

**Tagline:** The recent protests in Maribor around a corruption scandal are now spreading across Slovenia, putting into question the legitimacy of the whole political class and the economic situation in the country.

### **Gotof Je! The Maribor Protests**

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The question to ask in Maribor is what were the protests and clashes between police and protestors all about? This is not a new debate in Slovenia, since it is deeply connected to privatization that has been ongoing since before the collapse of Yugoslavia and the transition that followed. This process already left people divided over such issues as running the economy and relationship to the European Union (E.U.). Nevertheless, Slovenia has followed a steady course of privatization along E.U. lines and at times been hailed as a model transition country. The flaws in this perception are, for many who live here, now becoming visible. But how do the recent events in Maribor relate to this debate?

On the surface this was a conflict that emerged over the instillation of high-tech radars (about 30) around the city of Maribor. These are intended to better regulate traffic offences, such as speeding in urban areas. The project is a private – public partnership between the municipality of Maribor and Iskra Sistemi, whereby the state put up the initial funds to implement the radar system. Already here there are disagreements over who benefits from such a partnership. Some say that it is an efficient way to build necessary infrastructure without burdening state bureaucracies, since the management of the radars is taken over by the private firm, issuing the speeding tickets and collecting the fines. Others would say this is just a means for a private firm to socialize the cost of something it cannot fund on its own, and then to privatize the profit, since the system would be run on a for-profit basis. It is thus a form of extracting wealth from society for private companies.

The next important point in this is the cost of this project. Initially the city of Maribor was to spend around 5 million Euros on the infrastructure. However, the cost rose exponentially to a final total around 30 million Euro. This translates into about 1 million Euro per radar installed. This price tag was paid from the municipal budget, under the supervision of its current mayor Franc Kangler. A few weeks ago these radars started to be attacked out of protest against the costs and the corruption. So far 11 have been destroyed.

Kangler himself already has a history of allegations against him involving corruption and favourable treatment to private companies. He is currently under investigation for 12 counts of corruption, including for the radar program. He has maintained his innocence in all cases. The public resentment against him has grown over the last months, and his recent move to get elected on to the Državni Svet (National Council, the representative body for local and territorial interests), giving him political immunity, was seen as the final straw. Across Maribor people began to say *gotof je* (He's finished).

What has been most particular about these demonstrations is the lack of any clear organization or organizer. There is no known group, political party, trade union or social movement behind this. Rather, it seems to be a general feeling of anger and frustration that has activated people and brought them into the streets. All around Maribor, on peoples' front doors, in apartment blocks and on the streets, the slogan *gotof je!* is visible. At the two largest demonstrations so far (November 22<sup>nd</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>) the heterogenous composition of the crowd was another indication that

this issue is speaking to a broad section of society. Some very general calls were made over social media sites, such as facebook and twitter, to a general demonstration; they were immediately popular and people came out in the thousands on both occasions.

On the second demonstration another aspect emerged that pushed it beyond focusing on the local situation: there was a clear voice of youth heard, and it was voice of frustration. It also had a sense that they were unsure of their future. This frustration found two ways to release itself on the night: in slogans such as "Maribor is our prison", and in confrontation with the police. The political class of Slovenia, particularly the Minister of the Interior Gorenak, put the blame for the violence squarely on the shoulders of some young demonstrators. Indeed, even the anonymous facebook page that had called the demonstration distanced itself from the violence, de facto blaming the public rather than the police. There were, however, clear provocations from the police throughout the night. They pushed people away from protesting in front of the mayor's office when no threat was apparent; tear gas was fired indiscriminately into the crowd still composed of older citizens, children and everyone in between; a police helicopter was constantly hovering overhead, shining a bright spotlight on people; later people were divided and kettled all over the city by police lines; mounted police were brought out and charged into the crowd a number of times and so on. At the point of the first police intervention the crowd had only been armed with some firecrackers and their voices. The crowd responded with anger; but not just the young protesters, the general public also stayed, demanding free movement and that the police remove themselves.

In the end what was tangible in Maribor on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>, but particularly the latter date, was the release of built-up frustration with a persistently poor economical situation. Whether or not this dates back to the transition is another question, but for now we can say with some certainty that as they are, things cannot continue much longer like this. This multi-generational, heterogeneous protest tells us that all over people are feeling hopeless and left behind while a few individuals build up their personal wealth at the expense of others. In the aftermath of the 26<sup>th</sup>, all institutions and many people immediately distanced themselves from the violence, casting the disaffected youth again into the margins. Only the statement from the 15 October movement came out with a demand for the release of all arrested, highlighting the police violence as the root of the night's conflict, not the so-called hooligans. But with the mayor refusing to step down, the spread of protests to Ljubljana and other cities around Slovenia, and with the whole political class of Slovenia now being targeted (already there are posters appearing with the words *gotovi so*, meaning 'they are finished'), it is clear that this protest will continue into the near future and the political establishment has a big problem on its hands.