

European Progressive Observatory 2022¹

Portugal, 30 January: A Socialist landslide victory

The Portuguese Socialist Party (PS) achieved a landslide election victory that was impressive and surprising. Impressive, as it resulted in an absolute PS majority in the Portuguese parliament, something that had happened only once before in the party's long history. Surprising, as it was won against the odds of the polls before the elections – especially those very close to election day.

This victory was as much a collective one for the party, as it was a personal one for Prime Minister António Costa, whose leadership is clearly appreciated and rewarded by Portuguese voters. In his speech during the election night, Costa strongly underlined the essence of democracy when he said that an "absolute majority is not absolute power", embodying the pledge of the PS to move on towards the future in dialogue with all democratic forces in the country.

Ana Catarina Mendes: "In 2015, the PS assumed the destiny of the country's governance and we still haven't forgotten the situation we found when taking over: a country buffeted by four years of right-wing governance, during which we had constantly been told that there was no alternative to austerity policies, no hope. Despite all odds, however, our government managed to turn the page on austerity and to prove that left-wing policies can not only instil hope again but that they can also set the country on a path towards social justice, equality, and progress".

Bruno Gonçalves: "Coming back to the obvious winner of the election, the Socialist Party, one can only say that its success reaffirms António Costa's approval in Portugal and his importance for the social democratic family in Europe and the world, through the Portuguese Republic's dedication to a just multilateralism and international cooperation. [...] More than just the second-ever absolute majority for the PS, this has been the most

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extraordinary election since the party's foundation. From the *geringonça*-solution in 2015 to an election victory in 2019 that made a minority government possible, the path of the PS has been steady and growing – a remarkable feat given the natural wear and tear of six years of government action. For now, the most thrilling and demanding times begin with the exclusive opportunity of restructuring and reforming the country under the EU Resilience and Recovery Plan (RRP) for a just and fair transition on digital and climate action”.

Maria João Rodrigues: “This new absolute majority seems also to be based on trust and on recognition of the hard work delivered by the PS over the last difficult years, with special merit for its leader Costa: overcoming the austerity paradigm which almost destroyed the country during the eurozone crisis with intensive and creative political action in Portugal and in Europe; leading the presidency of the EU Council to coordinate the European response to the pandemic and the recession; implementing the European Social Pillar with an action plan to fight against worsening social inequalities”.

Pedro Silva Pereira: “The message was clear: when we are heading to a post-pandemic scenario and beginning the implementation of the Recovery and Resilience funds, the Portuguese people wanted stability and the continuation of a progressive agenda to move the country forward. For that, no one better than António Costa [...] After a very successful Portuguese presidency, António Costa was already an important voice on the European political landscape, always trying to build progressive compromises for the future of Europe. For sure, he will be even more so after this remarkable victory. For the socialist family, this is a moment of joy and celebration, but it is, above all, another strong reason to believe that a socialist victory is possible in the upcoming 2024 European elections”.

Tomas Vieira Silva: “The snap elections were called after the defeat of the 2022 budget. In the parliamentary vote, the left-wing parties that had supported past budgets (BE, PCP and PEV), voted with the right-wing parties and rejected the budget proposal, triggering a political crisis. In the midst of a global pandemic and with the implementation of the Recovery Plan ahead, the rejection of the budget and the political crisis that followed created great instability. After six years of stability and several parliamentary agreements, the Portuguese people saw an uncertain future. By conferring an absolute majority onto the PS, the Portuguese showed a ‘red card’ to the political crisis and to those who contributed to creating the instability it caused”.

Malta, 26 March: Third consecutive victory for the Labour Party. What makes social democrats govern better in turbulent times?

The incumbent Labour Party emerged as a strong winner among six parties competing for the 67 seats of the House of Representatives. It won with 55.11%. These votes translated into a clear majority of 38 Members of Parliament. The turnout was 85.3%. But only four women were directly elected to the House.

Having already governed two legislative terms, including through the challenging Covid-19 period, the Labour Party approached the campaign being perceived by the voters as a reliable and responsible political force. It was considered to be distinctive because of its coherent, traditionally social democratic, yet also very modern programme. This programme was also the reference point for the open consultations about a vision for Malta, which resulted in connecting with many individuals, opening the party structures, and drafting an agenda of 1,000 ideas. The mobilisation of women and young people, who largely contributed to this process, was therefore particularly relevant.

Nikita Alamango: “The Labour Party keeps regenerating itself, pushing for a more progressive society, tackling issues such as divorce legislation, sexual health, the personal use of cannabis and the need to create more gender equality in parliament and beyond. At the forefront of these discussions were Labour Youth and Labour Women. They helped bring about much needed legislative changes in these areas, including the gender corrective mechanism, designed to end the male dominance of parliament, which was used for the first time in this election. [...] While this election is one for the books for the Labour Party, the party should not get too comfortable. Labour must remain sensitive, humble, and welcome the public’s opinion, whether it is praise or criticism. But one thing is clear: progressive politics works. A vibrant economy, social reform, equal opportunity and a caring society can be easy bedfellows. A third term of Labour needs to be just as inventive and creative as the previous two, because it is the way to advance society and win approval at the ballot box”.

Aaron Farrugia: “While I would have wished to see a stronger opposition for the sake of the health of our democracy, I am glad that the progressive party is back in government, with a strong mandate to continue improving our country and making bold decisions towards a brighter future for all”.

Hungary, 3 April: Hungary’s bogus election

If you thought Hungarian politics could not surprise you anymore, you would have to think again. Despite abysmal management of the Covid-19 crisis, the experience of runaway inflation, and teachers organising nationwide strikes due to poor salaries and working conditions, Viktor Orbán managed to increase the vote share of his party and retain a constitutional majority in parliament. Outside the capital city Budapest, the one-party state is practically complete, and after four years of right-wing assaults against institutions of culture and higher education, Orbán is now expected to turn his guns on local governments where the democratic opposition still holds positions.

This outcome is based on a decade-long distortion of the Hungarian constitutional system, the elimination of checks and balances over the executive branch of state power, and the subordination of the vast majority of public and private media to the will of

just one person. Nevertheless, the European Union institutions just continued in their tranquillised state until this sinister stage of autocratisation was reached, and it was only a few days *after* the election result was made public, that the European Commission finally came out with the launch of the rule of law mechanism and another cluster of infringement procedures.

However, it is also important to explain why and how the new way to organise the democratic opposition in Hungary worked out, and in what ways it did not in 2022. Nevertheless, in the end the Russia-Ukraine war made a decisive impact on voters' choices, allowing the incumbent party to deploy the full force of its media superiority to present a deceptive picture. Lessons must be drawn again for the reconstruction of progressive politics in Hungary by correcting the mistakes of its past strategies and entering a period of comprehensive renewal with regard to its content, style and organisation.

Attila Ágh: "The EU has neglected the Orbán regime's constant undermining of democracy and the similar situation taking place in some of the other 'new' member states. It is now no longer just Hungary that is paying a high price for this neglect, but the EU too – the whole situation having been brought about by the ill-famed policy of Angela Merkel, with its dangerous mixture of benign neglect and soft support for the emerging autocracy in the Orbán regime. [...] Orbán's turning an emerging democracy into a well-organised autocracy needs to sound alarm bells for the EU too, because this regime is not only a big burden for the Hungarian population but also threatens EU integration and EU crisis management. The European bloc must clearly give up its decision-delaying and conflict-avoiding strategy with regard to its new member states, because with his 'successful' autocratic regime Orbán has presented himself as the biggest enemy of European integration. The EU is currently financing systemic corruption in an undemocratic regime. It is high time, therefore, that the European Union switched from 'dialogue' to 'decisions'".

András Bíró-Nagy: "Studies on the values of Hungarian society not only reject the idea that left-wing politics cannot have a majority in Hungary today, but also confirm that only left-wing politics can potentially defeat Fidesz. Although the majority of Hungarian society is conservative on cultural issues, the majority expects left-wing answers on economic and social issues. For the progressive political forces, it is time to announce as dead the strategy of appealing to 'centrist' and 'disappointed Fidesz voters'".

Ágnes Kunhalmi: "The most immediate task is to maintain the unity of the democratic opposition, while we also have to reckon with the transformation of the fragmented party structure. Regaining the confidence of voters that was lost by Jobbik on the moderately conservative plank, and by Momentum on the liberal plank, seems to be a key task, while on the left the unification and strengthening of the socialist, social democratic and green political planks is the most important goal".

France, 24 April: In the end, it's still mais, non

The incumbent president Emmanuel Macron received 58.8% of the vote and became the second president to accomplish re-election in the 21st century. His contender, Marine Le Pen, ended up with 41.5%. This put an end to the anxiety that a representative of the far-right Rassemblement National could take over the Palais de l'Élysée.

Although no words have been spared to celebrate this victory, several aspects of this election suggest that the outcome is far from black and white. There was a large abstention of almost one third of the voters. The far-right decisively gained strength. And half of the votes cast in the second round in favour of the president were an expression of the opposition to his competitor. This does not amount to a strong mandate and indicates how unwelcome the policies of the previous five years have been, leading to protest movements such as the yellow vests.

The final duel among two people who had already faced each other in the presidential elections in 2017, alongside the results that the other candidates obtained, suggests that there is a profound tectonic shift inside the French political-party landscape. The Republicans and the Socialist Party, which, until only two decades ago, dominated the stage and were the reason for speaking about France as a 'two-party system plus', saw their candidates obtaining together less than 10%. With Jean-Luc Mélenchon coming third in the first round, and being by far the most preferred among the first-time voters, there was a valid question of how and in which constellation Progressives could hope to return as a viable alternative in the future.

Mathieu Fulla: "While several social democratic and socialist parties are regaining a certain electoral audience in Western Europe, in the French presidential race, the socialist candidate Anne Hidalgo won 1.75% – the lowest for the Socialist Party since the beginning of the Fifth Republic. [...] The marginalisation of intermediaries between the political Left and the popular milieux contributes to explaining why an increasing number of workers progressively broke with the PS and the French Communist Party. [...] Most of them expressed their distrust towards representative democracy by regularly opting to abstain in elections, with some deciding to vote for the radical right party Front National (FN), which started to gain support in the 1984 European elections. Only a minority rallied behind radical left organisations. Above all, an increasing majority among the new generations of blue-collar workers, employees, and craftspeople, stopped voting or chose to vote for the right or radical right parties".

Philippe Marlière: "The reshaping of the French party system has also been achieved by triangulating themes and policies of the far right. This has further normalised Le Pen's party and legitimised the candidacy of Zemmour, a man who has already been condemned twice by French justice for incitement to racial hatred. [...] Under Macron, traditional opposition on socio-economic issues has been supplanted by endless culture wars on Islam, immigration and national identity. This has put off the young and pushed many of them to support Jean-Luc Mélenchon, a radical-left candidate who came third in the first round".

Sweden, 11 September: 176-173 – the big issues behind the result

On 11 September, Sweden went to the polls to choose the 349 members of the Rikstag. The election came after a tough and turbulent period. It was marked by the Covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine, which saw the country moving away from neutrality and applying for NATO membership. What is more, it was a demanding legislative period during which social democrats led the government with a steady hand, despite the withdrawal of the support from coalition partners and the challenge posed by a no-confidence vote against Stefan Löfven. Then, in November 2021, Magdalena Andersson, who had served as a finance minister, took over, becoming the first female prime minister of Sweden.

The campaign had been intense, spinning around issues that show how much polarisation, divisions, and anxiety there is in Swedish society. Migration, crime and the emerging cost-of-living crisis were the main themes. The Social Democrats worked hard, conducting a record number of conversations, calls and rallies. Even though in the end they gained an additional 7 seats, reaching 107 in total, the block around them came behind the block around the Moderate Party (173 to 176). Evidently most worrying is the result of Sweden Democrats, a party with nazi-roots and a neo-fascist ideology, which made the biggest gain (in terms of support as well as in seat numbers). They became the second-largest party, with 73 seats (five more than the Moderates), having won an unprecedented number of workers' votes.

Jenny Marika Lindgren Åsbrink: “With the SD (Sweden Democrats) being the most disliked party of all among the electorate and without previous experience in governing, it seems unlikely that the SD party leader Jimmie Åkesson could gather enough support in the obligatory parliamentary vote to become prime minister. The party will, however, have a considerable influence over a right-wing government, which will not be able to form a majority in parliament without the SD. This means a dramatic change in the political landscape in Sweden, where right-wing populists for a long time had difficulties in gaining political momentum. Not so anymore. [...] SAP has been clear in stressing the threat the SD poses to humanism, to equality and also to national security, since there have been numerous incidents where SD activists and politicians have taken sides with Putin, Orbán and the like. The strategy of reminding the public of the party's roots in racist and Nazi movements (in this election as well as in 2018) is in all probability the explanation for the growth of support for SAP among the demographic group with which we usually have not been strong: well educated urban men and women”.

Anders Lindberg: “The big winners are the Sweden Democrats, a party founded in 1988 by neo-Nazis and neofascists from movements that are directly rooted in the extreme right that survived the second world war. One of its founders, SS-Rottenführer Gustaf Ekström, even served in the SS-Hauptamt in Berlin during the war as a propaganda specialist for the Waffen-SS. [...] The conservatives attacked Magdalena Andersson for completely fictional political proposals, they lied, and they smeared in a Trumpian fashion. They used attack-ads (a relatively new phenomenon here). It worked. And the right also used the internet

effectively – especially TikTok and Youtube – meaning that first-time voters massively turned out in support of the right. It looks like Cambridge Analytica from the Trump campaign all over again. Why the left was unprepared for these tactics is an enigma. But they have some homework to do”.

Lisa Pelling: “To win back the voters lost to the Sweden Democrats, the progressive parties have to offer truly progressive politics. According to detailed exit polls, the Sweden Democrats have now almost as much support among workers as the Social Democrats (32% vs 29%). But according to a recently published study, another factor might be even more important in explaining the success of the Sweden Democrats: they are the largest party among the unemployed, and the second largest party among those on sick leave. The living conditions of these groups deteriorated dramatically under the previous right-wing government (2006-2014). It made massive cuts to the social insurance system: lowering unemployment benefits, making it much harder to receive sick leave, and increasing the income gaps between people at work and people on pension. During the past eight years, the Social Democrats have done very little to improve the situation of these groups, and Swedish discontent has kept growing. Still, (with the exception of a long overdue increase of the lowest pensions under pressure from the Left Party) the Social Democrats did not campaign on making improvements either – unlike the Sweden Democrats”.

Eric Sundström: “This was the darkest election campaign in living memory. The conservative Moderate Party proposed compulsory tests for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) for all five-year-olds in immigrant-heavy suburbs (to counter crime later in life). The Liberal Party suggested mandatory language tests for two-year-olds “who are not enrolled in preschool” (code for children of immigrants). The Social Democrats talked about a cap on residents with “non-Nordic background” in immigrant neighbourhoods, and Magdalena Andersson promised a Sweden without any ‘Somali-towns’. [...] As in the rest of Europe, the overriding challenge for Social Democrats is to find bold reforms that can reverse the strong trends that divide our country and allow populists to grow. Ideally, this should be done while building sustainable societies at the same time. However, there has been a lack of progress in this regard over the last eight years of governing with a very divided parliament. The divide kept growing, and voters on the wrong side took notice. The working class decided the outcome of the election, and the Social Democrats lost: Among ‘workers’, the Social Democratic Party won 31.8%, while the Sweden Democrats won 28.8%”.

Italy, 25 September: The eclipse after the ‘night of pride’ – Georgia Meloni’s quest for power and beyond

The snap election followed this summer’s crisis that saw the fall of the coalition government led by Mario Draghi. This was the first time that citizens would choose their representatives after the 2020 constitutional reform, cutting the number of members of parliament to 400 in the Chamber and 200 in the Senate (from 630 and 315 respectively).

The emotional, polarising campaign did not boost mobilisation, and the vote had an unprecedentedly low turnout of 63.7%. The centre-left bloc (including the Democratic Party, Civic Commitment, Greens and Left Alliance, and More Europe) obtained 26.13% of the vote – falling far behind the right wing (composed of the Brothers of Italy, Lega, Forza Italia and ‘Us Moderates’). The bitter outcome led to the resignation of PD Secretary Enrico Letta and to the decision to summon a party Congress, where the PD will need to answer the call for self-reflection regarding its own identity and organisation, and consider how to regain ground in the predominantly blue map.

The absolute majority that Georgia Meloni commands is reason for serious concern. Her party takes pride in evoking a neo-fascist (or post-fascist) narrative. And while she speaks about her readiness to revive Italy, she spurs a sense of injustice among voters. Today, the enemies are migrants, but whom she picks next is yet to be seen. The European Union and several EU national governments have warned that they will watch her moves closely. Others – including the Polish PiS and the Hungarian Fidesz – joined the Italian prime minister in her joy. It seems that Meloni’s ‘night of pride’ may turn into a serious eclipse for Italy and the EU, which will make the dire winter even more severe.

Anna Colombo: “The warning lights are all flashing. The new government, according to the vast majority of its composition, is anti-European, sovereignist, inspired by Orbán’s bravery to ‘defend his national interests’, anti-vax and therefore against a ‘Europe of health’. The vast majority of it (Brothers of Italy and Lega) voted against the NextGenerationEU and the Italian Recovery Plan (by far the most substantial one) and would have preferred, as Meloni said, a “direct intervention of the IMF” in Italy. [...] The Italian centre-left must be ready for a serious discussion about identity, values, goals and leading principles. And about unity, including also what is left of the 5 Stars Movement. But also what is left of the PES with its allies. On one hand, there is nationalism, the end of the EU as we know it, no new international multilateral order to promote peace, equality, financial and energy market rules, and ecological change. No social protection. No just and progressive tax system, no tax for the rich. Privatisation of public services. Fossil fuels proliferation. And on the other hand, there is a very strong international movement, that goes back to basic and courageous social democracy, that builds on international, democratic political movements and parties capable of generating a new positive hegemony in our societies. That gives real, sustainable answers to our people. It is a choice. There is no choice in between”.

Fortunato Musella: “The latest parliamentary election is a turning point for the Italian Republic. Giorgia Meloni reached a historical victory, paving the way for her post-fascist formation. There are no serious consequences for the future of democracy to be expected. Yet electoral results showed strong elements of fluidity within the party system that could provide new lessons for the largely defeated centre-left coalition. [...] In a context of economic crisis and war, it is not easy, even for experienced politicians, to govern. But as former prime minister Giulio Andreotti used to say, from the height of his long Christian Democratic experience, in the end, power wears out those who do not have it. For the progressive electorate an element of consolation – and a lesson again!

– could be the fact that, for the first time, this sentence can be pronounced by a female prime minister also in Italy”.

Michele Prospero: “Now that the right has triumphed (in terms of parliamentary seats won, not in the number of votes, since the non-coalition centre-left parties received a clear majority of votes), there is a question still hanging in the air: what about the lack of a culture of governance, the fragility of the ruling class, the true stature of Giorgia Meloni? External constraints, the predictable reactions of the markets, will hamper the creative finance strategies that have been promised to miraculously reduce the fiscal burden. Once the path of tax cuts is no longer viable, the government will lurch onto the favourite right-wing ground, where vigilance from Brussels or international investors is far more accommodating. Symbolic policies (civil rights, abortion, historical revisionism) will then remain the only weapons available to polarise the nation. The working people who voted for the right in the belief that the future government’s enemies would be others (migrants, ‘deviants’, creatives, slackers claiming the basic income), and felt reassured by the silence of the trade unions signalling a calm period of social harmony, will have to think again. For the ultra-right government, lashing out at sexual preferences won’t suffice. The financial crisis, the recovery, the generous renovation subsidies for homeowners will have to be paid for somehow. And as always, the workforce is the most reliable cash machine for government coalitions”.

Eleonora Poli: “Italians are mainly asking for three simple things: to have a job, to have a decent salary and to live in a secure environment. Meloni used simple rhetoric based on nationalism, identity and tradition to appear close to the people, and to appear as the leader whom Italians could trust the most to fight their battles. [...] Moreover, she led the only party in parliament that opposed Mario Draghi’s coalition government. She claimed this was in order to remain coherent with her party’s ideas, but conveniently it made her appear as an authentic leader, and it allowed her to start campaigning long before Draghi’s previous government fell”.

Latvia, 1 October: War at the doorstep defines the outcomes

On Saturday, 1 October 2022, Latvian citizens went to the polls to elect 100 members of the Saeima. The preceding campaign was incredibly tough and exposed two underpinning processes. First, it evolved around the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its consequences. Despite the country’s straightforward standpoint in solidarity with the victim of the aggression, the discussions about sanctions and European involvement were more divisive. Almost a quarter of the 1.2 million Latvian population belongs to the Russian ethnic minority. Many of them have relatives on the other side of the border. Second, the impact of the conflict has been a polarising factor and resulted in a tectonic shift: four of the five largest parties of 2018 fell below the parliamentary threshold of 5%, this time. One of them was the PES member ‘Saskaņa’ (‘Harmony’). At the same, four new parties made it into

parliament, taking place on both the right and left sides of the aisle. The winner, with 19% of the vote, was the 'New Unity Party' of the incumbent Prime Minister Krišjānis Kariņš, who had pledged to continue the current governmental coalition.

Jānis Urbanovičs: "For several decades, 'Saskaņa', the Social Democratic Party, had received the unequivocal support of the Russian-speakers in elections, which has allowed us to be regularly the biggest party in parliament. When we woke up in a completely different world on the morning of 24 February, we faced a dilemma: to fundamentally condemn the war started by Russia or remain silent about it, which would have meant morally supporting the aggressor".

Bulgaria, 2 October: It was complex, it is complicated

Bulgaria faced another electoral attempt, the fourth in just 18 months. The low turnout of not even 40% indicates both exhaustion and disappointment among the citizens. Indeed, disappointment echoed strongly in the campaign, which was dominated by the question of the war, and also by the issues of the quality of public politics and the accountability of the institutions. Following the parliamentary vote of no-confidence initiated by the conservative GERB ('Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria') against the four parties of the government of Kiril Petkov (from the 'We continue the Change' party), 24 parties and six coalitions competed to get into the 240-seat chamber. GERB managed to take first place on the podium, with a quarter of the votes cast and 67 seats. That is very far short of the majority of 121 seats that are needed to form a government. The PES member, the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which had been part of the incumbent government and ran in a coalition with the green 'Ecoglasnost' and the 'Trakiya Political Club', noted yet another low point, falling to the level of 9.31% and losing one of its previous 25 mandates. The landscape looks complicated enough not to rule out a fifth snap election, which may increase citizens' worries even more about the costs and effectiveness of yet another round.

Ildiko Otova: "Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brought back to relevance one of the biggest cleavages in Bulgarian Society: Russophiles vs Russophobes. In the following months, the centrifugal forces within the already complicated coalition intensified. In June, the government was overturned in a no-confidence vote, occasioned by the decision of 'There is such a people' to withdraw support from the cabinet".

Georgi Pirinski: "The upshot has been a fundamental decoupling of politics from citizens' preoccupations, resulting in an almost complete collapse of trust in elections, institutions and the overall democratic political process. [...] What follows now is the constitution of the new 48th National Assembly with parallel efforts to reach some sort of shared approach to forming a cabinet. As things stand now, the hopes to succeed are dwindling markedly. The most disturbing prospect for the immediate future is therefore

another aborted legislature, one more caretaker cabinet and a new fifth round of elections in early 2023! All this entails a high risk of the virtual collapse of basic democratic processes and institutions”.

Denmark, 1 November: The Danish gambit – snap elections reconfirm the lead for Social Democrats

Danish voters were called to choose the 179 members of the Folketing in snap elections. The preceding campaign proved to be very challenging, both because of the international and European contexts, and because of the domestic situation. As many as 14 parties competed, a political fragmentation which additionally induced the already high volatility of the Danish electorate, seeing, this time, 50% of voters changing their political preferences.

In the end, the electoral night saw the incumbent prime minister Mette Frederiksen achieve the best result for the Social Democrats in two decades with 27.6% and 50 MPs. The ‘red block’ managed to secure 90 seats, which is a majority – even if a slim one. The result leaves Social Democrats with a question on how to build bridges, consolidating the various political stakeholders behind tough challenges that the new government will undoubtedly continue to face, especially in the combined energy and cost-of-living crises.

Peter Koch Palshøj: “The question after the elections is if the Social Democrats will be able to continue a progressive agenda or if the overall election result will push a new Social Democratic lead government into a more liberal centrist agenda. The Social Democrats are now by far the largest party in Denmark. [...] They won the last elections in 2019 on a traditional Social Democratic platform of more robust welfare, not least improving a new right to early pension for workers who started their working life early, and better-balanced development in smaller cities and the countryside vis-a-vis the biggest cities plus a tighter policy on refugees and immigrants. This strategy improved its standing amongst its traditional voter group of workers outside the bigger cities. That reversed the trend over the last 20 years, where a significant part of this voter group moved to the right-wing Liberals and the right-wing Danish Peoples Party”.

Britta Thomsen: “For the first time in 20 years, immigration was not the core theme in a Danish election because the Social Democrats have vowed to remain tough on migration, depriving right-leaning parties of a possible rallying point. Instead, hospitals, healthcare and social care have been highlighted as the main concern of the voters. Thousands of posts in the public sector are vacant, partly due to low salaries, which also has a very important gender dimension. The government therefore promised to raise salaries in some sectors after the election. [...] For the first time in Danish history, women constitute 44.5% of the MPs, without gender quotas as there is great resistance to these quotas in almost all Danish parties. Some of the parties elected more women than others. The Social Democrats are represented by 34.5% of female MPs”.

Slovenia, 13 November: Something borrowed, something new and still some blues

Even though more than one third of the electorate was still undecided just a few days before the elections, in the end the turnout reached almost 70%. The outcome was a bold rejection of the prime minister Janez Janša and his authoritarian ideas, many of which he seems to have gladly borrowed from illiberal democracies in Poland and Hungary. To see his project's defeat was more than a relief. It was seen as a catalyst of new hope in the future of democracy.

But, as always, there is more to the story. The victory went to the liberal 'Freedom Movement' of Robert Golob, the newly established liberal party that won 41 out of 90 seats. Such a result had never been achieved before in Slovenia. But it also meant that the so-called traditional parties could only count on meagre support and, in the end, the future of the system of political parties in Slovenia is in question.

Finally, the Social Democrats (SD) under the leadership of Tanja Fajon received 6.6%. This placed it as the second force on the centre-left with seven MPs. Though the SD is anticipating playing an important role in a new governmental coalition with the 'Freedom Movement', it will need to further digest the result. Especially as it had run such a fierce and energetic campaign, with a real alternative offered by the visionary programme that was developed in a remarkably inclusive and participatory process.

Neva Grašič: "The SD programme – a plan for a new decade of development – was recognised as the most thorough political programme, containing exhaustive measures to help overcome the inequalities within our society, which the policies of the current government had further exacerbated. A reform of the healthcare system, a guarantee of decent wages and pensions, free kindergartens and free meals for pupils, and an affordable housing policy were some of the measures firmly anchored in the Social Democratic vision of society. [...] With a more consolidated parliament of five parties, a new government under the 'Freedom Movement' leader, Robert Golob, is expected to be formed before the summer. The SD is likely to become part of the new coalition. Nevertheless, the political challenges lying ahead are great: the effects of the energy crisis and rising prices, the post-pandemic recovery and the reform of the health system, deepening inequalities, a depleted budget and record debt, unstable international relations, and the urgent responses to climate change. It is the task of Social Democrats to be a strong counterweight to the liberal policies expected by the 'Freedom Movement', and to make sure Slovenia returns to a socially just, progressive society, based on solidarity and equality for all people".

Matjaz Nachtigal: "During the Slovene EU Council presidency, too many conflicts took place, such as the conflict with the national press agency STA and a conflict with the European Prosecutor's office to appoint the Slovene prosecutors. Support of the SDS by the EPP and its leader Manfred Weber only a few days before the election was understood by a large segment of the Slovene electorate as a blank cheque for further undermining independent institutions in Slovenia. [...] In the longer run, the hope remains that Social

Democracy at the national level – as well as at the EU level – will find coherent structural, institutional and policy proposals to reconnect with the voters and to enable more inclusive and sustainable democratic development at all levels of the international polity”.

Blaž Zgaga: “The landslide victory of the recently founded ‘Freedom Movement’ at the last Slovenian elections confirms the Slovenian people’s commitment to western values, and it corrected the political shift the country had experienced since 2020. [...] Despite a significant majority in the Slovenian parliament, the new coalition [Freedom Movement, a social liberal and green liberal party] will face many challenges in a period of health and security crises. Many institutions, particularly the police, the army, security and intelligence agencies, tax administration, public media and others have been seriously damaged during the vast political purges of the far-right government”.

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