

We are small (can only be small) in our heads only

"Who said so, who lied so, Slovenia is small..."

Paris, early spring 1992. We sit in a restaurant in the Latin Quarter with a respected French architect. He, a man of middle to late years, a refined skinny intellectual with round glasses and curly grey hair, looks at me inquisitively when I explain the so very obvious advantages of the products which are made by a company from the Dolenjska region, the products I had started to represent on the French market. And me. I am proud to be responsible for the establishment of the first Slovenian company in France after our attainment of independence. A young man with a fresh MBA diploma, a Slovenian, *d'ex-Yougoslavie*, which I will be forced to use so many times for the next few years as an explanation for which part of the world I come from.

The President of the Republic of Slovenia appeared often in the international media during 1992. He represented Slovenia perfectly, Public Relations-Marketing-wise! The poor little country on the sunny side of the Alps, which became the victim of the evil Balkan riff-raff, who had attempted in the not so distant past to subordinate this small country, first economically and then militarily. But David beat Goliath and now we are finally independent! A very effective story that it is understood by even the largest international masses of people which, in its rearranging of good guys vs. bad guys, did not require much mental effort to draw conclusions as to who was who.

Well, this kind French architect slowly bends over, looks at me and without blinking, with the faintest of smiles appearing in only the corners of his mouth before he speaks. I know that he follows the development of events in connection with Slovenia in the media. He knows quite a lot about Slovenia. For a Frenchman, he knows a great deal. And then he poses the question: "Well respected young gentleman from Slovenia. Tell me, truthfully: are you, since you have already been living in one of the most important countries in the world for a month or two, in the most beautiful city in the world, starting

to feel small, because you come from a so much smaller country than France?" I look at him stupidly; in my brain ideas begin to well up for an answer in the style *small is beautiful* or "pearls are also small" but also "we have the most

*"Slovenia is a **small** state and **small** states are economically and politically a good deal more vulnerable than large states."*

Milan Kučan, President of the RS, press conference during an official visit to Kazakhstan, September 2002

*"They arranged refereeing against a **small** Slovenia which is not decent enough for the players and viewers."*

Kasim Kamenica, Selector of the Slovenian Men's Handball Team, press conference after a game against Germany during the World Championships, January 2007.

*"Slovenia has already been a full member of the European Union for more than a year, one of the biggest political and economic global organizations; the **smallness** of Slovenia, in many cases, means a lot of advantages and opportunities"*

Prof. Dr. Karl Kuzman, Deacon at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering UL, address at the web page of the faculty.

beautiful horses, cave's, prosciutto,...in the world"... but I cannot utter a thing. I look at him in silence for a few seconds, before I reply: "Well respected gentlemen from Paris, do you ever, when you are walking in Paris's District 13, where the Chinese make their homes, feel small and insignificant when you are in the middle of the most beautiful city in the world, in the middle of France, surrounded by only citizens of the biggest nation in

the world, so many times more numerous than the French?" The smile disappeared from his lips; I can see that he is thinking. Afterwards he kindly replies: "Égalité (we are equal)." For the next almost five years, as many as I will spend in the French capital, we became good acquaintances.

So why this story? Simply because it speaks in its own way about Slovenian "smallness". As long as we profit from it (a small oasis of peace in the vicinity of the wild Balkans!) we like to cling to it. But when our competition starts to use it against us in any field of social life, we start to struggle against it as the Devil against the cross.

The cases in which the "smallness" of Slovenia is evident are plentiful. Let us take a look at only two fields, sport and the economy.

Lets us recall, for example, the last two World Championships in the male team sports of basketball and handball. How is it possible that, in both sports, out of groups of so proven and brilliant individuals we cannot squeeze out those synergies which would tie the elite individuals into a winning "team"? Or is it just a coincidence that our handball players, basketball players, and footballers have had countless opportunities to listen and read statements about "small Slovenia" for whom it is "already an honour it succeeded in participating in such a huge contests as the Olympics, European, or World Championships?" And if these statements are correct, how is it then possible I never detected them coming out of the mouth of the winners of medals from the biggest competitions in individual sports, as are, for example, Flander, Sraka, Petkovšek, Majdič, Pegan, Čop...? They also come from the same "small Slovenia", don't they?! Or did somebody simply forget to remind them of that "fact"...

The "smallness" of our country of course isn't some objective reality which could, has to, or even should influence the life of any individual amongst us. "Smallness" in all of its adjective uses is simply a handy, generally socially accepted and often even desired excuse for the absence of the other long oppressed notion "of personal responsibility" which is, for example, often possible to evade in team sports, though in the case of individual sports such evasion is simply impossible. On this point, a memory from a few years back when our consultancy was drawing up a document on market strategies for one of the biggest Slovenian industrial groups. One of the assignments was also the analysis of uniform documents with comparable companies, Slovenian ones in the first place. We enthusiastically started our analysis of the first company when an interesting detail caught my eye. The company which had its manufacturing capabilities located on the coast defined, as their strategic and even primary export market, Bosnia-Herzegovina. The justification of this decision was roughly this: "in Italy there is huge competition, but there is none in Bosnia-Herzegovina, so let's go there!" But, my dear fellows, if today you are not capable of producing such a simple product as yours is, and to offer it in competition to a market which is just 15km away, then you have to be aware of the obvious danger that this already existing Italian competition will also offer a competitive product in Bosnia-Herzegovina tomorrow! And where will you run then?

What does this case have to do with Slovenian "smallness"? A lot, since we are dealing with a practical application of it. The Slovenian companies today are mostly led by directors in their 40's or 50's, at least. The Slovenians of this age group lived most of their life in Yugoslavia and everybody can still, without hesitation, show the borders of the ex-Yugoslavian Federal Republic on the map of Europe. A lot of them are still living with these imaginary restrictions of the former state, even though the expression "former Yugoslavia" was changed to the politically more accurate expression "Countries of South

Eastern Europe". We Slovenians are therefore supposedly "small". But our problems merely begin when "smallness" itself becomes an irrelevant concept. When we think about it, write about it, talk about it, and especially when we use it as an excuse for our ignorance, incompetence and lack of motivation. When it helps us as an anaesthetic for our inferiority complex, when it helps us climb the 8,000 m Himalayan peak, or in cases where we, as painlessly as possible, dash ourselves against the barrier of the highway at 200km/h and we equal ourselves with great delight with the "great" James Dean in the last adrenalin fuelled moments of our lives.

Maybe it would be worth while modelling ourselves on the developed, comparative cultures which, today at least, considering the surface area of the country, or number of residents, aren't so much bigger than Slovenia (Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland...), but they are big in the minds of their inhabitants. Yes, big are their inhabitants. Because there are no big or small states, there are no big or small nations. We can only be big as individuals in our own heads and we alone are responsible for this in its entirety. So let's grow up already!

MA Zoran VAUPOT
Ljubljana, February 2007