

Trapped in a Populist Imagination: Slovenia under Janša

Article by Alem Maksuti

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On July 1st, Slovenia took over the rotating presidency of the EU. However, the country's relations with the EU are currently strained, as Prime Minister Janez Janša and his party continue to pursue a course of populist tactics and rhetoric, undermining democracy and curtailing freedoms and fundamental rights. Political scientist Alem Maksuti provides some insight into Janša's regime and its rise, and where it might be headed.

Green European Journal: Since Slovenia is rarely the focus of international news, how would you sum up the situation in the country to those living outside it?

Alem Maksuti: In Slovenia, a minority government is in power: The Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) is currently in coalition with two conservative parties and supported by a far-right Eurosceptic party. The fourth coalition member (Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia) left the coalition in December in protest at the "Orbanisation" of Slovenia. SDS is led by the autocrat Janez Janša. His policy is a dead-end from which there is no return. It is a delusion that is poisoning foreign relations, impoverishing society, and slowly but surely pushing Slovenia towards the periphery of Europe. Janša bases his political strategy on what he calls "anti-communism"; he speaks of an unfinished transition (from communist, multinational Yugoslavia to an independent Slovenia) and advocates for a "second republic", constantly emphasising the shortcomings of the former Yugoslav regime.

Over the past year, in the self-righteous manner of his role model, Donald Trump, Janša has been seeking to usurp practically all the branches of the state, from the media to the courts. In addition, the measures implemented by the Slovenian government in the fight against Covid-19 are simply not working. Janša has lost the trust of citizens. People are frustrated, and the government does not have majority support among the public (only about 30 percent). Thus, the only solution would be early elections, which Janša is avoiding any way he can. He is aware that there will be no willing coalition partners with which to form a new government in the next parliament. He went too far. His policy has no future.

The next elections are due in 2022. Talking to The New York Times, the philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues that it is too early to write off Janša, in part due to the "impotence of the Left". Could he yet make a comeback, or is he too isolated and weak?

A victory for Janša at the next elections would only be a Pyrrhic victory because he will not have a majority in parliament to form a coalition. That is the first problem.

Žižek's assessment of the impotence of the Left seems abstract to me. I understand that the Left has many problems, but the results of the next elections in Slovenia will be determined by anti-Janša sentiments. We have four opposition parties that will most likely

form the next coalition. Janša will be relegated to the right corner of parliament where he'll remain as a destructive opposition. Of course, the strength of Janša's party depends on the relations within the party system. In this sense, it is not possible to write him off completely. There is always the possibility of him coming back but it is still too early to speculate about that.

Authoritarian populist leaders usually start their takeover of democratic institutions with the courts, the media, and civil society. Are all these institutions under attack?

Janša, like Trump, denies reality and continuously labels those who confront him with the consequences of his actions as his greatest opponents. In this sense, his biggest opponents are the political opposition, the media, the courts, and, of course, the people. A good example of Janša's attitude towards the independent media, is his treatment of the Slovenian Press Agency (STA). The government threatened to withhold the funding of the STA, even though it is obliged by law to guarantee its operations, and despite the European Commission's warnings.

Practically every month, the Constitutional Court points to the unconstitutional nature of laws sent to parliament by Janša's government. Janša and his ministers react by calling this a conspiracy by the Constitutional Court, whose nine-member senate includes Dr. Rok Čeferin, the brother of Aleksander Čeferin, UEFA president. So the conspiracy is supposedly led by forces of the deep state, of which the Čeferin family is alleged to be one of the fundamental pillars.

What were the reasons for Janša's electoral victory? The refugee crisis is often mentioned, but do economic challenges and the country's Yugoslav or post-Yugoslav history play a role?

It is characteristic of all European countries for there to be between 5 and 10 per cent support for right-wing nationalists. As the average turnout is around 50 per cent, and this group is more likely to vote, this 5-10 percent support will turn into a 10 to 20 per cent vote share for parties with nationalist rhetoric. The same goes for Janša's SDS party. Regardless of what is on the political agenda, his party in Slovenia gets around 20 per cent.

All Janša has is anti-communism. His party's political essence was cemented in 1991, from which it has never moved on. If you watch or read the SDS's own media, you have the feeling that they are still in the 1990s, with Janša taking on the role of the main character, a role which he enjoys and to which his constituents agree in exchange for treating their own frustrations. In this way, the circle between the leader and his supporters is closed.

Janša does not respect democratic standards, but has he overseen their deterioration to the point of compromising the integrity of elections and ending the level playing field for other political actors?

Yes. Of course. In the past, Janša only recognised elections in which he was the winner, and this will go on in the future. In the 2014 elections, for example, he claimed that the election was stolen from him just because he was in prison at the time, being convicted in the Patria affair (a political controversy surrounding claims of bribery of Slovenian officials by the

Finnish defence industry company Patria).

He claimed that the 2018 elections were illegitimate because his SDS party received the most votes (close to 25 per cent) but still did not manage to form a coalition. This is, of course, pure nonsense in a multi-party democracy. Janša, like Trump, only acknowledges elections in which he is the winner. He wants the media to report according to his truth. Everything else is superfluous to him; and he would rather abolish the mechanisms of democracy. He is a classic autocrat, just as Viktor Orbán is.

Janša is seen as a close ally of the Hungarian prime minister. Hungarian investors (close to the governing Fidesz party) have in recent years invested in media outlets supportive of Janša's party. This gives the impression that Hungary is attempting to create another "illiberal democracy" in its neighbourhood. What role does Hungary play in Slovenia?

Janša is fascinated by Orbán's political style. But Slovenia is not Hungary, and the SDS is not Fidesz. In a proportional multi-party system, the SDS will never get an absolute majority. However, Hungarian influence in Slovenia has been growing over the years.

First of all, this influence is especially evident when we look at the media outlets close to the SDS party. They run a propaganda machine of one party (SDS) and one man (Janez Janša), following the example of Orbán and the media in Hungary. (In some cases with the involvement of Hungarian investors.) The problem is that these "media" are promoting all kinds of racists, homophobes, and other lunatics. They attack opposition politicians, journalists, intellectuals, and even ordinary citizens, who dare to be critical of the government and the cult of "Janšism". In Slovenia, these media are referred to as "the factory of evil" by the majority of the public.

The second aspect is the political influence of Hungary. The ruling coalition wants the Hungarian state and companies to invest in Slovenian infrastructure projects (such as the second track of the Divača-Koper railway line). As these are projects financed from the state budget, the government makes direct decisions. Janša wants to make the most of this political power.

The third area of influence is private investment. At the forefront, of course, are financial funds and banks. The most recent example is the Hungarian OTP bank, which bought a stake in the Slovenian NKBM, making it a larger banking group than NLB (once the largest state-owned bank). Although these are the operations of independent companies, the circle of people around Janša and his party have been implicated in numerous corruption scandals, which means that we have to monitor developments in this area very carefully.

What exactly does Janša's party stand for ideologically?

Janša's political capital rests on the ideological basis of nationalism, which substantiates national sovereignty by the principle of ethnicity. This is contrary to the idea of liberal democracy, based on the sovereignty of citizens, and opposed to the nation as the organic category.

Democracy presupposes freedom of choice between different interests by different social groups; nationalist ideology is based on the link between nation and territory. Janša has

used the nominal transformation of the old Yugoslav one-party system into a quasi-plural society, characterised as a multi-party system, to hide his intention to create a new form of authoritarian state organisation. Janša's policies confirm this with each passing day.

You argue that a possible early election would be likely to put an end to Janša's reign. But would a new government be capable of cleaning up after the SDS and rebuilding democratic institutions?

The next government will face several challenges as a legacy of Janša's regime. The first problem will be the rehabilitation of public debt, as the Janša administration dug a multibillion-euro hole in the budget. Restoring trust in state institutions will also be a difficult task.

Slowly but surely, we are sinking into the living mud, from which it will be increasingly difficult to escape. The opposition, such as it is, should therefore get serious. Now is not the time to debate post-material values, ecology and the fate of the planet. The most successful opposition party will position itself among loosely allied parties as the leader and agent of change in the next parliamentary elections.

As of July, Slovenia holds the rotating presidency of the EU Council. This will be the second time it has done so, since the country joined the EU in 2004. The first presidency in 2008 took place during Janša's first term as prime minister, at a time when his politics were far more moderate. Will this presidency be marked by conflict?

The first thing to remember is that the EU Presidency is a matter of protocol that would be carried out regardless of the political party and prime minister in power (although Janša, of course, believes that he alone is capable of it).

Janša's politics are determined by ideological positions and permanent conflict. For example, the war with the media is the essence of his individuality, which means he will never stop with the politics of conflict. Throughout his career, Janša has been addressing the most paranoid elements of the Slovenian society with simplified conspiracy theories with the aim of creating general mistrust and paranoia, which will develop an environment for action and increase his own privileges. He communicates by selectively choosing the arguments he uses to form his own truth. Regardless of Slovenia's EU presidency, he will continue to do this.

What can the EU do to help Slovenia's democracy?

First, the EU should have zero tolerance for Janša's policies that encroach upon the field of independent media and the judiciary, or that undermine other state institutions. Secondly, the EU should categorically defend the rule of law and democracy in Slovenia. Janšism builds on the actions of an individual or organised groups that, without objective criteria and legal basis, take matters into their own hands. Whenever they try to do so, the EU should clearly condemn it.

It would also be useful for the Slovenian people for Janša and his actions to be closely scrutinised during the Slovenian presidency. It is necessary to finally reveal who he is and what his policy is.

The governing SDS is a member of the European People's Party (EPP) in the European Parliament. Is this a source of conflict in Brussels, or does it rather provide shelter for SDS?

I am convinced that important changes will take place in this area in the future. The EPP's policy is becoming too narrow a framework for Janša and his SDS. For example, while preparations for the presidency of the Council of the EU were in full swing, Janša and his party were preparing a congress resolution entitled "For the defence of the constitutional foundations of the Slovenian State" - a cheap populist pamphlet in which Janša and his party colleagues deal with an imaginary opponent: "cultural Marxism, Leninism, Kardeljism (roughly: Yugoslavism), and the deep state, which is connected with foreign networks and movements (Antifa, Black Lives Matter and Woke ideology)".

All of this is the ideological underpinning of Orbán, Matteo Salvini, and other people who believe the world is one big conspiracy. Janša actually believes that Slovenia is ruled by a deep state; that the world is led by George Soros through non-governmental organisations; that Hitler and the Yugoslav president Josip Broz Tito are equal criminals; that in Antifa the fascists are disguised as communists. All this is the basis for a new group of parties in Europe that are turning the political space and history upside down.

How do you see the role of progressive parties such as the Greens (both on the European and the national level) in fostering change or protecting democratic institutions in the country?

The result of the election in Slovenia (or in other democracies) is influenced by more than just party programmes, depending on the political context in which elections take place. Of course, a wide variety of ideological options are welcome in a democracy, as they enrich the democratic process. I am not convinced that in the abundance of parties in Slovenia (the current Parliament is made up of nine parties, five of them in opposition), the Green parties will succeed in addressing their voters. The integration of Green parties with the EU level is definitely a good starting point for success. It should be noted that national issues prevail in the national political arena, which are often related to ideological topics for domestic voters. In this sense, the memory of World War Two is still a more useful mobilising tool than environmental protection and the protection of the planet. It is sad, but that is our reality.

Occasional meetings of the opposition bloc are not enough. Debates on a green and digital future will also not help. The conciliatory discourse of the President of Slovenia Borut Pahor is also not the right path. It is necessary to set up a political platform for the categorical rejection of everything that comes from the SDS party and its satellites. We need a clear political platform that will condemn Janšism and all the practices of this ideology and will change the structure of the Slovenian state and society day by day. We need anti-Janšism as a political platform.



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