
After 10 Years of in the Union and after the European Elections: More Europe, More Slovenia?

May should have been a month for Slovenia to focus on Europe, promoting its European identity and the positive effects of 10 years of membership. It was a month book-ended by events related to its inclusion in Europe. At one end, the 10th anniversary of Slovenia's accession to the European Union (E.U.), and at the other, the European Parliament election on the 25th. The unusually mild and sunny weather this spring along with the abating of the sovereign debt crisis also make this a perfect moment to reflect on Slovenia's 10 years as part of the E.U. Though the government is making an effort to celebrate integration, this sentiment is not shared by all.

Slovenia entered during the E.U.'s single largest expansion; an expansion that primarily incorporated eastern and central European states. It was the first of the formerly socialist states to enter the monetary union three years later, in 2007. Today it is still the only ex-Yugoslavian state in Schengen and the monetary union, though Croatia is on course to join the Schengen regime next year, in 2015. At the time of accession, Slovenia was considered a model transition country, the brightest example of post-socialist states embracing the free market more completely than before. Its economic development under Yugoslavia and the experience of a creeping liberalization of the economy from the late 1970s had already given it a good start in the process of meeting E.U. membership standards. Of course, to varying degrees, this is true for all of the republics of Yugoslavia, since the capitalist market was always present, but until the liberalizations imposed by the IMF after the crisis years of the 1970s, the federal state was the final mediator in the market and the capital-labour relations.

But since 2007, a year before the global financial crisis hit, Slovenia has experienced economic decline and significant instability in government. It is now looking for its third government in as many years. Since the collapse of Bohut Pahor's Social Democrat-led government in 2011, the coalitions have been beset by unpopularity and corruption scandals, and internal conflict. Janez Janša's government came after Pahor's, but only following a protracted scramble to form a majority. Janša himself was by then implicated in a corruption scandal around the purchase of weapons. His government fell after less than a year during unprecedented protests across the country (not necessarily targeting Janša) and when further corruption allegations emerged. The latest collapse was triggered more by the self-interest of Ljubljana's Mayor Zoran Janković. He challenged and beat incumbent Prime Minister Alenka Bratušek for the presidency of the Pozitivna Slovenija (Positive Slovenia – PS) at the party congress in April when the government was otherwise relatively stable. Bratušek, with the backing of the coalition partners declared herself unable to govern without full support of her own party, and promptly resigned.

It is impossible to claim that this recent instability is itself a product of E.U. membership. A more direct cause is the economic crisis. The crisis is much bigger than Slovenia and than the E.U., but has its roots in the kind of economic development that was expected of aspiring member-states. Though it initially led to a boom in construction, and economic growth, the growth was debt-based. This was particularly felt in the banking and construction industries in Slovenia. When the global credit crunch occurred following the Wall Street collapse in 2008, it became impossible to

pay the loans with new contracts or to service debts through further credits. It spelled the end for the largest construction companies, such as Vegrad, and left many foreign workers (many from ex-Yugoslavia) with unpaid wages and expired work permits, since initial work-permits were company property. While the construction industry collapsed and some of the workers left without ever getting their money, the banks fared better thanks to the bail out. Regardless of these individual instances of economic boom and bust, the trend in Slovenia has been towards rising unemployment, stagnation and emigration.

Yet, the light was again visible at the end of the economic tunnel; stability was achieved in the financial markets and on Slovenian government Bonds through the successful transfer of toxic loans clogging the banking system to the government managed Bank Asset Management Corporation (BAMC – the “bad bank”) at a cost of over three billion in public money. But while this has created stability in the markets, it has been unpopular in the society, particularly as these measures were accompanied by deep cuts in public spending.

Beyond the economic impact, mobility has been another tangible change through accession. The internally opened borders have enabled a greater mobility of the population. The opportunities of exchange offered by the ERASMUS programme, for example, is one that has facilitated important academic exchanges. But here too, it is a question just how open this has made the common space? While the national borders within the E.U., at least within the Schengen states, have lost much of their significance beyond crude nationalist nostalgia, the economic and political borders have remained and even proliferated. E.U. citizens moving to Slovenia, for example, have access to the labour market, but must prove a monthly income equivalent to the cost of living, around €230, if they want to apply for residency. Proof of health-care is another requirement that can be limiting, since not everyone will be able to afford private insurance or take health-care with them from their home country. The health system thus remains largely inaccessible for lower income foreigners, who also have to agree not to apply for financial welfare from Slovenia. This has also affected the local population. The drive towards a private economy, and private institutions of welfare, has added personal economic situation, to the criterion for access.

The Erasure has also remained an outstanding issue for Slovenia and Europe. This year the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) came to a decision in a major case of the Erased of Slovenia, 25,671¹ people who lost their residency status and rights following Slovenia's independence in 1991. The judgment in *Kurić and Others v. Slovenia* gave just satisfaction to the plaintiffs, awarding financial compensation for the period of the Erasure. This put further pressure on the Slovenian state to implement the general compensation scheme for the Erased, as mandated in a ECHR decision in 2013. These negotiations around the compensation scheme have yet to conclude as the offer from the state has not had a positive reception among the Erased. The Erasure happened well before accession but is a product of the formation of the nation in which certain categories of people were systematically excluded. The issue of the Erased is largely ignored, and media coverage remains very limited. Yet it has been a defining failure of Slovenia's transition and the conditions created for E.U. integration. Sadly, this year has been punctuated by the deaths of two leading activists in the struggle of the Erased. Alexander Todorovič committed suicide in February and Stojan Bubanja succumbed to cancer in April.

If there is one single indicator of the E.U.'s depth of traction, it is surely elections on the European level. But even here, the signs are not promising. Slovenia didn't have the lowest participation rate in this round of European Parliament elections, an honour that went to Slovakia with 13%, but it

1 This is the official number given by the Ministry of the Interior of Slovenia.

did set its own record low of 24%. Most of the votes went to the conservative Democratic party and the Slovenian National party. The constant decline in participation reflects a trend across Europe, though this year's European wide participation rate, 43.1%; is the same as in 2009. The large victories of Far-right, Eurosceptic parties, such as UK Independence Party (UKIP), the Front National in France and Nova Slovenija, not to mention borderline fascists such as Hungary's Jobbik Party and Croatia's Party of Rights, likely benefited from the level of disenfranchisement felt across Europe. Rather than suggesting this is a sign of rising fascism however, it is more likely a protest vote. People in Slovenia, as across Europe, either stayed at home or selected a vote against the E.U. Conservative and nationalist parties are always going to benefit from this.

Though it appears hard to commend Slovenia's integration into the E.U., the idea of reversing the process and strengthening national sovereignty hardly offers a progressive alternative. Returning to a strong nation-state is to be expected from the right, yet it is also gaining traction with the left. New parties, such as Solidarity and Initiative for Democratic Socialism (IDS) have advocated various proposals that amount to 'Less Europe, More Slovenia'. Yet it is a question of how much this can help prevent crisis in the future. Moreover, it ignores the influence of non-state actors, such as financial institutions. Such strengthening of the state would likely only isolate the economy from investment as well as limiting the movement and perspective of the citizens.

If the picture seems generally bleak, then the recent protests in Slovenia, the *vstaja*, along with other movements across Europe, offer a dose of hope. The protest movement brought a level of popular mobilization that put a bright spotlight on the legacy of the transition and the failure to translate the economic growth after independence into general social wealth and perspective. Many of these social movements are looking at and are creating a Europe from below. They are highly mobile, ignoring political borders and sharing their experiences and ideas through common projects, meetings and actions. But they are also documenting the limitations and problems of the current configuration of the E.U. The *vstaja*, though it was largely a domestic protest, at its core it was a struggle over the quality of everyday life. In this it was a common struggle despite local particularities.

Vstaja was of course never articulated as a struggle about the kind of common Europe people want. But along with the uprisings in Turkey and recently in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and organized protests, such as the demonstrations in Brussels in the middle of May, *vstaja* is an example of the desire to find ways to live better. So while May in Slovenia, in the end, has said more about the limitations of the current institutional European project, the idea of a social and common European space is clearly still alive and being worked on in different ways.

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