



Matjaz Hanzek

When will words become actions?

Reflections on hate speech in Slovenia

Slovenia's former Human Rights Ombudsman, Matjaz Hanzek, finished his six-year term in office in 2007 amid a barrage of criticism and contempt for his alerts about human rights violations in the case of asylum-seekers, Roma, and Muslims. Here, Hanzek describes how homophobia and xenophobia, falsely parading as free speech, has entered the Slovenian political mainstream. A target of hate speech himself, Hanzek warns that it is only a matter of time before words become actions.

"Load 'em onto railway cars, Hanzek too, and apply the gas!!!"¹

The international mirror

According to the reports of a number of international institutions that deal with racism and intolerance, hate speech by politicians is a big problem in Slovenia. The most recent of these was issued by European Commissioner for Human Rights, Alvaro Gil-Robles, in March 2006. In the section of the report dealing with Slovenia's "erased" population,² Gil-Robles wrote, "The Commissioner is extremely concerned about the continuous public manifestations of hate speech and intolerance by some politicians. The Commissioner calls for greater responsibility of politicians and media in this regard and for the full respect of the rights and values laid down in European Convention on Human Rights and other international instruments."³

Similar statements have been made by other organizations, such as the ECRI (European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance) and the UN. In 2005, the United Nations Human Rights Committee expressed concern in its concluding statements over the emergence of hate speech and intolerance in Slovenia, and recommended that Slovenia adopt firm mechanisms for the prevention and prohibition of hatred and incitement of intolerance.

The hate speech of Slovene politicians is thus known throughout the world. But what about at home? Only a few individuals, non-governmental organizations, and the Ombudsman for Human Rights talk about it. Among the majority of other state institutions and among some legal experts, the prevailing view is that hate speech is inappropriate, a "bad joke", an expression of poor taste or upbringing. However nothing more.⁴ Among people who recognize and condemn hate speech, a consensus often reigns that it is better to keep silent about politicians' homophobic and xenophobic utterances than to publicize them. But is this really a solution?

Keep silent or react?

Hate speech in Slovenia

On women:

"In my opinion God made his biggest mistake when he created woman for man. You can tell from the Bible that he was already cutting corners..."

On "the erased":

"Kill the gypsies!!!"

"We've had enough of these vermin... let's create a pure Slovenia once and for all!"

On foreigners:

"All these *cefurji*⁵ should be kicked out. They're dirtbags!!!!!!!"

"Adolf is turning in his grave."

I think we need to make use of those *foibe*⁶ again, soon.

"A rapid cleansing would do a lot of good! I'll donate a day's wages for a bunch of one-way tickets across the Kolpa!"

"All these *cefurji* should be swept into crematoria like they did with the Jews! And give 'em a little gassing first!"

Source: Various websites

Assuredly, the best way to deal with such homophobic and xenophobic utterances would be for everyone, and in particular the media, to keep silent about them: writing and talking about them only serves to publicize them. Such utterances serve to create an electoral base large enough to ensure social and economic security for those who make them. This is also true whether they are discussed approvingly or critically. Unfortunately, however, much of the media finds hate speech too attractive to ignore. Even if written about with a hint of disagreement, this is sufficient to mobilize support. For example, one television station allocated the head of a racist political party five minutes a day of prime-time viewing, while the others frequently host both him and members of his party. This makes it impossible to consign politician's hate speech to oblivion. At the same time, the absence of any public outcry means that there is a lack of opposing information. Thus hate speech, humiliation, the smearing and ridiculing of minorities, and even calls for them to be lynched and suchlike, have entered normal, acceptable, everyday discourse.

Similarly, some people think that the use of the Internet to express intolerance alleviates social tensions and serves as a harmless release for individuals. "I'd rather see someone write in some forum that all the Jews should be killed than have him go out and kill them for real," commented a friend of mine. I would agree with him if it really did work that way; perhaps for some people it does. But for many a racist, the absence of any counter-reaction to his opinions means gives him licence to continue what he is doing, or even escalate it. This is all the more likely if his opinions are supported by statements by politicians and members of parliament. Prejudice, as Mirjana Ule writes in *The Social Psychology of Prejudice*, "has the unpleasant quality of rapidly becoming a socially binding fabric for the masses; it spreads like a virus and can reach epidemic proportions. At that point, prejudice changes into a tool of aggression and a declaration of lynching, an excuse for all kinds of discrimination, persecution, ostracism, and the abandonment of threatened groups to their fate."

A visit to Jerusalem

Hate speech in Slovenia

"The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, being firmly convinced that tolerance and pluralism are at the foundation of genuinely democratic societies and that diversity considerably enriches these societies:

Condemns the use of racist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic elements in political discourse;

Stresses that such discourse is ethically unacceptable;

Recalls Europe's history, which shows that political discourse that promotes religious, ethnic or cultural prejudice and hatred considerably threatens social peace and political stability and inevitably leads to suffering for entire population;

Is alarmed at the consequences that this type of discourse is having on the general climate of public opinion in Europe;

Is deeply concerned that the use of racist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic political discourse is no longer confined to extremist political parties, but is increasingly infecting mainstream political parties at the risk of legitimizing and trivializing this type of discourse;

Notes with serious concern that this type of discourse conveys prejudices and stereotypes in respect of non-citizens and minority groups and strengthens the racist and xenophobic content of debates on immigration and asylum [...]

The ECRI deplors the fact that, as a result of the use of racist, anti-Semitic and xenophobic political discourse:

Ill considered measures which impact disproportionately on particular groups or affect the latter's effective enjoyment of human rights are being adopted;

The long-term cohesion of society is being damaged;

Racial discrimination gains ground;

Racial violence is encouraged."

From ECRI, *Declaration on the use of racist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic elements in political discourse, adopted in 2005*

A visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem shows the visitor where expressions of hate and contempt towards other groups of people, perhaps beginning with "innocent jokes" at the expense of others, can ultimately lead. The media of pre-Nazi Germany began featuring caricatures of Jews and "realistic" pictures of Aryans, in which they exaggerated carefully selected features of both. Of course, by dehumanizing the first and ennobling the second, the intention was to prepare people in the majority community to conceptualize the minority not only as unlike themselves, but even as non-human. Once this kind of climate has been created, the path to the physical destruction of entire groups of people is easy. Although these caricatures are familiar to us, we still need to describe them: the caricatured Jews were usually rich, fat, short, and old, with a hostile look and hooked nose and dark hair, while Aryans were tall and slender, blond, poor but friendly workers, muscular and athletic in build. Added to this portrayal of Jews as physically repulsive was the threat they (and others, too: homosexuals, the mentally ill, the politically suspicious, the Roma, immigrant, etc.) supposedly posed to Aryan pure blood, their historical blame for the murder of Jesus, and their imperialistic intention to control the world. Thus, the first steps were taken towards their elimination: the use of humiliating language and ridicule, the labelling of all members of the group according to negative group characteristics, blaming the group for crimes in the past and accusing them of harbouring harmful intentions in the present. This opened up the way for the Holocaust, with all these groups already labelled as being "dangerous to society."

From labelling to massacres

We can see similar tendencies in the attitude towards various minorities in

Slovenia, though the process is still in its early stages. *Cefurji*⁷ and gypsies are dirty and thieving, foreigners and asylum-seekers are lazy (but still take jobs from Slovenes), Muslims aspire to take over Slovenian territory and destroy Slovenian culture, "fags" represent a dead end for humanity, are morally degenerate and sub-human — to list just some of the stereotypes perpetrated. A slew of negative and dangerous traits supposedly possessed by such people can be found listed on the Internet. Is it any different when the head of a Slovenian parliamentary party appears on national TV calling for the branding and lynching of paedophiles? And when his interlocutor adds that "human rights don't apply". If human rights do not apply, then it is of course a perfectly normal statement to say that you do not need to kill a hundred paedophiles to set an example, but only a few. The worst part of this story is that the public prosecutor saw nothing controversial in any of this! Silence about such hate speech, directed against other people or cultures in the name of freedom of speech, means silent assent and hence participation in the destructive march of intolerance. Mockery and stereotyping turns into discrimination, boycott, and segregation and ends up as repression and physical destruction.

The "freedom of expression" excuse

Hate speech in Slovenia

"It is a fact that national status symbols such as mosques, in accordance with our constitution, do not belong in our country, since this kind of building would dominate the landscape. The construction of a mosque in Ljubljana would greatly change the image of the city. A mosque in Ljubljana or in Velenje would offend the religious sensibilities of Slovenes and Catholics. They should be more afraid of Islam. Simply because it is a militant faith, and the Slovenian nation has already suffered a great deal because of it."

Transcript of a session of the Ljubljana City Council on the construction of a mosque in the city.

Article 39 of the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia is often cited as a motto on the various websites propagating intolerance: "Freedom of expression of thought, freedom of speech and public appearance, of the press and other forms of public communication and expression shall be guaranteed. Everyone may freely collect, receive, and disseminate information and opinions." Of course, these bigots deliberately forget to cite Article 63, which prohibits the incitement of inequality and intolerance and the instigation of violence: "Any incitement to national, racial, religious or other discrimination, and the inflaming of national, racial, religious or other hatred and intolerance are unconstitutional. Any incitement to violence and war is unconstitutional."

This kind of behaviour coincides completely with the narrow, one-dimensional view of the world determined by a racist, one-dimensional understanding: what is true is only what I say, a rainbow is the colour that I see, and only I have the right to live. But while proponents of hate speech claim freedom of expression for themselves, they are not prepared to acknowledge that same freedom for others, or accept any limits on their actions towards others.

When words become actions

Hate speech in Slovenia

Some affectionate comments about the author:

"That Janissary⁸ fascist bigot Hanzek is spreading hate and intolerance towards Catholics and Slovenes!!!"

"Take a rope, find the nearest big tree, and string that post-communist camel-driver Hanzek up!"

"Kill Hanzek and impale him. Stop kicking up such a stink over Muslims and the erased. If you want to finish out your mandate in this function, you'd better adapt unconditionally to the majority of Slovenes and start working on their behalf."

"Hanzek keeps forcing the erased, the Roma, and homosexuals on us, which the majority of Slovenes don't like. I'm no bigot, but someone in need of psychiatric treatment can't represent me."

"That damned Hanzek can shove them all up his ass: lesbians, fags, and the erased, too! Fuck that motherfucker! And put that band of *cefurji* in front of a machine gun, and RATATAT!"

The essential point in all this is that it is not just about freedom of verbal expression. The right to the free expression of thought, speech and public assembly is merely a pretext for and first step towards the next stages, which end in physical violence and destruction of others. The right to freedom of expression assumes that the individual has something of substance to say. Bigots have nothing of substance to say. They only wish to shock and provoke, and thus require the constant invention of new forms, since what was shocking and provocative yesterday no longer has the same effect today. Sooner or later, then, there will inevitably be a "qualitative" leap from words to deeds. It begins with the expression of an opinion, followed by the posing of a question, and finally an affirmation. After affirmation, there is no longer anything remaining in the sphere of words. The next level is a call to action and finally action itself — a hate campaign, in which various groups and media participate: elected politicians, anonymous persons on the Internet, journalists in the mass media, and so on.

A member of the national assembly expressed the opinion that the Roma have too many rights, that they live at the expense of working Slovenes, and so on. His views were disseminated by the media, and further amplified by anonymous voices on the Internet. As a result of their anonymity, their statements were much more extreme, calling for the Roma to be exiled or even killed. Soon a "hero" appeared, who dared to offer 1000 euros for every dead Gypsy. It is no longer a question of *whether* anyone will try to earn that reward, but rather *when* that will happen. And we have had a bomb in the bedroom of a Roma settlement. Should the blame for the death should be borne by only the perpetrator of the crime and the one who put him up to it?

All of this takes place with varying intensity at various times, depending on the needs of politicians and the state of society. Accordingly, the groups towards which rage is directed varies: first, homosexuals, then Muslims, then drug addicts and the handicapped, then the unemployed and the poor. Throughout, people and groups who oppose hate speech, intolerance, and discrimination are targeted. Of course the opponents of intolerance are labelled as the most intolerant of all: "Why do they speak up? If they'd just keep quiet, everything would be just fine."

The intensity and forms of hate are of course different towards different groups — but only in publicly expressed speech. In reality, homophobes and racists are bothered by everyone equally. Since they know that they will gain the most support by opposing paedophiles, and that people will not be too picky about the means employed, a campaign against this group best serves to mobilize

supporters. They can even demand the use of illegal methods such as lynching, mutilation, and suchlike, since it is easy to forget about respecting the law when thinking about the depraved acts of paedophiles. Anyone who dares doubt the justice of such behaviour is immediately accused of defending murderers and paedophiles, and even subjected to insinuations of paedophilia himself. And in their efforts to intimidate, homophobes and racists do not hesitate to drag their opponent's family members into the conflict. This is exactly what happened in the reaction to my condemnation of Zmago Jelincic's⁹ televised comments on paedophilia.

Getting personal

When I protested against his call to lynch paedophiles, and notified the public, the state prosecutor's office (that found that Jelincic was not in breach of the law!) and the journalism tribunal, Jelincic's first statement was to declare me an unfit parent. Soon thereafter, a disinformation campaign was launched, to the effect that I only protect paedophiles and murderers and do not give a damn about children. The next act was the abuse of the practice of parliamentary questions in order to spread the falsehood that, because of my poor relationship with my family, I was banned from contact with my children. (This "question" was submitted not only to the government, but also to dozens of media outlets and individuals.) The MP's letter was immediately published by the president of the national assembly on the website of that institution, even though parliamentary questions are frequently rejected. When the allegation was firmly rejected and discredited as a complete fabrication, four members of the Slovenian Nationalist Party sent additional questions on the same topic, by means of which they hoped to give the first question greater weight and relevance. The president of the national assembly did not publish them, but also failed to express any disapprobation regarding the inappropriateness of this means of slander. After that, there was no longer any question but that the attacks would be directed against my family members as well. Indeed, I have already received a letter in which I — defender of murderers, terrorists, and blacks — am politely informed that my oldest daughter will be roasted over a fire. What can we expect next?

Of course racists are bothered not only by paedophiles; actually, I'm not convinced that paedophiles bother them at all. They're just the most suitable group for manipulating and mobilizing the public. Once they gain enough support to take illegal action against them, they will quickly redirect those illegal means against other groups, just as the Nazis did. It is only a short step from paedophiles to "faggots".¹⁰ Who will be next in line?

¹ An opinion about *cefurji* (a derogatory word for "foreigners" — trans.), expressed on the website *Nemejebat.com*.

² In 1992, shortly after Slovenia gained independence, residents of Slovenia from other former Yugoslav Republics were obliged to re-apply for Slovenian citizenship. The many who failed to apply for or were refused this status (Amnesty International puts the figure at 20 000) belonged to "new minorities", including ethnic Serbs, ethnic Croats, ethnic Bosnian Muslims, ethnic Albanian Kosovars, and ethnic Roma. They were subsequently "erased" from official records and denied access to employment, housing, and social and medical benefits. See the [Amnesty International Report](#) — trans.

³ European Commission for Human Rights, "Follow-up Report on Slovenia (2003 — 2005) Assessment of the progress made in implementing the recommendations of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights – CommDH(2006)8."

- ⁴ Boris Vezjak, editor of Slovenian *Dialogi*, [compares](#) the Slovenian government's failure to respond to Hanzek's reports to the "old Yugoslav reflex to characterize appeals for arbitration by international institutions as dangerous and damaging".
- ⁵ See footnote 1.
- ⁶ Massacre by Yugoslav Partisans of ethnic Italians during and after WWII — trans.
- ⁷ See footnote 1.
- ⁸ Janissary: In Slovene folklore, janissaries were supposed to be raised from Christian children, abducted during Turkish raids. A "janicar" is somebody of Slovene origin who adopted a foreign (primarily "southern") culture and is now fanatically anti-Slovene — trans.
- ⁹ President of the Slovenian National Party (Slovenska Nacionalna Stranka, SNS) — trans.
- ¹⁰ The Slovene word for pedophile is *pedofil*, for "faggot" *peder* — trans.

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