Igralništvo v slovenskih medijih: med protiigralniškim in korporacijskim diskurzom

Gambling in the Slovenian Media: between anti-gambling and corporate discourse¹

Matei Makarovič²

Povzetek

Po desetletjih legaliziranega igralništva se je zdelo, da večina prebivalstva na lokalni in vseslovenski ravni podpira ali vsaj tolerira igralniško dejavnost. Več dejavnikov je nato prispevalo k precejšnjem umiku javne podpore projektu HIT — Harrah's. Analizirali smo medijske vsebine od 1. maja do 31. decembra 2007, da bi ugotovili, ali je medijski diskurz bolj pod vplivom korporacijskih akterjev ali pa igralništvu nasprotnih skupin civilne družbe. Negativna stališča do igralništva v analiziranih prispevkih so bila skoraj izključno odziv na »mega« projekt HIT — Harrah's, ne pa na druge dogodke. Zaključimo lahko, da takrat, ko je poročanje o igralništvu le rutina, zmorejo piarovski profesionalci korporacij jasno obvladovati medijski diskurz. Obstajajo pa posebne situacije, ko se to lahko obrne in postanejo aktivni državljani in nevladne organizacije enako ali še bolj vplivni.

Ključne besede: igralništvo, javni diskurz, mediji, civilna družba.

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² Assistant professor at the Faculty of Applied Social Studies, Slovenia.

Abstract

Following the decades of legalized casino gambling, it has seemed that most of the local and national population seemed to support or at least tolerate casino gambling. Several factors then contributed to the significant withdrawal of support for the Hit-Herrah's project by the public. Media content from 1 May till 31 December 2007 was analyzed to determine whether the media discourse has been more influenced by the corporate actors or by the contra-gambling civil society groups. The negative attitudes towards gambling in the analyzed articles were almost exclusively provoked by the Hit-Harrah's 'Mega' project but not by other events. It is concluded that when reporting on gambling is just a routine, the corporate P.R. professionals are clearly able to dominate the discourse. Nevertheless, there are special situations when this may reverse and the active citizens and NGOs may become equally or even more influential.

Keywords: gambling, public discourse, media, civil society.

Generally, gambling is an issue that may strongly divide the public opinion. It may be argued that public opinion concerning gambling does not depend significantly on any 'objective' social and economic impact on gambling, it is not particularly related to the social costs of problematic and pathological gambling. Rather it is based on the *perception* of gambling within a given environment. This perception is mostly produced and reproduced by public discourse on gambling that mostly takes place within the mass media.

Some research demonstrate that gambling may become more acceptable for the general and local public after being present in the area for a certain period of time, for example, more than a year

(Reith 2006). The research, for instance, by Room et al. (1999) concerning the gambling casino at Niagara Falls and by Frisch et al. (1999) in Winsor casino, Ontario, may confirm this. When casinos, especially large casinos, are planned and established they are likely to become a matter of public controversy but after the people get used to live with them they may become more tolerable and normal; they may cease to be a public issue.

Has this also been the case in Nova Gorica, a small Slovenian town with two large casinos owned by Hit, many gambling halls and the unsuccessful — as it had turned out — plan for the large gambling tourist center by Hit and Harrah's Entertainment? It may be claimed that the public discourse and public opinion that contributed their part to the failure of the Hit-Harrah's 'Mega-Centre' project in the region of Goriška should be understood in the local political, economical and cultural context.

It should be stressed that legalized casino gambling in Nova Gorica had already begun during the communist regime – for the western tourists only, while gambling was prohibited for the local population. During the 1980s Nova Gorica become the first tourist destination in Slovenia (and in Yugoslavia which Slovenia had been a part of) where casino gambling was not a supplementary but the central local attraction for western, mostly Italian, tourists (more on that in Luin 2004). These circumstances are closely related to the fact why casino gambling was not a major public issue in Goriška and Slovenia, at the time when it began:

1) public discussion on controversial issues was, despite some minor exceptions, clearly limited during the communist times;

2) social costs of gambling were not an issue that would directly affect the local population, since local citizens were not allowed to gamble legally.

Zlata Krašovec, the press representative of the NGO called 'The Coordination for the Restriction of Gambling' replied to a question why they had started to oppose gambling only now, several decades after it had been established in Slovenia: 'In our country, the first casinos appeared at the time when no one cared about the public opinion, since their establishment was decided by the Party, which saw them as a chance for money laundry for its own needs and for the needs of Udba [Yugoslav communist secret police]. Today, in the time of democracy we can and we should express our opinion about them.' (Krašovec 2007: 4). Her explanation about the communist times clearly makes sense. It remains unclear, however, why they have only decided to express their opinion 17 years after the institutionalization of parliamentary democracy in Slovenia.

It seems that after the fall of communism, the local population has already been accommodated to casino gambling. Allowing the locals to gamble in the local casinos was not a major policy issue but rather a normal expression of the overall liberalization of the society. During the 1990s the major casino company Hit only became the centre of a heated discussion because of the serious charges of corporate crime and judicial prosecution against some of the Hit top managers of the time. Even that, however, the major issue was not gambling as such but white collar crime.

Following more than two decades of legalized casino gambling, it has seemed that most of the local (in the Goriška region) and national (Slovenian) population seemed to support or at least tolerate casino



gambling. This was, for instance, demonstrated by the combined national-local sample within the social survey by CATI agency (2006). The support even went beyond tolerating the existing scope of gambling. Most of the respondents have also supported the possible extension of gambling supply in the region, including a major new investment. This was confirmed in spring 2007, when the national sample in the social survey by the agency 'Aragon' when most of the population claimed that the state should 'support' (not only tolerate) 'the investment with the foreign partner to the new gambling centre in the Goriška region' with 52 per cent of respondents in favor of the investment, 36 per cent against it and 11 per cent undecided (Makarovič and Zorec 2007).

Because of the lack of directly comparable social surveys data available it is difficult to evaluate directly to which extend the attitudes of the public towards the Hit-Herrah's project and gambling in general have changed. Nevertheless, at it seems, a relevant shift in public opinion, especially at the local level, has taken place during summer 2007. One may just mention one of publicly available social surveys by Delo Stik in July 2007 revealing that:

- 38% supported the HIT-Herrah's investment
- 30% supported gambling but not the presence of the American partner
- 25% opposed gambling because of etical reasons

It may be argued that several factors contributed to the significant withdrawal of support for the Hit-Herrah's by the public in Slovenia and particularly in Goriška region as demonstrated by the subsequent research. It may be argued that several factors have contributed to it:

 Mobilisation within the civil society against the HIT-Harrah's project and (to some extend) against casino gambling as such; the leaders of the movement were clear that they want to *limit* gambling in Slovenia;

- Ambivalence of the local authorities who while mostly supporting the project hesitated to express full and unreserved support for it;
- ambivalance and unclear goals among the (potential) supporters of the project (on issues such as taxation, the role of the foreign partner, the lines of negotiations, competition and canibalisation concerns etc.);
- the lack of mobilization among the supporters and potential supporters of the Hit-Harrah's project.

Public discourse on gambling as presented through the mass media may follow a variety of patterns. Generally, relevant research up to now demonstrates no fully consistent patterns of the public discourse on gambling. Discourse on gambling in often inconsistent and incomplete (Abt & McDowell, 1997). It tends to lack proper balance, since the advocates of gambling tend to overemphasize the benefits caused by gambling while the opponents tend to overstress the damage related to gambling (Reith, 2006).

Some authors such as Campbell (2003) found the dominance of the moralistic and 'moral panic' discourse when gambling is concerned. They noticed that anti-gambling arguments had clearly prevailed over the pro-gambling ones. Others, such as McMullan and Mullen (2001) found that corporate discourse clearly dominated over anti-gambling arguments making them rather insignificant.

This is also the key research question of this paper: who actually dominates the public discourse on gambling: the corporations supplying the gambling services or the opponents of gambling active



and organized within the civil society? Who is more able to determine the major political decisions on gambling in the critical moments?

To discover which of the options was truer for the Slovenian media and Slovenian public discourse, media content from 1 May till 31 December 2007 have been analyzed. We selected the period when the public discussion in Slovenia on the Hit-Harrah's project and gambling in general was the most intense. We have included the following media:

- Three relevant national dailies (Delo, Dnevnik, Finance) dealing mostly with political and economic issues
- A national political weekly (Mladina)
- A free commercial newspaper (Dobro jutro)
- The regional daily for the western part of Slovenia (Primorske novice)

Due to practical reasons, the analysis was limited to the printed mass media. The unit of analysis was a single article. Any article in the given media within the given period was included into the analysis if it mentioned either the Hit Company or gambling. This enabled us to build a database of 527 articles. Out of them 414 mentioned gambling (related to Hit or not), while the rest mentioned Hit but did not explicitly refer to gambling in any sense. Each of the papers was analyzed in qualitative terms. This part of analysis enabled us to determine certain parameters and code them. The coding included, among others, the date, title, author(s), media, genre, the tone towards gambling, the size and position of the article within the printed media, some typical concepts used in the argumentation related to gambling, the sources used in the article and so on. Thus

the database was created and some simple statistical techniques were applied using the SPSS statistical package. For the purposes of this paper, however, we have limit ourselves to some basic aspects while others remain available for the future analyses.

The tone of writing about gambling regarding different media can be seen in Figure 1. Most of the articles were neutral. However, there were significantly more articles that use negative tone on gambling than those that speak on gambling in positive terms. This is not only true in general but also for any particular media except *Finance*, a Slovenian economic daily, mostly known for its predominantly (neo)liberal economic worldview, at least when compared with the other Slovenian newspapers. The political weekly *Mladina*, which is mostly considered as being of leftist orientation, and the free commercial weekly *Dobro jutro* did not publish a single article with predominantly positive views on gambling.³

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³ It may be debatable what is more relevant: the number of articles or the printed area they cover. While the following results are presented as numbers of articles, another analysis was done as well where articles were weighted by their area. The measurement unit was thus no longer the number of articles but the number of square centimeters covered by them. Despite some clear differences, the overall pattern remained the same as presented in the given analysis, where the number of articles (not their area in square centimeters) has been the base of our measurement.

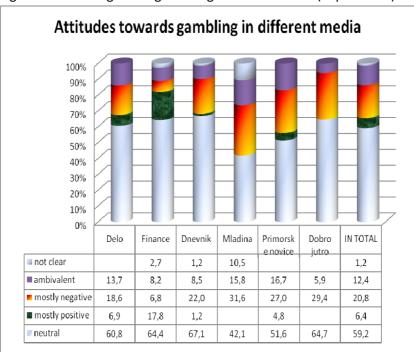
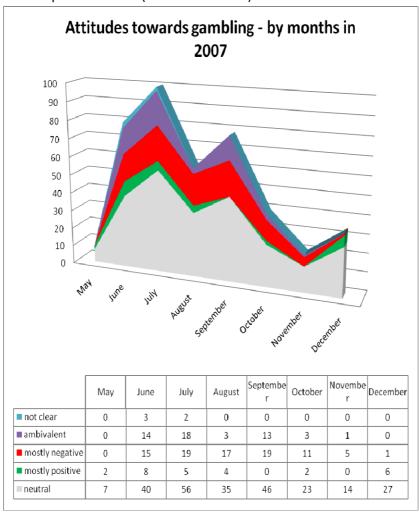


Figure 1: Tone on gambling with regard to the media (in per cents)

Moreover, it is worth noting how the relations between the articles are changing within the four months period with regard to the prevailing attitudes towards gambling and Hit-Herrah's project (see Figure 2). Though the period is too short to enable one to discover the trends in the long run, the data are quite interesting and telling.

Figure 2: Changes in the tone towards gambling during the seven months period in 2007 (counts of articles)



The number of articles in Figure 2 clearly demonstrates the significant increase in the number of articles opposing to gambling as the debate had intensified. On the other hand, this is not the case for



the 'positive' articles. Consequently, it seems that the advocates of gambling (especially of the Hit-Harrah's project had been – already at the beginning – unable to follow the debate in a more active manner and were not able to maintain a proportional amount of media attention during the most intensive parts of the debate. In December, however, one can observe a reversal and a situation similar to the one in May: again, more articles speak in favor of gambling than against it.

An even clearer picture can be given calculating the Janis-Fadner coefficient that ranges between – 1 (only negative attitudes) and 1 (only positive attitudes) while 0 means that the situation is completely 'balanced'. In the literature several version are used (see e.g.: Splichal 1990; Pollock et al. 2001, Bansal and Clelland 2004; Deephouse in Bansal in Clelland 2004). A modified formula that also includes the possibility of the ambivalent position (as slightly different from the neutral one) would be (when there are more articles with the predominantly negative than with the predominantly positive attitude towards gambling):

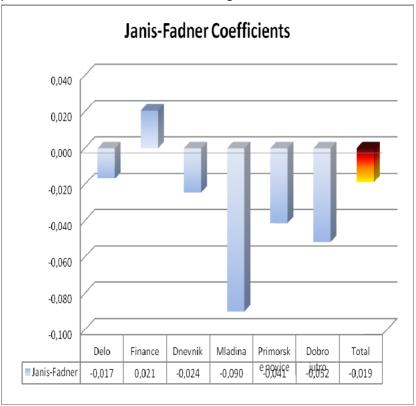
$$\mathsf{JFC} = \frac{(n \times p) - n^2}{t^2}$$

When p = number of positive articles and n = number of negative articles and

t = positive articles + negative articles + neutral articles + ambivalent articles

In Figure 3, one can observe the data on the Janis-Fadner coefficient in general and for the particular media. Except in the case of *Finance*, the values are negative but far from extreme. This demonstrates the domination of the neutral attitudes with a slight leaning towards the contra-gambling position.

Figure 3: Janis-Fadner Coefficients concerning gambling for the particular media and for the media in general

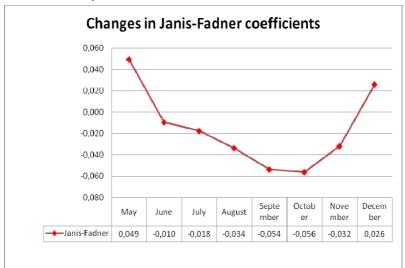


What is much more significant are the changes in Janis-Fadner coefficient from May to December, 2007 (see Figure 4). Although the



changes are not extreme, they reveal an interesting pattern. Negative values in the Janis-Fadner coefficients were the most significant when the public debate on the single particular project reached its peak. The negative attitudes towards gambling in the analyzed articles are almost exclusively provoked by the Hit-Harrah's 'Mega' project of what was supposed to become the European largest destination casino resort. They either opposed this project in particular or gambling in general but they almost never opposed any other project that extended the gambling capacities in Slovenia. Nevertheless, these capacities have significantly increased during 2007 and the failed Hit-Harrah's project was far from the only one during that time.

Figure 4: Attitudes towards gambling in the selected Slovenian media as measured by Janis-Fadner coefficients



During a single month, in December 2007, Hit opened a new gambling and entertainment center *Mond* in Šentilj in Northeastern

Slovenia at the Slovenian-Austrian border (8000 square meters, 400 slot machines, 20 gambling tables) as one of its largest green-field investments ever. During the same month (!), three new gambling halls were opened: in Bernardin hotels, Portorož, (2100 square meters, 168 slot machines, 4 electronic roulettes), in hotel Riviera, also in Portorož, (500 square meters, 176 slot machines, 3 electronic roulettes), and in Sežana (800 square meters, 130 slot machines) (Perko 2007: 20).

These events were quite briefly reported by the media, mostly directly summarizing the messages by the corporate public relations services – without critical comments by the journalists, the NGOs or active citizens. This was a type of reporting that contributed to the relatively 'positive' coverage of gambling issued in December, 2007, when – on the other hand – the debate on the Hit-Harrah's 'Mega' investment has almost ended, since the implementation of the project at that time has already been considered by the opinion makers as very unlikely. In other words, there was an extensive and relatively critical public debate about a project in the field of gambling that has failed and a complete lack of any public debate about the gambling projects that had in fact take place.

The question whether the public debate, the mobilization of the civil society and the activation of the NGOs in fact determines the success or failure of the projects in the field of gambling is not particularly relevant for our discussion. It would be a great oversimplification to claim that the Hit-Harrah's project had failed purely because of the resistance within the civil society. The later was merely one of the factors, whose significance, however, is quite difficult to determine in the Hit-Harrah's case.

The crucial question is rather why corporate discourse may dominate the media in some circumstances (like in May and December, 2007) but becomes rather inferior in the intensive public debates caused by some other circumstances (e.g. from August to October, 2007). And, why was the corporate discourse – during the most heated debate – unable to match the opposition within the civil society?

At least a partial explanation for the latter question can be found in the different types of argumentation used by the advocates and the opponents of the Hit-Harrah's project and gambling in general.

There are 32 articles, where the pro-gambling attitudes clearly prevail. Their typical authors are the representatives of Hit and Harrah's, mostly as the interviewees or signed under the published official statements, experts and only a few journalists (expecially in Finance). The typical emphases of these articles are on the (economic) benefits based on the expansion of gambling, the connection between gambling and tourism. Only a few contributions include certain moral and ethical concepts such as responsibility (5 articles) and honesty but this is more an exception than a rule. The pro-gambling discourse is mostly instrumental-rational. It stresses the benefits in relation to costs. The language of morale and values is mostly used in the defensive sense, when they have to defend against the accusations by the opponents. The basic values are mostly not used more aggressively - to advocate the Hit-Harrah's project and gambling in general, for instance demanding freedom, free entrepreneurial initiative, freedom of (consumer's) choice, national confidence and development, national, citizens' and consumer's maturity etc. Although such emphases might have fit the pro-gambling discourse they had been virtually absent from it. It should be noted that the value of freedom has been used (though not often) in Slovenia by the opponents not the advocates of gambling.

The contra-gambling discourse on the other hand, is quite different. There are 92 articles in our sample where contra-gambling arguments clearly prevail. Their typical authors are NGO representatives, intellectuals of different worldviews, Roman-catholic Church representatives, and left oriented journalists. Concerning the opposition to the Hit-Harrah's project an interesting (and rare) alliance can be noted between the leftist and rightist-conservative actors who otherwise tend in quite an open political and cultural conflict in Slovenia between each other.

Gambling can be rejected on two different grounds, though they can be related to each other:

- Because of its problematic consequences (social, psychological, economical etc.)
- Because of being evil as such.

Within the Slovenian discussions on gambling the first option was much more likely, especially as far as the official public statements of the contra-gambling NGO co-ordinations were concerned. The second option was significantly less present and was mostly expressed as an personal opinion of some individuals.

The contra-gambling discourse in Slovenia, as it seems from our data, is often extensively value laden, since its basic concepts are either important positive values (jeopardized by gambling) or negatively valued concepts (caused by gambling). The most typical positive concepts can be observed in Figure 5 and the most typical negative ones in Figure 6.

The most notable positive concept is the family, often with the emphasis on the children as the value which should be protected from gambling. It is hardly a coincidence that family is also the institution most trusted by the Slovenians and is considered as one of the highest values according to the public opinion surveys (Toš et al. 2004). The concepts of Slovenian nation and homeland (that should be defended against gambling, especially the *foreign* one) is stressed.

Figure 5: The positive concepts in the contra-gambling discourse (counts of articles where concepts appear)

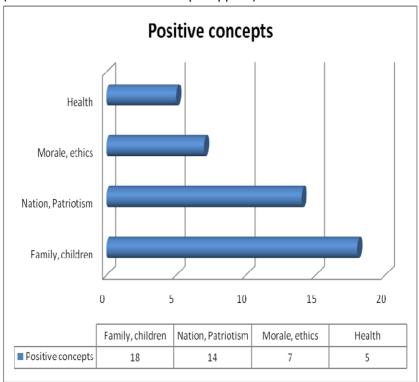
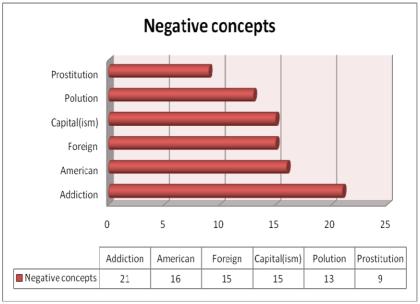


Figure 6: The negative concepts in the contra-gambling discourse (counts of articles where concepts appear)



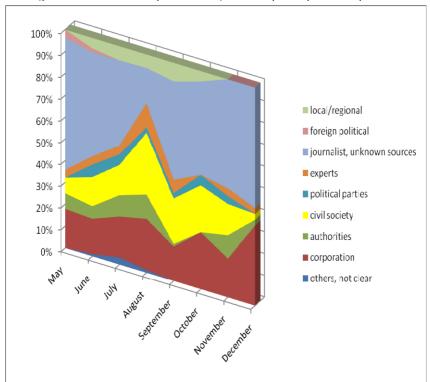
Among the negative concepts, addiction from gambling (which is mostly not valued laden) is ranked first. The value component, however, is much more present in the concepts of 'America(n)', which tends to be presented with a clear negative connotation. In several cases the rightist-conservative – sometimes even xenophobic – understanding of foreigners (foreign, foreigners, foreign labor force) may go hand in hand with the (mostly leftist) tendencies towards anti-Americanism and anti-capitalism. The concept of pollution is also quite interesting to note, since it is sometimes (deliberately) used in an ambivalent manner. It can imply both ecological matters and/or the (metaphorical) *moral* pollution of the people and the land, which are otherwise clean.

One of the (perhaps quite successful) strategies of the contragambling discourse is also its use of contrasts. For the purpose of this analysis these have been classified as follows:

- The ecological contrast: the green Slovenia against the American desert (the new centre will change the green Goriška region and Slovenia to something like Nevada desert);
- The nationalist contrast: Slovenian against the foreign (foreign capital; being sold to the foreigners, to the Americans; the problem of foreign labor force, of foreign habits);
- The sociological contrast: community against disintegration caused by gambling that jeopardizes the community;
- Preindustrial contrast: the idyllic agriculture against the dangerous gambling;
- Postindustrial contrast: high technology and education against 'cooks and waiters';
- The contrast at the level of actors: civil society against the big corporation.

The relation between the corporate and other discourses when gambling is concerned can also be observed from a more quantitative angle. The articles in our sample were also categorized according to the circumstances under which they had appeared: do they, for instance, seem to be a direct reflection of a corporate press conference, a government press release, a statement by an NGO, an initiative by the journalist or her/his editor, the result of her/his research etc. This may also tell as *who* in fact generates the news in a certain time period and is thus able to impose his/her own discourse to the others through the mass media. The changes in this respect within our sample can be seen in Figure 7.

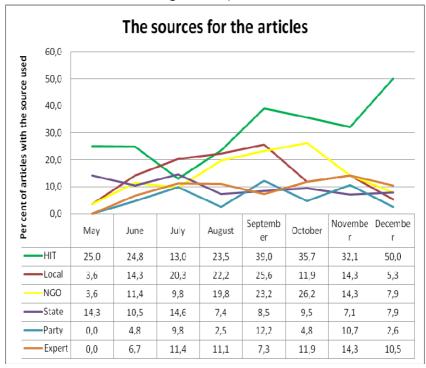
Figure 7: Where does the initiative/cause for the article mainly come from (per cent of articles per month) – one option possible per article



It can be noted that corporations (including Hit and others) were able to have the major initiative for new articles in May and especially in December, 2007. During summer and early autumn when the debate on the Hit-Harrah's project had been the most intensive, however, it was almost overrun by the NGOs and individual active citizens (both included under the concept of 'civil society').

These relations quite clearly corresponds to the question which sources an article refers to. Being used as a source mostly means the ability to present one's own arguments and the logic of thinking about gambling issues. The changing relationships between the sources used in the articles can be seen in Figure 8.

Figure 8: The actors used as sources (several different actors can be used as sources within a single article)



The most important sources to which the articles in the sample referred were Hit, the local authorities (municipality representatives) and the NGOs. The increasing mobilization of the NGOs through summer can be observed and its decline in November and December

when the Hit-Harrah's project became very unlikely. The activity of Hit public relations has clearly increased in autumn. However, this was mostly not an intervention to save the Hit-Harrah's project but mostly the communication concerning either other internal matters in Hit or the rest of the Hit projects.

Returning to the question of whether the media coverage of gambling in Slovenia is more dominated by the discourse of the (corporate) advocates of gambling or by its opponents, we cannot confirm either of these two options. The situation seems to be somewhat more complex. It may be argued that in the 'normal' circumstances, when reporting on gambling is just a routine, the corporate P.R. professionals are clearly able to dominate the discourse. Their press conferences and press releases are the major source for the media and thus they are the major generator of news and of the prevailing media discourse. In this respect one may agree that the findings of McMullan and Mullen (2001) may also be valid for the Slovenian case.

Nevertheless, there are **special situations** when this may reverse and the active citizens and NGOs may become equally or even more influential in the public debates on gambling than the corporate representatives. This is preconditioned by the (expectation of) great events – great enough to enable the mobilization within the civil society. This is not, however, a massive mobilization but rather an activation of several local (and national to some extend) opinion makers that are active enough to persuade the public that the issue they are up against is highly controversial. Although the opposition to gambling, which became symbolized by the Hit-Harrah's project, was represented by two co-ordinations which formally included numerous NGOs, only a few (though extremely active) persons from

these opposition actually appeared in the public. Nevertheless, such a mobilization should generally be considered as a relatively unlikely event that could not be caused only by gambling as such but by a combination of several factors.

These may particularly include:

- The socially perceived scale of the project, which was mostly constructed by its labels such as the 'mega' project, 'Slovenian Las Vegas', etc. The project was thus perceived as extremely significant and thus worthy of a significant response;
- The possibility for the wide alliance of the opponents based on the variety of *values* including nationalists, conservatives, the Roman-catholic church and its allied associations, anti-American and anti-capitalist leftists, etc.
- The coincidence between the opposition to the project based on values and significant vested *interests* of some relevant local and perhaps even national actors; these may include even some owner of the gambling halls in the region which might perceive the new project as a too dangerous competition;
- The ambivalence and reservations of the local elites reluctant to fully support the project and thus contributing an overall atmosphere of skepticism towards the Hit-Harrah's project.

Such a combination is far from typical and there is no necessity that it may be successful again in the future in some different circumstances. Consequently, it would clearly be premature to consider the failure of the Hit-Harrah's project to be a triumph of the civil society against the corporation. Although it is rather a unique complex combination of factors it demonstrates that special situation

when the contra-gambling discourse prevails over the (corporate) pro-gambling discourse is one of the options.

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