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POPULISM REPORT



SPECIAL EDITION:
SLOVENIA

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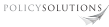
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IN THE STRANGLEHOLD OF POPULISM: SLOVENIA

In many respects, the Slovenian parliamentary elections of June 2018 followed a different trajectory than the election results of the neighbouring countries in Central and Southern Europe. In Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia, rightwing populist forces gained power, and the public mood in these countries shifted visibly to the right. At first glance, it appears that Slovenian domestic politics did not succumb to the populist climate that prevails in the southern and eastern segments of the European Union. The domestic political landscape remained unchanged: similarly to the election results seen over the past decades, the votes cast were distributed between the right and left at a ratio of 40-60, respectively, while voter turnout (51%) declined. Even though the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), which has approached the refugee crisis of 2015 in a similar way as the governing parties in the region, was the winner of the election, the majority of the electorate ended up rejecting xenophobic communication.

New faces

So is Slovenia the last remaining country in the southern European region with a progressive government that has successfully withstood the prevailing populist trend? The situation is not quite so unequivocal. Over the past few years, both sides have tried to introduce innovations to the previously moderate, one might

say “dull” politics. While on the Slovenian right this primarily involved ethnicity-based politics and urging action against various minorities, on the left public opinion focused on the constant search for “new faces”. The latter brought a long-term benefit for the left: the ongoing political casting, the emergence of new faces, made the top leader of the rightwing camp, Janes Janša, look unappealing and worn out by comparison.

The list of “new faces” in Slovenian politics is rather lengthy. A group that has since been completely forgotten, the Slovenian Youth Party, and its chair, Dominik S. Černjak, played a pioneering role in this respect. The appearance of another new face in politics, Katarina Kresal, is reminiscent of the Youth Party’s meteoric rise and fall. Kresal revived one of the core parties of the nineties, the Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (LDS), but then quickly faded from public life. To some extent, one could also count the left-liberal politician Gregor Golobič as falling into this category. The politician, who was inspired by the Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek and is nicknamed the “Slovenian Stalin”, promised a new agenda with his Zares-New Politics party built on the ashes of the LDS. Finally, this trend was also reinforced by the mayor of Ljubljana, Zoran Janković, who had brought a new approach to Slovenian politics in the 2000s by embracing the public administration mantra (“govern the state as if it were a company”) of the current Czech prime minister, Andrej Babiš.

We could also mention the name of the lawyer Igor Šoltes, who is one of the less influential political newcomers. Šoltes only founded his party called Verjamen (“I believe” in English) so he could enter the European Parliament. And he did. Gregor Virant was previously a popular SDS politician and senior civil servant, who also had some peculiar and novel ideas about governance. Virant created a platform within SDS for liberal and left-wing sympathisers, and

then led a split-off from SDS on the eve of the election. Thanks to a series of coincidences and extraordinary circumstances, Alenka Bratušek – who also ranks among the new faces – climbed to the top of Slovenian politics, and then she founded her own party, the Alenka Bratušek Alliance, after seceding from Jankovič's Positive Slovenia party.

The emergence of the United Left and Miro Cerar takes us to the most recent faces and new formations, which burst into the Slovenian public sphere a few years ago. The former was an electoral alliance created just before the parliamentary elections of 2014, uniting smaller leftwing groups and movements, as well as some independent public figures. The leftwing populist party The Left (Levica) ultimately grew out of this one-off alliance.

The lawyer Miro Cerar was appointed prime minister in 2014 despite the lack of a political background and very limited relevant experience. Cerar had burst into domestic politics with the movement called Modern Centre Party. Following his early resignation, the best Cerar could hope for was to make it into the newly elected parliament, and he did manage to realise this goal. But the list of new faces is still not concluded, for the parliamentary election of 2018 and the presidential election preceding it also saw a new candidate, namely Marjan Šarec, who is indisputably one of the most unusual figures of Slovenian politics – and maybe also of European politics overall. Šarec is the very personification of an outsider, without a platform, a team, references or ideas.

Who is Marjan Šarec?

“It doesn’t matter one bit who voted for me or against me, I will work for everyone,” said Marjan Šarec, the ninth and youngest prime minister of modern Slovenia after parliament voted the first ever minority government in the country’s history into office. The prime minister’s party, the List Marjan Šarec (LMŠl), had finished second in the election. The new five-party centre-left governing coalition holds 43 seats in parliament. This minority is supported from the outside by the two MPs representing the Italian and Hungarian ethnic minorities, respectively, as well the MPs representing the populist left (the Levica). Šarec hails from a background in local politics, he was twice elected the mayor of the municipality of Kamnik. He founded his party on the occasion of Slovenia’s presidential election in 2017, when he finished in second place, barely edged out by the incumbent social democrat Borut Pahor.

Šarec’s performance was all the more remarkable because he had no previous experience in national politics, despite winning two mayoral elections by overwhelming margins. Nevertheless, his unexpected and overwhelming victories were not accidental: early in his career he laid the foundations of his subsequent popularity as a comedian on Slovenian public radio and television, starring in a popular comedy show, which was also liked by young people. To many it might have seemed that Šarec continued to impersonate his former theatrical character on the stage of politics, but at the same time his critics allege that he is just a clown and a demagogue, who always opts for the simplest solutions.

Šarec introduced himself in national politics at the time of the presidential election, but observers at the time assessed that his personality remained hidden. It is worth noting that when the host of the televised presidential debate asked Šarec whom

he identifies with, whom he respects and whom he would take advice from – in light of the fact that his campaign relentlessly pushed what he was against – Šarec chose an answer that was populist in its approach, saying that he was only accountable to the Slovenian people and himself. In response to a question by the host, Šarec also said that he is fundamentally a liberal, but at the same time he could also entertain the idea of the welfare state playing a greater role.

Disappointed Slovenians

The lack of confidence that prevails in Slovenia is the reason behind the long line of new faces cropping up in politics. Disappointed citizens keep voting for fresh characters because they hope that new players might break with the established practices and open a new chapter in politics. Another important and spectacular factor concerning these formations is their personality-centred politics, which is the alpha and omega of electoral behaviour, its central appeal. The main characteristic of these parties is that they are extremely weak organisationally, and in practice everything about them hinges on the fate of the person leading the party. This phenomenon has had the result that these political parties – several of which are named after the leader – are nothing but tools for promoting the politician's public persona and in helping them realise their political ambitions. At the same time, at national level, these new parties feature only the most essential bureaucratic structures, while locally they have a minimal organisational presence or structure.

The Slovenian rightwing populist

But how can it be claimed that voters in Slovenia have decisively rejected ethnicist politics? If we look at the number of votes cast for the Janša party, we can draw some interesting conclusions. Although SDS received slightly more votes than in the most recent elections, as compared to the 2004 election its support has diminished substantially. And the current results look even worse when juxtaposed with the party's peak tally in 2008, when it received 307,000 votes but was still relegated to an opposition status. The difference amounts to 90,000 votes in a country with 1.7 million people in the voter roll.

The various other parties' shares of the vote are more telling still. The parties that have positioned themselves in opposition to Janša's policies received the support of ca. 343,000 voters, while SDS and NSi won 282,000 in total. In terms of seats in parliament, this translates into a ratio of 52:32. Looking at the results at an electoral district level, we see that the leftwing bloc (Levica, SD, SMC, LMŠ, SAB) outpolled the rightwing bloc (SDS, NSi, SLS) in 67 of the 88 districts (75%). Thus, while it is indeed true that SDS won the most votes, overall the fragmented leftwing parties nevertheless prevailed.

Janša made several tactical mistakes during the campaign. He wasted his energies supporting some minor rightwing parties that were not even capable of fielding a list of nominees. These smaller parties – together with SDS – were often in intense dispute with one another. Janša also involved the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán in his campaign, even though Orbán does not have many adherents in the country. He talked a lot about the Visegrád countries, but from a Slovenian perspective that particular alliance is more about eastern Europe than about central Europe. A significant portion of the SDS campaign was conducted online,

but the Trump-style lies and disinformation of SDS, as well as the efforts at discrediting political opponents, did not prove persuasive to Slovenian voters. In the meanwhile, it was very difficult to cast Janša in the position of the protector of the “ordinary citizens” vis-à-vis the political-economic elite because he has himself been a part of this elite for nigh 30 years now. Meanwhile, the Slovenian Christian Democratic party has disappeared, and Janša is left without close allies. His sole supporter is Matej Tonin, the chair of NSi, who is likely to challenge him as the leader of the Slovenian right in light of SDS’ electoral failure.

Janša and the SDS

Moreover, Janša does not seem to be a consensus-seeker but a “political warrior” when it comes to choosing what he is willing to do to attain his goals. His speech reflecting on the election results is a case in point: He complained then that the political parties had failed to address the real reasons behind the migration crisis. Although the claim may even be true, but, nonetheless, it was his party that had started a massive billboard campaign claiming that each refugee admitted would cost Slovenia 1,963 euros. Also, the Nova 24 TV station owned by people close to Janša continuously presented ever new cases highlighting the alleged “invasion of migrants”.

The campaign was also joined by the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán. The propaganda methods used by Nova 24 TV station and other tabloid media were similar to those we have seen in Hungarian campaigns: the once neutral word “migrant” is imbued with numerous menacing attributes, and the relentless pushing of the issue is meant to scare the Slovenian public.

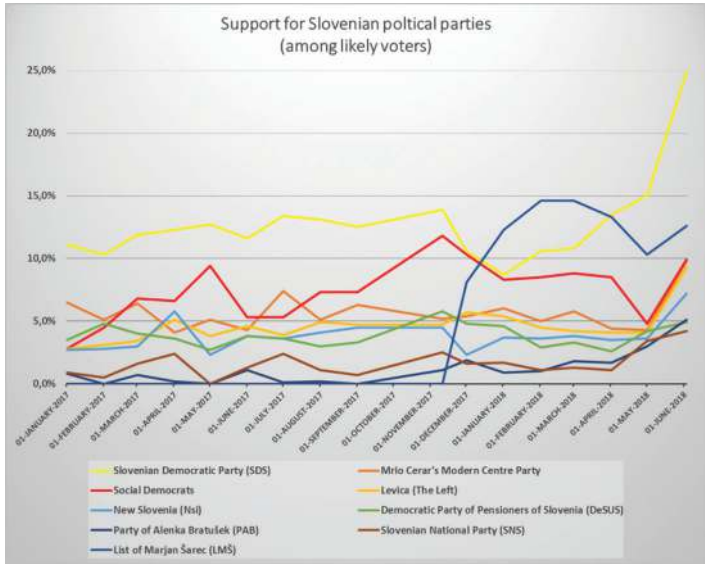


Table 1 (Sources: Populism Tracker; Mediana poll)

The lessons of the Slovenian situation

Similarly to all other post-communist countries, the prevailing sentiment in Slovenia is one of financial insecurity and fear of the future. The global financial crisis in the previous decade, the refugee crisis of 2015, the rising social inequalities and the fact that globalisation increasingly impacts everyday life have all exacerbated these feelings. Wide swathes of society are losing their trust in politicians and the prevailing institutional framework, and that may be one of the reasons while not a single government since 2008 has managed to serve out its full term. Owing to this

general crisis of confidence and legitimacy, the former voters of Slovenia's established parties turned towards so-called "new faces", punishing the political establishment. A particularly odd aspect of this development is the hope that many citizens have vested in particular individuals rather than parties, who they hope will implement a swift comprehensive overhaul of the entire political system. But this expectation has proved unrealistic thus far. Soon we will find out how long Slovenians will be pleased with Marjan Šarec's efforts.

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FEPS is the first progressive political foundation established at the European level. Created in 2007 and co-financed by the European Parliament, it aims at establishing an intellectual cross-road between social democracy and the European project. It puts fresh thinking at the core of its action and serves as an instrument for pan-European intellectual and political reflection.

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Policy Solutions considers it important that political research should not be intelligible or of interest to only a narrow professional audience. Therefore, Policy Solutions shares its research results in conferences, seminars and interactive websites with journalists, NGOs, international organisations, members of the diplomatic corps, leading politicians and corporate executives.

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Populism Reports

The past few years have seen a surge in the public support of populist, euroskeptical and radical parties throughout almost the entire European Union. In several member states, their popularity matches or even exceeds the level of public support of the centre-left. Even though the centre-left parties, think tanks and researchers are aware of this challenge, there is still more that could be done in this field. There is occasional research on individual populist parties in some member states, but there is no regular overview – updated on a quarterly basis – how the popularity of populist parties changes in the EU Member States, where new parties appear and old ones disappear.

That is the reason why FEPS and Policy Solutions have launched this series of reports, entitled 'Populism Report'.

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