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NEW SLOVENIAN PRESIDENT WINS WITH THE SUPPORT OF BLACK-RED COALITION

On Sunday, December 2nd, the fourth Slovenian president since the disintegration of Yugoslavia and its first presidential elections in 1992, was elected. Fourth serving president will be Borut Pahor (1963), presidential candidate that managed to defeat the last president, Danilo Türk (1952) in the second round of presidential elections.

In comparison to 2002 presidential elections, with 72,07 percent turnout and the last elections in 2007 with 58,46 percent turnout, these elections had a record low electoral participation with only 41,95 percent. Pahor, although supposedly a left wing candidate of the Social Democratic Party, eventually managed to present himself as an acceptable figure for right wing parties. In the last week of campaigning he secured support from current right wing prime minister, Janez Janša (1958), former president of Slovenian Nationalist Party, as well as support from the organization that represents the Nazi collaborators in the II. World War. This political trend is unprecedented and was unseen in the last 20 years of sovereign Slovenian state. As such it marks a true break and a beginning of a black-red political cohabitation between the Prime Minister and the President of the Republic. Both have stressed time and again that austerity measures are of paramount political importance and have no ideas about alternative strategies for solving the crisis, whatsoever.

The last week of the second round of presidential campaign has also seen dramatic and explosive protests that are without comparison in the whole Yugoslavian period as well as the period of independent Slovenia. On Monday, November 26th, some 10.000 protesters have gathered in the second biggest Slovenian city, Maribor and demanded the resignation of the city major, Franc Kangler, and for the first time Slovenian police has used tear gas on the protesters. Only a couple of days latter on Friday, protest was organized in Ljubljana, Slovenian capital. Here, water canons were used for the first time. New protests have already been announced and the, so called All Slovenian upheaval is planned for December 21th. Before contextualizing all these events, analyzing the responses of the ruling politicians and showing some underlying causes that have generated such anger, let us provide the overview of the socioeconomic situation of Slovenia and then continue on to the presidential candidates and campaign as such.

Socioeconomic Situation of Slovenia

Conventionally speaking Slovenia has been, throughout its accession period to EU and NATO, characterized as the so called "success story," and a textbook example of an Eastern European country. Nowadays it is widely speculated it might be next in line to ask for bailout help from the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund, the infamous troika. Incumbent government is regularly threatening with the "greek scenario" if we won't undertake the strict austerity measures and in the last couple of months there were high visits from all of the troika

representatives, emphasizing the exact same thing. The classic justification of these measures being the idea we have lived above our means, have consumed more than we have created and now have to sober up and each sacrifice our share.

How perverse is this mantra that affluent ruling politicians never get tired of repeating becomes obvious when we look at some concrete data. According to latest official figures 273.000 Slovenians are living in poverty and another 113.000 risk social exclusion, all in all 19,3% or almost a fifth of the population. These people have not lived above their means and have been struggling to make ends meet for a long time. The crisis has just worsened their situation and preaching to them they have to sacrifice furthermore is just pure cynicism. Another part of population whose perspective is very grim is the youth. A great majority is working in extremely precarious conditions without any social security and hope for getting a more stable and secure position. Many graduates have to rely on the support of families to get through the month and a lot of young people in their late twenties and even early thirties are forced to live with their parents as they just cannot afford to pay the rent.

Having said that it must be emphasized that a great majority of the current problems Slovenian economy is facing right now originate in the first mandate of the Janez Janša government in the period of 2004-2008. In between 2004-2006 economy grew with an average of 5% per year and in 2007 it achieved almost 7% of growth. However the main part of this growth was generated by excessive borrowing on the part of companies. And much of the credit was used for managerial takeovers which effectively just exhausted the companies and undercut their core activities. Government of the time did nothing to limit this credit frenzy, on the contrary it encouraged it. A lot of the private debt that was generated in these years was later on socialized as public debt. Right now the public debt amounts to 47 billion euros and it stands at 42% of GDP and is still almost half than EU average that stands at 82,5%. However since this is already a socialized debt ruling class widely uses it as an excuse to cut the public spending and contract the whole public sector. This is basically at the core of the anti-austerity struggles and explains the explosive social situation that culminated in the major protests. Before addressing these let us now focus on former presidents of the republic and the recent campaigning.

Former presidents

In Slovenia, the President of the Republic is elected via direct elections and can be elected for a maximum period of two five-year terms. Although President does have a substantial, especially moral, authority and is an important public figure and state representative, his executive powers are very limited. Slovenian political system in this sense is much more similar to Germany, rather than to France or even United states of America. Since the disintegration of Yugoslavia there were four presidential elections and three serving presidents. The first Slovenian president, Milan Kučan (1941) was elected in 1992 and later on in 1997 secured the second mandate. Kučan was already actively engaged in Yugoslavian politics, being the president of the assembly of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia (1978-82) and the President of the Central Committee of the Slovenian Communists (1986-90). On the declaration of Slovenian independence on 25. June 1991 Kučan became famous for ending his speech: "Today dreams are allowed, tomorrow is a new day." Without going into too much detail it is safe to say that throughout the nineties the relationship between the President and Prime minister was predominantly cooperative.

With a brief interruption of six-month right wing government, Janez Drnovšek (1958 - 2008) was Slovenian Prime Minister in the period between 1992-2002, leading the coalition governments under the leadership of his Liberal Democratic Party. He

succeeded Milan Kučan as the second Slovenian President. Drnovšek was politically active in Yugoslavia, as well, being the President of the Presidential council of Yugoslavia (1989 - 1990) and was a crucial figure during the accession to European Union. As a politician he was seen as a dull and reserved technocrat, however this radically changed in the last two years of his presidential mandate. Diagnosed with kidney cancer Drnovšek undertook a radically different public appearance. In a rather new-age manner he started to emphasize that it is crucial to raise human consciousness and make the world a better place. This dramatic change was in stark contrast with his former political persona. Drnovšek also became actively engaged in various foreign policy campaigns, becoming an early advocate of Kosovo independence (which declared its independence on 17. February 2008, just six days before his death) and urging the international community to take a more determinate stand against the conflict in Sudanese region Darfur. From the perspective of domestic policies Drnovšek became a harsh critic of Janez Janša (1958), who had his first mandate as a Prime Minister in the period of 2004-2008.

Third, soon to be former, president, Danilo Türk was a high ranking career diplomat in the United Nations, serving under the former general secretary, Kofi Annan. After thirteen years of working for the UN he returned to Slovenia in 2005 and became a professor of international law at the Faculty of Law at the University of Ljubljana. In 2007 he won the fourth presidential elections with a wide support of left wing parties. At the time it was widely speculated if Borut Pahor will candidate as well, however Social Democratic Party managed to convince him to rather focus on parliamentary elections, which he won the following year, defeating the right wing government of Janez Janša.

2012 campaign

All this background is essential for understanding the political situation nowadays since all of the above mentioned, with the exception of the deceased Janez Drnovšek, continue to play a very important role in Slovenian politics. It was quite self-evident that Türk, whose presidency was characterized by a rather intellectual and diplomatic style will stand for the second term as well. It was not surprising that right wing parties will try to promote their candidate as well. This was to become Milan Zver, former Minister for Education in the first government of Janez Janša, being also a vice-president of his Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS). There were also other candidates who did not manage to collect enough support to become official candidates. However, what came as a surprise was the candidature of the third candidate, Borut Pahor.

Less than a year ago the government under his presidency lost so much public support and faced such internal contradictions that Pahor had to step down and announce early elections. Latter on he also lost the support of his, Social Democratic Party and ceased to be it president after more than a decade. When everyone thought he was done with, he announced that he will run for a President of the Republic and managed to become the third official candidate. And what at first seemed to promise a swift reelection of Danilo Türk, gradually and radically changed. Right wing candidate, Milan Zver provided a rather lethargic campaign lacking any serious political energy that created an impression the whole team. Especially striking was the lack of any serious support from the party president and prime minister, Janez Janša. Zver who lost in the first round of campaign, eventually more than anything else presented himself as a wing man for the campaign of Borut Pahor. All of this became increasingly evident in the second round of campaign.

It is not surprising that Borut Pahor, himself a former model, organized his whole political campaign as one huge fashion show. He paraded himself through various voluntary 1-day jobs, which usually enjoyed huge media coverage, especially in the beginning since such type of campaign was most unusual and unprecedented. Trying not only to relate

himself to common man but emphatically presenting himself as *the* common man, Pahor undertook dozens of different 1-day jobs. To mention just a few of his instant occupations, the newly elected President posed as: construction worker, garbage man, lumberjack, worker in the auto mechanic shop, butcher, baker, engineer measuring the level of radioactivity, bookseller, worker in the architectural office, hairdresser, marketer, health technician, humanitarian worker and numerous other through which, as is written on his web page, he managed to achieve 281 hours of voluntary labour. It is rather perverse that the former prime minister who (unsuccessfully) tried to implement the so called mini jobs, that would severely precarize workers of all generations, undertook a campaign that portrayed him as an exciting mini worker that seemingly effortlessly and swiftly changes his occupations. As such the campaign reinforced the liberal myth of secure flexibility that is usually advocated together with massive layoffs. However Borut Pahor did not really become a garbage man, a butcher or a bookseller but skillfully marketed himself as a kind of role model of each occupation he undertook, which is of course even more insulting for a real garbage man, butcher and bookseller that quietly and without media attention work for 40 or more years.

So, although it was at first widely assumed that the presidential campaign would be a mere formality since, in the first polls president Danilo Türk enjoyed a very high support, it provided for an unexpected twist when Pahor suddenly became the favorite. Although all three candidates vehemently argued that only they can provide for a national unity in the time of crisis, Pahor had another hugely successful ace up his sleeve. During the campaign he played the card which was invented by his party successor, Igor Lukšič (1961), namely that he is the representative of the so called *new left*. While on the other hand Türk was the representative of the *old left*, one supported by the so called uncles from behind, i.e. former communist party nomenclature, led by the former president Milan Kučan. This sinister network of influential old boys supposedly sacrificed state interests to preserve their personal gains. It goes without saying that all this was hugely successful among right-wing politicians that have themselves, most vehemently Janša, argued for many years, that such a network exists. Adding that Pahor publicly supported the austerity program of his government it becomes obvious we were experiencing a beginning of a beautiful friendship. For the first time at least on the relation between President and Prime Minister Slovenia will have the so called black-red coalition.

Protests and the necessity for the socialist alternative

It has now become obvious that both highest representatives of the Slovenian state will be in total unity about the issue of austerity. As Pahor has stressed time and again, what is needed nowadays is unity which can lead us out of the crisis. However this unity is not one of social solidarity but is a type of unity that ignores the actually existing class divisions in the society. It is a unity for preserving capitalism and sacrificing the remnants of social welfare state. Suffice it to say that even such orthodox pro capital newspaper as The Economist wrote that Slovenians have voted for Austerity when they elected Borut Pahor for their new president. However one must bear in mind a record low electoral turnout and the fact almost 60 percent of the people have decided not to cast their vote. This shows a huge and growing discontent with the established politicians and political parties. This was first showed with the huge trade union protests organized on November 17th that some 10.000 people attended. It became even more evident in the last couple of weeks with even bigger spontaneous protests that have already been mentioned in the beginning. These protests developed under the slogan *Gotof je!* (*He is finished*) and have been first aimed at the major of second biggest Slovenian city, Maribor. However these protests have sparked other upheavals and right now almost

every day there is a protest in a few Slovenian cities. It seems a certain culmination is to be expected on December 21st when the so called All-Slovenian upheaval is planned. Especially because Education, Science and Culture Trade Union of Slovenia (Sviz) which is one of the most important trade unions, has already announced it plans a general strike for the same day. This also promises that current events that have up to now expressed the much justified anger and discontent might be turning into a direction of a more positive political articulation.

This is of crucial importance because prime minister Janša in his response to the presidential outcome already announced the need for political reforms, which amounts to his long-time political goal of establishing a first past the post system which would effectively introduce a two-party system. A first draft of proposal from the ruling party also includes the possible dismissal of majors, members of parliament and even judges. The basic idea being that none of these officials will have a secure mandate. Having said that, what is needed, nowadays more than ever is a radical leftist alternative that will be able to politically label austerity measures for what they really are, i.e. an intensified form of class struggle. A kind of party inspired by the experience of Greek Syriza which successfully combines various social movements that later on forged a political party. It is difficult to say how long this process will take but it is quite obvious that none of the existing, nominally left-wing parties will be able to provide such policies. What is needed right now is unity for socialism.

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