SLOVENIAN BASKETBALL ON TOP OF THE WORLD
THE PROJECT OF THE DECADE

Slovenia has begun the political autumn with the adoption of one of the most important and far-reaching structural measures of the last 10 years – a draft of amendments to pension legislation. There have been no political, economic or demographic dilemmas over whether such deep social changes are necessary: the population is ageing, a decreasing number of people of working age have to maintain an increasing number of pensioners, and state coffers can no longer cope with the burden. There are two possibilities: either we alleviate this burden and divide it among the generations by making older people work longer, which means that they will have to be maintained for a shorter period, or the value of pensions will continue to decrease over time. Without raising the retirement age, if conditions are unchanged the budget deficit will increase by one percent of GDP every year, meaning that in less than two decades Slovenia will break the Maastricht rule on public debt, posing a serious threat to the stability of public finances.

Of course, every social measure that affects rights acquired by the individual is painful and hard to accept at the personal level. That is why the government has spent the last year attempting to agree the reform in consultation with the social partners (particularly the unions). Unfortunately, however, the gap between the urgency of the reform and workers’ expectations has been too great to allow a reconciliation of positions within a reasonable time. For this reason the government, headed by Prime Minister Borut Pahor, has been forced to take a risk and place before parliament a draft law on which agreement has not been reached.

This could lead to a number of complications, from demonstrations to a referendum (although a referendum on an issue such as duration of employment would be constitutionally questionable). Nevertheless, the government cannot shirk its responsibility; every year, meaning that in less than two decades Slovenia will break the Maastricht rule on public debt, placing a burden on the younger generations.

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As a complete beginner it took some time to get the hang of things at first, but I soon realised I would be okay. These canoes are really excellent for enjoying the river. And the river did not seem particularly cold either. At the height of summer it can reach 18 degrees, but now it is already cooling. It really is so refreshing. “Don’t worry, just get stuck in!” says the guide Zdenko. And I do. And, of course, Borut encourages our every effort.

From the very moment I set foot in the kayak, I was completely hooked, and by the time I reached the first travertine terrace, I had promised myself that I would definitely come back to the Kika river. After four hours of kayaking and “dropping anchor” at Zuzemberk, I was genuinely tired. But it was the kind of pleasant tiredness that you feel when you have really been in touch with nature. Travelling along the river is a wonderful feeling. From the kayak the environment seems to tell you the story of the places along the river, and you see their culture and countryside from a different point of view. The local forests lend an impression of unspoilt nature as you paddle in the company of trout, ducks and storks. On the river all that matters is the moment and being in touch with the river and its surroundings. Priceless. So I understand why Zdenko, the guide, says that kayaking down the Kika fills you with positive energy. “This is my anti-stress programme. Kayaking really relaxes me,” he explains and adds that it offers “a fantastic feeling, when the people you have guided on a unique experience discover the unspoilt nature of the Kika river valley.”

But your experience with the Javorniks does not end with the river descent. Their farm is celebrated as one of the best inns in the area. Their food is based around the excellent local trout, prepared in many different dishes, as well as game. You will also find them serving all kinds of other things that grow or they gather locally. They also offer their own excellent homemade apple juice.

When people slowly begin to harvest the grapes from the vineyards that spread over the slopes of the Kika valley, it is still a good time to kayak down the river. The Javorniks take people down the river during October (the season goes from the start of April to the end of October), and occasionally even organise winter trips for their friends. And when you have finished the kayaking, there really still is more to come. No more hard work, just pure hedonism round a table piled with delicious food. The kayaking and the eating were fantastic.

For more information see: www.kayak.si
It’s nice to be the winner of the Tour de France, or to win Wimbledon. But we must never forget the path that leads to a profession, victory (glory) and earnings.

The piste. I have to be able to see all the pitfalls and worst-case scenarios and at the same time the solutions for every possible outcome – simple, complex and unpredictable. It is actually the ultimately unforgettable moments that show the difference between a good surgeon and a bad or average surgeon. When a good team is carrying out an operation you cannot actually tell that anything is wrong. Others become nervous at the first sign of trouble, the sound level increases and you start to see additional, unnecessary movements.

Is it true that your second year as a medical student was decisive when it came to you choosing plastic surgery?

It was very important in my career path, because Professor Janko, for whom I was doing a research project, took me to Professor Arnèl, who was full of energy, whereas in the hospital ‘24 hours a day’, and who had very high standards. I came to his team and I followed him around: I went with him to the clinic, on duty, at night – I was at the medical centre more than half the week, all as a volunteer and still at the learning stage, so that I could see whether this interested me. I followed the professor’s work and saw satisfied patients. In my third year, under his mentorship, I presented my research in the Congress of the British Association of Plastic Surgeons at the Royal College of Surgeons.

Eight or even ten hours in the operating theatre with food and drink, the whole time in more or less the same position – that must be hard? Is physical fitness also important?

It is important but not decisive. In medicine, dealing with major issues, you are full of adrenaline, you do not feel tired and time stops: all in front of you is finished work and unfinished work. So you yourself: five veins are already sewn up and you have to sew up another eight, after that you have to sew sinews, nerves, skin... step by step you finish the work. Without thinking that you have already been hunched over a microscope for six hours, that you have not been to the toilet all this time, that you have not had a drink. You ignore it. Some athletes with sponsors compete during competitions. Our principal training, however, consists exclusively of working in the operating theatre. Only this strength, precisely defined movements, Composure and reliability only come with a lot of sewing. Usually we surgeons simply do not have time to worry specifically about our physical condition. Sometimes we start from morning to evening, and often at the weekends as well. I know very few surgeons who go to a fitness club.

You need people skills and plenty of knowledge and creativity when you are dealing with the most serious wounds, and of course an aesthetic sense for prettier cosmetic surgery. 

An aesthetic sense is also necessary in reconstructive surgery: when you are creating a new breast out of nothing and it must be identical to the other breast if you want the patient to be happy and you want to feel happy with your work. It is a lot harder to make a breast out of nothing than to do a breast enhancement! Most patients with cosmetic surgery are not looking for a breast enhancement takes just over an hour and is not technically demanding! In reconstructive surgery you have to show greater abilities but there is an aesthetic element in every type of surgery – everyone wants a nicely sewn-up wound. The finest cosmetic surgeons in the world come from reconstructive surgery. It is very rare for us to ask for advice when they needed it in other way round. Unfortunately, people who are looking for someone to carry out a cosmetic operation are too little aware of this. Only rarely do they ask about the background of the surgeon who is going to operate on them. In other countries the situation is completely different. Those without suitable training pay high insurance premiums, or find that insurance companies are unwilling to insure them at all.

Have you ever considered that being a cosmetic surgeon is ‘beneath your dignity’ in the sense of dealing with the dictates of fashion? And if I win? Or if I am satisfied, after talking to the patient, that the patient’s wishes and expectations are realistic and that I can fulfill them. I carefully discuss possible complications and expected results with the patient. With the right choice, even cosmetic surgery can bring a doctor great happiness. It often also brings worry and disappointment. In the end it is always the patient who decides the result is good, depending on his or her expectations.

What is your personal view of aesthetic requirements that are dictated by fashion?

At one time everyone had to be more pear-shaped, a white skin was desirable (only poor people worked in the fields under the hot sun) and fat people were those who had enough money to eat well. Today being surnamed means sunbathing in the Caribbean and slim is a sign of a healthy diet. 

However, being here is to help people. We carry out reconstructive surgery and help people in their lives. We respect legislation that says that it is inappropriate to advertise these services and unfortunately we do not have time to create a good website, because there are eight specialists in the department divided amongst thirteen locations and we work every day. But word of mouth is effective and we even have patients from abroad. These are the patients for whom we carry out the biggest reconstructions, and most difficult operations – these are...
In your writings you criticise politics, handing over money, false ideals of beauty. Do you really think like that?
Yes. Directness and sincerity are part of me, part of my upbringing. When you talk sincerely there are no hard feelings, no game-playing that takes away your energy, when you sit at home wondering what someone was trying to say. I am not afraid to say what I think. I usually use arguments and verifiable information. When I encounter a problem I try to solve it. For example: we were all shocked to learn that the percentage of people in Slovenia who are willing to help in the case of an accident is less than 10%. My reaction was that the problem lies in the knowledge that we experts need to communicate to others, and that is why we wrote Prva pomol (First Aid), which was twice book of the month in terms of sales and sold out an edition of 3,000 copies in one year. Gvozdeči proš (Talking Fingers) is a book that draws attention to hand injuries. One of Sklatri notegva (The Eagle from Scarlet Mountain) confronts a taboo topic: a death in the family. I am always looking for subjects for useful and effective work. I do not like like listening to people who talk a lot and have little to say. Can you imagine a doctor standing over a dying patient talking about what could and should be done and what others have failed to do? I have a fighting spirit to do is prescribe the medicine, pick up the skalpel and make the incision. Immediately, without lots of talk. This is something that I also expect from other professionals and politicians.

Do you ‘rule’ your department with an iron hand?
There is no ruling, there is cooperation and complementing each other’s work. Openly, with discussion, correctness and equality for all! I am well aware that every single person in the department is important. I want us all to have the same conditions for work and to reach our goals. I realise that all of us have given the greater part of our lives to medicine. Were you an outstanding student?
For a while, but I always kept something in reserve. That means that I never failed an exam when I was a medical student, but at the same time my average mark was not ten out of ten. I was rational: one investment of effort for one result!
Are you ambitious? Is at a relatively short time and at a relatively young age you occupy a responsible position, you run a more than exemplary department, you are an excellent surgeon...
Youth is a relative concept. The last time I noticed that was at the hairdresser’s. I enjoy my work and I have always loved team sports. Leading and encouraging a team. Being head of the department is also the desire for a combination of circumstances and the departure of three colleagues. It also means additional work that is not connected with treating patients and is therefore less interesting. When you become a head of department you do not become cleverer, more experienced or better overnight. Perhaps you merely have more opportunity to influence the results of the whole, and a great responsibility in surgery.

“The word plasticus means design, and here you can demonstrate the movements you have learnt, your ideas and all your hidden talents.”

“... you can never stray from solid ground, not even with one foot, and surrender to luck, triumphalism, arrogance or believing that you are irreplaceable. If you think like that you will be taught a serious lesson the very next day! You have to stay realistic and keep your feet firmly on the ground.
You have two daughters, Ivona and Hana, aged nine and four – am I right?
Ivona and Hana, aged nine and four – am I right? My wife and I have been together for 20 years (laughs), since the first year of university. I cannot remember what year we got married but I do know that it was in September. I kept my wedding ring on for all of two hours. Such external symbols seem entirely unnecessary to me. The important things are the head and the heart. A settled family life is a condition for being able to work well and hard, and to have a tranquil life. Some people like a more exciting life, full of tragedy, comedy and adrenaline... perhaps they are adventurers because they have a more tranquil working environment.
Fortunately everyone makes their own decision. The essential thing is not to harm others with our actions.
Are you an artistic spirit?
In a way: I enjoy word games, photography, design... work: plastic surgery. The word plasticus means design, and here you can demonstrate the movements you have learnt, your ideas and all your hidden talents.
Your writings reveal how much your family means to you, how you breathe with them, the relationship you have with your wife and your two little girls. At the same time you love freedom. A family is a group of people bound together by ties of kinship. Good families are also connected by shared activities, sports, hobbies, fun, having lunch together, playing ludo or Monopoly, sincere conversations, a healthy upbringing. There are people who write bestsellers that try to explain to us what a true family is and how to bring up children properly, but I do not read them because I do not know their authors and their families and children. I respect the basic principles that my parents gave me. I would like my children to be hard-working and creative, to have a fighting spirit and to be free in their decisions. I try and help them as a more experienced, wiser partner.
Do you ever feel guilty about spending too little time with your family? Do your daughters miss you?
Frequently! I am only rarely at home, and even then I am sometimes only there in body. When the family is together we are together very intensively. At the moment other members of the family often take my place and act as drivers, cooks, tutors, and so on. But when the family is together we are together very intensively. At the moment other members of the family often take my place and act as drivers, cooks, tutors, and so on. But when the family is together we are together very intensively. At the moment other members of the family often take my place and act as drivers, cooks, tutors, and so on. But when the family is together we are together very intensively.

JESENICE, AN OLD IRONWORKING TOWN LYING AT THE FOOT OF THE KARAVANKE MOUNTAINS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE UPPER SAVA VALLEY, IS STILL THOUGHT OF BY MANY SLOVENES AS A SYMBOL OF A GREY, SOOTY TOWN WHOSE LOOK AND LIFE WERE SACRIFICED TO INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION. ITS SOMewhat MARKY IMAGE WAS CREATED FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE 19TH CENTURY ONWARDS, BUT THE NINETEEN-SEVENTIES WERE UNDOUBTEDLY THE MOST INTENSIVE PERIOD, WHEN THE JESENICE IRONWORKERS EMPLOYED MORE THAN 8000 WORKERS WHO CAME TO JESENICE FROM ALL OVER THE REGION, WHICH REACHED FROM RATECE ON THE ITALIAN BORDER SOUTHWARDS TO PODSHEDO ON THE PRIMORSKA SIDE OF THE JULIAN ALPS AND TO THE EAST AS FAR AS KRANJ, AND TO A considerable extent from all over the former Yugoslavia. IN those days, the human ant-hill, which teemed between the tall factory chimneys, which belched forth so many solid particles that even on the clearest day the town was covered in a reddish fog, traded a large part of its quality of life for the good wages that the factory paid. of the municipalities which recorded the highest income per person, Jesenice was ranked in the top ten wealthiest Slovenian municipalities for at least thirty years.

The decline of the socialist economy in the nineteen-eighties turned the town’s position on its head. The ironworks shrank to a mere 20% of its former size and today employs just over 1000 people. It moved from the centre of town to a new plant, which it had built in the eastern suburb of KOROŠKA BELA during the good years. The town, which grew for a century alongside the factory to which it had become subservient, found itself with an empty and even physically decaying core composed of old industrial plants, thus with a sort of hole in its centre. It looked as if it had suffered a huge boring raid, and its life was in fact sucked out of it quite quickly. Half of the companies which had formed the former ironworks failed and found themselves in one or another type of bankruptcy proceedings. Unemployment in the town rose to unbelievable proportions, with more than a third of the inhabitants out of work. The depression was somewhat eased by the proximity of Austria, where many Jesenice residents worked on the black market in those years, performing the most menial tasks. During the nineties Jesenice fell to last place on the list of developed municipalities, behind even the most impoverished rural municipalities, which had lived off small...