
Political Shakeup after the Slovenian Elections

Slovenian voters went to the poles on Sunday, July 13 in an early election following the collapse of Government in May. They were voting for representatives in the first house of Parliament (Državni Zbor) from where the government is formed. Coming only two months after the European Parliament Elections, and amid some considerable political turmoil, the results were surprising as The Party of Miro Cerer took the largest number of votes. The early elections were held after Prime Minister Alenka Bratušek lost the presidency of her former party, Pozitivna Slovenia (PS), and decided with the coalition partners to call early elections. Sunday's results are a direct product of the political and economic instability that has marked Slovenia since the last election, in 2011.

It started with Zoran Janković, the popular major of Ljubljana, and his attempt to win in the 2011 national elections. He formed PS, and came in first place in the national election, with 28,5 percent of the vote. But despite the win, PS was unable to form a coalition government to gain a majority in Parliament. This was largely seen as being down to his uncompromising style, which is what has made him popular in the capitol. After months of negotiations, the mandate was passed to the Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska demokratska stranka – SDS), led by former Prime Minister Janez Janša. They successfully formed a coalition, but only managed to govern for a year, before social unrest swept the country, focusing on the political elite and a general lack of perspective for people. This, along with embezzlement charges made against both Janša and Janković, destabilized the government to the point where the coalition fell apart.

But rather than call new elections, the initiative to form a new coalition passed back to PS, still the largest party in Parliament. Janković had stepped down from the presidency of the party, clearing the way for Alenka Bratušek to take over and negotiate with other parties. PS succeeded in forming a new government. However, they also only managed to survive for little over a year in power. This time the collapse was the result of internal politics in PS. Despite the relative stability of the coalition, Janković decided to challenge Bratušek at the party congress last April and won back the presidency. Without the support of her party, Bratušek announced she could not lead the government and called for fresh elections. At the same time, Janez Janša was convicted of corruption in a business deal involving the Finish weapons dealer Patria in 2006, the charges were upheld and he was sent to jail for two years.

It was in this political climate that both the European and the national elections were held. The economic crisis had largely faded from the headlines; an international bailout was avoided following a €4,7 billion (largely tax-payer funded) cash injection into the banking system. But discontent with the political elite remained. The European election yielded a turnout of little more than 20 percent. The results favoured the political right, and while there were no big surprises, it reflected a discontent in Slovenia with European politics. As such the biggest winner was SDS along with two smaller conservative, nationalist parties Nova Slovenia (New Slovenia – NS) and Slovenska Ljudska Stranka (Slovenian Peoples Party – SLS). Of the center-left parties, only the Social Democrats and a new party, Verjamem (translated as 'I believe'), gained a seat each.

The national election, however, is a different story. The turnout has again been low, with 50,9

percent of voter casting a ballot, down almost 15 percent from 2011. The discontent towards established political elite was again tangible, but the voting pattern was different. Whereas the vote in the European elections tended to the right, on the national election it went towards the left, bringing some new and unknown faces to the political scene.

The two big losing parties are PS and SDS. SDS lost almost 10 percent of their vote in comparison to 2011. They had advertised this election as a referendum on Janša's imprisonment. Despite small daily protests in front of the Supreme Court in Ljubljana, there has not been a general public outrage at Janša's sentence. The party have tried hard to reproduce the mythos of Janša as the political prisoner of the old socialist ideology, even producing a campaign poster with the text: "Svoboda Jansi. Svoboda Slovenia" (*Freedom for Janša. Freedom for Slovenia*). Yet it did not resonate with the public. The parties response to this defeat has also been fairly negative. Janša has sent a cryptic twitter message from prison in which he quoted Mahatma Gandhi about not ever apologising if you are on the side of truth, or if you are ahead of your time. The party statement after the election was to reject the legitimacy of the election and call on people to engage in acts of civil disobedience against the government. They also stated that the next leader of government would be a Slovenian Lukasenka (President of Belarus, often thought of as a dictator).

PS, which ran a campaign ad featuring Janković and the word "Poštena" (*Honesty*), lost almost 100 percent of their votes from the last election. They gained only 3 percent overall this time, and thus are not in parliament. It is now a question for Janković how this will translate to the municipal elections later this year and his likely bid for re-election as mayor. In any case, it is hard to see any serious future for the PS party.

Another party that seems to be falling into obscurity is the Social Democrats (SD). Three years ago they were the largest party in government (from 2008 to 2011) and held the prime ministership. This election, however, they received only 6 percent of the vote. Alenka Bratušek, the out-going Prime Minister and head of a new party, Zavezništvo Alenke Bratušek (Alliance of Alenka Bratušek – ZaAB) saw poor returns for her party considering her ability to claim successful crisis management. The 4,8 percent return does mean they get into parliament but will not likely hold much power. Finally, despite success in the European elections, the Verjamem party did not get enough votes to enter parliament.

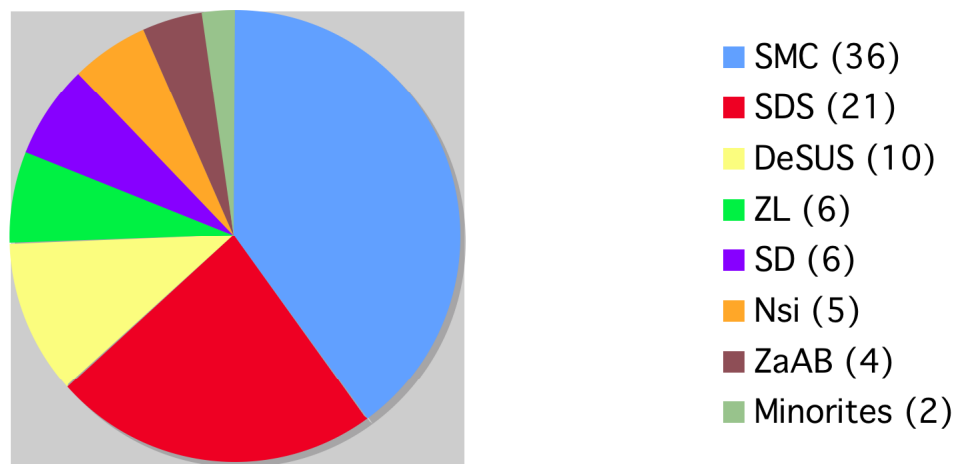
The three big success stories are Stranka Miro Cerer (The Party of Miro Cerer – SMC), DeSUS (Democratic Pensioners Party) and Združena Levica (ZL – a coalition of three parties and initiatives including the Initiative for Democratic Socialism). SMC is the big winner, gaining 35 percent of the total vote. This is a party that has only existed since June and has yet to publish any kind of manifesto. Cerer himself is a fairly well known legal expert and professor at the law school in Ljubljana. The constant line of the party is that they intend to restore rule of law in Slovenia. Cerer is also not particularly enthusiastic about the ongoing privatizations of Slovenian companies. He prefers that bigger companies remain as strategic assets to the state. The party generally have also clearly benefitted from their distance from the establishment.

DeSUS is a party that has constantly been in parliament since 1992, and part of every governing coalition since 2004. Their 10 percent returns are the highest in their history, placing them third overall in this election. As an issue-based party, they have focused on pensions and retirement from the beginning, which has also shielded them from being too associated with the political elite in the public perception.

Finally, the young ZL far exceeded early predictions. After a fairly poor showing on the European election, where they were linked to the European Left of Alexis Tsipras, they gained 6 percent at the national election. As a new party they are free from the burdens of political establishment. They also present a leftist political platform of, among other things, opposition to the privatizations of Slovenian industry and companies, reduced gap in the lowest and highest wages (5:1) and offshore banking. These are key issues currently in the public discourse in Slovenia, which partly explains ZL's success. Their roots are closer to social movements, student parties and the well known Delavska Punkerska Univerza (Worker Punk University – a self-organized intellectual lecture series focusing on left and radical left analysis of economic and social issues).

While it still remains to be seen how the new coalition will compose itself, the large number of votes won by SMC should provide some political stability. They will have significant power in coalition negotiations, and have the luxury of going into larger or smaller coalitions depending on their wishes. The greater challenge will likely be economic. Opposition to privatisation and the possible inclusion of ZL in the coalition will not be popular with foreign investors and financial markets. This could lead to a raising of interest rates and return the spectre of a European or IMF bail-out, which would effectively mandate the privatization of the economy. But privatising all the state assets will remove state revenue and make the repayment of existing debts, while investing in the local economy, virtually impossible. In that sense, despite new faces and parties in government, it may just end up being business as usual for Slovenia.

The new composition of Državni Zbor:



David Brown