

Slovenia's Choice Has High Stakes for Europe

Article by Tomaž Zaniuk

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Despite having a population of just two million, the outcome of Slovenia's parliamentary election is likely to have ripple effects well beyond its borders. For the past four years, Slovenia has been governed by a centre-left coalition headed by prime minister Robert Golob. As he faces a formidable challenge from former premier Janez Janša, can Golob escape the incumbent curse, or will Slovenia – and Europe – swing further to the right?

Slovenian voters have never been very kind to incumbents. Except for liberal democrat Janez Drnovšek, who led the country from 1992 to 2002 (interrupted only by the six-month right-wing premiership of Andrej Bajuk in 2000), no other prime minister has received a second consecutive mandate. However, this Sunday's parliamentary elections may change that.

Due to the proportionality of Slovenia's electoral system, no political party has ever won a majority in the 90-seat parliament since the country's independence in 1991. As such, it is not just important to know which party garners the most votes and is granted a mandate to form a coalition government, but also which smaller parties successfully cross the 4 per cent electoral threshold. Yet with just days remaining before the election, it is clear that the race mainly boils down to the rivalry between two political figures.

Leading the polls is former minister Janez Janša's Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), followed by incumbent premier Robert Golob's Gibanje Svoboda ("Freedom Movement"). Still, with public opinion sharply divided and the candidates polling close, the outcome of the vote is far from certain.

Janša has served as Slovenia's prime minister three times. He is still a leading figure in the right-wing political parties under the umbrella of SDS, as well as an ally of Viktor Orbán and an admirer of Donald Trump. Since 2013, Janša has lost every election to political newcomers. He last took office in 2020, when then-prime minister Marjan Šarec resigned to make way for new elections. This, however, backfired, as two political parties changed sides and helped Janša form a coalition that lasted until 2022. This government is remembered for its questionable Covid-19 measures and investments, police brutality against protesters and migrants, attacks on public media and independent culture, and the undermining of state and civil society institutions, among other things.

Golob, on the other hand, is a relatively new face who entered Slovenian politics just before the 2022 elections. He was comfortably settled in his role as general director of the state-owned GEN I electricity company, which was targeted by Janša's government for a political takeover. Taking advantage of public disapproval of the illiberal actions that were being taken so openly in Slovenia for the first time, Golob's newly established Gibanje Svoboda party won a record 41 seats. Svoboda then formed one of the strongest governments in the country's history in coalition with the Social Democrats, and leftist Levica, which was joining government for the first time.

Rivalry and campaign controversies

But what should have been a liberal, social-democratic, and progressive-left government has often given

the impression of trying to sit on two chairs at once. Golob's coalition raised the minimum wage and was friendly towards trade unions even as it accommodated capital representatives; It expressed opposition to wars but supported exporting arms and succumbed to US pressure to increase defence spending to 5 per cent of GDP; and although it recognised the state of Palestine, it refused to join South Africa's genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Moreover, Slovenia reneged on a promise to remove razor wire and fences along the border with Croatia and refused to accept migrants from the most burdened EU member states, choosing instead to pay under the new European Pact on Migration and Asylum. Lastly, although Golob expressed support for the green transition and environmental protection, his government funded energy and sewage projects that destroy rivers and threaten the air quality and drinking water reserves in Ljubljana.

Since taking office, Golob has faced a series of challenges, including changes in the cabinet, the loss of two parliamentary seats, and a failure to keep promises on improving the public health system and implementing tax reforms. Nevertheless, the first-time prime minister's biggest challenge came from opposition leader Janša, who has spent the last four years relentlessly attacking him in a bid to take over executive and legislative power once again.

The two political heavyweights share a number of similarities, particularly in their approach to the media, anti-corruption measures, and the integrity of institutions. Moreover, Golob's coalition has at times taken an explicitly right-wing populist stance. For instance, after 48-year-old Aleš Šutar was killed in Novo Mesto in a fight with a group of Roma people, the government granted new sweeping powers to the police. Intervention laws were enacted that discriminated against the Roma minority and enabled the police to designate a high-risk security area in the centre of Ljubljana, a move that even surprised Janša. This, in turn, led Janša to radicalise his political agenda further.

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The ongoing heated election campaign has also featured unprecedented events and controversy. For instance, dead animals have been found hanging from Svoboda's billboards, and a campaign bicycle of Mi, socialisti! ("We, socialists!") MP Miha Kordiš had its tyres knifed.

But even more importantly, there have been multiple instances of wiretapping. Audio tapes have been released of individuals connected to Golob's government and party that contain compromising remarks about political interference in public institutions and private business affairs. Those incriminated claim that the tapes are edited and, in some cases, AI-generated. However, Janša has once again seized the opportunity to call for the resignation of the "corrupt" Golob government. The police, the Commission for the Prevention of Corruption, and the Intelligence and Security Agency are investigating the matter amid suspicions of foreign interference in the elections.

These suspicions of foreign intervention took on a more urgent shape on 16 March, when prominent civil society organiser Nika Kovač, digital activist Filip Dobranić, and investigative journalist Borut Mekina organised a press conference to present a report titled "The Activities of a Foreign Intelligence Agency in Slovenia Prior to the Parliamentary Elections". The report cites data from Flightradar24, which shows

that a Hawker 800XP private jet owned by the Israeli company Arrow Aviation flew at least three times since November from Tel Aviv to Ljubljana Airport. The aircraft reportedly carried representatives of the Israeli private intelligence firm Black Cube. On 22 December, all four passengers allegedly went directly to the SDS headquarters, where they were personally greeted by Janez Janša.

Black Cube has a reputation for wiretapping and extortion. The company sets up fake companies and profiles, targets individuals, and then deletes all the fake data. The gathered materials are then anonymously distributed to the public. In 2016, some of the company's representatives were convicted for gathering compromising materials against Laura Kövesi, who was the head of the anti-corruption office in Romania at the time. The firm was also hired by American former film producer and convicted sex offender Harvey Weinstein to control prosecutors and journalists and harass his victims. Non-governmental organisations and the media were also targeted by Black Cube in Viktor Orbán's Hungary.

The revelations raise more questions than can be answered before the election. What was the cost of this operation, and who paid for it? Why did Janša invite an Israeli private intelligence firm to Ljubljana in the first place?

Janša's politicking

While Janša has previously helped establish satellite parties, these have generally remained marginal, as they target the same pool of voters as SDS. In Golob's term, however, a more significant split emerged. Former long-time SDS member, foreign minister, Anže Logar was forced to leave the party, with Janša demanding that he return his mandate.

Logar refused, and instead secured the support of two other MPs – Eva Irgl from SDS and Tine Novak from Svoboda – allowing him to form an independent parliamentary group. According to a poll conducted by Mediana for the public broadcaster RTV Slovenija, Anže Logar's party, the Democrats, looks set to enter parliament. The quest for centre-oriented political voters who find Janša's rhetoric too aggressive and radical was evidently successful. Notably, Logar has simply refused to clarify whether he is willing to form a government led by Janša, fuelling speculation that the Democrats is a satellite party.

It remains uncertain whether any additional smaller parties will cross the threshold to enter parliament. One potential entrant is the anti-vax populist party Resni.ca ("Truth"), which gained traction in the wake of the radicalisation of Janša's last government. Meanwhile, the Pirate Party has also reached a new high in polling, just below the threshold. For now, both parties insist that they will not form a government led by Janša or by Golob. If they do enter parliament and stick to their word, forming a majority coalition could become complicated for both SDS and Svoboda.

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Going into the election, Golob can count on the support of his two coalition partners, the Social Democrats and Levica, while Janša can only be sure of the support of fellow European People's Party member Nova Slovenija and its joint list with two other right-wing non-parliamentary parties: the

newcomer Fokus, and the Slovene People's Party (SLS). Although the final composition of the parliament is in doubt, it is evident that there will be more than five, as was the case in the previous mandate.

The uncertainty in this election cycle is reminiscent of 2018, when Janša took first place but was unable to form a ruling majority. However, if he manages to clear the hurdles this time and become prime minister for the fourth time, we can expect a series of controversial decisions based on his campaign promises.

A new Janša administration is likely to exert significant political influence on the police, state-owned media, and the judiciary, denying climate change and hindering the green transition. He has also promised to establish a deportation office similar to ICE in the US, and to maintain fences on the southern border with Croatia. Moreover, SDS is expected to cut funding for independent artists and civil society organisations, putting an end to what it terms LGBTQIA+“ideology” in schools, treating climate change as a hoax, and attacking the independence of the judiciary. Whether or not Viktor Orbán manages to retain power in Hungary, he would have in another Janša government a great friend and ally. This also explains why Slovenia's election is watched so closely in Brussels.

A green-left experiment

Although Gibanje Svoboda will not come close to the record 41 seats won in the 2022 elections in this cycle, it could still serve a second consecutive term with its coalition partners, without the need to reach out to newcomers or the Right. However, such an outcome will only be possible provided that the Social Democrats and Levica gain more votes than they did four years ago.

This is unlikely to happen for the Social Democrats. Despite being entrusted with important portfolios, such as the Ministry of the Economy, Tourism and Sport, the party failed to implement social-democratic reforms.

Meanwhile, the more progressive Levica, taking part in government for the first time, became increasingly social-democratic. The party took over the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities; the Ministry of Culture; and the newly founded Ministry of a Solidarity-Based Future. These proved to be challenging and under-resourced areas. Without efficient health and tax system reforms, the main achievements of the Golob government were changes to the pension system, long-term care contributions, and increased funding for culture, all of which were initiated by Levica.

Still, Levica's first experience in government had significant ups and downs. The party's parliamentary representation dropped from five to three. One of Levica's founders, MP Miha Kordiš, was expelled due to internal disputes. In addition, the head of the party's parliamentary group, Matej Tašner Vatovec, changed sides and defected to the Social Democrats. Despite these setbacks, Levica remains relatively cohesive. Moreover, Kordiš's Mi, socialisti! party is projected not to enter parliament, and the Social Democrats will most likely not benefit much from Tašner Vatovec's defection.

Although the Left is traditionally fractured in Slovenia, Levica has joined forces with Vesna, a Green party established in 2022 that has not yet been represented in parliament. It remains to be seen how this will affect the progressiveness of Levica's policies in the future, but according to the latest polls, the joint list of Levica and Vesna is gaining momentum and has a chance of taking third place. That said, the competition is fierce, with the Social Democrats, Nova Slovenija, SLS, Anže Logar's Democrats, and Fokus all polling closely. If Levica and Vesna do end up as the third-biggest political force after this

election, it will be an impressive achievement, given that Levica lost some of its traditional left-wing voters when it was forced to make compromises as part of the Golob coalition.

Uncertain outcome

Slovenia faces a critical election. While it seems unlikely that the country will become “Orbánised” under Janez Janša as prime minister, the possibility of his return cannot be ruled out. If Janša does secure a fourth term, it will likely be through election interference and support from new political parties – some of which are made up of his former party members. During the campaign, some of these parties have failed to clarify whether they will enter a coalition with Janša, while others claim they will not form a government with him or with Robert Golob as prime minister.



Tomaž Zaniuk, a journalist and columnist, is the communications coordinator at Policy Lab. He is also the former director and editor-in-chief of Radio Študent Ljubljana. Zaniuk advocates for degrowth, civil society, independent culture, and a third media sector of free community media.

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