

T 3.3: Locals' narratives: case study town of Velenje, Slovenia

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1 Introduction

1.1 Goals

As we established in a previous research, Velenje is an industrial town. With almost 60% of workplaces in the productive sector (manufacturing, mining, construction), it is one of the more industrialised medium-sized towns in Slovenia (see Bole, Kozina & Tiran 2017). This fact is conveyed to visitors and inhabitants through visual, textual and other material and immaterial symbols in the town. In the report on the industrial town semiotics (see Bole et al. 2018), we identified 'themes' connected with these industrial semiotics: the first one being socialist nostalgia, conveyed to younger generations with popular cultural symbols (in cafes, restaurants, clubs ...), through slogans and the glorification of signs of the socialist past. Even at the immaterial level, there are signs that the ideals originating from the socialist past, such as solidarity, volunteer (shock) work and community building, are put on display not just for the locals, but also tourists and visitors. Industrialism is the second prevailing theme found in the material and immaterial symbols of the town. The foundation of this 'socialist wonder' is rooted in creating an ideal industrial (proletariat) society. The industrial past is heavily represented by monuments, architecture and pop culture. Again, it is tightly connected with the socialist era, when the modern town was founded.

However, there have been signals lately that municipal officials are trying to adopt a new narrative. Although the 'socialist nostalgia' and 'industrialism' come in handy for local politicians when strengthening their position on the political left, it seems that institutions want to convey a more 'modern' narrative. The strategies, official documents and emblems are increasingly orientated towards emphasising an innovative green economy, start-up companies, tourism and a high quality of living environment. Although all of the mentioned aspects have roots in industrial production (for instance, the environmental research stems from the former mining and energy sector), industry is omitted from official documents. In the report, we speculate that this narrative could be adopted under the influence of prevailing post-industrial strategies, which try to re-imagine towns or cities as 'creative', 'innovative', 'smart' or by similar labelling corresponding to an antagonistic view against industrial development.

However, city re-imaging strategies can often provoke conflicts between traditional values and norms on the one hand and modern development aspirations on the other hand (Van Winden 2010, Gribat 2013). The local perspectives of an industrial city may vary substantially from the official version of its identity presented by policy-makers. They come from personal experiences of the local people, their memories and emotions related to specific places. These perspectives are often neglected and underresearched (Glorius & Manz 2018). In this research, we focus on the role of the individual, subjective perspectives of the different temporal layers of the town's (post)industrial development. We speculate that those personal narratives of the past, present and future industrial development contain 'hidden' or alternative narratives, which can be in a binary opposition to the dominant narrative that tries to rebrand the town in a more post-industrial manner. The hidden narratives are also important because they show the themes and events that attach the local population to the environment they live in and ultimately lead to a distinct industrial identity or industrial culture (Harfst et al. 2018).

Our aim is to present empirical evidence from a research project, in which we try to reveal the different narratives of industrial town's development and especially those linkages between different periods of industrialism, town development and local identity processes. We wish to know if the collective knowledge, memories, emotions and reflections of the inhabitants construct 'hidden' narratives that are in opposition to official or dominant ones, which are stressed in the town's

strategies and promotional campaigns. In a way, we will show what happens to the industrial collective identity in a post-industrial world and perhaps assign certain sociocultural specificities of the town that could support further developmental or policy-making processes.

To sum up, the first goal is to construct a dominant locals' narrative of (post)industrial development. The second goal is to explore any implicit or hidden narratives that offer alternative (positive and negative) views on the development of the town. We explored both goals by two methods: a) short street interviews, meant as a survey to measure the collective heartbeat of the town and b) longer planned semi-structured interviews of selected interviewees, which enabled a more detailed investigation, especially of hidden narratives.

1.2 Historical context: development of the town of Velenje

Velenje has about 30,000 inhabitants and is considered a 'new' town. It was built mainly in the 1950s when the amounts of lignite mining increased and Velenje experienced a rapid growth spurt. It was called Titovo Velenje. Only a small rural mining village existed in its location before that with only about 1,000 residents. The developing coal mining and industry opened many employment opportunities and the number of inhabitants grew drastically. The rate of inhabitant growth exceeded the average growth in other Slovenian towns. The number of inhabitants almost tripled from 1961 to 1991. The main reason for this expansion was immigration, which was most intense during the 1970s; almost 40% of all apartment buildings in the town were built during this time. Today, only 4 out of 10 people have lived in Velenje all their lives. Of these, a third emigrated from countries of the former Yugoslavia and half moved here from other places in Slovenia. The town grew under a common modern urban plan, which set the foundation for a modernist garden city with bright and sunny apartments among greenery (a so-called "utopian socialist town").

Immediately following 1991, Velenje experienced a decline in heavy industry and coal. The once heavy immigration of people, including those from other republics of the former Yugoslavia, ceased. However, since the immigrants were young at the time, the natural increase remains high. Despite the deindustrialization, Velenje's economy still rests on two larger industrial systems: the Velenje Coal Mine group and the Gorenje business system¹, employing almost half of the active citizens in the town. Environmental problems became prominent, and environmental (and partly economic) rehabilitation began: lakes that had formed in the area of the coal mining have become bodies of water suitable for swimming and an important recreation area for the citizens and even tourists in recent years. Industrial technologies in factories have also been modernised and Velenje has essentially become a transformed socialist SMIT: industrialised in the socialist era, but with a relatively successful industrial transformation with medium-tech machinery. Velenje's industrial heritage and a successful export-oriented economy with mining, manufacturing and energy sectors also reflect its political power, with a prevalence for left-leaning parties and a strong industrial and working class culture.

2 Methods

The main method for interpreting the multiple views on (post)industrial development (past, present and future) in the town of Velenje is a narrative inquiry or narrative analysis. The narrative inquiry

¹ Gorenje Group is one of the leading European manufacturers of household appliances bringing together some 11,000 employees of 42 different nationalities and generating 95% of its revenues in the global market.

uses field texts, such as stories, autobiographies, journals, field notes, letters, conversations, interviews, family stories, photos (and other artefacts) and life experience as the units of analysis to research and understand the way people create meaning in their lives as narratives (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, Connelly & Clandinin 2006). For researchers of social life, narratives not only help to explore issues such as personal identity, life-course development and the cultural and historical worlds of narrators, they also help explore the specific phenomena, such as structural socioeconomic changes and how are they 'lived' or experienced by social actors (Ospina & Dodge 2005).

Our assumption is that narratives contain meaningful information about different views of (post)industrial development. Narratives obtained through interviews and their subsequent analysis are a tool to understand the perceptions and interpretations of Velenje's (post)industrial development. Our methodological approach is closest to the deductive narrative analysis (Mills, Durepos & Wiebe 2010: 591) where we want to get retrospective (past-looking) and prospective (future-looking) sense-making of the case study town. We collected narratives by two types of interviews: short street interviews and planned semi-structured interviews. In both cases, we conducted a thematic analysis, since we focused more on the specific societal and local themes of the industrial and post-industrial development.

The analysis of both (short and planned) types of interviews provides us with the themes, events, viewpoints from which we could construct two 'strands' of narratives: the dominant narrative, which is openly debated within the society, and alternative or 'hidden' ones, which are sometimes in opposition to the dominant views or complementary to it and express the marginalized voices or plots. The hidden narratives are especially important, because they can serve in the future to construct grass-root developmental strategies, tailored to the specifics of an industrial town such as Velenje.

2.1 Short street interviews – interpreting dominant narratives of (post)industrial development

The first type were on-the-spot interviews with the public (local people on the streets of Velenje), where we asked questions linked to the general perception of everyday life in the town. We focused the questions on industrialism and the concepts of (post)industrial development that we had identified in a previous research (study of the industrial semiotics of the town). The street interviews were short, on average ranging up to 20 minutes, and were used mainly to collect the people's general conceptions of the dominant town narrative and as a starting point to draft themes for longer in-depth interviews. As a conversation starting-point, we asked about three 'dominant' town symbols:

- socialism (as it relates to the town's past and its semiotics are palpable across the townscape),
- industrialism (we suggested certain topics such as pollution, employment, development, memories relating primarily to the present situation),
- future development strategies (the official strategy of the town is very post-industrial, so we asked about their stance towards the 'dominant' issues of the policymakers).

Those elements (or symbols) were used to observe the people's experiences and emotions regarding the dominant narrative of the town or, in other words, to establish the people's opinions regarding its past, present and future development. Since we conducted the interviews on-the-spot and we wanted to gain trust among the participants, we only wrote memos but did not record or transcribe the interviews. Each interviewer had to mark the reoccurring themes, topics/issues that came up in

the conversation. Due to the large number of interviews, we also asked the interviewers to try and assess the emotions of the interviewees when debating the three themes: either as having a positive, negative or a neutral attitude towards the three dominant themes. We used these assessments to try and quantify the qualitative data collected by this method.

Altogether, we conducted 33 short interviews in March and April 2018. The interviewees were randomly selected on the streets and public spaces in Velenje. We interviewed 16 workers, 2 unemployed people and 15 retirees between 27 to 82 years of age and encompassing 14 males and 19 females.

2.2 Planned semi-structured interviews – interpreting hidden narratives of (post)industrial development

The second type of interviews were semi-structured, designed for specific professionals and directed towards finding the sub-narratives of (post)industrial development or at least more diverse interpretations of it. Similarly to the short interviews, we asked thematic questions (socialism, industrialism, future development strategies) and tried to identify the hidden narratives describing undesirable developments in the past, any problematic present situations as well as attractive future scenarios, which do not fit in with the dominant narratives. To reach the all-important facets of social life in the community, we interviewed the local representatives of four specific sectors that largely relate to the quadruple helix model:

- public authority (2);
- business representatives (11);
- civil society (3);
- science and culture professionals (3).

Our data was saturated with no new themes emerging after conducting 19 interviews, which ranged from 20 to 90 minutes. We used a semi-structured approach with open-ended questions. The interviews were transcribed and coded with computer-assisted ATLAS.ti software. We selected the codes on a mixed deductive-inductive basis. Due to our knowledge of the dominant narrative (from the previous analysis on the town's industrial semiotics and short street interviews), we structured the thematic analysis alongside three main themes (socialism, industrialism, future development strategies) that were further divided into codes to reveal possible alternative (or hidden) views on the town development.

Table 1: Open-ended questions for the interviews.

A	General ideas and interpretations of the case study town
	1. How would you describe your town? 2. What kind of reputation does your town have? 3. Does your town have any kinds of peculiarities? What kind?
B	Interpretations of the town's strategies, projects, and future plans
	1. What kind of strategies/projects does your town have? What are the most important ones? 2. What kind of plans does your town have? 3. How do you see the town's future?
C	Strengths, problems, possibilities, and risks of the case study town
	1. Which challenges are the most important ones to be addressed? How should that happen? 2. Which are the opportunities? 3. Which factors might endanger the preferred development?
D	Interpretations of the town's industrial development (previous and current)
	1. How would you describe the town's previous industrial development? 2. How would you describe the town's current industrial development?

E	Collective heartbeat
	1. What are the most important events in the town's history? 2. What kind of issues and/or events have affected the town's development the most? In what way? 3. Are there people or groups in your town who do not have the possibility to influence the town's development? Or are there people or groups whose voices are not heard?

Table 2: Final list of the descriptive codes used in the interview process.

Socialism	Industrialism	Future development strategies
social engagement of the youth	work as a value	"young" town
worker's and social rights	energy	lakes
social equality	Gorenje	quality of life / residence
town construction	economic diversification	culture and sport
Yugo-nostalgia	economic specialization	small town
local identity	high-tech / innovation	environmental restoration
political culture	industrial heritage	traffic accessibility
sunken villages	education, knowledge and creativity	tourism
volunteering	cosmopolitanism	urban way of life
land expropriation	cultural and creative activities	traffic management
solidarity and connectedness of people	small and medium-sized companies	
memorials	town of opportunity	
shock work	multi-culturalism	
	pollution	
	important people	
	coal mining / TEŠ	
	industry restructuring	
	new company development	

3 Results

In the results section, we present the dominant narrative of (post)industrial development in Velenje and its variations (alternative or hidden themes). We try to interpret the meaningful events in a sequential order (past, present, future).

3.1 Assessment of the collective heartbeat

We noted that the passers-by on the street expressed quite varying, albeit mostly positive attitudes when speaking about the three dominant themes (Table 3). However, it seems that collectively, they value socialism and industrialism a bit higher than future development strategies. Moreover, older interviewees (>40) have a better attitude towards the socialist past, whereas younger participants (<40) have more positive attitudes towards industrialism and future development strategies. Socialist nostalgia is obviously and expectedly more significant for older generations who have lived and experienced socialism in a more intensive way, whereas concerns for future (post)industrial development more often concern younger people.

Table 3: The structure of the interviewees and their attitude to the three dominant themes.

Status	Age	Sex	Attitude of interviewee towards 'socialism'	Attitude of interviewee towards 'industrialism'	Attitude of interviewee towards 'future development strategies'
unemployed	27	f	0	1	1
worker	27	f	0	1	1
worker	31	m	1	1	1
worker	31	m	0	0	1
worker	33	f	1	1	1
worker	34	m	1	1	1
worker	35	f	1	0	-1
worker	37	m	-1	1	1

worker	40	f	1	0	-1
worker	43	m	1	1	0
worker	46	f	1	1	0
worker	48	m	1	1	0
worker	48	f	1	-1	-1
worker	50	f	0	-1	1
worker	53	f	1	-1	-1
unemployed	53	f	0	1	0
retiree	54	m	1	1	1
retiree	55	m	0	1	0
retiree	58	m	1	0	1
worker	58	f	0	1	1
retiree	60	f	0	1	1
retiree	61	m	1	-1	-1
retiree	62	f	0	1	1
retiree	62	f	1	1	1
worker	63	m	1	1	0
retiree	64	f	1	1	1
retiree	70	f	1	1	1
retiree	72	f	0	-1	1
retiree	74	f	1	1	1
retiree	74	m	0	1	-1
retiree	75	m	0	1	1
retiree	80	m	1	-1	0
retiree	82	f	1	1	0
Total (sum):			19	17	13
Legend: 1 positive attitude, 0 neutral attitude, -1: negative attitude					

The respondents expressed a mostly positive attitude towards **socialism**. A nostalgia for the ‘good old days’ could be felt among many of the interviewees. Positive connotations referred to solidarity, shock work, equality, social rights, access to jobs and housing and culture and education. Local people see socialism as inseparably connected with the creation and development of the town. The negative attitudes can be associated with dictatorship and a restriction of freedom of speech. However, most of the respondents were very protective when the word turned to ruining or eliminating the monuments, sculptures and other visible signs of socialism. They see all the socialist symbols as an expression of their history and tradition that cannot be denied but should be a source of pride. The visible expressions of socialism are not problematic, as long as they are not abused as a means of opening up ideological issues and aggravating political polarization. Some interviewees also expressed the opinion that socialism in any form is an obsolete concept and therefore no longer relevant. Many of them see the socialist idea, politics and way of work as unsuitable for the present time.

Similarly, as in the case of socialism, **industrialism** was generally positively evaluated by the passers-by. They were completely aware that there would be no Velenje in the current extent and shape without big industrial companies. Many of the respondents pointed to the importance of the industry not only for the development of the town, but also for the country as a whole. In their opinion, the industrial heritage is an important part of the history, design and identity of the town and as such, it should be at least partially preserved. The negative aspects can be associated with environmental concerns and abandoned industrial buildings. Some interviewees also mentioned the negative implications of the transition from public to private ownership, which has strengthened the economic, but lessened the social role of industrial companies. Although industry has left behind some significant environmental burdens, it has also brought new opportunities for the development of tourism by utilizing the mining lakes and revitalizing old industrial buildings.

When it comes to **future development strategies**, the respondents admitted a lack of exact knowledge and information, which was also reflected in a sort of ‘passivity’ to these questions. After

being briefly acquainted with the main urban development priorities (quality of living environment, tourism, SMEs, services, etc.), they mostly agreed with municipal plans to develop tourism (especially around mining likes, which lack the proper infrastructure) as one of the substitutes for the forthcoming industrial/mining decline. Simultaneously, they do not see tourism as a panacea for all the economic challenges. In their opinion, industry should be preserved and transformed to be able to address the current needs. Dependence on big companies should be tackled by developing SMEs and education. Too harsh break with the past industrial development is not deemed welcome. Many respondents also mentioned the need to develop social programs and housing schemes for young people.

Among other **hidden narratives** that became important ingredients for the planned semi-structured interviews, the passers-by most often mentioned ethnic conflicts, especially with the newly emerged and growing Albanian minority. One respondent said: “... they [Albanians] are not accustomed to cleaning up after themselves and they leave rubbish behind after their picnics in parks ... and they are squeezed in overcrowded dwellings ...” It seems that the embedded multicultural and tolerant spirit faces some serious challenges in future urban development. The interviewees also mentioned injustices caused by land expropriation when the city expanded. These processes are still relevant today with the subsidence of the lake area.

3.2 Analysis of locals’ narratives

A deeper analysis of the locals’ narratives was performed alongside three distinctive periods of (post)industrial development of Velenje (Figure 1).

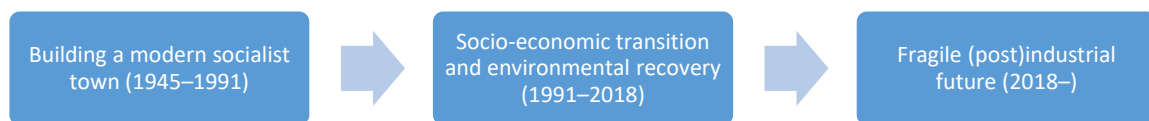


Figure 1: Three periods of (post)industrial development in Velenje.

3.2.1 Building a modern socialist town (1945–1991)

View of the dominant narrative:

On one hand, Velenje is aware of the recency of its origins, but is also proud of the rich history and **values of socialism** on which the city was founded. These are values of shock work, comradeship, equality, multi-culturalism, mutual respect and solidarity, which the interviewees believe have an ideological background in work being a fundamental value and cultural element of the past period. They think that the unifying note of work and mutual help and “having each other’s back” was transferred from the mines to the surface and seeped in all the other pores of socioeconomic life. According to a municipality representative, these socialist-era values are consciously nurtured and a great source of pride:

“Throughout our short history, people in this environment have never been left in need of help or on their own. People have never been regarded in any other way than deserving a certain quality of life. Of course, these values have continued to be nurtured and developed here. And I think we are still living according to these values today. Even though, these days it gets difficult to control everything sometimes. But we are still those who decide at the level of the local community on how and in what direction our town should be developed so that these values are cherished, respected and, of course, followed. Because without that, Velenje would no longer be the same as it was in the past. It was called a socialist wonder for a reason. We are not ashamed of this, we are proud of it.” (public authority, D17)

The socialist values are built into the structures of the town and its inhabitants and are manifested in **social practices** in many different ways. Even though socialism is no longer formally practiced in Slovenia, it seems Velenje continues to adopt the system. It appears the socialist values are idealized and manifested through **socialist Yugo-nostalgia**.

"We still regard it as being here, Tito's Time, as we call it, meaning we still live in this socialism." (business representative, D6)

The town's administration gets a lot of credit in this by providing various **free** social services that have a positive effect on the quality of life, all in the spirit of the former times. One such example is supporting the well-established concept of societies and associations by providing the free use of municipal spaces.

"It's tradition in Velenje to have many services that are free of charge. People have somehow started taking this for granted. So we have gone along with this policy, continue it to this day and want to keep it up." (public authority, D17)

Representatives of other sectors also point to the well-organized actions of the municipality. An interviewee in the field of science and culture (D12) noted that Velenje has a reputation for good internal collaboration. All the social sectors are very interconnected, purposefully managed and each has their own vision and ambitious plans they successfully achieve. Many fields also thrive through the idea of networking and community building. The city council strives to unanimously pass legislation. Even interviewees from the economic field testify that the town is open to various suggestions from the inhabitants and perceive its activities as being very participative and inclusive in relation to various social groups and interests. This was very accurately illustrated by the interviewee from the field of science and culture:

"It is perfectly normal in Velenje to find a miner, doctor, professor and a junkie sitting at the same table." (science and culture professional, D12)

Velenje is widely recognized for its **multi-culturalism**, wherein such and "amalgam" or melting pot is difficult to find elsewhere in Slovenia. According to interviewees in the field of the civil society, immigrants from the southern republics of the former Yugoslavia constitute the core of society in Velenje and are deserving for Velenje's current state. An interviewee from science and culture (D12) quipped that people from the neighbouring higher-elevation Carinthia (Koroška) mischievously say that "there is no snow in Velenje, because there is too much of the 'south' there." The city intently encourages the cohabitation of different cultures and nationalities (for example, Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian, Roma) and most of the inhabitants accept it.

"... even in my own apartment complex and my apartment building, I see there are people of different religions, cultures and we get along perfectly well. And this is the precise formula for the functioning of the entire social sphere here in Velenje. And we are extremely proud for never having had problems with this throughout our history." (public authority, D17)

"We are used to being a multicultural town. It is a part of us. It's no big deal to go to an event hosted by the Bosnian or Roma community. It has always been a part of us, we grew up with it. Even our mothers, fathers. So it continues to be a part of us and it is nothing special. This is probably why you, outsiders, perceive it completely differently. We are used to this cohabitation. And to the development of this culture, be it this kind or any other." (civil society, D8)

According to the science and culture professional, the mining immigrants who moved here "from all corners of the world" after World War II were connected mostly by the work. There was no room for intolerance in the mine shaft, where everyone was equal. Even in the late 1990s, when a war was

raging in the Balkans due to ethnic frictions, there were no major incidents in Velenje. However, certain indications of intolerance and social polarization based on racial and ethnic basis are beginning to take shape with the recent migrant crisis in the EU and the predicted coal mine downsizing. After the arrival of the immigrants and establishment of the asylum centre in 2017, a section of the civil society strongly opposed it and used all available legal means to try and stop it, with no success in the end. In June 2018, posters with Nazi symbols started to appear in the city centre.

The **youth** is an important protagonist in preserving socialist values; they are very socially engaged in Velenje.

“The youth sector is extremely prevalent, meaning the youth is very engaged. There are tons of charity activities organized by young people. It is also visible in the events, for example the Kunigunda Festival of Youth Culture. There is also the Youth Council, which operates well. In short, the younger generation is very engaged.” (civil society, D9)

Young people are especially active in the area of volunteering as the heritage of shock work. For example, a volunteer work event was organized on the 50th anniversary of the construction of the city centre to renovate the city outdoor cinema; organizers at the Youth Centre are considering resurrecting shock work brigades for the upcoming 60th anniversary. Younger interviewees coming from start-up companies stress that Velenje is one of the few towns in Slovenia that has passed a Youth Policy Strategy. The town supports them through the SAŠA Incubator and other spaces such as the Youth Centre, which manages the hotel, daily centre and house for bands. In this way, the town makes sure young people can participate in the economic, social and cultural life in different ways.

During the era of socialism, Velenje not only nurtured social development, but also managed to establish an **effective and innovative economy**. The driving force of development were mostly the coal mine and Gorenje, which continue to assume the role to this day. A while ago, another important “player” was the Vegrad construction company, which did not manage to withstand the recent global economic crisis. The coal mine was the testing grounds for trying the most recent techniques of lignite excavation in Europe. It had close ties with foreign companies and constantly invested in improvements and development. The science and culture representative (D13) labelled the coal mine, which had been completely insignificant before World War II, as a success story. In addition, the coal mine used to promote cultural and social activities by constructing sporting and recreation objects. The story of Gorenje is somewhat different in this. As opposed to the mine, this company’s influence on the social life in Velenje is barely felt, because its functioning is infused with cosmopolitanism. It always had one foot in Yugoslavia and the other in the West. It was very ambitious, used modern approaches and experimented with innovations.

Hidden/alternative interpretations:

Despite the prevailing positive attitude to the socialist past and many positive manifestations in the present, the interviews also revealed some hidden/alternative aspects that shine a different light on socialism. Two of the hidden or under-represented narratives in Velenje’s public discourse relate to its formation and town construction. The first has to do with the shock work and the collective work actions and the other relates to the injustices that happened due to the loss of land due to the ground sinking and/or the town expansion. The third narrative has to do with the (potential) political ideologization.

The science and culture representative (D13) believes that **shock work** undoubtedly served the role of a social connector that people were proud and glad to do. However, we must be aware that,

according to many testimonies, this kind of work was a sort of “volunteering must”, as it helped people qualify for workers’ and social benefits (for example, qualifying for an apartment).

“Who wants to do another two hours after of work after coming home from the job?” (science and culture professional, D13)

The interviewee also stresses that Velenje was “built” mostly by miners by digging for coal and not just by Nestl Žgank (one of the founders of the post-war town, coal mine director and later mayor, while also a prominent member of the communist party) and other political big-wigs who often brag about this. They state that the celebrations, like the one when the city centre was opened in 1959, have been idealized today. The interviews with people who attended them revealed that they remember them very briefly and have therefore not been particularly imprinted into the collective memory.

The processes of **land expropriation after the ground started sinking due to mining activities and/or town expansion** were jointly headed by the coal mine and the municipality. One municipality interviewee stated:

“This simply meant the development of the city and there had to be some kind of consensus.” (public authority, D4)

However, this development had its negative sides and the interviewee was aware of this:

“I believe that the emotional scars are still present, because people were relocated for the coal mine and the projected sinking, they were assigned new locations to build new houses.” (public authority, D4)

The problem was that the provided compensation could not account for the emotional attachment to their familiar homestead. As the interviewee stated:

“I know some funds were offered as compensation to rebuild in a different location, but they could not reach a satisfactory agreement, simply because no location could replace their current location.” (public authority, D4)

The experience from the past could be used in modern procedure of urban planning.

According to the representative of science and culture (D13), one of the greater mistakes of the town’s authorities is that history has always been placed in the service of politics and ideology. The political elite was said to be truly and honestly building socialism and was very proud of it. However, there was also a lot of succumbing to ideological schemes and political blindness. The interviewee believed that one of the greatest obstacles that can threaten the future development model is the intertwining of politics with ideology or **political ideologization** stemming from the socialist period. The political elite in Velenje is also said to be fearful of intelligentsia, especially those who are critical about the authority’s activities, and is said to surround itself with obedient people. Interviewees from the economic area are mostly politically neutral, but confess that the right political affiliation (the Social Democrats party, the legal successor of the League of Communists of Slovenia, which has successively won the majority in the city council since 1993) can expedite certain interests more efficiently.

3.2.2 Socio-economic transition and environmental recovery (1991–2018)

View of the dominant narrative:

The period after Slovenia’s independence was marked by two milestones that affected the changed developmental model of the city. The first relates to the collapse of communism and introduction of neoliberalism, which affected the gradual shift in values. There is the danger that the principles of

tolerance, multiculturalism, solidarity and social equality on which the town was founded and developed are fading due to the increasing stressing of individualism, competitiveness, decentralized authority, as well as a shrinking public administration and deregulation, liberalization and privatization of the economy. The other milestone, stemming from the late 1980s, is represented by the ecological revolts as the consequence of the environmental degradation. The latter caused a shift in mentality and the realization that the Velenje's environment has limited capabilities and affects the quality of life. The milestone also has to do with looking for alternative economic opportunities with the increasingly rapid decline of coal mining.

The increasingly stronger **flow of a capitalist mentality** after the collapse of socialism was confirmed by a representative of the city authorities:

"It's kind of a habit that some values try to dry up over time. ... It's logical: the more time goes by, the harder it is to nurture these values. Velenje is no exception here. So, the challenge is ever increasing in how to preserve the values connected to the sense of social justice ..." (public authority, D17)

Representatives of civil society were sure people in Velenje used to be more connected and prone to solidarity. Despite this, they believe there is still a lot of connectedness and collaboration, which they believe is the consequence of past socialism. They elaborate, saying the "common man" was taken care of in socialist times by receiving large, spacious and bright apartments, holidays and jobs.

"I did not live in socialism long, so I do not have much to say. But from what I hear, every family had the chance to go to the seaside, which is no longer the case today, as well as many benefits, which I regard as positive. This is gone today. They didn't live so poorly, I believe." (civil society, D1)

Apartments from the socialist era greatly exceed the standards of miners' apartments from before and soon after World War II in size, brightness and equipment. The interviewee from the science and culture (D13) mentions an anecdote of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and his wife visiting Velenje in 1963. When they were shown one of the newly constructed miners' apartments, they were certain it was meant for a well-off mining engineer.

A quality living environment was already an important developmental paradigm in socialism; the focus was placed mostly on residential construction, as well as health facilities, education and recreation. This was the authorities' way of improving the miners' living conditions, who would spend a lot of time underground. After heavy pollution and mass public demonstrations in the late 1980s, these kinds of efforts were increased until they reached a very high level, which is a special source of pride in the town.

"I doubt there is another city in the world today that would have coal excavating in the immediate vicinity, as well as produce electrical energy, and manage to live in as clean and high-quality environment as we do here." (public authority, D17)

This is also said to be noticed by the visitors.

"And when people come to Velenje, visitors from the outside, they see it and are shocked that it is an industrial town. They see all the greenery in Velenje. Which, as we know, has an architectural role as a town in a park." (public authority, D4)

In terms of its title as a green town, Velenje no longer aims to attract environmentally questionable companies and the majority of the most important municipal projects are directed on the environment and **achieving a higher quality of life**. In this way, the main municipal projects are directed towards improving the air quality, energy restoration of buildings, remote heating, providing free public transport, renovating the old town centre, communal infrastructure, managing the lakes

and their surrounding areas and establishing cycling infrastructure. Improving the quality of living environment not only has a positive impact on the well-being of the inhabitants, but also on the development of tourism, which can help to diversify economic activities. Many interviewees are very much in favour of tourism development with a beach and lake-side activities and a rich cultural life.

Hidden/alternative interpretations:

According to interviewee testimonies, the loss of fundamental socialist values in the transitional period has been most obvious in the fracturing of once strong ties between 1) indigenous inhabitants and newcomers, 2) the older and younger sections of the population and 3) between foreign/non-local owners or managers of companies and the local community.

According to some interviewees, the **tensions between the indigenous inhabitants and newcomers** largely stem from the formers' perception that the newcomers are privy to a disproportionate share of social benefits.

"... then it's easy for someone who works, I don't know, eight hours a day or even more, to survive to come in conflict with a person coming here, with no job, no nothing and being eligible for some benefits." (public authority, D17)

Most interviewees believe the problem relates mostly to the modern **integration of an increasing number of Albanian-speaking immigrants**, who also speak a "different" language.

"All in all, I don't really see a problem in Velenje, if someone is walking down the street, perhaps speaking Bosnian, Croatian, any language we are familiar with. But it is probably more obtrusive if people are walking around, speaking a language that is unknown to us. In that case, you cannot even communicate with these people, create a connection, collaborate, or help them or seek help from them. This is where all these big social problems are lurking." (public authority, D17)

According to the representative of science and culture (D14), the newly immigrated Albanians seem inaccessible, unorganized, operate as closed groups, do not speak Slovenian and are a burden to their fellow pupils and teachers. The blame for this seemingly lies with the state that does not have any implemented integration policy and puts the responsibility on the shoulders of the municipalities and non-governmental organizations. Despite numerous negative and worried views on this topic, the representative of the civil society presented a more encouraging view by presenting a successful project that integrated Albanian women about which the local inhabitants foster quite a few stereotypes:

"We started with creative workshops. They did not just associate in the creative workshops, but we managed to connect the local inhabitants. I think the most prejudice can be found with the older population. They express prejudice like: "Why have they come here?", that "that they can't do anything." And so we have merged two strong areas, our grandmothers' knowledge, that of the older local inhabitants, mostly women, and the Albanian-speaking people. So they were actually learning Slovenian on a subconscious level, while they were sharing their knowledge, because all the power is in their hands. Their power is in their hands, in their creation. And it is also about breaking down these stereotypes ... we presented ourselves at the intergenerational festival by weaving the town's carpet, where we showed all of Velenje that we have things in common. We even have similar holidays, we just call them something different. And that is the thing ... speaking the language is the most important, of course, so that we can understand each other, but they must be allowed to be included. Not even allowed, just not to boycott certain activities, because you know some of the attendees will be speaking a different language. But you have to try and understand their distress, why have they come, what they want." (civil society, D8)

Certain social tensions have recently also been arising **between the older and the younger population**, which threatens the traditionally strong intergenerational dialogue. According to city

officials, older people who have helped build the town and also gotten workers' and social rights with shock work are very sensitive if these won rights are tried to be in any way trampled or they believe the structure or contents in the town are handled inappropriately. Older people believe the younger generations often have not had the right attitude about it, especially those who are not that well educated about the founding and history of the town.

"Those people who used to work in the coal mine, the old miners and those generations that helped build Velenje. Then there are these new generations. The old generations really had a lot of benefits, but I think today's generations still have pretty good conditions, especially miners with their salaries and everything. But this sense of belonging, the sense towards heritage is slowly disappearing to an extent. It is not as emphasized." (public authority, D4)

The final recognized social tension relates to **foreign/non-local owners or managers of larger industrial companies and the local community**. This conflict did not exist in the past, as the connection between the economy and the local community was once very strong. Until recently, the helm of industrial giants was always held by locals who would manage companies while also caring for the quality of life in the town. With the arrival of new owners or managers from other parts of Slovenia or even abroad, the role and importance of the companies' social responsibility is diminished, especially when it comes to environment restoration and education development. In terms of environment restoration, municipal officials miss companies' compensation for the environmental degradation, which could be used to preserve and increase the inhabitants' quality of life. This is them perceiving a "stepmotherly attitude of the state to our community." The same goes for the development of educational programs.

"If we are being completely honest, we have missed social responsibilities and social engagement of the economy in the educational spheres. It seems we have taken a step back here. For example, we have not had scholarships, no basic things that were a given in the past and which could entice pupils and students to go through the educational process and give them the option to gain direct experience in the economy. There is much less of that than there used to be." (public authority, D17)

3.2.3 Fragile (post)industrial future (2018–)

View of the dominant narrative:

The town is aware that after the coal mine has been closed in about 50 years, the conditions will be significantly different. There have also been developmental changes in the operations of Gorenje, which was bought by the Chinese company Hisense in 2018. The interviewees stress that Velenje must prepare for **long-term restructuring, industry modernization (industry 4.0) and the arrival of other companies** that will in time become the main employer in the Šalek Valley.

"But we know that if anything happens with Gorenje where things aren't exactly rosy right now (note: the interview was conducted before the Chinese company Hisense acquisition) and with the coal mine, Velenje will become a ticking social bomb." (public authority, D17)

The municipality is trying different ways of setting up developmental models to diversify the economic foundations. This is being done primarily by establishing the appropriate conditions to strengthen the economy, especially by encouraging small and medium-sized companies and attracting foreign investments. The SAŠA Incubator plays a major role in establishing the right conditions for further economic development, as they have been supporting the activities of numerous small and medium-sized companies.

“Start-ups are “in”, a lot of start-ups got started here. There is an enormous amount of education and knowledge transfer happening here. So I must say there are quite a few innovative people heading these things. All of this is supported by the municipality, which I must say, is great.” (business representative, D10)

“Just last year, our incubator created twenty-three new jobs, which is a huge number, considering we have been in business only two years.” (business representative, D3)

Interviewees from the economy in general believe that the municipal administration is in favour of creating new jobs in these new companies, which would decrease the dependence on the existing old companies, such as the coal mine and Gorenje. Despite this, most of the interviewees think all of this is about 10–15 years too late.

“Right now, as I said, things are moving in the right direction with these new initiatives, but with a few years’ delay. These activities should have “started up” earlier, so that more results would already be visible now.” (business representative, D5)

Among the practical developmental limitations of economy restructuring, the entrepreneurs most often mentioned the lack of space for economic activities and lots for building new industrial facilities. Some small developing companies are said to have moved from Velenje elsewhere due to this.

In terms of the contents, the interviewees’ answers give the impression that Velenje’s future is somewhere in **green energy and industry**, which indicates a desire to move away from the developmental model that led to this “environmental bomb” in the late 1980s. This also corresponds with the founding of the town itself, which has been designated “a town in a park”, “garden city” and “green town”.

“... to try and use innovative approaches to look for solutions that could transform this energy industry into green energy. Because we do have all this knowledge on acquiring and producing electric energy. We have educational systems in Velenje that are compatible with this kind of economic activity and it would be a great shame to say we won’t be pursuing the energy game anymore after the coal mine is gone. I think that we shouldn’t do that in the first place, because it is extremely difficult to find a location for energy production in Slovenia. ... We want to remain in energy in the future. Even after the mine has been closed.” (public authority, D17)

In connection to that, Velenje is aware of the meaning of preserving and developing the engineering knowledge that has accumulated in the town over the decades. Representatives in science and culture believe this knowledge should be developed in close collaboration with the educational institutions. This would be a good way to refocus from the classical processing industry with a small added value to high technology.

Among the new opportunities of future economic development, the only branch expressly mentioned by the interviewees was **tourism**, of which they are largely in favour.

“The greatest potential over which we ourselves have direct influence is undoubtedly the development of tourism. I am sure demand will grow quickly here and that the field will offer more and more employment opportunities over the years. And I think we will be encountering problems with finding the right staff in Velenje sooner than later.” (public authority, D17)

In addition to the right **staff**, the future development of tourism will require **constructing the right tourist infrastructure**.

“So, we have lakes, as well as many other tourist products that have been developed lately. And so we are noticing more and more tourists in Velenje every year. Velenje Beach alone gets well over a hundred thousand visitors per year. Pippi Longstocking, the largest kids’ festival, gets over a hundred thousand

visitors in a week each year. All of these are tourism potentials that we naturally want to hone and exploit in the future. But you can't expect overnight success if you do not have the proper infrastructure." (public authority, D17)

An environmentally sustainable economic development and constructing the right infrastructure are in accordance with the town's main wish to create a more **high-quality living environment**. Aside from the municipal officials, the biggest proponents here were economists, who stress that Velenje is not a typical mining town and that the town may have the wrong reputation. They stress that Velenje is probably the best maintained mining town in Europe; it is not dirty, it is clean; it is not dark, but bright. They believe the town is distinguished by a good quality and low service prices. They also stress the safety, proximity to nature, good accessibility inside the town and options for free exercise, as well as the free public transportation. The interviewees from small, especially start-up companies stress that the good quality of the living environment is what makes them want to live in Velenje on a permanent basis and not move elsewhere, especially not abroad. One of them said:

"Because we said we had no intention of going to work in Germany or live up there, we want to stay at home. We want to be in Velenje. So we said, let's work from here for Germany." (business representative, D6)

Another interviewee emphasized the advantages of Velenje being built as a garden city:

"The town was built seventy years ago according to the "garden city" concept. This has proven very beneficial to this day. Cities trying to develop today try and go in that direction, whereas we already have it. So this special feature is a great advantage." (business representative, D16)

Here, two representatives of civil society, landscape architects, warn that the municipality has endangered the quality of the living environment in Velenje with thoughtless urban planning decisions.

"It is my belief that the land is municipal, public, all of ours actually, so people should be asked for their opinions when it comes to large projects like shopping malls. ... I really think the people should have a say in this. The profession should have a lot of say, but when it comes to such large projects where you encompass a large area in the town with an activity, the public should be included. I know this can be hard at times, but I think that if you want to get their opinion, you will get it. But if you don't, you'll organize a workshop no one will know about." (civil society, D1)

Hidden/alternative interpretations:

Despite the high awareness of the limited options regarding the existing industry and the increasingly pressing need for restructuring the economy, there is a certain noticeable **lack of a more specific developmental vision** in the town. This is visibly noticeable by the absence of a specific town slogan.

"I mean, we have a ton of slogans for people to identify with. But I couldn't tell you which is the main one." (public authority, D4)

The town authorities are aware that the transformation process for establishing the town's identity in the 21st century is far from complete.

"Because it is at a crossroads, experiencing a transformation. ... perhaps Velenje is facing these issues more directly now, finding its path on the economic sphere, about what to transform. We are feeling it out, searching for ourselves." [...] "If Velenje was relatively unknown a few years ago, Titovo Velenje was very important in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. In the meantime, many would say, we kind of disappeared from Slovenia's map. Velenje, where is that? What is that? It seems we are slowly positioning ourselves again. We don't really have a crystal clear vision yet. That "branding" is probably what's missing. About what we want to be known for. But we are positioning ourselves. And considering the fact that we are Slovenia's youngest

town, I think there is still time to transform from an industrial character and find a clear vision. We still have things to look forward to.” (public authority, D4)

Interviewees from small companies think that the municipality isn’t active enough in attracting international companies from branches other than Gorenje. A concrete example was the chemical industry:

“It was a mistake that the chemical industry project wasn’t completed, because it could be bringing in a lot of new jobs now. It could have been transported from the chemical coal processing into some more advanced technologies. So, a few other fields have been forgotten that could have been developed at that time.” (business representative, D5)

The interviewees believe one of the limiting developmental factors in Velenje is the **“miners” mentality**, which is on one hand characterized by elements of clientelism, nepotism and corruption on one hand and a lack of ambition and a certain amount of resignation on the other. A representative of the civil society believes that the people managing companies are not necessarily the most competent for the job, but people placed there because of their connections:

“I see a problem in Gorenje. I know they work, they are hard-working, but there is a lot of “messiness”, which is the same thing why other companies are stagnating a bit as well. I see a problem in this kind of coal mining identity. The management is always the same, people just switching positions, but that is not good.” (civil society, D1)

Some economists also mention that the management of large companies, such as Gorenje, is more interested in saving their current positions and high salaries than focusing on long-term restructuring. A representative of science and culture (D13) was also critical of the coal miners’ mentality, which he transplanted onto politics. He believes the political elites keep emerging from the same social sphere, which is not good, even harmful. At the same time, they fear intelligentsia from elsewhere and prefer to make their own uncritical decisions. In addition, these mentality problems are not only detectable in the leading circles, but also among the other inhabitants of Velenje, who seem to be following the same kind of inertia and are not expressing much ambition and even resignation in some cases. Some interviewees from small and medium-sized companies think that Velenje’s greatest problem is that people are not industrious enough.

“Not brave enough, I would say. A large share of the youths in the town think, well, you get a guaranteed pay check in Gorenje, maybe in the coal mine, thermal plant, that kind of thing. Maybe the Skaza company² as well. But convincing people to take up entrepreneurship is very difficult.” (business representative, D3)

Some see the reasons for a less industrious climate in the ingredients or heritage of socialism.

“With no industrious people, there’s no point in anything. But there aren’t any industrious people, because everyone is relying on social benefits and people prefer “leisuring” about. So, if you aren’t working, you get, I don’t know, four hundred euro, but if you’re working in Gorenje, you might get six, seven hundred. So, you must really be a bit whacky to work, right?” (business representative, D18)

The miners’ mentality is also partly connected with the **lack of appropriate institutions of higher education**, a fact, particularly stressed by the economists.

“We have very well developed high schools, but not higher education. That means everybody going to university moves away, but don’t move back. Because there aren’t any jobs for them.” (business representative, D16)

² Skaza is an innovative, fast-growing, market-oriented company in the field of plastic processing. It employs more than 200 people and is listed among the 1000 most inspiring companies in Europe.

The same interviewee went even further in that respect, as the development of high technology would also help **attract a more qualified work force**.

“It’s my personal wish to bring new industry to Velenje. A different one. Actually, digital industry. The kind that doesn’t pollute the environment. The kind that gives opportunities to start-ups that can grow quickly and produce low costs using only an idea, selling knowledge and experience. This will lead to the town attracting a completely different structure of people in the future, different types of immigrants. If you build the right environment, the right kind of people will come. If you have a traditional industrial old environment, you will get regular, even non-qualified workers expecting nothing but simple, easy tasks. But if you create an environment with different institutes, I don’t know, technological parks, sample cities and similar things, you will get different people. I think there are many opportunities to develop the town in that direction.” (business representative, D16)

Many of the interviewees often mentioned Velenje’s **poor reputation** among the important negative factors impacting future urban development, which is preventing the town from being very recognizable in the general mind set of Slovenians despite its special features and successful projects. Interviewees from science and culture attribute this characteristic to a lack of knowledge, ignorance, negative media reporting, environmental strains, as well as the poor image of coal mining towns in general. Representatives of civil society think that immigrants are the reason for Velenje’s poor reputation. The reason for this is the general belief that the share of immigrants in Velenje is above average. Here, all three interviewees are critical to the media as well as the state, stating that they should regard immigrants as an opportunity and that Velenje’s experience in integration is a case example of immigration policies that should be adopted elsewhere in Slovenia.

In addition to the tourist infrastructure, another obstacle in the development of Velenje is the **construction of a motorway, the so-called 3rd developmental axis**, which would connect the Šalek Valley with the highway network. The interviewees think this would have positive effects on the economy, tourism, as well as the quality of life for the locals. This will also represent a big challenge in itself. With this issue in mind, the opinion of an interviewee from a small company is very telling, who said that the projected route of the motorway through Velenje is harmful for the planned lake-side sustainable tourism, which is said to be the main topic in the municipality, entrepreneurs and locals. The motorway will run along the only undeveloped area near the Velenje Lake, immediately along Šalek Lake, cutting the town off from the lakes. It will have a negative effect on the natural environment and encourage the development of daily mass tourism, which is based on individual mobility with cars instead of multi-day tourism.

4 Conclusions

Short street interviews with random passers-by helped to measure the collective heartbeat of the town by assessing people’s general conceptions of the dominant town narrative and its three subthemes (i.e. socialism, industrialism and future development strategies). We noted that the interviewees expressed quite different, albeit mostly positive, attitudes when speaking about the dominant narrative. Findings from this fieldwork helped us to draft topics for planned semi-structured interviews with specific professionals. They clearly revealed the interviewees’ opinion on the dominant narrative and shed light on the many hidden/alternative narratives that are in opposition or coherent with the dominant view.

Table 4: The main aspects of the dominant and the hidden/alternative views in different periods of urban development.

Building a modern socialist town (1945–1991)	
Dominant view	Hidden/alternative view
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • socialist values (shock work, comradeship, equality, multiculturalism, mutual respect and solidarity) • modern social practices based on socialist values (volunteering, social activity and municipal support for services and social activities) • socialist Yugo-nostalgia • active youth sector • effective, innovative and socially responsible economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shock work as a (non)voluntary activity • expropriating land owners due to mining activities causing the land to sink and/or town expansion • political ideologization
Socio-economic transition and environmental recovery (1991–2018)	
Dominant view	Hidden/alternative view
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • intrusion of the capitalist mentality • environmental restoration and raising the quality of life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tensions between indigenous inhabitants and newcomers (growing number of Albanian-speaking immigrants) • tensions between the older and younger generation (endangering intergenerational context) • tension between foreign/non-local owners or managers of larger industrial companies and the local community
Fragile (post)industrial future	
Dominant view	Hidden/alternative view
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • restructuring of the economy, industry modernization (industry 4.0) and the arrival of other companies • strengthening green energy and industry • development of tourism (training/attracting staff and constructing infrastructure) • quality living environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of a more specific developmental vision • lack of appropriate institutes of higher education • attracting a more qualified work force • “miners” mentality • poor reputation • improving transport accessibility

The results show that the collective memory is what is keeping socialism in a positive light, especially from the viewpoint of the values that once strengthened social cohesion and built an effective and innovative economy. These are values of shock work, comradeship, equality, multiculturalism, mutual respect and solidarity. These values continue to persist to a large degree today and have been transferred to modern sociocultural practices, such as the institutionalization of certain volunteering activities and the non-governmental sector and municipal support to services and social activities. Especially the older generation that experienced socialism to a greater degree in their youth exhibit a nostalgic propensity to times gone by, while the youth carry on in the culture of a very active social engagement. The hidden narratives relate to the founding of the town itself, when injustice occurred to certain sectors of the population and as the ground sunk and/or the town spread and to the interpretation that the shock work was not entirely of a volunteer nature. These stories can be related to the totalitarian style of ruling at the time. One of the hidden narratives includes political ideologization, rooted in an undemocratic past and still present in the entanglement of politics with ideological questions and an overpolitization of social life, as well as a fear or intelligentsia.

In addition to the changes in socioeconomic arrangements, the demise of socialism also brought challenges in environmentalism, as the intense industrialization had caused a degradation of the environment and negative effects on the quality of the living environment. The transition period was therefore characterized by the introduction of the Western capitalist mentality, which had numerous positive effects on the economy and the environment, but it also affected the disintegration of once stronger social ties. The challenges in this area are illustrated in the tensions between various social groups, such as the indigenous inhabitants versus newcomers (especially newer Albanian-speaking immigrants), the older versus the younger generation (weakening of intergenerational dialogue) and foreign/non-local industrialists versus the local community. These challenges point to weakened socialist values on which the town was founded. The conflicts are mainly triggered by the increasing intolerance to the immigrants and a lack of social responsibility from the companies.

Velenje's future development is focused mainly on restructuring of economy, industry modernization and the arrival of other companies, strengthening green energy and industry, tourism development and a continued establishment of a quality living environment. This could be significantly aided by the establishment of higher education institutions and attracting a more qualified work force, which would affect changing/expelling of the "miners'" mentality and improving the town's reputation. Another important contribution to urban development would also be the improvement of the traffic accessibility, which is supposed to bring the town closer to national and international developmental currents.

The social-cultural specifics of Velenje that could be used to generate social and institutional innovations are undoubtedly the aforementioned positive values of socialism and industrialism. The results of the interviews show that the inhabitants are proud of the achievements of socialism and industrial tradition. They are aware of the positive aspects of past development that they continue to preserve and develop to this day, albeit in an adapted form. They are also aware of its frailty, which is influenced by neoliberalism and tends to lose significance in some cases and represents the main challenge for the future development of the town.

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