in the conflict, while little attention was devoted to the underlying causes and those demands by protesters that did not fit the anti-Janša narrative.

Moody's Downgrade: The Nation Loses Face. When the credit rating agency Moody's downgraded Slovenia's sovereign debt rating to "junk" status, the dominant narrative in the analysed media was one of a moral failure. A financial analyst quoted in 24ur.com (30 April 2013) and Delo.si (30 April 2013) described it as a "loss of credibility," with 24ur.com reporting that finance minister Uroš Čufer met with international investors in order to "restore credibility." Even though Rtv slo. si (30 April 2013) covered the Libor scandal in the same days, the credibility of rating agencies and interest rates on Slovenia's bonds was never questioned. Rather, politicians, financial analysts and economists were given free rein to interpret the event as a failure of Slovenia to implement neoliberal measures, or as an unidentified source "close to the European Commission" put it: to adopt "well known reforms" (Delo.si, 2 May 2013).

The question was not whether the continuation of austerity policies and privatisation was the correct path or not, since they were interpreted as "absolutely necessary measures" (Dnevnik.si, 3 May 2013). While the credit rating agencies Standard & Poor's and Fitch had retained a substantially higher rating of Slovenia's sovereign bonds and this fact was noted in the media, the downgrade by Moody's received far more attention and served as an alibi for the promotion of neoliberal policies. This is not to say that media had a neoliberal slant in general in the analysed period. The downgrade occurred just prior to May Day and critiques of austerity policies, reports on rising unemployment and inequalities were well represented.

Yet critical reporting and possible alternative solutions were conspicuously absent from news on the financing of Slovenia's sovereign debt as such. The issue was not reported like a political problem, but as a technical one: the only question seemed to be how government would satisfy the demands of international financial markets for "structural reforms."

Conclusions

The study indicates that political, economic and social faces of Slovenia have changed substantially during the half-decade of the crisis. The ability of citizens to influence important political decisions has been seriously curtailed on both the national and transnational level. Instability has become endemic, while social solidarity has been eroded. The realisation of journalism's fundamental obligation to meaningfully connect people to societal life and give them voice in this context appears increasingly difficult. In this respect it is not surprising that analysis of how Slovenian news media communicated the unfolding crisis indicates they hardly served as an integrative force and a common forum for an inclusive and open debate between 2008 and 2013.

Results of the quantitative content analysis indicate that journalism communicated the "causes" for the crisis by portraying it as something purely accidental, while rarely pointing at the possibility of its systemic nature. Similarly, "solutions" have been predominantly portrayed within the prevailing paradigms or through the neoliberal prism favoured by holders of political and economic power. In addition, ethnographic analysis of news items concerning the identified discontinuities that emerged as decisive breaks and formative moments shows that Slovenian news media mostly relied on event-orientation, simplistic juxtapositions and naturalisation of the established power divisions on national as well as international levels. In this context, opinions of non-elite sources were used only in the cases of newsworthy events, such as "15-O protest" and "All-Slovenian People's Uprising," and even then they were commonly overshadowed by reporting on the event itself, while power holders appeared as routine sources interpreting social implications of the analysed events. Furthermore, notwithstanding some examples of thorough analyses of the troubling developments, media largely communicated events in a fragmentary manner: connections between them were rarely established and remained largely unrelated to the social totality from which they emerged. For example, when covering the demands from EU institutions for stricter austerity measures, these measures were disconnected from the effects they had on poverty, unemployment and social welfare, although the latter were communicated isolatedly.

News media therefore failed to provide comprehensive answers as journalists appeared to be caught in what Splichal (1999, 299–300) understands as the "paradox" of journalistic objectivity: as journalists strive to provide impartial renderings of reality, they become partial towards the existing social order. By "objectively" communicating the unfolding crisis, it can be argued journalists in fact reproduced and legitimised established power relations, normalised central concepts and ideas of the historical context, and re-established journalism's structural position in capitalism. While the doctrine of objectivity has historically been a cornerstone of newsroom's coalition with media owners, it now appears as an assurance of journalism's adaptability to economic uncertainties furthered by the crisis, regardless of the true nature of its political and cultural implications for citizens' linkage to societal life.

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